

The Sandpipers

Chapter 1

Lon wasn't a man of belonging but of fitting. Watching the sandpipers skitter along the shoreline, running into then away from the tide, he wondered how it felt to be free. He couldn't remember a time when he wasn't pretending to be like people unlike himself. Were *there people like him?* The breeze swept low over the beach, cutting the steam on Lon's coffee. He had moved to the island years ago and itched more and more to leave. Not for a lack of comfort or ease but because he was tired.

Lon lifted his paper cup and licked his lips. He loved the faint saltiness. Nothing but an island would do, he thought, or at the very least, a peninsula. He collapsed the cup, coffee drunk, and turned to his cottage just beyond the grass bank. The windows were open as he'd left them, curtains fanned out with the breeze; through the doorway, his unofficial uniform lay draped over the chair. After brushing the sand off his feet, Lon picked the newspaper off the front mat and creaked open the door.

The sun shone in ripples on the opposite chair, flickering in and out with the curtains. He closed the window and sat, glad for the sunlight over his paper. *The Voice* had seven sections, but Lon kept only three and a half; the rest, he folded and dropped into the garbage bin. He ripped through the headlines – *nothing new* – the painting and sculpture section, business overviews, and finished the crossword in five minutes, only mistaking one word. Lon flicked out the pages and discarded them beside the others.

His routine from there moved quickly – four boiled eggs from the fridge, a cold shower, his work clothes and steel-toed shoes. Lon was out the door and in the car.

The factory sat a putrid olive green amidst the surrounding forestry. It had an appearance of desperation, not green enough to blend into the mountains or sleek enough to stand out as a modern plant. No, Lon thought, more like an oversized shed.

Inside, he slipped on a hairnet and beard-net and punched in. The floors, concrete, didn't echo his shoes when he walked. Lon remembered the reverberating *clacks* in Okeechobee. These, in comparison, hit flat.

Once through the swinging doors, he heard the familiar factory dings and smelled the fruity acids. He washed his hands and fit the nets over his shoes. The workday began.

The factory had a tight staff. Lon had worked there for years but had only met 20 people, not including the boss. And somehow, no one ever did include Mr. Hill. That was why, when the loudspeaker crackled halfway through the day, Mr. Hill announcing a new hire, people scrambled from their positions to the lobby. It appeared everyone was waiting for him.

Mr. Hill walked in the front doors with his arms out beside him like expecting a barrage of child-hugs. When none came, he dropped his arms, smiled wide, and said enthusiastically, "Hello, everyone. How are we feeling today?"

Goods and bons.

"Ah-ah," he said, wagging his finger with faux-playfulness, "English at work."

Mr. Hill laughed alone.

"We have a new staff member today. It's her first day, so I expect you all will be welcoming..."

The room was quiet.

"Right, *of course we will, Mr. Hill,*" he said. "Everyone, this is Marie Pierre."

Everyone waited. Mr. Hill coughed, gesturing to the side door, "*Marie.*"

When again nothing happened, he jogged to the door and opened it, peeking through.

“Marie,” he said with deliberate slowness, “you can come in now.”

“Dakò, misyé.”

“English, Marie, please.”

“Okay, sir.” She appeared from behind the wall, and the room stilled.

Marie and Mr. Hill stopped at the front of the lobby, and even he seemed tongue-tied.

“Hi, I’m Marie,” she waved.

Lon and a few others waved back. Some people whispered, and Lon heard a woman say in Kwéyòl, “I didn’t know we hired retards here.” A man yawned, “As long as we don’t have to pick up her work.”

Lon thought what a wonderfully innocent face she had. *Almost childlike.*

The workday continued without interruption or change. Lon didn’t see Marie again until he was punching out. She came up beside him in a purple hairnet. Lon had never before seen a purple hairnet.

“Hello, Marie.”

“Hi! What’s your name?”

“I’m John,” he held out his hand. “How was your first day?”

She didn’t move to shake his hand. “It was slow. I thought people would be faster.”

Lon dropped his hand, amused. “Well, I’m sorry we can’t all keep up with you.”

Marie smiled, “You’ll get better.”

Lon drove directly to the resort for his second job. Unfailingly, it was beautiful and busy and smelled like expired suntan lotion. He slipped through the employee entrance and ate a quick half-dinner in the kitchen. The cooks always tried to set aside leftovers for on-the-move staff.

When Lon came to the resort, they offered him a front-facing position. His only explanation was his lack of accent, easier for foreigners to understand; nothing else about him, he knew, was marketable, neither young nor charming. But it didn't matter – Lon was looking for a backdoor job, something unseen and unheard. He became a janitor. After a couple years, Lon moved to part-time, working at the factory during the day. He thought it was safer that way.

Late afternoon passed into deep evening, and Lon still hadn't spoken to anyone since Marie. He changed back into his factory clothes, leaving the resort coveralls behind for the launderer. On his way to the staff exit, he felt a small hand pat the back of his leg. He turned.

“Have you seen my mommy?”

The boy, Lon recognized, was barely school-age. He had more a look of wonder than worry, still so young that he thought everything was as it should be. Lon hoped he wouldn't lose that today. He looked around but saw nobody nearby.

“Let's go find her,” he said, crouching down. “Where did you last see her?”

The boy pointed down the hallway towards the lobby. “She went to the bathroom.”

Lon nodded, then reached for the boy's hand but hesitated.

The boy, not noticing, took off towards the lobby. “Come on, come on.”

Lon followed him, emerging from the hallway.

“Mommy!”

The woman ran for her son, picking him up in one swift movement. She stroked his hair, whispering so only they could hear, and kissed his ear. Then she saw Lon.

Lon was stiff as the woman thanked and hugged him – but far more uncomfortable when her son did the same.

He left in a hurry for home.

Even a shower wasn't enough to get the feeling off.

Chapter 2

Lydia was known by most as Mama James. Given, her town was small, but as far as Lydia knew, she was the only *Mama* around. It was just she and her three daughters – their fathers had left one after the other – and she was, to all who knew her, a marvel.

