

THE ABALONE DIVER

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I'm not sure how it went down or what excuses my father gave her. It was still early in the summer, 1993, the year Beth Hart appeared ten times on *Star Search*. I came home in the afternoon. The school term was over, and I must have been swimming at the community pool with my brother and friends because I can remember my hair dripping down my back and onto the linoleum. Cold little splashes around my bare feet.

My mother was in the kitchen, packing knives in bubble wrap and duct tape. She wasn't about to have us stuck in the house, she said, with all of his stuff missing from the drawers and medicine cabinets. She told us we were moving to the coast, to a small, northern town I'd never heard of—Caspar. Our uncle owned a cabin there that he'd let us use. She'd already boxed up the majority of my room.

The television was the last thing we packed. Ellis and I spent the remaining minutes in our empty, childhood home watching Beth Hart sing-scream into a microphone, her hair scrunched with gel or sweat, her lips painted dark brown, not quite black, but still dangerous. Powerful. The judges gave her four stars, and my mother unplugged the TV during a commercial, telling Ellis to find room for it in the bed of the truck.

It was hard not to hate her. And I'd like to think that maybe she understood that then. I thought my mother must have done something—something monstrous—to make him leave us. I wanted her to admit to it. The night we drove away from our house, our lives crammed into one trailer and one truck, I told her so. I was screaming, slamming my palm

against the window. She didn't cry. In fact, I never saw her cry over my father. She lit a cigarette, cracked her window, and told me to stop acting so cliché.

Back then, I wanted to be famous. I wanted darkness and a single spotlight. It wasn't just a want, it was inevitable. I could feel my blood reaching out, destined to be known. I figured that it was just a matter of time, and I longed for it the way other children longed to be firemen or doctors. I imagined myself participating in interviews when I looked in the bathroom mirror. *Like most mothers, she tried to dash my dreams*, I would say. *But now look at me.*

Caspar was not the kind of place you went to get famous. Caspar was a place where people went to disappear. It was a town proud of its rusted lawn art and weather-beaten houses—everything encased by forests on the east side and cliffs falling off into the Pacific on the west. A hundred years ago, it was a popular logging town. The rest of my family seemed ready, eager even, to find themselves in this forgotten place. My mother started to write a novel. She spent her days asleep and her nights in front of a typewriter with the door closed. Ellis had his new driver's license and the truck, which he took out for long periods of time without telling anyone. But I wanted to be seen.

I guess that's why I started hanging out with Miguel. A week after we moved, I met him on Caspar Beach, and he offered me a piece of raw abalone. The meat was thick and pink, and it jiggled in his sandy hand like Jell-O.

"No thanks," I said.

"Scared?" he said.

The ocean was only a few blocks and a short dirt path away from our new house. I had walked down there because I planned to write a chain letter to my friends back in Stockton, and I wanted to have something good to tell them. A beach was something, at least. It was glamorous. Important. *Like Malibu*, I planned to say. *There might even be celebrities here.* But instead, I found the beach dark, the water frigid, and the sand covered with dark brown seaweed that smelled like dead fish. Where the dirt path met

the sand, there was a black and yellow sign, warning swimmers about great whites. There were no famous sunbathers with tropical drinks in their hands. There was only Miguel, sitting with a bag full of shells and a little knife by his side. I must have been feeling brave that day. I must have felt above the quaintness that permeated the town. I sat down next to him like I knew him. He didn't seem to mind.

Miguel crammed the little slice of meat into his mouth and smiled at me while he chewed. I could hear the crunch of sand between his teeth. I thought he looked about the same age as me, thirteen. He was dressed in jersey shorts and the top half of a wetsuit. He had a diamond earring in each of his ears and a little smudge of downy hair underneath his nose. As he swallowed the meat, he ran the back of his hand over his mouth and budding mustache.

"How'd you get those," I asked, motioning to the bag of shells. There were only four or five, but they were massive. The size of my face. Miguel tossed the empty shell in his hand out in front of him. Its inside was smooth and iridescent, like a flattened-out pearl.

