

ISLAND OF THE DOLLS

REVIEWS FOR THE WORK OF JEREMY BATES

“Thriller fans and readers of Stephen King, Joe Lansdale, and other masters of the art will find much to love in this highly recommended, action-packed read.” — *Midwest Book Review* on *Island of the Dolls*

“An understated horror story that will remind readers what chattering teeth sound like.” — *Kirkus Reviews* on *Suicide Forest*

“[A] short, sharp shocker...Bates writes persuasively from Brian’s adolescent point of view, making the horror of his youthful reminiscences that much more intense.” — *Publishers Weekly* on *Black Canyon*

“Jeremy Bates has written a great book that would make a great Hollywood screenplay!” — *Suspense Magazine* on *The Taste of Fear*

“Big on suspense!” — *HorrorAddicts* on *Suicide Forest*

“A graphically violent story with building suspense and a moral about where weaving such a web may lead.” — *Booklist* on *White Lies*

“Jeremy Bates doesn't miss a trick.” — **Glenn Kleier**, *New York Times* bestselling author on *White Lies*

“A horror story like none other...makes for a read that will delight horror fans who want their novels steeped in psychological suspense as well as action.” — *Midwest Book Review* on *The Catacombs*

“This is one of those books that invites you to read it in one sitting.” — *Hellnotes* on *Suicide Forest*

Novels and novellas by Jeremy Bates:

SUICIDE FOREST

THE CATACOMBS

HELLTOWN

ISLAND OF THE DOLLS

WHITE LIES

THE TASTE OF FEAR

DARK HEARTS

BLACK CANYON

RUN

REWIND

NEIGHBORS

NEW AMERICA: UTOPIA CALLING

SIX BULLETS

BOX OF BONES

ISLAND OF THE DOLLS

WORLD'S SCARIEST PLACES: BOOK FOUR

JEREMY BATES

Ghillinein Books

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FIRST EDITION

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The novels in the *World's Scariest Places* series are set in real locations. The following is a Wikipedia “Island of the Dolls” excerpt:

A two-hour canal ride from Mexico City lies Isla de las Munecas, or the Island of the Dolls. It is the best-known *chinampa*, or floating garden, in Xochimilco. It belonged to a man named Julián Santana Barrera, a native of the La Asunción neighborhood. Santana Barrera was a loner, who was rarely seen in most of Xochimilco. According to the legend, Barrera discovered a little girl drowned in mysterious circumstances in the canals. He also found a doll floating nearby and, assuming it belonged to the deceased girl, hung it from a tree as a sign of respect. After this, he began to hear whispers, footsteps, and anguished wails in the darkness even though his hut—hidden deep inside the woods of Xochimilco—was miles away from civilization. Driven by fear, he spent the next fifty years hanging more and more dolls, some missing body parts, all over the island in an attempt to appease what he believed to be the drowned girl's spirit.

After Barrera's death in 2001—his body reportedly found in

the exact spot where he found the girl's body fifty years before—the area became a popular tourist attraction where visitors bring more dolls. The locals describe it as “charmed”—not haunted—even though travelers claim the dolls whisper to them. Professional photographer Cindy Vasko visited the nightmarish island and described it as the “creepiest place she has ever visited.” The excursion began through maze-like canals, surrounded by lush greenery and beautiful singing birds, but soon her boat was slowed down by a swarm of lily pads and the canal fell ominously silent. She told MailOnline: “At the end of the journey, the *trajinera* turned along a bend in the waterway and I was struck by a surreal vision of hundreds, maybe thousands, of dolls hanging from trees on the tiny island.”

The dolls are still on the island, accessible by boat.

2001

The bullfrog sat on a big green lily pad in the middle of the rotten-smelling pond. Its throat expanded like a balloon as it made a rusty croaking sound.

Eight-year-old Rosa Sánchez took another careful step toward it, then another, doing her best not to disturb the scummy water. She had taken off her sandals, and the mud on the bottom of the pond squished between her toes, feeling both good and gross at the same time.

The frog shifted its fat body on the lily pad so it seemed to stare right at her, its bulging eyes glistening.

Rosa froze, one foot in the air, stork-like.

The bullfrog croaked.

“Look away, frog,” Rosa mumbled in Spanish. “Look away.”

It didn’t, and Rosa, thinking she might topple over, get her clothes wet and stinky, set her lead foot down. Something sharp—a rock or a pokey bit of branch—jabbed the underside of her heel. She ignored the pain, keeping her eyes on the bullfrog.

