

Costa Rican Schadenfreude Excerpts

Chapter 1

Chapter 3

Chapter 5 (excerpt)

Chapter 11

Chapter 14 (excerpt)

“Fucker was supposed to be here at 3:30. God damnit!” It was 3:45 AM and the taxi hadn’t arrived. They had a flight leaving from LAX to Costa Rica at 5:30 AM and Topanga was easily a forty-five minute drive to the airport, even without traffic.

Carl loved it when he could find justified anger, no matter what time of day. He reveled in his rage, but if you asked him he would deny there was any enjoyment involved. He deserved to be pissed off. It was dead serious. Poor Carl didn’t get the humor in his own behavior. Who really does when they’re that deep in their own shit? But he would admit fault in the aftermath, accompanied by apologies, regrets, and maybe some laughter when all was said and done.

“What a fucking asshole I was, huh? Jesus, I’m sorry.” Laugh, laugh, laugh.

He grabbed onto his long salt-and-pepper hair with the perverse satisfaction that he hadn’t cut it for a while and had a nice handful to yank on. He snarled up his angular face, prematurely creased by sun and stress.

“Fucking bastard!” he said. “Gonna ruin our whole trip!” He took anxious sips of his Yerba Mate (coffee made him too edgy, he said), pacing back and forth on the scuffed blonde hardwood planks of their kitchen floor. His 6-foot body was trim, but he looked older than his 38, or maybe just more worn out. Having no real work besides “possibilities” for the past two years didn’t help either. Carrie had to “cover for him” – a nice way to say she paid for fucking everything – and though she wasn’t stressed about the taxi, she fed off Carl’s anxiety with voracious appetite.

“Stop acting like such an idiot! We can drive ourselves if the taxi doesn’t show.” Oh yeah - they hadn’t fucked in months either— more fuel to the symbiotic fire of their dissipating 10-year marriage.

“Whaddya mean, doesn’t show! He hasn’t shown. Taxi Cocksucker!”

“You’re being an infant, Carl. Just deal with it.”

Carrie was still an attractive woman at 36, with a smooth-skinned, heart-shaped cherub face, flushed all healthy tan and rose. She was what might be considered sassy. She had a sinewy little body from a high metabolism, a business mindset and power yoga classes.

Carl watched her wavy blonde hair slap back and forth as she stamped across the kitchen, her firm little ass cheeks raised high and beckoning as she reached over to grab the French press. He figured he should fuck her right over the red stone-tiled counter, slink up behind her, slide down her yoga pants and slip into her sweetness, thrusting like a throbbing rocketship as she panted and gasped for more. Or maybe he’d wait and they could do it on the toilet in the plane, cramped, impassioned, sweaty, their faces pressed against the mirror, hungry lips locked together as fellow passengers impatiently tapped on the fold-away door, waiting for a mere pee or poo – but they were all fleeting moments in his mind. Carl never acted on them anymore. Maybe early in the marriage he did, but now they passed through like porn clips, arousing and leaving within a few seconds.

When the actual opportunity arrived, usually on Sunday in the early evening after Carrie was rested and relaxed enough to want sex, Carl was never inclined to reciprocate. She had to initiate foreplay and he rejected her overtures.

“Come on.”

“Not now,” he’d say.

“This is the only time I feel relaxed enough!”

“I’m sorry.”

“You are sorry! I want to make love and you’re ruining it! Again!”

Carl would finally concede with an apathetic sigh and the act became a desultory job for both of them until Carrie eventually stopped initiating. Now she channeled her desire into steaming frustration while Carl remained clandestinely aroused.

“I know you watch porn and jerk off before I get home.”

“I don’t.”

Both had recently learned to meditate with a popular Venice Guru. Carl kept that faux-spiritual excuse eternally at hand, to get out of servicing his wife.

“I’m not. It’s the meditation. I just channel the energy.”

“I’ll have an affair then, Carl. I will.”

“Go ahead, Carrie, I don’t mind. I told you that.”

“Asshole.”

“We’ll try to make love tonight, OK, Carrie? OK?”

But they didn’t, night after night, week after week, and now month after month. Four months and five days if you were counting, and Carrie was. She consciously cancelled her thoughts of family, the path they’d started on five years before. She gave birth to a beautiful daughter, Violet. Carrie’s mood was blue before she went into labor and she got wrapped up in the mood until the baby arrived. The pain of delivery pounded her into a darker color, giving the baby her name.

“Violet! Violet! Violet!”