After having her third girl and watching another father leave, Lydia decided to root herself. She made use of her real estate license and climbed, and she bought the cheapest house in the nicest neighborhood in town. In her free time, she participated in local politics, fundraisers and volunteer opportunities, and threw herself into her children: president of the PTA, assistant coach of their teams, the poster-woman for participation. In the ten years after Kieran was born, Lydia became the most recognizable face in the area. Despite her age, people saw her as the epitome of community and motherhood.

So when, of all the children in the town, it was Lydia's daughter – Mama James' baby – who was attacked, people were shocked. Most of the town openly supported the lawsuit, especially once it went national, but the whisperings lingered. *How could she let it happen*, some would say, *where was she; maybe she was too young for motherhood after all*.

Four rape kits were connected across Florida, and the case lasted over a year. Lydia was as involved in the case as anyone could be. She argued for execution. The jury didn't go for it.

The man got life in Okeechobee.

Years later, Lydia heard on the radio about a four-man prison escape. From Okeechobee. And she heard his name.

She searched with every search team. She stalked the Everglades alone. Time passed, and the police found three of the convicts, but not *him*. They theorized he went South by boat, disappearing into Latin America like an escaped Nazi. Eventually, they stopped looking.

But not Lydia. She surveyed every travel photo website, subscribed to Latin and South American news, and set up alerts for every social media post tagging the Caribbean islands. It became both a passion and a hobby, settled into a routine morning-and-evening check.

But now her daughter Kieran was going to college. Lydia spent most of her days packing boxes, watching the house empty itself of the last of her children and found her routine upended. She stopped checking. This had happened before, in lulls, but she began to wonder if it was time to stop. Her daughter, after all, was leaving, healing, and Lydia was going to be alone.

On the drive home from college drop-off, Lydia felt nothing but peace. Seeing Kieran fall onto her bare dorm mattress, eyes closed and smiling, she was excited. She pictured her daughter flourishing, finding herself as her sisters had. Neither of them wept then.

But when Lydia arrived home to a barrage of empty boxes, scattered and stacked around the house like kraft-brown cartridges, she cried. After devoting her life to her daughters, they were gone.

That night, she lay in her bed, eyes wrinkled, and looked lazily at her missed alerts. Yawning, she scrolled through a recent Facebook post. Then another, wiping her eyes. And a couple more, and then she stopped.

In a couple's vacation photo, at the back corner behind the woman's elbow, a man stood with a mop. They were posing, and he was cleaning the floor, his eyes looking off to the left. Lydia sat up and grabbed her glasses. *It was him*. He had a beard, and he'd lost some weight, and

he was wearing beige coveralls, but Lydia felt it in her stomach, in her gut, in the deepest part of her heart: Leonard Bass was alive, mopping floors in St. Lucia.

Lydia had never been on an airplane before. She booked her flight immediately, on instinct, after seeing the photo. Hastily, she tied things up. She told her daughters and company that she was going on vacation. Everyone said, *good. Long time coming.* She asked a neighbor to water her plants and lawn. She booked a two-week stay at the resort from the photo. And she didn't tell anyone that her flight was one-way.

Walking onto the plane, Lydia wondered if she had been too hasty. She had never been on a plane, or out of the country, she didn't know jiu jitsu or karate, she didn't have a gun, she suddenly felt completely out of her depth. A man behind her grunted. She walked farther back. Settled into her middle-seat, Lydia closed her eyes.

She imagined the man who grunted was friends with Leonard. Maybe they played soccer together in a neighborhood league, she thought, and the men would finish with a cigar and talk about their wives, *women*, they'd say, and Leonard would puff on his cigar and think about little girls and boys. Lydia felt her lip curl.

"Pardon."

A woman stood in the aisle, motioning to the window seat beside Lydia.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said, standing and leaning back.

The woman smiled and waved her off.

Some minutes later, a second woman sat in the aisle seat on Lydia's other side. She felt comforted to be flanked on both sides by other women traveling abroad alone. The flight itself was less daunting for her after that.

But she still threw up in the bathroom halfway through the flight. Whether from the turbulence or nerves, Lydia didn't know.

She spent the flight running over everything she knew about Leonard Bass. What she had heard in court, gleaned from his character witnesses, noticed in his mannerisms and reactions. She absentmindedly looked down at her backpack, wherein she had stashed a DVD with recordings of the trial. The backpack, once her daughter's, was a bedazzled red dragon. *Maybe I need a new backpack.* She shifted back to thoughts about Leonard.

The landing, Lydia thought, could've been in Florida – the grasses, the blue-teal water, the hills, even, looked identical to the place she'd left. She leaned back in her seat and waited for the wheels to touch down.

The airport was smaller and less commercialized than her home airport but otherwise similar. She felt relieved to see that everything was in English. The taxi driver's accent, the color-splash architecture, the looseness of the air all felt familiar to Lydia. It wasn't until she got to the resort that she was struck by her misplacement. That she remembered why she had come.

When she got out of the taxi, the first thing she heard were children. Squealing and laughing and saying *Mama, look, look.* Lydia passed children on her way to the front desk, heard them while checking in, stood beside one while riding the elevator. She thought what a perfect place Leonard had chosen. Parents were distracted and children played alone. A janitor would blend into the tan walls, largely unnoticed. She was sick – sick to her stomach, sick in her bones, her mind, and her heart. The sickness invaded every pore and empty space in her body until, entering her room, she threw up onto the carpet.

After Lydia had wiped down the carpet, she sat on the bed.

She considered extradition – *maybe the death penalty would stick this time* – and how Leonard would be thrown in a cell, dragged off the island, flown back to the U.S. for another trial. *Another trial*. Another trial would mean Kieran would see him, hear his name on the news, hear him claim again that he didn't want to. He would sit on the stand again and cry and say he never forced the kids, he loved kids, he wished he could be anyone else, but he wasn't. He would lie, she thought, and she would have to keep her lips shut from spitting on him.