It continued to stare back at her, its eyes unblinking. The air left the sack in its throat, and the bullfrog shrunk nearly in half. Still, it was a big sucker. And it was so close...

Rosa took another step and thought she might be able to grab it

now if she was quick enough. She stuck her hands out before her and tilted forward slowly.

The bullfrog sprang. Rosa's hands clutched its slimy flanks. But she was too slow. It plopped into the water and disappeared from sight.

Rosa's momentum, however, kept her moving forward. One uncoordinated step, two, then she dunked facefirst into the water. She closed her eyes but forgot to close her mouth and got a big gulp of what tasted like sewage. Her hands sank into the muddy bottom of the pond, then her knees, yet she managed to arc her back and keep her head from going completely under.

She made a noise like she was crying, though she wasn't crying, she was eight years old, a big girl, and big girls didn't cry when they fell in water. Still, she *wanted* to. She was soaked, a foul taste was in her mouth, and she couldn't get back to her feet. The mud sucking at her hands and knees was too slippery—

Now her head did go under. Water gushed into her ears, her nose, but at least she'd kept her mouth closed this time. When she burst back through the surface, she crawled, moaning, toward the bank, grabbing at tall grasses, roots, anything she could reach, until she was up on dry ground.

Rosa flopped onto her stomach, her eyes burning with tears. Then she sat up. Her clothes clung uncomfortably to her thin frame. And she stank like a toilet. Worse than a toilet. It reminded her of the smell when her big brother Miguel found the dead rat in the wall of their house, and told Rosa to take it out to the street.

Miguel. He was going to murder her. He was already mad at her for walking too slow when they got to the island and went looking for a spot to make camp. Then he got even madder be-

cause he wanted to kiss his girlfriend, but he couldn't do that with Rosa around. That's why he told Rosa to go do something. Rosa didn't want to at first. The island scared her with all of the dolls hanging from the trees or sitting on the ground, just staring at her with their painted faces and glass eyes. However, you didn't say "no" to Miguel, not unless you wanted to get a slap across your head, and so Rosa went, not planning to go far...and then she saw the pond. At first she wanted to muck around in the water a bit. She didn't know there would be bullfrogs. But there sure were; they were everywhere. She spotted three right away. Yet she wasn't careful then, and they all hopped off their lily pads and vanished beneath the water before she got close enough to catch one. It took her another fifteen minutes before she found the big fatty.

And now it was gone too, and she was dripping wet, and Miguel was going to call her names and slap her across the head—

A scream shattered the quiet.

Rosa jerked her head about.

That had been her brother's girlfriend, Lucinda.

Did Miguel jump out from somewhere and scare her, as he always liked to do to Rosa? Or did one of the dolls hanging from the trees come to life and attack her? That's what Miguel kept telling Rosa: the dolls were alive but they were just sleeping, and when you weren't looking they would—

Another scream.

Not Lucinda. Deeper, male.

Miguel?

Rosa didn't know, because she'd never heard her brother scream before, or at least not for years. Miguel wasn't afraid of

anything.

Rosa got to her feet, her soaked clothes forgotten.

Her eyes scanned the trees ahead of her, searching for movement, for Miguel to be sneaking from bush to bush—and that’s what this all was, wasn’t it? A joke, not on Lucinda, but on Rosa. Miguel got Lucinda to scream, then Miguel screamed too. As soon as Rosa went to investigate, they would jump out and scare her.

Rosa waited. The forest was silent. No wind. No crickets. Nothing.

“Miguel?” she said.

No reply.

Rosa picked up her sandals and began to walk back the way she came, toward the source of the screams. She knew Miguel was going to ambush her, but that was okay, because it would only be scary for a second, then everyone would be laughing. And that was better than how Rosa felt right now. Like she was sick, like she wanted to throw up.

Rosa left the glade with the pond. Trees closed tightly around her. She had to duck branches and watch where she stepped. The late afternoon seemed suddenly dark. She didn’t remember it being this dark earlier. Was that because the branches were blocking out the sun and sky? Or had a cloud passed before the sun?

“Miguel?” she said, though not very loud this time.

Because what if something else heard her?

Like what?

The dolls?

They couldn’t do anything to her. They were only dolls. Even if they came to life, she was a lot bigger than them.

But they got Miguel and Lucinda.

No they didn't! Rosa told herself severely. Miguel was joking around. He was going to jump out any second now.

He didn't jump out.

The forest remained silent and dark.

Maybe she should return to the pond and wait there for Miguel to grow bored of his game and come and get her? Then again, what if Miguel or Lucinda really were hurt? What if they needed her help?