Carrie's childbearing blues prophesied Violet's brief destiny. She died from crib death when she was a wee four months old. It stained Carrie's mood to a bruised black, and she swore, "No more children." She had a hysterectomy and demanded a vasectomy for Carl so he wouldn't wander to other fertile ground. He admitted he wasn't the best father material anyway. His father died an early death in a road rage car accident. He was about the worst role model in the world and taught Carl absolutely nothing about parenting, so it was done. No more children. Carrie regretted it from time to time. She finally submitted to sitting down with a shrink, who supposedly attributed the panic attacks to work stress, but if she dug a bit deeper, if she just scratched the surface...

My poor little Violet. I feel like I wanna die too.

Klonopin helped, but she felt the pills were actually instigating the symptoms the more she took them, so she was determined to replace medication with meditation. She was going to stop taking them for good, starting with this Christmas trip to Costa Rica.

Carrie spilled the remainder of her coffee down the sink. She made a decision to cut back on that, too. Just a few sips would be enough to wake up without getting edgy. She peered out the bay window into their backyard, which was essentially the entire Topanga hillside. It was cold in the pre-dawn, black and wild. The salubrious November rains turned the trickle of a river into a steady flow. Carrie could hear the soothing rush right through the window. She pictured the hill turning lush green when the sun peeked over the top in a few hours.

"I love it here," she said. "I'm so grateful we have this place to come back to."

Not if I kill you first.

Carl didn't know why the thought came to him. There was that article he read about a man in Florida that killed his wife because she refused to cook him a hamburger. It struck him as

so horrible and weird and simple, and he had to admit, he'd thought of killing Carrie before. They were just thoughts and he always felt terrible afterwards, but he also felt like taking out a steak knife right there and stabbing her until she crumpled over and bled out in the sink.

"I wonder when those owls will come back," he said absently, trying to push the thoughts of murder out of his mind.

"What?"

"You know, the ones that take over that cave up on the hill for a few weeks until their little baby owls are born."

"That's not until spring, Carl. It's December. What the hell are you talking about?"

"I don't know," he said. "I mean, I'm just thinking we're lucky to have this place too. But we won't be going anywhere if we don't leave, like right now."

Carrie sensed that the panic in his voice was about more than the tardy taxi driver, but she lacked the ability to delve into the darkest secrets of his mind. She knew he was covering something up.

"What else is going on?" she said, and Carl kept on ranting about missing the plane.

"I just wanna go, damnit! We're going to have to find a place to park on Century Boulevard and take a shuttle and if the shuttle doesn't get there we have to call another fucking taxi to take us to the terminal—"

"Just shut up," Carrie said. "We're going. Get the bags in the car."

"OK, I'll drive," Carl, said. "We'll get there faster."

"No, you sit in the passenger seat and meditate. You need it."

"You need to meditate too, Carrie."

“I will when we get on the plane, but with the way you’re acting we might get into an accident on the way.”

Carl considered arguing that she needed to meditate first, especially since she was stopping Klonopin for the trip. He could drag it out and make a case, but he knew better. Carrie had a law degree from USC. She was a top consultant for the biggest restaurant conglomerate in Los Angeles. She opened six of their ten places in the past three years and had to work with a bunch of massive egos, most of them male. She was brilliant in any argument in any forum. Her boss told Carl, “When you argue with Carrie, she doesn’t just take a bite out of your arm – she takes a whole chunk.” Carl knew the brutal truth, and he knew she knew he knew. Carrie had the “fishhook in his scrotum,” to quote a line in some James Jones novel he once read. To their credit, they always made up, and if not with physical love then at least with heartfelt apologies. They both knew no one else would put up with them except for each other. They were stuck together until death, and that’s how they carried on.

“OK,” Carl said. “You drive.”

He put his hand on her back in a gesture of affection but his heart wasn’t in it. It was a perfunctory move, and Carrie explained it to him clearly and without emotion.

“The way you touched me was very oppressive,” she said. “Your hand was very heavy on my back. It felt very oppressive.”

Carl recoiled and stared out the window into the darkness. He had emotions.

“What the fuck, Carrie?” he spat. “What are we even going on vacation for? What are we even doing together? Why?”

“Relax,” she said. She was used to his temper tantrums. “Don’t get defensive right away.” She moved closer and put her arms around his neck.

“See, this is how you do it, darling. Are you wearing that cologne I bought you?” Carl conceded again and blew the demon out in a few fast breaths.

“Yeah,” he said. “That Vetiver stuff you got me at Barney’s. I put it on so I’d smell nice for you when you nod off on the plane and rest your head on my shoulder, but now I don’t know why.”

“Because you love me, no matter what.”

“Yeah. I guess so.”

“It’s the poet in you that saves our marriage, Carl.”

“Poet. Sure. Where?”