No, Lydia thought, Leonard Bass didn't deserve a trial and execution. He didn't deserve decades of consideration and interviews and television specials and prayer. He didn't deserve a chaplain at his execution who would absolve him of his sins. He didn't deserve peace.

She had to kill him.

More than that, she wanted to.

Later that night, Lydia went to the bar and wandered the resort with her wine glass in hand. She saw only adults now, many of whom carried similar glasses. And then she saw him, lurking half in the lobby, half in an adjoining hallway. She nearly dropped her glass. After a minute of stillness, Lydia realized Leonard could look up and see her, and she turned around. She left her glass at the bar and watched him from behind a pillar, memorizing the new changes to his face. His was, she thought, the ugliest face she had ever seen.

Once sufficiently repulsed, Lydia moved to the lounge area with four or so other people, facing outward at the beach. A couple chattered about their next vacation, and one woman tittered on a call, and soft wave sounds crashed ahead. Lydia focused on the far-back sounds of the lobby, the footsteps and occasional coughs, in case.

Seemingly out of nowhere, a woman approached the lounge area and sat her young son on one of the chairs.

“Honey, stay here with these nice people while I go to the bathroom.”

“Okay, Mommy.”

He bounced in the chair as his mother walked away. Lydia glanced back at Leonard, who had gone – further down the hallway, she guessed. Once the mother had disappeared into the bathroom, Lydia leaned over to the boy.

“I just saw your mom go down that hallway,” she said. “I think she was waving for you.”

The boy gaped, then ran towards the hallway, screaming, “Mommy?”

Lydia followed the boy to the end of the hallway and listened. She would stay close, she assured herself, *nothing would happen to him*.

She waited, wanting to hear Leonard speak. To see him come out, closer-up. To watch what he would do.

Faintly down the hallway, footsteps moved closer, and the woman emerged from the bathroom to see an empty chair where she’d left her son. Just as she started running to the lounge area, her son ran out of the hallway.

Leonard followed behind, and Lydia stayed half-turned from the scene.

The woman thanked him, and Lydia thought she might retch. But then she asked for his name, and Lydia froze.

“John.”

Like Lon.

“Thank John, honey, and give him a hug.”

I’m sure he loves that.

Lydia decided that even death was too easy for Leonard. For Lon. For John the janitor, the friendly foreign footman, helper and lover to children one and all.

It wasn't enough.

Chapter 3

After two days of uninterrupted work, Mr. Hill called Lon off the assembly floor to talk with him. He was relaxing in his office, an ornately styled but windowless room, when Lon arrived.

“John, please come in. Close the door behind you.”

Lon sat down in the single chair opposite Mr. Hill. He stayed rod-straight and didn’t cross his legs. It felt to him like a legs-open, hands-clasped meeting.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Hill.”

“Yes, yes, it’s a nice day.”

Lon nodded.

“I need you to do me a favor.”

Lon knew whatever coming was neither a request nor a favor, but he nodded anyway.

“I need you to train Marie.”

“Why me, sir?”

“Well, you’re American! You and I,” he gestured to Lon and himself, “we’re used to people *with her condition*. They’re less tolerant here, you know.”

Lon didn’t have a response to that.

“So?”

“Of course, Mr. Hill.”

He clapped: “Brilliant! I’ll send her to your station later. You should probably work with her for at least a week, maybe more.”

“Okay.” Lon stood to leave.

“You’re the man.”

“No, sir, that’s you,” he said instantly.

Mr. Hill laughed and waved him off.

Lon worked at his station for over an hour before Marie entered the floor. He surmised that Mr. Hill must’ve sent her without instructions, because when she walked through the swinging doors, she kept walking. Lon asked a nearby coworker to watch his station and jogged over to Marie.

“Bonjour, John!”

“Bonjour, Marie. You need to wear your hairnet when you’re on the floor.”

“Oh, pardon,” she said, tucking her hot-pink net around her hair.

“And you need to wash your hands and shoes before doing anything else.”

“Okay,” she said, looking around. “Where?”

Lon walked her back near the entrance doors and demonstrated the proper way to sterilize your hands and shoes. She mimicked him.

He led her around the floor, stopping at every station to explain its purpose and workings.

“This machine fills the bottles,” he said, “and that one affixes the caps,” and he pulled a bottle off the line to show her. He led her down the line, showed the laser label printer, then patted an unmoving machine: “This one attaches the labels, but it broke a couple years back. We haven’t been able to replace it, so Anita has been doing its job.” Lon gestured to Anita, who looked and said, “Bonjour.”

“Bonjour,” Marie said, then moved close to Anita and showed her the bottle Lon had snagged. “Can I drink this?”

Anita's eyes flickered to Lon and back, half-smiling: "Yes."

After trying and failing to uncap the bottle, Marie asked Lon if he would open it for her. He did. "Merci," she said.

It was refreshing to Lon, who, a decade-long foreigner, hadn't felt knowledgeable in years. He loved the feeling of teaching and leading Marie around the floor. Watching her fascination with the same machines and processes that had first fascinated him. He felt experienced and responsible and, a foot and a half taller – and stronger – than Marie, like a man.

After visiting the other stations, Lon took Marie to his – what would be, for the next week, theirs. He listed for her the different fruit-drinks that came down his station line, which ones required constant work like Anita's, and the ones that only needed general damage control – "like," he said pointing at the orange drinks on the line, "these." He was showing her how to adjust the bottles when the off-side machine spat one off the line into a bin on the floor. The clamor made Marie jump. Lon put one hand on her shoulder and said, "Take a step back," using his other hand to press the red button stopping the assembly line.

"What was that?"

Lon debated removing his hand from her shoulder, but she didn't seem to notice it was there. He kept it.

"It does that sometimes. If the bottles don't line up right or get clogged or bent, it spits around here."

"Oh. How do we fix it?"