"The ocean," he said, narrowing his eyes. I couldn't tell if he was making fun of me or not. Waves crashed onto the sand a few yards in front of us. I wanted to ask him if he was afraid, but thought better of it. I didn't want him attributing that fear to me instead.

"What's the knife for?"

"To pop 'em off the rocks," he said. "And for protection." He stabbed the knife into the air, ninja-style.

Then he stood up and pulled a sweatshirt over his head, pocketed the knife, and slung the bag of shells over his shoulder. He stood there for a second, looking out into the ocean, then stooped over, picked up the empty, glimmering shell, and threw it in my lap.

"Welcome to the neighborhood," he said.

I didn't know how Miguel knew that we were neighbors. I had never seen him before. His words made me think that he'd been looking at me, spying on me, and this made my stomach jittery with the possibility. I started to return the favor, keeping an eye on the house to our left, where he lived.

The house was even smaller than ours. A dozen or so young men lived there too, and as far as I could tell, there were no women. I had a hard time imagining how (and why) all those men, plus one boy, could fit inside the house.

"Cannabis farmers," Ellis told me. "They have farms all over these forests."

"Don't talk like that in front of Mira," my mother said. She poured herself a cup of coffee and wrapped her hands around it. She'd taken to wearing sweats and knitted sweaters, her hair in desperate need of a tint.

"What's cannabis?" I asked.

"Weed," Ellis said. He pinched his pointer finger and thumb together and kissed it with his lips. I laughed and brought my own fingers to my mouth, mimicking Ellis's pouted lips and half-opened eyes.

"Mira," my mother said. "Stop it."

The mornings were the only times I ever really saw my mother and brother. After my mother had her coffee, and Ellis had his scrambled eggs and sports drink, they wandered off. Nights were great because I had the TV all to myself. Eventually, I moved it into my room, laying it on a blanket and dragging it down the hall. When *Star Search* was on, I forgot all about my mother and brother, and even my father, wherever he was. It was a show that negated the past. It didn't matter what the contestants' real lives were like. It only mattered that they could sing. It only mattered that they could win. I borrowed my mother's duct tape and made a silver star, just like the one on the show's stage, on my bedroom floor.

But the days were different, and I loathed daytime programming—soap operas and talk shows that exposed their guests' ugly secrets. Paternity tests and sex changes. So I started going to the beach during the day to watch Miguel dive for abalone.

"Who are all those men you live with?" I asked him one day.

He shrugged. His catch of the day was spread out in front of us. After a while, I started to like the salty, squishy fish that he pulled out of the ocean. Some days, he'd only get one or two or none at all, but today he had at least half a dozen. I sat with a shell balanced on my kneecaps, scooping the meat into my mouth.

"A couple are my uncles," he said. "Some cousins. Some are just random dudes."

"Where are your parents?" I asked.

"Where's your dad?" he said.

It was my turn to shrug my shoulders now. My father had called the house a couple days ago, the first time since we'd moved. He called with a skimpy apology, and then he promised that we could spend the next summer with him, if we wanted. Ellis told him to go fuck himself. I asked him if he was serious about next summer, and he said, *Sure, of course*, as if he hadn't expected me to want to come. As if he had expected me to take my mother's side. But he wouldn't tell me where I'd be spending my summers with him. *We'll figure that out when the time comes*, he said. "Tokyo," I told Miguel. "Or else London. He travels a lot for his job. It's hard to keep track sometimes."

"He leave your mom for someone hotter or something?" he said.

I sucked in air too quickly at the question, and a little piece of fish caught itself in my windpipe. I coughed it up. It landed in my palm with a mess of foaming spit. I thought I might start to cry if Miguel said anything else, so I laughed at him instead.

"No," I said. "He would never leave us."

Miguel didn't laugh back at me. Instead, he said, "Right. Of course."