Rosa continued forward, pushing through the thick foliage. She began to move quickly, heedless of the scratching branches and the sharp rocks and other deadfall beneath her bare feet. Then she was running. All she could hear was a thumping in her head and her loud breathing. Every tree looked the same, and she wondered if she was heading in the right direction. But she didn't stop. If she turned back, she would probably only get more lost. Besides, she was pretty sure the camp was right ahead. It couldn't be much farther.

She ducked around a tree—and ran into several dolls hanging from a low branch. She cried out and fell on her butt. Looking up, she recognized them from earlier: grimy, peeling, sinister.

That meant the camp was not very far away.

“Miguel!” she shouted. She could no longer suppress her fright.

“Rosa!” His voice came back, strangled, weak, filled with terror. “Go! Run!”

Rosa got to her feet. A sob caught in her throat, tight, painful.

“Miguel!”

“*Run*—” He was cut off abruptly.

Rosa hesitated a moment longer, then she turned and ran.

JACK

1

I woke up covered in my own blood. It had congealed between the right side of my head and the pillow, and I had to peel the damn pillow away, as if it were a crusty bandage. I held the pillow in front of me, staring in disgust at the brown splatter on the white slip. All the while I was trying to remember what had happened the night before.

I'd been having dinner with my fiancée, and her brother and his girlfriend. What a ball that had been. Listening to Jesus talk about himself all evening. That was Pita's brother's name, Jesus. Ironic how the one guy I'd ever met named after a god had an ego of a god to match. His girlfriend, Elizaveta, was far too good for him. Smart, down-to-earth, attractive. I didn't know how he landed her. Actually I did: money. Pita's and Jesus's father, Marco, turned a mom-and-pop restaurant and pub into a multi-million-dollar

brewery, and after Marco died of a brain aneurysm the year before, twenty-nine-year-old Jesus stepped up to the top position.

Setting the stained pillow aside, I touched the cut on my head, igniting a sharp pain that until then had been dormant. The cut ran from the outside of my eyebrow straight to my hairline. Dried blood crumbed beneath my fingertips and fell to the bed like red dandruff.

Recalling what happened, I cringed in embarrassment.

We'd been sitting on the back deck, the four of us. Dinner was finished. Jesus had been smoking one of his expensive cigars and going on about a skiing trip to Chile he and Elizaveta had gone on the previous winter. I was only half listening until he launched into some ridiculous story that had him backcountry skiing outside the ski resort's boundaries, which he reached by helicopter. I chuckled loudly. It wasn't that I didn't believe him. Pita once told me she and Jesus had gone on skiing trips every year when they were younger. So I assumed he was a decent enough skier. It was the bragging. Making sure to mention the chartered helicopter, the difficulty of the off-piste terrain, his entourage, which included a famous Mexican singer.

I wasn't nitpicking or being overly critical of Jesus. Everything the guy said and did was orchestrated to make him look good, to make people want to admire him, to see him as the apotheosis of success. Yet at the same time it was all layered in humility, like he was just one of the guys. His efforts were so transparent he became a caricature, a joke. You couldn't help not laughing at him sometimes.

Jesus asked me what was funny. I told him nothing, please continue. The back and forth escalated, the insults becoming sharper,

Pita and Elizaveta telling us to stop. Then the asshole took a cheap shot, bringing up the accident that ended my racecar driving career, saying I didn't have the guts anymore to break the speed limit.

I could have taken a swing at him. I should have. Instead I went inside to take a leak. I didn't return to the deck. I went to the second floor, to the balcony that overlooked the deck and the adjacent swimming pool. I climbed atop the railing so I stood precariously on the headrail, yelling that I was going to jump into the pool below, challenging Jesus, the fearless alpine skier, to do the same.

It was probably a good thing I slipped. Roughly ten feet separated the balcony and pool, and had I jumped, I might not have reached the water. But that's what happened, I slipped—or lost my balance, it was all a blur—falling backward and cracking my head on something. I have no idea what. All I remember was the exploding pain—loud was how it felt—then the gushing blood, then everyone gathered around me. They wanted to call an ambulance, but for some reason I didn't want them to. I guess I didn't want to spend the night in the hospital. Then I was in the shower. I seem to recall standing there for a very long time, watching pink water swirl down the drain.

Grimacing, I pushed myself off the bed now, to my feet. I felt momentarily lightheaded, likely due to a loss of blood. I was in the guest bedroom. Not surprising. Pita wouldn't have let me sleep in our bed bleeding like I'd been, even if it was my house. And what had she been thinking letting me go to sleep with a serious head wound? I know I said I didn't want her to call an ambulance, but she should have done so regardless. I might not have woken up at all.