Lon reluctantly took back his hand so he could move closer to the belt. "Depending on the issue, you need to move them around, remove any extra, or remove the bad bottle.

“In this case,” he picked the bent bottle out of the bin, showing it to Marie, “the machine did the last one for us, so we just let it go.”

He pressed the red button, and the assembly started up again.

“Why do they bend?” Marie asked.

“They’re old machines.”

“You’re old.”

Lon almost laughed but realized he didn’t know Marie’s age. “That depends. How old are you?”

She smiled at him, seemingly pleased to know something he didn’t. “What do *you* think, John?”

Lon rolled back on his heels, considering. Usually, he thought, the best approach with women was to guess younger, but with her condition, that may come across as insulting. But, he countered, he certainly couldn’t guess any older than 30 (unless she was clearly over 50), because no woman liked that. And Marie didn’t look 50.

He settled with “25”

“No.” She smiled larger, although Lon suspected it was because she stumped him, not because she felt complimented. “I’m 32.”

He nodded. Again, he wasn’t sure how to proceed; rude if he said *oh, I see it now*, too on-the-nose if he said *you don’t look it*. What Lon really wanted to say was:

“You’re a lovely 32.”

She blushed. It reminded Lon of a schoolgirl. “Merci, John.”

He rocked forward on his feet. “Plézi mwen, Marie.”

“You know Kwéyòl.”

“I’ve picked up some.”

“I like you.”

Lon couldn’t remember a time he felt attracted to someone over 14. To like Marie was, for him, completely remarkable. He felt invigorated.

Chapter 4

“Hi, Kiwi, how was your first week?”

“Hey, Mama. It’s been fine... Zoe keeps microwaving soup, so it smells like soup in here.”

“What kind of soup?”

“I think tomato. Maybe chicken noodle, too.”

“You were always more of a cream-soup girl.”

Lydia heard her daughter sigh. “I miss home.”

“Home never smelled like soup.”

Kieran laughed.

Lydia asked about the college, and they talked until nothing was left to ask.

“I’ll let you go –”

“Wait, Mama, how’s your vacation?”

Lydia looked around her room – at the scribbled papers taped to the wall, her clothes thrown in the gape-mouth drawers, and the TV, ever-on, muted on the St. Lucia news. “It’s great, baby. Beautiful.”

Lydia had rewatched all the trial recordings and reread all her court record copies, and she had spent the few days watching for Leonard and pinpointing his work schedule. It seemed that he worked the same hours every day, without deviation. All her notes were plastered on one wall of the room, missing a key component: the rest of Leonard’s day. Where was he all day

before work, what did he do in his free time, where did he live – Lydia needed to know everything about his life in St. Lucia, most importantly his routine.

She put her phone and cash in one pocket, her room key and pocket knife in the other, and slunk down the stairs into the parking lot. Her taxi was waiting. She told the driver to turn off his lights and stay parked, “you can keep the meter running.” He didn’t seem to think this was a strange request. They stayed silent while Lydia watched for Leonard.

And then, there he was. He came from the back exit in his usual nice clothes, changed from the onesie, and got into a beaten-up navy car.

“Follow him,” she told the driver.

He nodded, again unperturbed.

Lydia wondered what the driver must think. *Probably that we’re married, or were.*

The more populated tourist areas faded into rural.

Far up the road, Leonard turned off into grass. Lydia told the driver to stop the taxi. He did. She paid him and told him to wait there for her to return. He reclined his driver’s seat and kicked his feet onto the dash in response.

She walked along the road, staying in the overgrown grass, and breathed as softly as she could. Lydia knew that this walk wouldn’t be the riskiest thing she did while in St. Lucia. It wouldn’t be close.

But her legs still shook.

Waves crashed beyond Leonard’s cottage. Anywhere else, they would’ve calmed her, but as it was, the sound cut through her ears.

Lydia reached the cottage, a faded beach-blue, and stopped. The side-facing windows were open. She pressed herself against the back wall.

She breathed for some long minutes before she finally moved, first to the edge, looking out at the side of the house, then to the corner, where she was just out of sight from the window.

[Island 1]

Lon heard the news. After he escaped, he heard car radios and English broadcasts from Cuba detailing his and his cohorts' prison break. He listened whenever he could to hear the updates: one was captured within the day, another was found a week later, another after a few months. The first man, convicted for the same crimes as Lon, was given an additional six years; the second, convicted for drug trafficking, was given a second life sentence; and the last man, already convicted of murder, killed another two women in attempts to conceal himself, and so was sentenced to die at the hands of the state.

Lon remembered how the tone of the news shifted over those months. At first, the news surmised that the trafficker was the mastermind, the murderer the brute, and Lon and his cohort strung along. The first man even corroborated the story. But as the other men were found, fingers began turning to Lon. The trafficker and murderer insisted that *he* planned the escape, and the rapist moved to support them. Lon couldn't tell if it helped their sentencing, but their story remained steady.

The news was against him.

For a while, he listened intently to the radio-broadcasted criminal profiles of him, the psychological analyses of his childhood and proclivities.

But he never felt he was listening to talks about him. The man they discussed was a stranger to him.

It wasn't *him*, Lon Bass.

That man was a fear-monger, a sociopath and manipulator, control- and power-hungry. He was villainous, vile, and wanted only to hurt others.

But all Lon ever wanted was

All Lon ever wanted was

What did Lon want?

[Island 2]

Lon stood on the beach with his morning coffee.

For the first time, he imagined someone beside him.

[Island 3]

Lydia stood at her window as the sun rose. A hotel employee carried a single ornament past the hotel pool and onto the beach. The ornament – the size of a suitcase – dwarfed the employee, a child in its shadow. They walked along the far edge of the sand until they arrived at one of the few scattered palm trees. The tree towered long and lean above them. Lydia waited, expecting them to jump into the air, hoisting the ornament above their head. But instead: In one seamless motion, the employee attached the ornament to the back of their belt and climbed onto the tree trunk, moving up small and fast like a squirrel. Before she knew it, they were back in the sand, admiring the glittering red ornament that now hung from a palm frond.