“As long as I see it,” she said, and she kissed him on the cheek, with just a little barb on the end. She couldn’t help herself.

“Even though I know you’re just cooperating because you want to see your boyfriend Jared and if we miss the plane you won’t be able splash around in the ocean together in your little board shorts.”

“Shut up, Carrie. Really. Shut it. Fucking making us so late!” She laughed and said,

“Come on. Let’s go.”

The open kitchen/living room to the rented house in Puerto Viejo was a spacious haven with tropical hardwood floors - and no walls. It was completely open to the jungle. Two fans as big as plane propellers hung from the beams over a long wooden dining table, 10 matching lounge chairs and three bouncy couches, circling through the humid morning in graceful silence. The tall palm-thatched roof was supported by thick bamboo and narrow wooden planks. A jungle rain burst from the sky, accompanied by cawing toucans and the horrific echo of howler monkeys. Gwen was used to the noise. After six days, she was already a seasoned Central American, unfazed except for a raised eyebrow.

“Calm down, you crazy monkeys.”

She chewed a bite of buttered toast with mango jam as her bronze fingers scanned through texts and emails on her iPhone. She was already tanned dark after six days, which she owed to the olive skin her father handed down to her, her Greek shipping magnate father, the father she never met, the father who invited Gwen’s mum onto one of his mega-yachts while she vacationed in Mykonos. She was a one night stand like many others and Gwen was not his only bastard offspring. There were numerous claims. Plus he had six ex-wives and fifteen other illegitimate children, so he squashed the paternity suits with threats and small payoffs, but for some reason he remembered the night with Gwen’s mother. On his deathbed, he demanded his attorneys amend his will, track Gwen down and leave her two million dollars.

Gwen was just 18 at the time. She’d given birth to her own illegitimate daughter Haley,

now 26 and sitting across from her on one of the couches. Haley had a gorgeous face and huge breasts she mostly attributed to her weight problem. Her father was also non-existent, a beautiful loser wannabe musician who left the day Gwen told him she was pregnant. Haley blamed her mom's bad decision for her plumpness and for every other problem, physical and psychological.

"I blamed my mum too," Gwen would reply, lovingly detached as usual, "but it didn't help me. Just don't make the same mistake we did."

The warnings weren't enough. Haley had two relationships in her life – one with a Russian mobster who got killed in a knife fight and one with a Mexican MMA fighter. He killed somebody else, outside the ring in a vicious rage, and fled back over the border.

"Wouldn't it be funny to see him here in Costa Rica?" Haley said.

"Hilarious, Haley. Hilarious. I still wonder what got into you, getting hooked up with those two atrocious men."

"Following your footsteps, mum."

"That is so untrue."

"What can I say? They were exciting, and they liked fat girls with big boobs and pretty faces."

"I forbid you to be so self-deprecating. I mean, really."

Gwen loved Haley beyond her problems, but the problems were still there. Haley had been well taken care of in the material realm. She never wanted for anything. She went to school in Switzerland and attended the Sorbonne in Paris. Now she lived in New York, a world-traveling fashion journalist and a success by all accounts, but the fatherless wound would never heal.

"I'm just hopeless when it comes to picking men," Gwen would say. She tried a few more times after Haley's father and failed. She preferred the company of her current male

companion, René. He was super handsome and made a super living selling super foods, but most of all he was super gay. René inherited a nice lump sum from his high-powered lawyer dad, and a few scars to go with it. His dad was a violent, homophobic alcoholic and gave his “faggot son” regular beatings. He soothed the pain with heroin until it almost killed him, but he didn’t really want to die. He never stuck a needle into his vein. He mixed the heroin into health shakes and drank it. When his dad stroked out, he left René 700,000 bucks with a footnote hoping that he’d kill himself with the money before he reached 30. René quit the narcotics out of spite the day after daddy died. He kept \$200,000 to get his business started and donated the other half-million to AIDS research and a clean water charity. He had an innately thoughtful heart and an innately filthy mind, and Gwen loved him for it. He was curled up next to Haley like some fabulous feline in tight cobalt Speedos.

“Well, at least she didn’t marry one of the brutes,” he said, “or give birth to a baby gangster.”

“I did have a miscarriage,” Haley offered.

“OK. Enough,” Gwen said. “Don’t stress me out. I’m on vacation.”

“Well, I’m staying celibate like you from now on, mum.”

“That’s not the answer either, Haley.”

“The straight life is a tough one,” René said. He dipped his spoon into his bowl of organic yogurt with dried goji berries he brought down from LA. He slipped the spoon into his mouth and took a luscious bite, his eyes fixed on Jared sitting shirtless in turquoise blue board shorts on the other couch. Jared felt René’s stare but kept his eyes on the two books he was reading simultaneously: one on spiritual growth and one on sex addiction.

