

UNDER THE AZURE DEE

"C'mon, get outta my face!"

"Give me the remote!"

Mark and Jennifer had been bickering on and off for an hour. Their voices, louder now, reached up the spiral stairs into the lookout room where Randall was peering through binoculars. He was watching a sloop a few hundred yards off shore. A slim woman with flying blond hair and only a bikini bottom was hauling down the jib. Like a weathervane, the sloop pivoted on its anchor, and Randall read *Dora Lee* on the stern. Then he returned to the bruise-colored cumulus building on the horizon. He had just noticed the woman and the clouds. For a long time he had been simply staring out the window. He lifted the binoculars again just in time to see her slide under the boom and disappear below decks.

"Daddy!"

The cat jumped from Randall's desk. She had the coat of a Siamese but not the face, not the china blue eyes. Her ringed tail and legs were like comic pajamas. Randall tabled the binoculars and watched her stretch. "Gamine," he said, "that's a good idea," and stretched from side to side, then rotated his head. At forty-three, he had thick sandy hair, muscular tennis legs, and wore white Docker shorts and a green polo shirt. He twisted down the narrow metal stairs into a darkened living room. "Why the drawn drapes?"

"Darkness suits us," said Jennifer.

"Suits you, ditso," said Mark, "Not me."

"You're as mean as Daddy."

Randall said, "Why is somebody so upset?"

Jennifer was fourteen. Thin and pale, she wore an extra large Nirvana T-shirt and had long dark hair. "Somebody's upset because somebody's so selfish. *Wuthering Heights* is on the movie channel, and that's on my summer reading list."

"Mmm, there should be a solution to this."

"Mmm, well, yes, naturally," mocked Jennifer. "Christ, I'm not one of your clients looking for a loan. Nothing bothers you two. Just alike."

"Jennifer, please?"

Mark said, "She's wigged because I'm watching World Cup." Well tanned, Mark was in surfer trunks, shirtless, and sprawled on the aqua-colored modular sofa with his Braves cap backwards.

"I should wash my hands of both of you," she said.

"Your brother will be leaving for college in two months, Jennifer. You'll have the TV all to yourself. We should try to help each other, not hurt each other."

She snorted. "Where's Gamine?"

"She's upstairs."

Mark said, "It's not like I don't have a special interest in this sport. It's paying my way to college, remember, ditso?"

"Duh, it's not like we don't get reminders." Jennifer flung herself onto the sofa, sitting with her knees drawn up under her chin. "Daddy, tell him not to call me that."

"Mark—"

"Okay, Dad."

Into a lull, the sportscaster's voice erupted, grew wild, fans roaring.

"Baggio's fantastic," said Mark. "Man, it's like magic feet. Second goal in two minutes."

Jennifer put her forehead to her knees, hiding her face.

Catching Mark's eye, Randall said, "We might be feeling sorry for ourselves. Let's get out of these shadows and go for a walk on the beach."

Jennifer said, "I wish we never moved into this house. And don't say, 'Your mother would have wanted it.' I'm sick of that."

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Randall drove over the bridge to Discovery Divers and pulled into a spot next to the dock. The largest dive boat, the *Azure Dee*, was gone, out on a charter. Kids were jumping off and splashing around a yacht at anchor. Randall walked over crushed shells to the shop.

Janet was using a pole with a hook to hang a Darlexx wet suit from the rafter above a display of Scubapro regulators, masks, and fins. Before she noticed Randall, a guy clapped him on the back and said, "Hey, way you been, man?"

"Oh, around," said Randall.

It was Itchy. Randall couldn't remember his real name. He was bulky from weights and had a mustache that swept from lips to jowls. He was in the diving course Randall and Mark had taken from Janet almost a year ago.

"Around? Hey, Janet, would you believe it? Randy says he's been around."

Behind Itchy, Janet gave Randall a great knowing wink. "Oh, I'll bet he has," she said.

"So what have *you* been up to?"

"Little as possible," said Itchy. He gave Janet a kind of leer as she moved off to help a customer. Lowering his voice, he said, "I'm not buying anything else in here, I'll tell you that. Vic never has sales. He's tight, tight as a crab's ass, and that's water-tight. See what I'm saying?"

Randall laughed. Since her divorce, Janet had been making new friends. Maybe Itchy was the latest. When Janet came back, he said, "Wha' say we grab us some lunch over at the Dock House?"

"Good idea," said Janet.