Lydia stayed at the window to watch the employee run, climb, and adorn the tree. By the end, she thought it was beautifully obnoxious, a vision in red and gold ornaments and tinsel garlands.

She still hadn't planned Christmas. She didn't know if her daughters would forgive her another missed holiday. They had lost younger holidays to her search for Leonard, and now they were losing more (although to their knowledge, for another reason). She wondered what she would tell them. What they would say.

Lydia brushed these thoughts aside, shifting towards her next move on Leonard. She knew it was time to bring Manuel into play. Now that things were escalating, she needed eyes and ears on Leonard.

But to play Manuel, she had to eliminate his other ways to get around.

Without any viable buses and few casual transportation services, the only obstacle was his car.

She'd have to get rid of it.

[Island 4]

Lon scrutinized the photo he had just taken on his phone. His shirt was too wide and too green, he decided; he looked like a Brussels sprout. He dropped the phone and slunk back to his closet. Shorts, pants, button-ups: maroon, black, blue, white – he turned back – *blue*. Lon switched out the shirts and set up his phone on the dresser. He stepped back until he could see himself fully in the frame and waited for the flash. Better, he thought, but was it too warm for pants? He pulled on a pair of shorts and took another photo before changing back. The beams of sunlight across his floor were turning a darker and darker orange. He wondered if his beard looked unkempt, his hair too long. His mind tilted – what would they think when he pulled up in a taxi? Lon sat on his bed.

It was only the third time he'd met a girl's parents. The first was Grace, his seventh-grade love, whose parents he thought looked like slugs (but who seemed to like him). The second was his prom date, Janie, who he didn't really like and whose parents' feelings were mutual. Not only had it been over 20 years, but Lon hardly spoke at those meetings – his experience was limited to strained encounters with parents of estranged girls. This, he knew, would be much different. He walked to the small bathroom mirror and brushed his hair again.

This time, he was meeting Marie's parents.

Marie's mother, who handmade all her hair nets in assorted bright colors. Her father, who toiled all day on their farm. Her brother, who worked in local politics. What would they see when they saw him?

His worn and outdated clothes? His uncalloused palms? His eyes? What would they find there, he wondered.

Would they see his depravity?

Did *he* see it... anymore?

Lon leaned against the sink, squinting at his reflection. He waded through his mud-eyes and searched for the repulsion he'd come to expect. It wasn't there.

He closed his eyes and envisioned the children. Their faces, round and soft and crying; their sounds, confused and desperate and frantic; their parents at court, livid and ashamed and tormented. He let them fill him up.

Lon opened his eyes and looked again at himself.

He saw remorse – but not disgust.

He realized he was forgiving himself.

Perhaps, Lon thought, this meeting would be alright. Perhaps Marie's parents would just see a man – not unlike any other man – with faults and regrets and hope.

After all, that was who he saw.

Lon stepped back from the mirror and slipped on his shoes.

The taxi pulled up 10 minutes later.

“Manuel,” Lon said, “are you the only taxi driver in St. Lucia?”

He slid in the seat, surprised that the taxi had the same driver as the previous week. Since the incident with his car, Lon thought, he'd only been driven by Manuel.

Manuel half-smiled at him through the rearview mirror.

“I am always working,” he said.

“So you are.”

Outside the cab window, country turned to city, and rolling greens turned to bursts of color. The storefronts in purples and blues, banners in oranges and reds, houses in yellows and

pinks. But as quickly as he came into the city, he passed through it and disappeared into deeper shades of green.

The further inland they drove, the wider the farmland stretched. Every farm Lon saw was Marie's until the cab passed it.

He smoothed his hair.

“Who are we going to see?”

Lon looked up to see Manuel's eyebrows raised in the mirror. He raised his eyebrows in return.

“You're fixing your hair.”

“What's wrong with that?”

“It cannot be fixed.”

Lon began to laugh but choked on it.

Manuel seemed to think this was funny. “Ah, so it is...”

“... a woman,” Manuel said.

At the same time, Lon said, “... a girl.”

Manuel's eyes flickered in the mirror. Lon wondered for a split second if he'd committed a faux-pas, if in St. Lucia, men didn't refer to women as “girls,” but then he felt the car turn, and there it was – there it must have been – *Pierre Fèm* – Marie's family house, at the end of a long stretch of fields.

The fields were empty of people. He figured her father was waiting for him inside.

Lon felt his legs tense. He smoothed the fabric of his pants, pressing hard with every stroke.

At least, he thought, he wasn't meeting them as a boyfriend.

Yet.

[Island 5]

Lydia's phone rang while she was in the shower. She recognized the ringtone and scrambled out, not bothering to grab a towel and slipping where the bathroom floor met the carpet. She pushed herself up and ran to grab her phone off the bed.

She panted, "Manuel?"

"He called me to drive him somewhere. Do you want me to come get you after I leave him?"

"Yes... Yes, thank you. Do you know how long?"

"No. I will call you."

"Thank you, Manuel. Let me know where he goes, please."

"Okay, Miss Lydia."

He hung up.

She dropped her phone back on the bed and slumped for a moment before jumping up: She still needed to wash her hair.

Out of the shower and dressed, Lydia sat on the bed with her phone and folder. She leaned back against the headboard and slowly unsealed the manila folder. The pictures she pulled out were high-quality prints, large and strongly saturated with perfect resolution. She laid them in a pile on her lap. The top photo was Kieran. It was her sixth grade picture. Her hair was in braids, and her smile was magnificent – the last wide smile in any of her school photographs. Lydia had debated including her picture, but eventually decided that it was important for Leonard to see who he hurt. Now, looking at her baby, Lydia wasn't so sure.

She absentmindedly touched Kieran's paper cheek.

The phone rang.

[Island 6]

Once Manuel parked the cab, he reclined his seat and crossed his feet on the dash. Lydia heard the start of a game as she closed the door.