Light streamed through the window, all too bright, almost audible, like a horn. I wondered what time it was. I stepped into the pine-paneled hallway and went to the bathroom because I heard running water.

I knocked on the door lightly, then opened it. Steam fogged the mirror. Pita stood beneath the shower spray, her mocha-colored back and butt to me, her hands massaging either shampoo or conditioner into her dark hair.

“Hey,” I said, the word coming out brittle. My throat was as dry as if I’d eaten a handful of saltine crackers.

When we first began dating some five years before, Pita would have turned all the way around, showing off her body. Now she only turned her head slightly so she could see me sidelong. She lowered an arm across her breasts.

“You’re alive,” she said in her Spanish-accented English.

“Barely,” I said.

“So does that mean you’re not coming anymore?”

“Coming?”

“Don’t you remember anything from last night?”

That irked me, but I said, “Where are we going?”

“You really don’t know?”

“I wouldn’t have asked if I did.”

“Maybe if you didn’t drink so much—”

“Forget it, Pita.”

I was about to close the door when she said, “Isla de las Muñecas,” and went back to washing her hair.

2

Man, I really had been black-out drunk. But a light switched on inside my head, the darkness shrouding my memories cleared, and the rest of the evening came back in snippets. Isla de las Muñecas. Island of the Dolls. That was the reason Jesus and Elizaveta had come by. We'd spent most of dinner discussing the details of the excursion. We'd agreed to leave at 10 a.m. Jesus and Elizaveta would pick up Pepper, then come by my house. Pita and I would follow them in my car to Xochimilco, where we would embark on a two-hour boat ride to the island.

Pepper was a host for a Mexican copycat of The Travel Channel, a basic cable show that featured documentaries and how-to programs related to travel and leisure around the country. He caught a break at the beginning of his career when he got a regular gig as a presenter on episodes featuring animal safaris, tours of grand hotels and resorts, lifestyle stuff—and in the process became a bit of a mini celebrity. Nevertheless, it wasn't until last year that things took off for him due to a documentary he hosted on El Museo De Las Momias, or The Mummies' Museum. The story went that after a cholera outbreak in the nineteenth century the city cemetery in Guanajuato was filling up so quickly that a local tax was imposed demanding relatives to pay a fee to keep the bodies interred. Most relatives couldn't pay or didn't care, the bodies were disinterred, and the best preserved were stored in a building. In the 1900s, entrepreneurial cemetery workers began charging tourists a

few pesos to check out the bones and mummies—and the place has since become a museum displaying more than a hundred dried human cadavers, including murder victims, a Spanish Inquisition victim in an iron maiden, criminals buried alive, and children laid to rest dressed up as saints. Most were so well preserved that their hair, eyebrows, and fingernails were still intact, and nearly all of their mouths were frozen in eternal screams, a result of the tongue hardening and the jaw muscles slackening following death.

The documentary proved to be a huge hit, so Pepper pitched The Travel Channel an ongoing series titled *Mexico's Scariest Places*. They liked the idea, and Pepper's next project took him to La Zona del Silencio, or The Dead Zone, a patch of desert in Durango that got its moniker after a test missile launched from a US military base in Utah malfunctioned and crashed in Mexico's Mapimi Desert region. The missile was carrying two containers of a radioactive element. A big US Air Force recovery operation lasted weeks—and made the region a pseudo Area 51 ripe with myths and urban legends regarding mutations of flora and fauna, lights in the sky at night, aliens, magnetic anomalies that prevented radio transmissions, the whole works.

Pepper has since done several other episodes in the series—most of which focused on haunted mansions and shuttered asylums and the like—but the Island of the Dolls had always been his golden egg so to speak. Problem was, the island was private property. The owner had recently died, and his nephew was now in charge—and he repeatedly refused to allow Pepper and his film crew access to the island. The Travel Channel, for their part, gave Pepper the unofficial go-ahead for the documentary, telling him if he got footage, great; if he got busted doing so, they didn't know

anything about it.

That was where Pita and I came in. Pepper didn't want to go to the island alone, and we didn't have any affiliation with the television network. I had been looking forward to the trip until Jesus got wind of it a few days ago and, in his blustering fashion, insisted he and Elizaveta come as well.

Pita was rinsing her hair now. Milky white soap streamed down her back. I asked her, "We still leaving at ten?"

"Yes," she said without looking at me.

"What time is it now?"

"You have half an hour to get ready."

I groaned, wondering if I could pull myself together in time.

"You don't have to come," she told me, turning enough I could see the side of her left breast.