"Randy, we gone lighten you up. Look, I'll meet y'all. I got me a few calls to make."

Watching Itchy leave, Janet rolled her eyes, then smiled at Randall. "I've got some good news."

"What?"

"Be patient. Let me get my purse."

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They sat under a candy-striped awning on the upper verandah of the Dock House. Across the channel, eelgrass fringing the island was vivid green. A school of menhaden dimpled far-side shallows. Janet studied his face and gave him a wink. "So, how's the weather?"

Randall grinned. "Well, I think I believe in God."

"Good, eight months ago you didn't."

"Well, I prayed Itchy wouldn't show, and it appears my prayers have been answered."

Janet said, "Poor Itchy."

"Poor! How so?"

"He's living some kind of fantasy."

"Well, everybody has some kind of fantasy. You're mine. That's why the thought of you getting tight with—"

"Yeah, right!"

"At the shop, he was checking you out, smacking his lips. Actually, I can't blame him. You're looking pretty good."

"Thanks, we do our best." Janet had round green eyes. The bones of her cheeks were high, and when she smiled, fine spokes appeared around eyes that always seemed interested. She was thirty-one, trim, with short dark hair and a swimmer's sculpted shoulders.

"So what's this good news?" Randall asked.

"Well, Vic bought another boat, an old oil rig shuttle that he's had refitted for diving. He's opening up a new dive shop. And, tra-la, he wants me to manage it, hire a skipper, dive instructors, the whole nine yards."

"Great!"

Their waiter, a university student in deck shoes and safari shorts, set down utensils wrapped in a cloth napkin, a basket of hush puppies, and two tall glasses of iced tea with lemon slices.

Randall said, "So where's the new shop going to be?"

"South Carolina, Charleston."

"Charleston! Whoa, right through the heart. I thought you said *good* news."

"It is."

Randall looked at the island and shook his head. "For *you*. Why have I been thinking *us* for the last few months?" Across the channel, three of the island's wild horses topped the tallest dune, slowly moved downward into cedar shadows, hit the sun again, and followed each other westward along a narrow ridge of hard sand.

"It's not like it's going to be easy to leave," Janet said. "But it's an opportunity for me to be a free agent. With my ex, I was a nothing."

The breeze shifted and he could smell her hair, a faint scent of shampoo. She tilted her head, and the sun made the thin partition between her nostrils rosy, her skin a pliant bronze.

"Do I make you feel like nothing?"

"That's not the point," she said.

"It is if I've been good for you."

She squinted, watching the horses. "It's possible we've been conveniently using each other."

Randall breathed through his nose, then slapped the table. "Well, I guess I don't believe in God any more."

She laughed. "You're in much better shape now."

"Have you said yes to Vic?"

"Not yet." She reached over, adjusted his collar.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked.

"I just told you," she said, "It's something I have to do."

"I thought we had some kind of dibs on each other."

Janet laughed. "Be careful, you don't want to break down and use the L-word, do you?"

"Anything you want."

"You know, this is the first time we've been in public in this town. It's always been at night aboard the *Dee*, or in one of those empty houses you appraise for the bank. Dinner in some out of the way place."

Randall said, "Come on. It's too soon for my kids. You know that. Especially Jennifer. Maybe even Mark. He still goes to the cemetery by himself sometimes. Jenny still hasn't put back the weight. And she thinks that because I've kept my tears to myself, kept working, and haven't seen a shrink, I'm some kind of monster. She's precocious, she's—"

"She's almost fifteen, Randy. Don't you think this very bright girl can understand her father might have needs that involve another woman?"

Randall began to laugh. "*Needs*, I like that. Let's steer clear of that L-word. We might wind up saying something we'd be sorry for."

A Bermudan ketch with no protruding wheel house or hatch covers chugged up the waterway for the open sea, its brightwork catching the sun.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Janet said. "All the teak handrails and hatch covers really give it class."

"She could weather some rough seas too," Randall said. "You want to buy one?" He winked. "I could arrange a loan."

She chanted, "People at the bank'll figure it out."

"I'm sure people at the bank already have. This is a small town. Tell me something."

"Shoot."

"Is it this new opportunity, or are you just bored with me?"

A guy in scuffy work shoes and dusty Levis, a hammer sheath on his hip, came out of the bar. He stopped at the table. "Hey, how's it going?"

"Pretty good," said Randall. "How's business?"

"Great. Got more work than I can handle."

"This is Janet, a friend of mine."