“Don’t you agree Jared, my love?” René said after he swallowed the spoonful.

Jared blew out an irritated breath but his sense of humor was still in-tact, and he still enjoyed musing gay.

“Of course, honey,” he said.

“Why don’t you toss your literature in the trash and run naked in the rain with me? We can fuck like wild monkeys in the jungle.”

“Sorry babe, I’m on a spiritual quest—”

René interrupted mid-sentence. “Please, we all are, babe. I was a drug addict and I gave it up, but I’m still a cock addict.” Jared continued as if he didn’t hear him. “...and sex is the furthest thing from my mind, with any gender.”

He took a peeled banana from the platter of tropical fruit on the table and bit into it. No matter what path Jared was on, he couldn’t resist a ruse.

“Then why’d you pick the banana instead of the papaya?” Rene said, glad to take the bait. “Or the mango, or the pineapple, or the passionfruit?”

“You’re the passionfruit, René. Now let me read my fucking book.”

“You’re the biggest fucking tease I’ve ever met,” René said. “I want you to scream at the top of your lungs, I’m gay, I’m gay, I’m gay!”

Jared laughed as Arabella glided from the kitchen, a stunning English-Danish Amazon carrying a plate of scrambled eggs with salsa and fried pork belly. She wore a transparent rust-colored sarong with tits twice the size of her tight white bikini top. She had intentional nipple slip written all over her. Arabella was Gwen’s friend – well, she was the model girlfriend of one of Gwen’s fashion photographer friends from London, until she broke his heart. He disappeared into Peru after a Sapo ceremony with evil shamans but Gwen and Arabella kept in touch. Now she was Gwen’s Costa Rican connection. She’d been coming down between modeling gigs in a

career that started at 17 and ended at 30. Arabella saved up for a loft in Tribeca and property on the Pacific side of Costa Rica, in Pavones, near Panama. She was part-owner of an Italian restaurant in Puerto Viejo with another boyfriend, but she ended the relationship and he committed suicide. She mourned, but she found most straight men pathetic, too easy to dominate, so she partnered up with a gay chef named Alessandro. He'd lived in Costa Rica for ten years, and she could trust him to run the business without any sexual draw. There would be less trouble that way, though she was always on the hunt for a soul mate. She never found one, but she still needed physical love, so she substituted submissive women who would worship her while she waited.

“Where’s Wifey?” René said with amused suspicion.

Wifey was Arabella’s latest concubine.

“Recovering,” she smiled.

Wifey, also known as Wendy, was a former make-up artist who’d worshipped Arabella since her modeling days. She was in their room, applying aloe vera to last night’s welts from Arabella’s love whip.

“And don’t quip with me, René. I’m still mad at you about Alessandro.”

She thought René might like him and brought them all to dinner the night before, but René was repelled by Alessandro’s baldness, his bulging belly and his body hair. He told him so after a few shots of grappa.

“Lose about 30, laser your chest and your back, and try again,” he said. “With a wig, maybe.” René threw himself at Jared afterwards, begged him to take him home and ass-fuck him. Jared carried René into the men’s room, René puked his misguided guts out, and Alessandro went home. Arabella remained perturbed by his very presence.

“Alessandro es un piggo, as they say in Spanish. And Jared is mine, I’m just waiting for him to open the closet door.” Arabella smiled like a cat with an unruly rodent. “The word is puerco, you fluffy fool. Leave Jared alone. Let him read. He’s trying to heal and you must respect that. Comprende, maricone?” She fixed her oval eyes on him to elucidate the point.

“Yes, mein Führer.” René gave a full Nazi salute. “Just don’t drown me in those hypnotic peepers of yours. I don’t want what you got, baby.”

“Please shut up,” Arabella said. She gave Jared a sultry smile and placed the plate in front of him. “For you, sweetheart.”

“Using pork to get to his dick?” René said.
Arabella didn’t give him the satisfaction of an answer.

“I bet I can suck his cock better than you,” René said.

“Oh God,” Jared said. “That’s what I used to say about Carl. I mean, I was only joking around, but the real thing is so much more...I don’t know, foul.”

“You wish I had my mouth on your cock.”

“No René, I don’t.”

“Liar.”

Gwen sighed. “Boys, boys, chill out, please. Let’s change the subject. Speaking of Carl, I just got a text from Carrie. Their taxi never showed up and they had to drive to the airport last minute, but they made the plane. They’ll be here tonight around 8.”