“I won’t be long,” she said at his cracked-open window.

He waved her off.

She opened the door with her spare key and stepped inside. Sand grains crunched beneath her worn sneakers. She closed the door behind her and looked in the trash bin for the familiar pile of newspapers. At the top, she pushed aside the painting and business sections, then the headlines – those, she saw on TV – and dug for the music and classifieds. Lydia sat in the closer dining chair and smoothed the papers over her manila folder.

Feeling the sun warm her face and hearing the faint waves in the distance, Lydia read. She thought – not for the first time – that she could live there. Maybe once Leonard was gone, she could buy the cottage. Kieran could come too, Lydia thought, on her spring and summer breaks. *How lovely.*

She finished the papers and carefully recrumpled them at the bottom of the trash. Next, as was her routine, Lydia walked through the house to look for any disturbances, ensure Leonard wasn’t there, nobody was there, and then she settled in his bedroom. Lydia opened the folder and laid all the photos like a grid on his comforter. Nine in all.

She assessed with her eyes where each picture would go – from the grid’s top-left to bottom-right, she’d line them along the walls, starting with the wall facing the beach.

The first photo was a young boy with black curls who smiled shyly at the camera. His parents had cried on the stand. This photo was among the court’s evidence, his fifth grade photo.

The second photo was of Leonard's nephew, only seven at the time of the court proceedings. Although Leonard's family wasn't involved in the case, Lydia acquired the photo through Facebook and wanted to include it among the others.

The third photo depicted his first victim, the oldest of the known victims, a 13-year-old girl with a round cherub face.

The fourth photo was the nine-year-old girl who lived next door to Leonard at the time. Her parents attended the proceedings and spat on Leonard as he passed them.

The fifth photo was Kieran.

The sixth showed the boy that Leonard hugged at the hotel. Lydia had taken a picture of him at one of the hotel's continental breakfasts.

The seventh was Leonard's niece, five years old at the time of the case. Lydia also got this picture off of Facebook.

The eighth was his youngest victim, a girl in first grade who was hospitalized after the rape. She needed stitches. Lydia couldn't find a single picture where she smiled.

After taping up all nine pictures, Lydia stood back and admired her handiwork. They were straight and evenly spaced and perfectly beautiful. Looking around, she thought that she really liked the room.

Lydia gathered her tape, folder, and phone, and left, locking the door behind her. Manuel was sitting in the same spot, swiping on his phone. She got into the car, and he set down his phone.

“All finished?”

“All finished.”

Manuel started the car and drove them away. Lydia couldn't pinpoint why, but she turned around to watch the cottage fade out the back window; she didn't want to leave.

[Island 7]

Lon felt he would collapse into bed the moment he walked through his bedroom doorway. But as he stumbled forward, he stopped mid-step. He had seen something in the corner of his vision – a flash of color. He knew his white walls had nothing hung on them when he left earlier that evening.

Lon slowly looked over to his left. Rebecca stared back at him. His heart stalled in his chest. She was smiling at him. He felt naked before her. He remembered meeting her, thinking she was his Lolita, feeling immediately connected. Now, he felt only shame. He blinked rapidly, dumb, and something else glinted. He didn't want to look.

But he did. It was Kenny, his nephew. *Why was he here?* He hadn't seen Kenny since before the trial. He was such a beautiful boy... but he never liked Lon. He always found a way to leave the room when Lon entered it. He knew.

Next to him, Lon saw Daniel. Sweet Daniel. His legs felt weak beneath him, and he reached for the bed to hold him steady. Daniel had looked at Lon like he held the world, and he felt like a hero. That was gone now.

Leaning against the bed, Lon's eyes followed them, Daniel, Kenny, Rebecca, Charlotte, Kieran, the boy from the hotel – the boy from the hotel, *why was he here?* How could he be here, in Lon's bedroom, with children he once knew and loved? The boy was a stranger, a passing moment. And his photo wasn't like the others – it wasn't posed or smiled for – it was shot from a distance, like a secret – in the hotel.

Lon realized someone had found him out. He scanned the faces again – Daniel, Kenny, Rebecca, Charlotte, Kieran, the boy, little Sophie (who unlike her brother, loved Lon), and

Harper... Lon's steadiness broke when he saw Harper. He slid onto the floor, recalling carrying her to the hospital. He cried then, too, when he dropped her off at the entrance. She looked then as she did now: terrified and torn.

He repulsed himself.

Maybe he deserved to be found, Lon thought. Maybe Marie was too good, his life here too good, for a man such as him.

Lon rolled onto his back on the hard floor. And there, on the ceiling, was a picture of himself at age eight, smiling uncomfortably back at him.

Tears dampened his hair until eventually, he fell asleep.

[Island 8]

“He cried.”

“You watched him?”

“I saw him through the window.”

Lydia imagined Leonard crying. Her instinct was to say *good*, but that didn't encapsulate everything she felt. It was too small a word.

“Miss Lydia?”

“Thank you, Manuel.”

“You are welcome.”

He hung up.

Anger. *Did he weep for Kieran?* Confusion. Grief. Pity. Regret. Hurt. Doubt. *What if he wasn't who she thought?* Sympathy.

She put a tape from the trial into the television set. When it got to a part where Leonard wept, she watched and rewinded and watched and rewinded and watched again.

[Island 9]

Lydia sat on the beach past the resort, her bare feet half-submerged in the sand.

For the first time, she imagined someone beside her.

[Island 10]

“I’m going back to school tomorrow.”

“Are you excited to go back?”

“I guess,” Kieran sighed, “but I’d rather be flying to you.”

Lydia laughed, but it quickly faded. “Well, of course...”

Kieran was quiet. Lydia knew it was her turn to say something, but she found her mind wandering.

Finally, Lydia thought of something: “How was your New Year’s?”

Shuffling. “It was fine. Anna came over, you know, and she brought her new boyfriend.”

“Wow, Anna has a boyfriend now... So it was you, Anna and her boyfriend, your sisters, and Josh?”