"Hey."

After he left, Janet said, "Who was that?"

"Guy named Borden. A couple years ago, he was at the end of his string. We made him a loan to start a building and remodeling business."

Janet laughed. "In one day, we've gone from sneak around to meeting the public. That's progress."

"You not leaving would be the only progress I care about."

"Don't," she said, and looked out at the island again. "Okay? I don't know, I'm afraid we might be clutching at straws."

Horses, one after another, their wind-lifted manes like fire, disappeared around the natural curve of the shore.

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Randall drove over the high bridge, an archipelago of eelgrass islands strung out below. When he got back home, the Wrangler was gone.

"Jennifer?"

The house was empty. He took a beer from the refrigerator and climbed to the lookout room. The *Dora Lee* was gone. He stood and watched purple-black thunderheads on the southern horizon. There was something attractive and frightening about the seascape's simplicity. Footsteps rang on the metal stairs. "Hey, Dad."

"Where's Jennifer?"

"She was with me. I took her looking for the cat. You must have let Gamine out."

"Did I? God, I probably did."

"Jen went gaga. I said she wouldn't go anywhere but, no, we had to drive over to the old neighborhood. Then we see the house, and Jen starts crying because new owners have let Mom's rose bushes go to pot." Mark began peering through the binoculars.

"What a lightshow out there!" After a few moments, he put them down. "We get back here and Gamine, of course, is sitting on the front stairs."

Randall put his arm around Mark, squeezed his shoulder.

*

Jennifer sat on the sofa with the cat in her lap, brushing its fur, making a pile of whitish sheddings on the aqua cushion. Randall said, "Jen, there's a great lightshow out at sea."

"We don't want to look out, do we, Gamine? It's just the abyss with a bunch of strobes."

Randall smiled. "Hey, maybe Gamine likes looking out and doesn't like you making decisions for her. Besides, she used to be an outside cat."

"She's been strange ever since we moved here."

"Cat's are paid to be strange," said Randall. "It's their *métier*. And all the sand around here—it's downright cruel to deprive her of such a great litter box."

Jennifer put a pretend mike to her mouth. "Thank you, thank you Our next guest here at the Comedy Store is—"

"Jennifer, do you want me to stop trying? Is that what you want?"

When the phone rang, Gamine sprang to the floor and Jennifer went into the kitchen. Randall stood there watching the cat clean herself. She licked each paw and repeatedly dragged it behind her ears. Then she yawned hugely and moved toward the spiral stairs. Jennifer came back and said in a loud, actressy way, "It's for you, Dad. It's your *paramour!*"

Randall grabbed her arm and squeezed. "You damned little—"

"Go ahead, say it," she screamed. "Say it, say it!"

He dropped her arm, took a deep breath, and went to the kitchen.

It was Janet. He closed the door and said, "Let me guess. You've changed your mind about South Carolina."

"Not quite. How's Jennifer treating you?"

"Topic of the day."

"She was very polite. I invited her to a dive party excursion on the 4th of July. Vic's decided to pop for a trip, free air tanks and everything, then a pig pickin' at the shop when we get back to port. Preferred customers only."

"I appreciate it, but—"

"But what?"

"Mark'll be delighted, but I don't know about Jen."

"She can snorkel, can't she?"

Randall said she could.

"Well, we're diving on a freighter wreck, *The Indra*, where the wheelhouse and upper deck are only about fifteen feet down, so she'll be able to see all kinds of fish from the surface."

"I'll work on it."

"Let me give you one word, just one word, okay?"

"Go."

"Patience."

"I'll try," he said. There was a close sizzle of lightning and a great thunder clap rattling the kitchen windows. The phone filled with static.

"Randy, you still there?"

"Yeah, it's starting to storm. Look, before we get cut off, I'm wondering if you'd like to have lunch day after tomorrow? I also have to, ahem, appraise a house up around Marrow's Landing."

"Sounds like a set up."

"Well, according to the marine weather report, this front's going to be squatting over us for the next two days. No charters, you'll just be stuck in the shop."

"This sounds kind of like a serious date."

"I thought you enjoyed looking at old houses. I don't know, maybe it's not a good idea."

"Wait, wait. I didn't hear myself say no. Will you put a rose between your teeth?"

"I might."

"How long will we be gone?"

"I don't know—fifteen, twenty years."

When Randall walked out of the kitchen, Jennifer said, "You're a goddamned phony, Dad, a complete fake."