Then he took my hand and rubbed the spit and fish chunk off into the sand. I'd never held a boy's hand before. And even though I knew it wasn't like that—he was just cleaning my hand—my heartbeat quickened when his fingertips touched my skin.

"You should learn how to chew before you swallow," he said.

I used to practice singing too, of course. We all wanted to sing back then—every girl I knew. I guess we thought it was a way out of our lives, plus everyone would want to be you if you could sing on television. If some girl from the Midwest with a decent voice could get famous, then we all could. There was something about Beth Hart, though. Every week, she came on, and every week she sang as if she were fighting someone. As if the microphone were some guy who left her all alone and she wasn't going to

take it anymore. She kept winning, and as I watched her each week, it was like I was getting closer and closer to being on that stage.

I couldn't bring myself to talk about singing with Miguel, though. He was different. Not at all like my friends from back home—who had, by this time, dwindled down to a few girls that would still call me back. He wasn't even like any of the boys I knew. He was scrappy. Eternally covered in sea salt. And I didn't think he'd get it.

"What do you do with them?" I asked him one day, turning an empty shell in my hands. It was a bright day, unusually warm. When he'd gotten out of the water and found me half asleep and sunbathing on the beach, he had shaken his head and laughed. Then he stood above me and shook his head some more, so that little droplets of water and sand rained down on my face. It was rare for the sunshine to break through the fog like that, and this indulgence made us giddy.

"Save them," Miguel said.

"For what?"

"I don't know," he said, turning toward me. "Got any ideas?"

"Maybe," I said.

I made him show me later that day. A small part of me hoped he was saving them for me, even though I knew that wasn't realistic. He had the abalone shells heaped up next to a big redwood in the forest behind his house. It looked like a shrine or a memorial that you'd see on the side of the road where there'd been a car accident. The shells glowed neon in the setting sun.

"How many are there?" I asked.

He wasn't sure. We tallied the whole pile, which was about as half as tall as I was. We counted 154. Probably it was illegal to have that many. But Miguel said the farmers weren't too worried about having illegal things in the forest.

Later, we brought the uneaten abalone to the farmers, who barbequed the meat and ate them with a bottle of tequila. Miguel snuck us a Budweiser each. After I drank mine, I started humming a little bit, quietly at first, and not quite forming any words. My skin felt tingly from the beer, the way it does when someone whispers in your ear. The forest was black in front of

us, and the farmers were loud and laughing behind us. I sang a few bars. I can't remember the exact song anymore. Quite possibly, it was about love. When I finished the verse, I got shy and stopped. I asked Miguel for another beer. He smiled at me then.

"You have a real pretty voice," he said.

The next day, he showed up with two bananas and a McDonald's bag. "Mira, that boy is here," my mother had yelled through my closed bedroom door. I was still in my nightshirt when I opened the front door and saw him standing on our porch, the fast food bag hanging from his fist.

"Come on," he said, grinning and lifting his chin in a quick jerk that made his adam's apple bulge. "I want to show you something."

"Let me put on some clothes," I said.

"Or not."

"Shut up," I said, crossing my arms over my chest. "I'll be fast."

We were quiet as we moved through the redwoods—through the giants—but everything felt loud: the leaves beneath our feet, the birds above our heads. I'd never been this far into the forest before. As the terrain started to incline, I could feel myself sweat. Damp hands. Cheeks blushed. Little flickers of sunlight bounced through the boughs.

When the ground beneath us finally plateaued, I realized that we were at the cannabis farm. The plants gave off a sticky-sweet odor, each one at least a foot taller than me. Miguel stopped in front of me, between the neat rows of plants, took off his shirt and tied it around his head. I'd seen him without his shirt almost every day that summer, but it was different this time, his skin smooth and flush instead of prickled with a salty cold. "Hot," he said.