“Ooh, I bet Carl was pissed,” Jared laughed.

“Is that your true love? Carl?” René asked.

“He’s my best friend and he’s married.”

“But they never fuck, right? That’s what Gwen tells me.”

Jared shot Gwen a look but she shrugged it off.

“Well, it’s true darling. Carrie tells me, and I’m sure Carl tells you. How they’ve stayed together so long is a mystery and you know it.”

Jared shoved a piece of bacon into his mouth, loaded in a forkful of eggs and chewed.

“They still love each other somehow,” he said, savoring the taste.

“I guess that’s what we all want, isn’t it?” Gwen said. Arabella remained stoic, her pools of blue and hazel overflowing as the jungle rain came down.

... Carrie and Carl's four-hour adventure from San José to Puerto Rico started with a detour. Part of the deal the driver gave them was that he could pick up his 15 year-old daughter for the ride. They drove through narrow streets full of potholes and palms popping out of crumbled sidewalks. The driver said San José used to be a small farming village, but the population exploded after the Second World War. He offered them a free tour when they returned, if they had the time. His brother-in-law gave cut-rate dental work, if they were interested – implants for one-third the price of American dentists, he said. He also had a good friend who did plastic surgery.

“You know, for the women,” he said. “To make them more full and beautiful. It's very inexpensive here—”

Carrie cut him off. “I don't want any face work or fake tits.”

“Your wife is very forward, my friend.”

“You mean like a man?” She answered. “Not used to that, huh?”

The driver turned to Carl like perhaps he should give her a slap but Carl just asked her to calm down.

“Please honey, he's only offering. I heard a lot of women come down here for that.”

“Maybe you should find one of them,” she said.

“I don't want one of them,” he said.

“You want something,” she said. “And I know it’s not me.”

“That’s not true.”

“It is true, Carl.”

“Come on, I love you, Carrie. You know that.”

“Right.”

“Maybe you need a nap,” he said.

“Or another drink,” she said.

The driver laughed. He told them there was a lot of spice in their talk, which meant they must be in love. They cracked up. Carrie actually let Carl lean in and give her a kiss. He wanted to fuck her in the back seat of the taxi – always at the most inopportune moment.

The driver stopped in front of humble shack and honked twice. A cute girl ran out, stocky like her dad, in a pair of knock-off Guess jeans and a torn t-shirt with Katy Perry on the front. She smiled politely and said, “Buenos dias,” when she got to the car. She hopped in the front seat next to her dad, who leaned over for a kiss on the cheek. Carrie smiled. “It’s nice you take your daughter on taxi rides,” she said.

“The drive is very dangerous,” he explained. “People die. I take my daughter with me, because if I die, she has no one. It’s better we die together.”

Carrie was shocked to find out the real reason, and shocked he’d say it in front of his little girl. She offered to put them up for a night in a Puerto Viejo hotel so they could drive back in the morning without risking their lives.

“It’s OK, señora, and my daughter doesn’t speak English. Don’t worry. She knows the road, and she prefers it this way too.”

“What makes it so dangerous?” Carrie asked.

“It gets very foggy through the park. The road is narrow, no one can see, and the cars drive fast.”

“Stop the car,” Carrie said. “I wanna take a plane down there.”

“Don’t worry, señora, I know the road like the back of your hand.”

“My hand. You said my hand! What the hell?”

“He said your hand,” Carl laughed.

The driver laughed too and his daughter laughed with him. Carrie elbowed Carl in the gut.

“Don’t worry,” the driver repeated.

“Well, I’m worried,” she said.

“Your husband told me you get nervous easy.”

“What?”

Carl tried to put his arm around her.

“Honey,” he said. “When you were flailing your arms around at the airport he asked me if you were OK. I just said you get nervous easy.”

“Don’t worry,” the driver said again.

“I won’t worry,” Carrie said, “if we stop at the nearest liquor store and get a bottle of fucking tequila.”

“Fucking tequila,” his daughter tittered.

“She knows that word,” the driver said.

The group passed over a couple of tiger-ant hills as they entered the jungle and walked up the ramp to the first zip-lining platform. All were equipped with crotch harnesses fastened by aluminum snaps and buckles, wearing leather gloves and plastic crash helmets.

“My God, those ants must be three inches long,” René said.

“About the size of your —” Jared said stopped himself. “Sorry, René.”

“I’m impressed,” René said. “Carl is such a good influence.”

Carl saluted René, the captain of maturity.

“If you only knew,” Jared said. Carrie almost wretched.

“You look like such an ass, saluting with that stupid helmet like you’re the authority on anything.” Carl shrugged off the insult with a grimace. He was so used to that kind of shit flung in his face it didn’t matter anymore.