*

Mark drove, and Randall sat in the back. Jennifer controlled the radio, stopped on "Midnight Train to Georgia," then switched stations.

Randall said, "Jen, I happen to like that song. It's a classic."

"Well, I don't, and whoever sits up here controls the radio, remember? Family ordinance number 1632."

They rolled past a blue tent between two steep banks of sand. A boy stood next to his mother who seemed to be tending smoke at a camp stove. A man in a sleeveless T-shirt emerged from the tent.

"Where are we going anyway?" asked Jennifer.

"Just killing time," said Randall. "Our reservation isn't until eight o'clock. We used to camp down here before you were born."

"We better not be going to The Flying Bridge."

"Why?" asked Mark.

"That was Mom's favorite place," said Jennifer. "You shouldn't even have to ask."

"This was also her favorite town," said Mark. "Maybe we should move to Piss Hole, West Virginia."

"That's enough," said Randall.

The one-lane road was partly sanded over and finally came to an end. On the left, there was a rusted fence that ran down to a stone breakwater and a channel full of swirling eddies. A sweep of dunes lay in smooth curves on the right. Randall told Mark to shut off the motor. He told them about the dive excursion on the 4th of July.

"All right!" said Mark.

Randall said, "Jen, I have a favor to ask."

"Dad, I'm not much for that kind of thing."

Mark said to Jennifer, "Hey, haven't I been your private chauffeur? Did I ever say no when you needed a ride somewhere?"

"Where, not wheres."

Randall said, "I forget her first name, but the Wilson girl will be there. And probably some other kids you know."

Jennifer looked straight ahead.

Randall said, "Here's something else to think about. You'll still be on the newspaper this fall, won't you?"

Jennifer unfolded her arms and nodded.

"Well, the skipper/divemaster of the *Azure Dee* is an interesting guy. You could shoot some pictures with the Minolta, interview him, and have your first feature written before school even starts."

Mark said, "C'mon, Jen."

A line of pelicans, hedge-clippers with wings, straggled past and, one after another, crashed into the waterway with big white splashes. Jennifer said, "I'm hungry, let's go."

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They were still in protected water before crossing the bar. Randall and Jennifer climbed up to the wheelhouse. "Come on in," said Ken, the skipper. He was drinking coffee from a slosh-proof mug and eating a banana. From its basket on the dash, a fat black cat, white chin and paws, looked at them with drowsy green eyes.

Randall said, "Ken, this is my daughter, Jennifer."

"Hey there, darlin'." Close to sixty, his face was seamed and tanned, and he kept tugging on the pulpy tip of his nose. There was a bit of swagger about him, somebody who prided himself on being one of a kind. He had an anchor tattoo on the back of his hand.

"Hi, can I pet him?" asked Jennifer.

"Sure, scratch his ears, you'll be friends forever."

"Doesn't he get seasick?" asked Jennifer.

"Popeye? Nah, cats adjust to anything. Besides, he'd rather be with me than in an empty house. Divers always spear fish for him, that I cook at night."

Jennifer asked the captain if she could interview him for her school newspaper.

"Sure, fire away."

"How long have you been doing this?"

Dusting the tip of his nose with a thick forefinger, Ken told her he was career Navy until he retired. Then a police diver, car wrecks, the recovery of drowning victims, that sort of thing. But he'd also been skipper of a patrol boat in Vietnam. Randall left when Ken was explaining the CRT depth recorder and how it color sketched a profile of reefs and wrecks, how it could zoom in for particulars.

The bones of Randall's feet tingled from vibration of the steel deck. The boat plunged, spray came over the bow, and teenagers up front yelled. Mark was there with two of his friends. A big offshore Scarab roared past on the starboard, catching lots of air under its red hull. A pair of T-shirts and sunglasses gave them the wave. An attractive woman with long dark hair was between them.

"What talent, huh?"

It was Itchy. Randall nodded. Itchy kept changing the position of the huge dive knife strapped to his ankle.

"Two on one—interesting possibilities." When Randall said nothing and looked away, Itchy said, "I mean, what's all this waving on the water. People in cars don't wave. I reckon if you was going under, they'd probably keep right on going. See what I'm saying?"

Randall wanted to disagree, but Itchy said "Ouch" when one of the high school girls came from below decks in a one-piece swimsuit, blue and white. "Women," said Itchy, and began telling him about a friend who, on days off, with much frustration, taught his wife how to drive. "So finally she gets her license and . . ."

