



# After Paradise

NSFW edition



*This is the first time that researcher Meg Hannady has been seen in eight years. Though numerous reports have placed her throughout the Himalayas, all attempts to make contact with her failed, earning her the moniker, The Yarlung Yeti. When I sat down with her, she made me a coffee, sweetened with a generous helping of condensed milk.*

"Is that the article?" Lucas asks, leaning over my shoulder and pressing his cheek to mine.

I nod. "He found Meg Hannady. I can't believe it." I trace a line over the picture of the mythical woman that Felix spent the last year trying to reach, at Sadie's behest. Lucas and I weren't the only people Sadie'd made plans for. Her husband had thrown himself into work, but he ended up hurtling into an emotional abyss for two years. And then her letter arrived. An assignment. An un-gettable get. Meg Hannady was a microbiologist at Harvard who left for a trip to Kathmandu and never came back. Her colleagues at Harvard would occasionally receive packages--styrofoam containers, packed with dry ice, and handwritten research notes--that led to the discovery of a bacterial species that held hope for the future of humans on earth. It consumed high amounts of carbon dioxide and was now being piloted in systems designed to scrub excess carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere. Before Sadie had gotten sick, she'd been obsessed with the story.

"Do you think he'll come back now?"

I turn to Lucas. "I don't know." I don't mean to sound downtrodden, but I miss Felix. Sadie tied us to each other with her love in the end and I want to know he's alright. Surrounding myself

with people who knew her helps me feel close to her. And, I am an older sister after all...I can't help worrying.

Lucas smooths the hair from my face. "How about this? Let's go back to Saba for a bit. I'll get in touch with Felix and let him know that we're going to be there and send him a ticket. It's worth a try, right?"

I look up at him, this man who helped me learn how brave I could be, with his strong arms that feel just right circling me, and his kind eyes that smile better than anyone else ever could, and his jet black hair that sometimes falls over them after he's showered. I nod. "Yes. Let's go back to Saba."

It's not that I don't like Taipei. I love it. The rolling mountains and colorful cityscape visible from our balcony are breathtaking. The people and the food are incredible. My Mandarin is improving, albeit slowly. But nothing will ever be like Saba for me. It's where Sadie and I flew through the air, where she got married on a beach in a beautiful lace gown made by Laurentina, and where we laid her to rest. It's where I found myself and met Lucas. It's my whole life and heart on a tiny speck in the ocean. And that makes it home. I press my lips to Lucas's, lingering there. He smiles against my mouth.

"I thought you might say that," he says. "They're already prepping the plane. We can leave first thing in the morning."

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While Lucas sold the airline after I left Saba and reinvested in making a line of eco-friendly retreats throughout the world, he kept a private plane. We're on it more often than I would like, if

I'm being completely honest -- I never completely got over my fear of flying. I still get nervous, but Lucas helps.

"Alright, we're all set. The pilot says we can leave in a couple of minutes," he says, leaning over me. "Can I do anything for you?" he asks.

"Put the sunglasses on," I ask.

He slides the aviator shades he wore that entire first plane ride to Saba on and drops into the seat next to me. The plane jostles just slightly as the pilot backs away from the hanger. Lucas twines his fingers through mine. His hands are warm. This is our routine. Because Lucas knows that the takeoff is the hard part for me and usually is the time when I think maybe I ought to wrestle the door open and fling myself out onto the tarmac. He leans close to my neck. "Nǐ hái hǎo ma?"

Who knew that my wonderful, sexy boyfriend asking if I am okay in a low voice would defeat my usual takeoff freak out? Well, of course, *he* did. He just gets me. I graze my teeth over my lower lip. "Hǎo," I say, just as the plane lifts off. The sun is cresting over the hills in the distance and the sky is brilliant blue.

"You know," Lucas says, a grin teasing at the corner of his mouth. "I think you're in the wrong seat."

"Oh really?" I say. That was supposed to be my line in this little game we play. He reaches down and releases my seat belt.

"Zhēnde." He is trying hard to maintain his serious expression, but his lips are playful, and his eyes are a mixture of happiness and heat. He slides a hand around my waist and draws me into his lap. "You usually sit here on the flight to Saba, as I recall. At least you did that one time."

I laugh, thinking back to my moment of total humiliation. I swivel around and face him. Reaching up, I slide the sunglasses from his face and set them carefully on the table in front of us.

"If I remember correctly," I whisper into his ear. "My hand placement was a bit inopportune. I was dangerously close to--"

"Your hand placement was just right."

He holds my gaze for a moment, slides his hands into my hair, and then melds his mouth to mine. "So right," he says, as his grin turns devilish. Beneath me he is rock hard. "Remind me," he says, his gaze drifting down to the peak rising between us. I lift one leg and move it carefully over him so that I'm straddling his lap. My hands are aching to touch him, my core is melting to liquid, pooling like molten lava between my legs. Lucas slides his hands low around me, pressing his fingertips into my ass and drawing me closer. My chest heaves. I cast a quick glance toward the door between us and cockpit.