“Thanks for the compliments honey, love you too.”

“OK, OK children,” Arabella said. “Time for zip-lining instructions. It’s very important to listen. It might save your life.”

They got to the wood plank platform and saw why. It was built around a tree that towered 50 feet above the ground. A thick cable was bolted in about eight feet above the platform, running like a clothesline as far as the eye could see with a 200 foot drop to the bottom of the jungle. The guides explained the rules and Arabella interpreted, told them to wait until they were fastened onto the cable and to lean back after they jumped off or someone pushed them off. They

had to put their legs close together and straight out and not get their hands anywhere near the overhead pulley or they could lose fingers. When they approached the next platform, they'd have to raise both hands over the pulley and pull down hard to slow down for landing, but Arabella warned them not to pull down in the middle or they'd get stuck, and it would take hours pulling themselves hand over hand across the cable to get back on solid ground.

“Just stay calm and have fun,” Arabella finished. “Who wants to go first?”

“Holy shit, what's that big thing in that tree?” Jared said. Carrie almost clawed through Carl's arm as the black bundle fur climbed up a tree.

“Honey, relax,” Carl said. “It's just a tree monkey or something.”

“What if it jumps on me when I'm going across?”

Arabella translated to the guides. They laughed and said something about *pendeja*, and Arabella told Carrie it was just a big sloth. One of the guides clipped himself onto the cable and went first so he could meet them at the other platform. As he zipped across with ease, the other guide attempted to hook Carrie in but she hesitated.

“I'm gonna go then,” Carl said. The guide fastened him on and he jumped off with a yelp of excitement.

“Go, baby, go!” Arabella yelled out to him.

Carrie fumed.

“You know, we're trying to salvage our marriage down here,” she said.

“So salvage it,” Arabella said. “Go after your husband.”

Carrie stared hard at Arabella then stared at the cable with equal hatred. She adjusted her harness and steadied her helmet. She took a step forward. The guide took hold of her harness clip and tried to attach her to the cable. She pulled his hand away and backed off.

“Don’t worry. Just go!” Arabella said.

“You go, bitch!” Carrie said. Arabella looked like she was going to slap her but she just laughed and stepped in front to her. The guide had her snapped on in two seconds. She smiled with a mix of pity and disgust. “Bye,” she said, and leaped.

“Well, I’m going,” Jared said. The guide fastened him on and he jumped, zipping away with René right behind him, then Haley. Carrie hyperventilated.

“Darling, you don’t want to be left here, do you?” Gwen asked.

“I don’t know what the fuck to do. Carl’s left me.”

“Don’t be so dramatic. He’s waiting at the next platform.”

“With her. How could you be friends with her?”

“Carrie. Honey. I’m going to zip now. I suggest you shut down the chatter in your head and follow, OK?” Gwen nodded to the guide. He clipped her on and she jumped. The guide looked at Carrie, shrugged his shoulders and said,

“Jes you an’ me, señora. I gotta go, so ju wanna jump or wait the fibe hours ‘til we come back?”

“OK, OK,” Carrie said. “Clip me on.”

She closed her eyes, trembling as the guide pulled her up on the cable and gave her a shove. She shrieked in terror out but managed to keep her legs straight and hold on. She was yelling out with glee seconds later, and she was grinning when she landed safely amongst the others.

“Good job, honey,” Carl said.

“Oh, fuck you,” she said, but she kept her satisfied smile. She was ready to enjoy the experience. The group zipped from platform to platform, laughing and slapping each other on the back. Now Carrie was vying for the first jump, competing with Arabella to see who had more

courage. Carrie would push ahead of the line and leap screaming like a warrior.

At the penultimate platform, Jared spotted a yellow eyelash viper curled up on the outer branch of a tree 10 feet away. Carrie was first on the cable and ready to go.

“Look you guys, one of those vipers,” he said.

They all gasped in guarded awe. Everyone knew the consequences of a possible bite except Carl and Carrie.

“Those are poisonous, right?” Carl said.

“Very,” Jared said.

“But they don’t bite unless you startle them,” Gwen said directly to Carrie.

“That’s right,” Haley said. “Even if you’re bitten, you have hours to get to the hospital.”

“Unless you panic, honey,” René said. Carrie was already panicking. She was frozen, staring at the serpent lying calmly beyond her.

“Just ride the zip,” Arabella said. “It is not going to lunge at you from the branch. They don’t do that.”

“How long if you panic?” Carrie asked in a parched voice.

“Honey, what are you saying?” Carl said.

“How long do you have after the bite if you panic! God damnit!”