Half listening, Randall watched the southeast darken to an angry purple. In the middle distance was a pool of sunlight that came and went as the bow rose and fell.

Itchy said, "So guess what happens?"

Coming back, Randall shrugged.

"One day she don't pick him up, okay? So he's walking home, pissed off, and here she comes, drives right past, smiling and waving bye bye, the car full of her stuff." Itchy laughed and repeated the punchline, "Bye, bye!" Again, he adjusted the dive knife strapped to his ankle. "He teaches her how to drive, she leaves him, in *his* car!" Squinting toward the horizon, he shook his head. "Who can figure it out?"

The *Azure Dee* plunged and spray flew. Janet staggered by and told them not to worry.

"Who's worrying?" said Itchy, yanking the knife out of its black sheath and sticking the blade, pirate-style, between his teeth.

Janet said, "It'll flatten out at the wreck."

Randall watched her go aft where one of the shop instructors was testing a regulator. The boat pitched and Janet leaned her body into the instructor's, knocking her head into his chest. They laughed.

"Looks like more than friends," said Randall.

"That's a negatory," said Itchy. "There's only one person she cares about."

"Really?"

"You ought to know," he said.

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Everyone was suited in rental black and looked like members of some strange cortège. Weight belt on, Randall helped Mark hoist and get into his yellow tank and vest.

There were loud blasts of air from divers checking regulators. Diesel smoke blew into their faces from the stern. "Mark, check my tank valve."

Reaching up, Mark said, "You're fine, Dad," and moved heavily off to the railing.

"That smoke is making me sick."

Janet said, "One of our divers is down setting the anchor. It'll be just a minute. Loosen your vest a bit."

The diver surfaced and yelled, "Great viz. At least sixty feet!"

The engines stopped, gave way to an eerie quiet. The surface without sun was black.

Randall said, "I've decided not to try to change your mind."

"I don't know what to say," Janet said.

"You already said it last week, that rainy day at Marrow's Landing."

She smiled. "What did I say?"

"Charleston isn't that far."

"Well, I meant it."

"I know, that's why I've got religion again," he said, forcing a smile. "No matter what, though, you've helped me a lot, more than I've—"

Janet put her hand to his mouth.

Randall laughed. "Okay, okay, I'm nervous though. I haven't done a dive in a long time."

"I'll partner with you."

Randall said, "Thanks for inviting the Wilson girl."

Janet winked. "Never mind. Just remember, how you go under is very important. One thing at a time. Ease the air out of your vest until you start sinking down the anchor line. As soon as you feel pressure in your ears, equalize, pinch your nose. Don't worry, I'll be right there."

Mark, with one hand on his mask and the other on the bottom of his tank, turned, took a giant step, and popped up in the dissolving white of his splash. With clipboard and watch, Ken recorded the number and time of entry of each diver. He told Randall he'd keep an eye on Jennifer and her friend.

Randall thanked him, then said to Janet, "I don't know. My stomach—"

"Don't worry. You'll feel better as soon as we get under," she said, pulling her mask into place.

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She was right. Link after link, he lowered himself down the anchor chain into the world of waver and slide. A stream of bubbles from divers below grew in size and wobbled upward past his face. Janet's round green eyes looked at him from behind her mask, asking for an okay. He made the standard thumb and forefinger circle. She pinched her nose, reminding him to equalize, which he did, and the pain left his ears with a pop. Then things came into greater focus. Mark had buddied with Itchy, and together they moved away in a graceful slo-mo across the deck.

Reluctantly letting go of the anchor chain, Randall drifted over the horns of a mooring cleat, bright orange, made asymmetrical by a sea urchin stuck to one of its tips. Antlers of yellow coral spiked up from the great garden of rust. Janet pointed to a tiny blue wrasse, bright as a drop of wet ink, hiding in the coral. Randall extended his finger, and it moved out of reach. He breathed slowly, calmly. Clutches of pink tubeworms,

like asters, swayed in the underwater wind, opening and closing. In front of them, a huge billow of silversides flashed as they moved from right to left, turning precisely, as if they were scales on the flank of a single great fish, the act of each mysteriously integrated within the larger ballet of the school, a shape in continuous change.

Janet was there. He could feel her presence without looking. Slowly, he finned forward. He was weightless now, held warmly by water, his breathing steady and slow. Above the dark yawn of a deck hatch, a great grouper hovered, then sank out of sight, as if in a dream where there is nothing to fear.