"I already told Pepper I would."

"I'm sure he would understand—your head and everything."

"Would you mind?" I asked cautiously, wondering whether I was walking into one of her traps. I would agree with her, only for her to pounce, accuse me of never wanting to do anything with her, of disliking her brother, something along those lines. Her machinations would have been amusing had they not always been directed at me.

"I think you should rest, Jack," she said. "That's what I think. But it's up to you."

3

Jesus and crew arrived forty minutes later in Jesus's brand new Jaguar X-Type. The vehicle suited him: all show, little substance. Because under the prancing cat hood ornament, and leather and wood interior, it was nothing but an all-wheel-drive Ford Mondeo. Jesus likely didn't know that. He would have purchased it because it was the type of car a young, affluent guy should be driving.

While Pita went out to greet everyone—wearing a chambray shirt with roll-tab sleeves and cutoff jean shorts that showed off the bottom curve of her ass—I went to the garage and loaded our daypacks into my three-year-old Porsche 911. It was parked next to a junked '79 Chevrolet Monte Carlo. I used to own the same make and model as a kid in Vegas. I'd worked in an auto-repair shop for three years to save enough money to buy it. When I turned eighteen and got my racing license, I began racing four nights a week at the local tracks. I consistently finished middle to back of the pack, but I nevertheless became a fan favorite because of my name. The race track announcers thought Jack Goff sounded like a joke and took every opportunity to mention it over the PA system to the delight of the crowd. Soon nobody was calling me Jack anymore. It was always Jack Goff. Announcers, interviewers, fans, whoever. It had that two syllable cadence—and of course innuendo—that made you want to say the whole thing.

I never won a checkered flag with the Monte Carlo, but it was my first race car, and I had some of my fondest memories in it.

That's why I bought the junker to restore a few months ago. It was a pet project, a way for me to fill in the days now that I was finished racing.

I got behind the wheel of the Porsche and rolled down the driveway until I came nose to nose with the Jaguar. Elizaveta, in shotgun, her face hidden behind a large sunhat and sunglasses, flashed me a smile and a wave, which I reciprocated. Jesus had his window open, his elbow poking out, as he spoke with his sister. His hair as always was impeccably neat, the sides short, the top parted to the left and slicked back. He wore Aviator sunglasses and a day's stubble he no doubt considered fashionable. The glare of the sun on the windshield prevented me from seeing Pepper in the backseat, and I was wondering if I should get out to say hi when Jesus and Pita finished their chat.

Jesus finally acknowledged me, tipping a grin and tooting the Jaguar's horn. I squeezed the steering wheel tighter and wondered why I had decided to come. But I had little choice. As I'd told Pita, I'd already committed to Pepper. I would be copping out if I gave him some excuse, especially given my head didn't hurt that much. In fact, my hangover bothered me more than the gash. I felt heavy, unmotivated, blah—but okay enough for a daytrip. Besides, Jesus's company or not, I was still interested in seeing the infamous Island of the Dolls.

Cranking up the volume of some Mexican song heavy on the base, Jesus reversed onto the street, swung about, and started off. Pita hopped in next to me in the Porsche.

A couple of minutes into the ride she began humming to herself. She'd pulled her thick wavy hair into a ponytail, away from her face, which was sculptured with faultless features. Long-

lashed, coyote-brown eyes (which she liked to say were hazel); a straight nose so unremarkable you didn't notice it, which was a plus when it came to noses; full lips more playful than pouty; angular cheekbones, and a gently rounded chin.

Pita's hums transformed into words, a Spanish song I recognized from the radio. She sang it softly under her breath. She had a throaty singing voice.

"What's up?" I asked her.

She glanced at me. "What do you mean?"

"You're in a good mood."

"I'm not allowed to be in a good mood?"

"I just mean...what were you and God talking about?"

"Don't call him that."

"I don't to his face."

"He calls you Jack."

What she meant was, he didn't call me Jack Goff. And she was right; he didn't. Not to my face anyway. I said, "What were you and your brother talking about?"

"Nothing."

"You were chatting for five minutes."

"He's my brother, Jack. We were just talking."

"About the weather? The trip?"

"What does it matter?"

"I'm making conversation, Pita."

"No, you're making it sound like we were conspirating or something."

I didn't correct her mispronunciation. She sometimes got certain English words mixed up or wrong altogether. Conspirating/conspiring was one I'd never heard before though.

“How’s Pepper?” I asked, changing topics.

“Excited.”

“Does he still want to interview you?”

“Yes, he will give me what he wants me to memorize on the boat. He wants you to say some things too.”