“Maya brought her girlfriend, too.”

Lydia hummed at this, her mind drifting.

Kieran’s tone shifted: “Were you with someone on New Year’s?”

She snapped back, surprised. “No, baby, just me.”

“Mama... Did you meet someone?”

This took Lydia even further aback. “Why would you ask that?”

“I don’t know... You’ve been out there so long – you even missed *Christmas* – and you don’t call as much...” Kieran trailed off before adding with a degree of slowness, “And you haven’t really dated... ever.”

Lydia opened her mouth to argue this, but she couldn’t. Her plan had been to wait until the girls were older, when they didn’t need her as much, but after what happened to Kieran...

After that, she never thought about dating. Her attention was captivated by other things, and the only man she ever thought about was Leonard. He certainly hadn't excited her about the possibility of meeting men.

But now...

"Mama?"

"You're right, Kiwi."

Kieran made a sudden noise. "You met someone?"

"No, about..." She meant that she *had* been gone too long and *hadn't* really dated... But now that Kieran said it, Lydia felt her stomach lurch. She had met a man...

"Maybe," Lydia said finally.

"Oh my god, Mama! You have to tell me everything."

Lydia staved off Kieran's questions and ended the call. She knew the conversation wasn't over.

More horribly, she knew that she could never tell her daughter – or anyone else – the truth. And if she *did* end up with Leonard, her entire life would be a lie.

Would it be worth it?

Lydia shivered at the thought.

[Island 11]

When Manuel first told her that Leonard didn't call for his usual ride home from work, Lydia didn't think much of it. She assumed a friend from work had taken him. A *male* friend. After a few days of needing a ride *there* but not a ride *back*, Manuel pressed Leonard about it. He told Lydia that it was a woman. This had given her pause, but it wasn't overtly concerning. She knew adult women weren't typically his style.

When this continued, she had Manuel hide in the warehouse parking lot and watch him. And follow him.

"They seemed like friends," he told her, and she let out a breath.

"Mé," Manuel continued, "he has been to her house. I have taken him there."

Lydia prickled at this but tried to remain hopeful. "How old is she?"

"I don't know."

Typically, Lydia thought, that meant she wasn't young. Her hope held. But she had to ask: "Is she pretty?"

Manuel coughed. "Miss Lydia," he said, "she is not like you and me."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"She is... different. She has some sort of disorder."

"Like what, Manuel?"

"Her face looks... flat..." he paused, "and very young... but not."

Lydia froze. "Very young."

"Yes."

"Young like a child?"

Manuel coughed again but didn't reply.

"Thank you, Manuel."

Lydia hung up.

It was one thing to find Leonard spending time with a woman but another thing entirely to find out the woman had something potentially developmental.

Lydia felt sick. Sick because the woman didn't know who Leonard was and what he had done. Because the woman didn't know how her looks probably fed into his tastes. Because she was in danger.

But more than anything, Lydia felt sick with jealousy.

She paced her room.

Beside the television, pictures and papers still covered the wall. The collage had tripled in size since she arrived in St. Lucia, now with new photographs of Leonard, his car (now gone), his house (inside and outside), the warehouse where he worked, his janitorial closet, pages from his newspapers, and other odds and ends. She'd sometimes find herself staring at this wall for hours.

Right now, she only saw what was now missing from the wall. *Who* was missing.

Lydia called Manuel back. She needed to know more about the woman.

[Island 12]

Manuel didn't know much about the woman at first. He told Lydia what her house and car looked like, what she looked like, but he had nothing to share beyond that.

Until he asked around.

He told Lydia the woman's name – Marie – and what the locals knew about her and her family, the Pierres – their farm, main trades, the brother who was an up-and-coming politician... Most people, Manuel said, told him they were comfortable but not overly friendly with Marie's parents and Marie, and that they all loved Marie's brother, *Misyé Pierre*. He said they all raved how *Misyé Pierre* was an honest politician, cracking down on crime and fighting hard against brutality, corruption, gang violence, and assault.

Manuel also confirmed that Marie worked at the same warehouse as Leonard.

Lydia wrote all these details onto pieces of paper that she taped onto her wall. Next, she needed photographs. Of Marie's house, she thought, Marie's brother, and of course, Marie herself. *For documentation.*

“And then,” she said pointing to a scrap of paper on the wall that read simply *MARIE* in large letters, “we'll get him away from you.”

Lydia already knew how she would do it.

[Island 13]

Lon was called into Mr. Hill's office on a Tuesday.

He was working at his station opposite Marie when Anita walked over: "Misye Hill wants you."

Marie raised her eyebrows at him playfully, and he raised one in response before heading up.

He knocked on the door to no sound. He knocked again and heard a faint *ungh*. Lon took this as an invitation.

When he entered, Mr. Hill was leaning back in his chair with his head in his hands. This didn't disturb Lon – he was well used to Mr. Hill's dramatics. He sat down in the opposite chair and clasped his hands.

Mr. Hill was silent and unmoving, so Lon remained silent and unmoving.

Finally, Mr. Hill removed his head from his hands and sighed, "John."

"Mr. Hill."

"I'm so disappointed in you."

Lon wasn't put off. This wasn't an unusual beginning to one of Mr. Hill's jokes. He played along. "For what, sir?"

Mr. Hill didn't appear to have heard him. He stood up out of his chair and began to pace, waving his arms around. "I couldn't believe you would do this to me. To our people. To this company. I said, *no, anyone but John. John is my right hand. He would never.*"

Lon felt a prickle of concern. "Do what?"

"But the proof was in the pudding. I couldn't deny it, because there it was."

“There *what* was, sir?”

“You must know we can’t accept this behavior. I understand if you’re struggling, I know you have a second job, but so many of us are struggling, not me of course, but you know, a lot of people here in St. Lucia, and around the world, truly, but theft is never the answer. And at this warehouse, it is not a forgivable offense.”