I wasn't sure if it was a statement or a question, but in response, I peeled off my own moist shirt. I could feel my skin beating beneath my thin, cotton bra. I could feel his eyes. He smiled, and I didn't know what I was supposed to do next. As I dropped my shirt to the ground, a loud noise came from behind the plants, like plastic buckets cracking, and a man in a dirty shirt and jeans stumbled out between us.

"The fuck?" he said, looking at Miguel and then at me. He started to

laugh when he saw me, my tiny breasts barely covered, then he turned to Miguel and said something I couldn't understand.

I grabbed my shirt, threw it over my head, and ran home, praying that everything in this town would just disappear. Including me.

I can't remember if he called my name or not. If he told me to wait, or if he just watched me run away from him.

There was a time when I told the rest of this story differently. A time when I said that I had been there the day that Miguel died. In some versions, I said that I had been in the water with him when the shark came, that he saw it coming and dangled the abalone sack in front of it to distract it from my own legs. Once, I told a therapist that I'd been waiting on the beach, unaware. I didn't know anything had happened, I said, until Miguel started dragging himself out of the water, a thick line of blood trailing behind him where his leg should have been.

It was the beginning of September, but school hadn't started yet. Our mother was in Stockton, taking care of some issues, as she called them, which Ellis and I both assumed meant our father. But we never said it. She'd left a twenty on the counter with a note that said we should buy ourselves pizza for dinner.

"I might be back late tonight," Ellis said, as he cooked me eggs on the stove. "So just go ahead and order without me."

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Just driving around," he said.

"Where?"

"You going to be down at the beach with that crush of yours?" He piled the eggs onto my plate and winked.

"He's not my crush," I said, remembering the farmer and my little-girl bra.

After Ellis left, I wandered around the house, in and out of each room. I opened my mother's closet and contemplated wearing one of her dresses. Dresses she hadn't worn since we moved. I opened her drawers and ran my fingers over her cupped, lace bras. I held one to my chest in the mirror, turning to get a glimpse of my fake-grownup silhouette.

The pages of her novel were stacked high on her desk, and a little pink quartz sat on top of them like a talisman. Under the pink rock was the title page—a nearly blank sheet with *Avicenna* written in small type in the center.

It was story that I knew well—a bedtime tale that our mother used to tell Ellis and me every night, for years, when we were little. I grew up with the main character, *Avicenna*, a dove-girl with wings like a warrior.

It had been years since I'd heard the story, and as I sat there with the pages, I lost myself in my mother's voice, muted but somehow more vivid on the page. More like how I wanted her to be. I ended up on the floor on my elbows, the pages underneath my chin. It was a cloudy day with no shadows, so I barely noticed as the room dimmed, darker and darker, into evening. By the time I had to turn on a lamp, I'd forgotten all about the beach and little pieces of raw flesh.

Miguel was dead by the time the paramedics got him to the hospital, so there probably wasn't anything I could have done. But that's not the kind of thing you want to live with. Not knowing.

That day he died, I didn't know it. I didn't have a bad feeling in my gut. I didn't run to the beach with a tourniquet. I didn't go knocking on the farmers' door, asking if they knew where Miguel was. (Although, these are all things that I've told people, at one point or another.) After I spent the afternoon reading my mother's novel, I watched the *Star Search* finals. Beth sat in the middle of the star on stage and sang softer than I'd ever heard her. I felt a part of something, watching her. A part of something real. I knew that she was wearing makeup, that there was special lighting, and that Ed McMahon was paid to say the things he said. But I didn't care. In that moment, it was real. I spent the rest of the night sitting in my duct-tape star, singing to the moon outside my window.

It wasn't until the next morning, Ellis running through the front door and into my room, that I knew anything had happened. He sat on the edge of my bed and put his hand on my shoulder. He'd been driving on the highway, past the hospital, and saw a line of news vans and a crowd of people. He'd gotten out and talked to some of them.

"Shark attack," they told him.

The news reporters had gotten a hold of Miguel's name from the hospital staff, and they were broadcasting it out to the world.