“I’m not going on film.”

“He really wants you to.”

“Why doesn’t he ask Jesus?”

“Because Jesus is too well known.”

“And I’m not?”

“We’re not in America anymore, Jack,” she said. “I’m talking about Mexico. People here know my brother. They don’t know you.”

It was true. I only stood out in this country because I was white, and because of my height. That anonymity was the initial appeal of moving down here. Having said that, my exit from racing had been a pretty big deal, and I could only imagine ESPN getting their hands on a copy of Pepper’s “Island of the Dolls” episode and airing a clip of me with the headline: “NASCAR Rookie of the Year, Jack Goff, Turned Paranormal Investigator for Mexican TV.”

“I’m not going on film,” I repeated.

Jesus stopped at a red light. I pulled up beside him. I was staring ahead at nothing in particular, going over the directions to Xochimilco in my head, when I heard the Jag’s engine rev.

I looked past Pita and saw Jesus grinning at me. He revved the engine louder and longer.

“Is he serious?” I said.

“Don’t you dare think about racing him,” Pita said.

“I’ll cream him,” I said, grinning myself.

Jesus started blipping the throttle, making the Jag go vroom vroom and sound sporty.

I depressed the clutch, shoved the Porsche into gear, and brought the engine up to 5k RPM.

“Jack!” Pita shouted above the noise. “You’re not racing him!”

“The road’s clear.”

“Jack—!”

Jesus jumped the start before the light changed. I dumped the clutch and nailed it. The tires let out a brief squeal, the revs went to redline. My head snapped back. Jesus’s head start had given him a fender length on me, but I gained it back on the shift to second.

We remained side by side through to third gear. I wasn’t worried because I knew I would out-per-mile him when I hit fourth.

And sure enough, by the time we were both in high gear, I’d put a car length on him with no trouble.

“Slow down, Jack!” Pita said.

Given I was doing ninety in a forty zone, and now two car lengths ahead of Jesus, I figured I’d proven my point. I let off the throttle.

Instead of backing down, however, Jesus ripped past me.

“Little prick,” I grunted, gunning it again.

“Jack!” Pita said.

We were approaching an onramp to the freeway that ran east-west across the middle of Mexico City. Jesus hit it without slowing. I did too.

Pita was still shouting over the roar of the flat-6—only now she sounded more scared than angry, her shrieks punctuated with “Stop!” and “We’re going to die!” But there was no way I was

backing off. Not until I put the poser in his place.

Jesus and I moved into the left lane, passing traffic at more than a hundred miles per hour. I parked myself on his ass, riding his slipstream.

I veered slightly to the right, to see ahead and to make my move to overtake—when I noticed one of the cars we thundered past had lights on top and “Policia” written down the flank.

A moment later the cop swung into the left lane behind me, siren wailing.

“Jack, you have to pull over! You’re going to get us arrested! Pull over! Jack!”

Jesus overtook a red sedan in front of him, swinging back into the left lane. I stuck with him for the next five hundred yards, whipping around several more vehicles.

“Jack!” Pita all but wailed. “Please!”

And I conceded.

Speeding down the far side of an overpass, I glanced in the side mirror, didn’t see the police car, and locked up the brakes, squeezing in between two freight semis in the right lane to the tune of bovine air horns and flashing high beams.

Several long seconds later the cop blasted past me none the wiser.

Jesus’s problem now.

4

When we reached Xochimilco an hour later, I followed signs that read “*los embarcaderos*”—the piers—to Cuemanco, one of nine locations that offered access to the ancient Aztec canal system. It was where we had agreed to meet the others. I parked in a busy parking lot, retrieved our daypacks from the trunk of the Porsche, and handed Pita hers. She took it silently and started toward the strip of ramshackle buildings that separated the parking lot and the waterfront. I fussed through my bag for a minute, checking the sparse contents. It wasn’t necessary. I knew what I’d packed. But Pita and I needed a bit of space.

After we had evaded the cop, Pita had spent the next ten minutes yelling at me in a mix of English and Spanish, saying I was crazy, I could have killed them, all because of my ego. I didn’t argue with her. She was right. Street racing was stupid and reckless. So I listened stoically to her tirade, which seemed to incense her all the more. Eventually, however, she ran out of fury and called Jesus on her cell phone. As it turned out, he ended up pulling over and paying off the cop. I didn’t pick up any more details than that, and Pita refused to speak to me, let alone elaborate, after she hung up.