Lon thought again that Mr. Hill was messing with him. *You stole my heart*, Lon figured he’d say, or maybe *the hearts of their customers*, or something similar. “Theft?”

Mr. Hill sighed. He stopped pacing, hands on his hips, and looked Lon in the face. “You’re fired.”

That’s when Lon knew, once and for all, that Mr. Hill was not joking.

[Island 14]

Lydia looked in the mirror, her braids undone and her hair slicked and oiled in two space-buns. Her skin was even and dewy from her makeup. She had no mascara, eyeshadow, or lipstick but lavender-tinted blush across her cheeks and nose.

She thought how different she looked.

Not at all like herself.

Like a child.

Lydia smiled.

Perfect.

[Island 15]

Lon stood in the sand, coffee in hand. He grasped onto this semblance of a routine, his coffee-and-newspaper mornings, the rest shattered. He thought how convenient that the resort no longer had any day shifts. He was forced into the evening like a mouse in its hole.

Lon's days now worked in a wave: After sleeping for a couple short hours, he woke to his coffee and newspaper, breakfast and shower, and then fell back asleep before eventually waking up and calling Manuel to take him to the warehouse. There, he picked up Marie in her own car (she'd given him a key), spent seemingly growing time with her, and drove himself to work, after which she took herself home. And then he worked until early morning, when Manuel drove him home and the wave began again.

It wasn't the same, he thought.

For one, he missed a good night's sleep.

For another, he missed the bustle of the warehouse. Mr. Hill and Anita and the in-and-out floor workers and wearing the hairnets and the godforsaken beard-nets that made him scratch and that he had hated at first but that eventually became an itchy appendage.

Lon sipped his coffee. It tasted particularly salty. But not unpleasant, he thought.

The sandpipers scurried.

The waves crashed.

The breeze blew saltiness into his cup.

It was, Lon thought, as if everything was as it should be. As if nothing had changed. But of course, for him, everything had changed. He went from being alone to having a girlfriend, from having two jobs to having one, having a car to having none, staying hidden to being

terribly, horrifically seen. He was Lon at home and John at work and now, he was Leonard again, too; Leonard at the lips of someone who knew the guttural truth of him.

He turned back to his cottage as if nothing had changed.

Whatever happened, Lon was convinced he deserved it.

[Island 16]

“Mama, stop changing the subject, I wanna hear about *the guy*...”

“So you have a mystery man!”

“Yes, he is very mysterious.”

“Mama, you should’ve told me! I had to hear it from Kieran.”

Lydia hummed absentmindedly.

“What’s he like,” Maya asked. “Is he a tourist, too?”

“Kieran told me you have a boyfriend now.”

“Did she?”

“Who is he, Mom?”

Janie never did mince her words.

[Island 17]

“Mama?”

“Hello?”

“What’s going on?”

“Are you okay?”

“You seem far away.”

“You’re acting weird.”

“You aren’t yourself.”

“Hello?”

[Island 18]

Despite the tumult, Lon watched the clouds in deepening grays and felt awash with calm. He found comfort in the storm. The sky had started that morning a clear robin's egg blue, melting into the ocean beyond Lon's cottage, and gradually dulled to a now-slate fog. But the color disappeared as clouds bubbled over; Lon knew it would all be gray soon. This, too, calmed his thoughts.

He let the clouds fill his vision, unfocusing his eyes upon them. He let the calm slacken his mind, replacing his thoughts with cotton. He fell.

Bom. Bom. Bom.

Lon jolted awake. He looked ahead at the clouds. They covered the sky completely so if he didn't know it was there, he would think there was no sky. He smacked his lips and felt his eyelids begin to droop again.

Bom. Bom. Bom.

He swiveled his head around. Marie stood close to the window, her hand pressed against it. She said, "Hi!" It came like a faint whisper inside the car. Lon motioned for her to step back, and he opened the car door.

"Bonjour, beautiful," he said.

Marie launched herself against him. Lon wrapped one arm around her and stroked her head with his other hand. He loved where her head rested — just beneath his heart. He was bending over to kiss her head when she pulled back.

Lon thought she must have seen his mouth move, because Marie then said, "Were you going to kiss me?"

He wasn't surprised by her candor anymore. "Yes, I was."

She got on her tiptoes and reached for him. "Then kiss me!"

Lon bent down and kissed her. He thought how her small, cupid-doll lips felt like heaven.

Marie laughed against his mouth and pulled away, rubbing her chin. Lon smiled and rubbed his beard in response. Thunder cracked overhead. He pulled her purse from her shoulder: "Time to go."

Another crack of thunder. Marie rushed into the car. Lon locked the doors and started it. He missed his own car. The only times he drove now were when he drove Marie before and after work in her family car. He then felt another pang — *he missed his job at the warehouse*. And then the downpour began, and Lon slackened his grip on the steering wheel. He knew somebody was watching him, torching his life, *but didn't he deserve it?*

He suddenly felt Marie's hand on his arm. "John." She looked, to him, like a nymph against the backdrop of rain.

"Yes, Marie?"

"Let's go."

"Go where?"

She seemed to consider this. Lon waited, his eyes wandering back to the now-hazy clouded sky.

"Your house."

Lon startled out of his daze. "What about my house?"

"Let's go."

"Let's go where?"

"*John*," she drawled.

Indubitably, Lon was at the heart of a storm.

[Island 19]

Marie's car jostled over the uneven grass.

As Lon watched her disappear from view, he realized that while he may deserve to lose his car, his job, and his dignity, Marie didn't deserve to be affected. *She was innocent, and some person was, secondarily, damaging her life.*

A person, he thought, who knows too much about him. He couldn't let them bring Marie into it all.

Lon walked to his closet and moved folded clothes from the floor inside to his bed. Where the clothes had been, he picked up the mysterious photographs and carried them into the kitchen. With a lighter from his drawer, he burned them over the kitchen sink.

Lon convinced himself that in order to protect Marie, he needed to stop letting this person get to him.

First, he needed to find out who they were.