"I'm so sorry, Mira," Ellis said. But I didn't believe him. Not at first. It sounded like a movie to me.

The farmers had a funeral for Miguel the Saturday after he died at the closest Catholic Church, which was in Mendocino. My mother went with me. She wore a nice black dress and curled her hair in soft waves that framed her face. It was strange to have her there, so close. It was cold inside the church, and I had to sit on top of my hands to keep them warm.

The pews were packed with people mourning a child that none of them knew. They whispered to each other about the details. "The kid abalone diver," they called him.

The news stations were there too. They lined up along the street in their white vans, microphones and paper coffee cups in their hands. Miguel was famous now, all over the nightly news. Strangers whispered his name in the grocery store, and once, I woke up to find his face staring out at me from the front page of the newspaper. The farmers didn't want to talk about Miguel's death. They didn't have any comment about abalone diving or the safety of Pacific waters. They packed up and left town a few days after the funeral, afraid, I assume, that the media attention would somehow expose their illegal farms, tucked far and deep in the forest.

When the funeral service was over, my mother and I walked out to the bluffs that overlooked the water. A few reporters tried to stop us, but my mother drew me closer and put her hand up to their cameras. "I'm sorry," she said. I wasn't sure if she was talking to the reporters or to me.

"It's okay to cry, you know," she told me when we reached the bluffs. She was bent over the edge of the cliff, looking down at the crashing waves.

"What's the point?" I asked, even though I could feel the sobs bubbling into a knot in my throat. I wanted to fight with her. I wanted her to give me a reason. A reason why she never cried over my father and why I should start now over a dead boy.

"I don't know," she said, like a sigh. "Maybe there isn't one."

Then she got her keys out of her purse and tapped them at her side

three times, like she was getting cold or tired, or both. "Come on," she said. "Let's go home." She turned around and started walking toward the car, her heels tilting unsteadily on the pebble pathway.

I started to follow her, and I really meant to. I meant to get into the car and buckle my seatbelt and go home. I even thought about going out to the redwood tree behind Miguel's house and spreading his abalone shells out on the ground—I could spell his name, or arrange them like wings and lie between them. I imagined the sun bouncing off their green and pink insides. But instead, I walked past the crowded parking lot, back toward the church. I walked to where the white vans were parked and to a reporter in a tight blazer and pencil-cut skirt. Her hair was unnaturally shiny, like doll hair.

"I knew him," I said. But she didn't turn around, and I almost left right then. It was windy, and she probably didn't hear me. But I thought that maybe she did hear me, and that she didn't care that I knew him. I thought knowing him wasn't enough. So I said, a little louder this time, "I was there when the abalone diver died."

The reporter turned then and looked at me for a second or two, her eyebrows wrinkled together.

"Miguel was my best friend," I told her. "The only friend I have here." I pulled a strand of loose hair behind my ear. "Had here, I mean."

There were a lot of quick movements and a sense of panic as the woman grabbed her cameraman. She applied more lipstick and put down her microphone to adjust a spotlight. The man seemed to buckle under the weight of the camera. His belly shook like raw fish as he adjusted it on his shoulder. Finally, the reporter bent down in front of me and smoothed the front of my dress. She smelled sweet, like lilies and fresh plastic.

"Now just tell that camera exactly what you just told me," she said, smiling. "Do you think you can do that?"

"Okay," I said. And I did. It was just like how I'd imagined, and the story came out of me as if I'd rehearsed it, as if there were cue cards with big block letters next to the cameraman.

"I was so scared," I said, "but he was so brave."

Even though I was talking about Miguel, I started thinking about my

father. I imagined the camera pixelating my image, transporting it through thousands of miles of wires. I wondered if it'd ever reach him.

"I didn't think he was going to die," I heard myself say. "I didn't believe it."

The knot in my throat finally made itself known. And by the time my mother walked up to us, ready to pull me away and into to the car, the reporter was down on one knee, bringing my crying face into her shoulder with one hand and holding the microphone in front of us with the other.