Nevertheless, the outcome was what I’d expected. This was Mexico after all, and just about every cop could be bought. Some actively searched out bribes. I’d learned this firsthand my first week in the country. A cop pulled me over on some empty stretch

of road and told me I'd been speeding, which I hadn't been. He took my driver's license as a "guarantee" and said I could either get it back on the spot if I paid him one hundred fifty American dollars, or I could follow him to the police station, where I would have to pay two hundred fifty. It was clearly a scam, I got pissed off, and tried to swipe my license from his clipboard. He accused me of being *aggressivo* and doubled the fine. We continued to argue until I gave up. I paid him one hundred sixty—all I had on me—which he was more than happy to accept.

I closed the Porsche's trunk with a heavy thud, slung my day-pack over my shoulder, and went to the docks.

5

The boardwalk along the canal was filled with people and a general air of festivity. Gondola-type barges called *trajineras* lined the bank for as far as I could see. Most were the size of a large van, featuring a roof for shade, open-aired windows, and tables and chairs for picnicking. They were painted a spectrum of colors, ornately decorated, and for some reason bore female names.

I scanned the crowd for Pita—I had little trouble seeing over all the dark-haired heads—but I didn't spot her anywhere. I wasn't too concerned. I had my cell phone. If I didn't bump into her sooner or later, I could call her, or she could call me.

I started along the boardwalk. Merchants called to me from their market stalls, hawking wares that ranged from handicrafts and T-shirts to embroidered clothing, linens, sandals, and other souvenirs.

A walking vendor fell into step beside me. He was short and wore white pants and a white shirt over his padded frame. Smiling, he asked what I was looking for.

“My friends,” I said.

“You want watch? Rolex? You want Rolex?”

“No, thanks.”

“What you want? Marijuana? Pills? I get you anything.”

I shook my head, pulling away from him.

“Hey, man!” he called after me. “Girls? You want girls? I give you my sister! Cheap!”

Another fifty yards on I came to two old women selling banana-leaf tamales. I realized I hadn’t eaten anything all morning, and I bought two, one stuffed with chicken and salsa, the other with refried beans.

I found a bench to sit on and dug into the tamales. Two of the best things about living in Mexico, I believed, were the weather and the food. It was pretty much spring-like year round with zero humidity, and the greasy street meat was made with crack or something it was so addictive.

I gave the last bite of my second tamale to a flea-riddled mutt that had been eyeing it hungrily, and I was thinking about getting a third when the vendor who tried to sell me his sister spotted me and came over.

“My man!” he said, sitting next to me. “How’s the tamale? Good, yes? You like Mexican food?”

“I’m not a tourist,” I told him. “I live here.”

“You live here? Where?”

I wasn’t going to tell him my neighborhood, as it was one of the pricier ones in Mexico City, so I simply told him the name of the general borough.

“So what you do?” he asked.

“Listen, I don’t want to buy anything.”

He smiled. “No problem. No problem. But where’re your friends? Maybe they want a watch? I have Cartier too. Anything they want.”

I stood and continued along the boardwalk again. The tout caught up to me.

“So you and your friends going down the canals, huh?” he said. “You need a boat? I get you good price.”

“My friend already organized one.”

“Your friend, huh?” I felt him looking at me like he didn’t believe me, or like I was brushing him off, which I was.

“Yeah, my friend. He’s filming that island with the dolls. He’s organized everything. The boat. The tickets. We don’t need anything.”

“You go Isla de las Muñecas?” he said.

I realized I’d said too much, and I was planning to ignore the tout, keep walking, but the expression on his face caused me stop. I couldn’t tell if it was fear or anger.

“What?” I asked.

“You go Isla de las Muñecas?” he repeated.

“No,” I said. “We’re not going *to* it. We’re going around it.” I made a curlicue gesture with my finger. “Take some pictures, come back. Just tourists, okay?” I started away, but his hand seized

my wrist tightly.

“You don’t go there.”

“Let go of me.”

Passersby were looking curiously at us, and I was starting to get angry myself. I tried pulling my arm free from his grip. He wouldn’t let go.

“Why you film there?”

“Let go of me.”

“Why you film there?”

“Last warning.”

“You go,” he said, lowering his voice to a threatening whisper, “you die.”

I stared at the guy, wondering if maybe he was crazy. Perspiration had popped out on his forehead. The cheerfulness was gone from his face, replaced with tension. His black eyes held mine.

My cell phone rang, breaking the terse moment. I yanked my arm free and took the phone from my pocket.

“Yeah?” I said, moving again, blending into the flow of traffic on the boardwalk.

“Where are you?” It was Pita.

“I just got something to eat.”

“Everyone’s waiting for you.”