Her voice reverberated through the jungle. Birds cawed and monkeys screamed and the viper raised its horned head. She clawed onto the guide.

“Unbuckle me! Unbuckle me!”

But he pulled away and lost his grip on her and she went zipping down the cable. The snake didn’t lunge, didn’t bite, didn’t even budge. Carrie clutched onto the cable with both gloves so fiercely she got stuck dangling halfway across, her screams choking the air out of her.

“Oh, shit,” Carl said. “She’s really losing it now.”

“Oh, God, poor thing,” Gwen said.

“What are we going to do?” Haley said.

“Someone has to save her,” René said.

“I’d go but I don’t know if I could coax her back. I’m just not that experienced,” Carl said.

“Well, one of the guides has to do it,” Jared said.

“She’ll start screaming if she doesn’t understand them,” Carl said. “I don’t want her to freak out anymore, I mean I don’t know what to do.”

“I can go,” Arabella said. “I have experience and at least I can speak English.”

The empathy in her expression perplexed Carl at first but he was desperate.

“OK, I mean, she might fucking freak more if she sees you coming down the cable but I don’t know, I don’t know what to do.”

René folded his arms. He didn’t trust any solution that involved Arabella. But he had none of his own so he kept his mouth shut.

“Is this behavior hereditary?” Arabella asked. “Is there any history with her mother or father?”

René threw his arms up. He couldn’t take it anymore.

“Oh, so you’re the zip-line psychiatrist? What the fuck! Look at her dangling out there. Just go fucking save her!”

Arabella’s eyes hooded and her jaw tightened.

“I’d leave you for the buzzards, bitch,” she said.

René struck out to slap her but Gwen intervened.

“Please, everybody! Let’s make this about saving Carrie. Just go out there, Arabella. Do what you have to do for God’s sake.”

The guide clipped her in and spoke to her in a low voice.

“OK,” she said. “I’m going to calm Carrie down enough to understand my instructions and we’re going to pull ourselves back to the platform.”

Everyone nodded in agreement. René whispered to Gwen that she should check Arabella for wire clippers and Gwen told him to shut up.

“I’ll get her back safely, Carl,” she said.

“Her mother and father died in a car accident when she was 22” Carl said. “They plunged off a cliff in Big Sur on their way to a health retreat. So don’t ask her anything about her family, OK? Especially about Violet. Don’t say anything, I meant it!” He blubbered on about their dead baby and Carrie’s workload and how he was a shit husband and worth nothing and he started choking on his own words, convulsing and sobbing.

“Oh, God,” Gwen said. “Just go save her Arabella. Please!” She slapped Carl square in the face. “When we get her back I’m going to commit you both to the Looney bin.”

The snake was disgusted with everyone. It slithered down the branch to more peaceful surroundings.

Arabella rode the cable to Carrie and put the brakes on. She grabbed Carrie, swinging limp and catatonic. She was lucky she didn’t break her neck flailing around.

“I don’t want any help,” Carrie said. “I wanna die.”

“Not now,” Arabella said. “Just let me help you.”

“Why you?”

Carrie’s eyes looked past Arabella.

“My father died when I was ten,” Arabella said. “He was my whole world and my whole world got fucked up afterwards.”

Carrie didn't respond. It was as if she didn't hear her at all. She just kept staring into her own private abyss. Arabella was incensed to have shared such an intimate detail and get nothing in return. Carrie writhed in her grip, starting to drool. Arabella grabbed her in a chokehold and shook her by the neck.

“OK! Stop! The snake is gone. Now listen to me!”

Carrie came back from insanity. She blinked her eyes and registered she understood what Arabella was saying, but Arabella still had her doubts.

“OK, what do I do?” Carrie said.

“Just watch me. Pull hand over hand and follow me back to the platform.”

Carrie groaned, but she didn't resist as Arabella lifted her torso and placed her hands back on the pulley.

“Now grab the cable. Remember, hand over hand...”

“Oh...fuck...” Carrie said. “Fuckin shit...I don't know if I...”

But she held on. She followed directions hand over hand, hour over hour, and they made it back to the platform. Everyone cheered and clapped and whistled, but the celebration was clouded over by the chaos already set in motion.

It was close to dinner by the time the group got back into Puerto Viejo. They were exhausted and hungry, having eaten only a few slices of pineapple and watermelon. Carrie gave the guides a big tip for what she called her “mucho problema.” they thanked her as they said good-bye and popped beers open because who wouldn't want to get borracho after a day with those crazy-ass gringos?

Arabella suggested they all go to her place for a nice early dinner but no one seemed excited, least of all Carrie.

“Thank you for saving my life but I’m a sweaty fucking wreck so, no. Please no.”