“Everyone’s here? Where? I didn’t know where you went.”

“About four hundred meters east of where we parked. You’ll see a restaurant with a green awning. The *trajinera* is out front.”

“I’ll be there soon.”

We hung up.

Stuffing the phone back in my pocket, I glanced over my shoulder, expecting to see the nut job staring after me.

He was gone.

1950

1

María Diaz was born premature at thirty-two weeks via an emergency caesarian section. She weighed three pounds thirteen ounces. She passed all the typical tests and was deemed a perfectly healthy baby. When she was one week old, however, her heartrate skyrocketed. Her parents rushed her back to the hospital, where she suffered twenty-two seizures over the next twelve hours. As epilepsy was not well understood then, her pediatrician assumed hemorrhaging in the brain and confidently told her parents she wouldn't survive the night.

María was now four years old. She knew nothing of what happened during that eventful first week of life, of course. Like most four year olds, her knowledge was largely restricted to her immediate environment, which included her house and the street out front of it.

Currently María stood before a shelf in the house's playroom, deciding which dolls would participate in her morning tea party. Her first choice was Angela, who was dressed in a lacy blue dress and bonnet. She was a Rock-a-bye Baby, which meant at nighty-night time you had to rock her until her eyes closed and she fell asleep. María carried her carefully to the small table and set her in a chair. She flopped forward, her heavy rubber head clonking the tabletop. "No more sleeping," María told her sternly and sat her upright. She waited to make sure Angela wouldn't move on her own again. Satisfied, she returned to the shelf. Eight dolls stared back at her, but there were only two available seats at the table. After some contemplation, María decided on Miss Magic Lips. She was wearing her pink dress with glitter-net trim, and she was smiling, showing her three front teeth, which meant she was happy. When she was unhappy she pressed her lips together and cried.

Not wanting to make a third trip to the table, María also grabbed Teddy, who wore nothing but an apricot-colored sweater. He was a bear and not a doll, but he was a friendly bear and got along with everyone.

At the table she sat Miss Magic Lips to the left of Angela, and Teddy to her right. They were better behaved than Angela, and neither of them tried to go to sleep. Pleased, María went to the chest in the corner and mused through the toys for the necessary saucers, tea-cups, and kettle. She set the table, then said, "Thank you everyone for coming to my tea party. Who wants some tea?"

"I do!" Angela said, though it was really María speaking in a higher pitched voice.

"Here you go, Angela," María said, reverting to her normal

hostess tone. She poured imaginary tea into her cup. “Who else?” she asked.

“Me!” Miss Magic Lips said.

“You’re happy today, Miss Magic Lips,” María observed, pouring tea into her cup.

“I want a cupcake,” Angela said.

“I don’t have any cupcakes.”

“Can you bake some?”

María looked at the pink stove by the wall and said, “Well, maybe. But Teddy still needs his tea. Right, Teddy?”

“Yes, please.”

She filled his cup.

“Can I have honey with it?” he asked.

“I only have sugar. Is that okay?”

“Yes, please.”

She picked up an imaginary cube of sugar and dropped it in his cup.

“I want a cupcake!” Angela said.

María sighed and went to the oven. She turned some knobs and said, “Okay, they’re baking.”

Back at the table, she took her seat opposite Angela, poured herself a cup of tea, then raised it to her lips. “Oohh. It’s very hot! Be careful every—”

She never finished the sentence.

2

María's mother knelt before her, a worried expression on her face. María blinked, slowly, torpidly, like a housecat after it had been fed. When did her mother arrive? Was she here for the tea party too? She was speaking to her. "Answer me, María," she said. "Are you okay? Can you hear me?"

"I'm having a tea party, Mom," she said.

"I see that, sweetheart. But just now, what were you thinking?"

María frowned. "That the tea was hot."

"That's all?"

She nodded. "Why?"

"You didn't answer me when I came in the room. You were staring off into space."

"I was thinking the tea was hot."

"That's all?"

"That's all."

Her mother seemed relieved and hugged her.

"Are you here for the tea party?" María asked into her shoulder.

Her mother released her. "No, honey. It's lunchtime. I made you tortillas."

"I *love* tortillas."

"Then let's go eat."

"What about my tea party?"

"You can finish it later. Your dolls won't mind, will they?"

“Angela might. She doesn’t like waiting.”

“That’s part of learning how to become a little lady. Sometimes you have to be patient.”

“Angela,” María told her, “you have to be patient.”

Angela stared back at her.

“Be good while I’m gone,” she added. Then she followed her mother from the playroom to the kitchen for lunch.