“I insist.”

“And I insist back. Could we just go back to the house and pick up a bottle of tequila on the way?”

It looked like another catfight was brewing, and Gwen had to intervene.

“Let’s get tacos to-go from the surfer bar,” she said.

“What a great idea, mum,” Haley said. “I could eat a few tacos and feast on a surfer or two.”

“Sounds delicious,” René said. “What about you boys, are you in?”

Carl and Jared shrugged as René rambled on.

“I’m sure there are some hottie surfer chicks as well. Of course, Carl’s eyes shouldn’t wander an inch from Carrie, am I right? And Saint Jared here, well—”

“Will you shut up!” Jared said. “We’re going.”

“OK, OK, fine, there’s just so much anxious energy in the air today. Heroin was good for that, but I’ll settle for a few tequila shots with Carrie.”

“Can’t wait,” Carrie said.

“I know the owner,” Arabella said. “I can get us—”

“I’ll pay, OK? OK?” Carrie cut her off.

Arabella paused and gave her a thin, patronizing smile.

“OK, sweets,” she said. “You pay.”

When Carrie woke up she saw a bamboo orchid on the bed with a note:

Didn't want to wake you up

Went for early surf lesson at Cocles Beach

Be back to make you a nice breakfast and more love

Carrie fondled the petals with her fingers and smiled. "Hello little beauty," she said. She stretched her arms out over her head and let out a laugh. "I feel so happy, for once," she murmured, followed by a wistful sigh. She got out of bed and floated into the bathroom, thinking she'd have a shower and some coffee and answer the bulk of her business emails, do some yoga and get ready for Carl when he returned.

He's bullshitting me again, she thought, but she laughed about that too. It didn't matter. Her anxiety was gone. That bastard. When he fucks me right, it's the best, but he was probably thinking about that bitch Arabella. So what? Maybe I'll seduce her, make her uneasy, maybe offer her a ménage. That would shock her. Let Wifey watch if she wanted. Who cares?

She turned on the outside shower and stepped under the spray. The sun shone through the screen, lighting up the tiny holes of the shower screen. She took the soap and gave herself a luxurious lather, running the bar over her body with one hand and touching herself with the other. She couldn't help but masturbate and think of the night before.

How glorious is this jungle? she thought. The soap popped from her hand and when she squatted down to get it, she saw a fluorescent yellow coil on the floor. At first she thought it was a flashback from the zipline, a nasty flashback, but when it cocked its horned head back, she knew it was real. She put her hands to her mouth. Her legs trembled and she almost stepped on it. The serpent struck and bit her on the leg. She let out a bloodcurdling scream and went into full-blown panic, running naked from the bathroom as the snake slithered out of the hole at the bottom of the shower and back to its master. Carrie didn't hear the swift, light footsteps running off into the jungle.

"Carl!" she yelled, at the top of her lungs. She saw his phone on the dresser and knew she couldn't call him. She couldn't call him, and he couldn't save her.

Her leg was swelling by the second but she ran out the door, tearing into the empty living room. She saw coffee cups and a half-eaten fruit plate next to the game on the table with everybody's domino trains trailing from the plastic mound. Her breathing was labored and she knew that panicking was the worst thing she could do, but she ran full throttle towards the gate, shouting uncontrollably to the guard.

"Help! Help! Help! I've been bitten by a fucking snake!"

He stared at her wide-eyed, but he didn't understand a word of English.

"You were at the bar with her! You! You! You!" she said but he just shrugged and shook his head and stared at her. Carrie clawed at him and he backed away as she pushed through the gate, running barefoot through the muddy gravel, slipping and panting. She was reduced to a hobble as she headed to Cocles Beach, flailing like only a dying woman could.

"Carl! I need Carl! Help me! Help me!"

A couple of cars passed with all heads out the window. When Carrie got to the bridge, a few

tourists and locals on bikes were watching and feeding the crocodiles below, their dogs started barking. Carrie was convulsing. She could barely get the words out.

“I’ve...been b-bit...by a... sn...sna...”

She pointed a palsied finger to her leg. A local shook her head in disgust as she tossed a rotten fish head into the river.

“Drogas. Pobre gringa.”

“I’m not on drugs!” Carrie screamed. She was frothing at the mouth, having a seizure that jerked her towards the woman. The woman’s dog jumped up barking and its paws landed full force against Carrie’s waist. Carrie stumbled backwards and toppled right over the low railing of the bridge.

“Díós mio!” the woman said.

Carrie sprawled into the river, splashing and screaming. Everyone watched in horror as the crocodiles snapped her up and swallowed her down.