"Pierre won't come out," Lucas says, reading my mind. "We're alone. We can do whatever you want."

Good, I think. Because I want this, him, us, together...right now.

I moisten my lips with my tongue and reach down between us.

Lucas inhales sharply.

He feels so good.

While I touch him, he slides a hand beneath my shirt. I bite my lip as his deft fingertips release my bra and cup the underside of one breast and then the other, and graze over my nipples, sensitive and taut. He groans and pulls me even closer to kiss me deeply. His tongue tangles with mine and I rock my hips against his erection while I grip its length with my hands.

When we come apart, Lucas pulls my shirt over my head, slides my bra straps from my shoulders, and takes me breasts in his hands again. He lowers his mouth to one, tracing a languid circle around the bud with his tongue. An electric current courses straight from this contact to my

center. His hands skirt the waistband of my yoga pants and the slide inside them. I sigh and let my head fall back. Lucas takes the opportunity to kiss my neck, nipping beside my collarbone.

"I need to touch you," I say.

"I thought you were."

"I want to touch *you*. I need you to take off your pants."

"As you wish," he says, he pulls off his shirt and then slides his sweatpants down, freeing his erection. He then helps me rise, and sets to work on my yoga pants, smoothing them over my hips, and down my thighs.

"Is that *the* thong?" he asks. The last time he'd seen it, it'd been dangling from his fingertips while he mocked me on the plane when we first met.

A sly smile spreads across my face. "Maybe."

"As much as I love it, I'm going to have to take it from you."

While I stand before him, he slides the lace down and dips his head between my legs. I don't know what language he's currently whispering against my pussy, but whatever it is, my body understands. A moan escapes my lips, and Lucas pulls me closer to him, sucking my clit gently between his lips. I start to tremble, but he holds me steady.

"Not yet," I say. He pulls away for a moment, but before he can have me again, I lower myself down over his lap. His hard cock presses against me and I hover there for a moment, testing us both, before I let go and he guides himself inside me. I put my hands against his chest and stay there enjoying the sensation of him. We're both breathing hard from impending bliss, from holding back, from letting go. Lucas kisses my neck and holds me firm while I rock my hips against him. It's hard for me stay quiet. The way he touches me, the way he lifts me just enough to fill me back up again when I slide back down, the way he reaches down and strokes me while we move together, it's enough to make me feel like I am 30,000 feet in the air even if we were on the ground. We move

faster, harder, in perfect unison. Pleasure is building up, electric and warm, almost too much. I am panting now and so is he.

"You feel so good," Lucas rasps.

"I'm so close," I say.

"Me too." He kisses me with the kind of abandon I imagine people would have if the world was ending. I hurtle over the edge, waves of pleasure crashing over me, and he groans. "Oh my god."

He pulls me against his chest. "I love you, Marin," he says.

"I love you."

We stay like that for a long time, skin to skin. Lucas absentmindedly traces things I can decipher on my back, leaves kisses on my shoulder, the crown of my head. When I sit up, he leaves a gentle kiss on one of my breasts and my skin tingles back to life. He stirs beneath me. "Are you serious?" I ask. "Again?"

"Marin Cole just joined the mile-high club. What better way to celebrate?"

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Saba hasn't changed, but I have. To me now, the sky is bluer, the water clearer, the tropical foliage even greener than I remembered. Maybe I haven't changed all that much. My heart and my breakfast nearly leave my body when we finally touch down on the world's shortest runway. I walk down the steps and the breeze, warm and fragrant hits me. Lucas bounds down ahead of me with our bags, while I stop to take it all in. Home, I think. At the edge of the airstrip, Ken is standing beside a Range Rover, waiting, only he isn't alone. There's Laurentina, in a beautiful, brightly colored

lace dress. I race down the steps and run with my arms extended. She lights up when she sees me and meets me half-way.

"It's been too long!" She says, crushing me into her in the very best way imaginable. "Let me have a look at you."

"I missed you," I say.

"You have one of those for me?" Ken says, and I look up to see that he's teasing Lucas.

Lucas gives Ken a hug, lifting his friend's feet off of the ground. "Okay, that's just humiliating, man. Why do you always need to remind me of how tall you are."

I laugh. "I'll hug you, Ken. I'm shorter than you."

"Someone had to be," says Laurentina, laughing.

"I'll have you all know that Elisabet likes my short stature. She thinks it's sexy."

"There's someone for everyone," I say and try to suppress a giggle.

Lucas winks at me.

"Look at you two," Laurentina says. "Still as in love as ever."

"You know it," Lucas says.

Ken pretends to gag, but he has that glow of a man whose partner makes him chocolate cake on the weekends and he and his toddler have their own TikTok account.

Laurentina takes my hand in hers. "You both are coming to dinner at my house tonight. I'm making callaloo, your favorite, Marin. And then we can talk about when you too are getting married?"

Lucas chokes on the water he'd just taken a large gulp of. He and Ken exchanged a look.

"What about Sabaoke?" Ken asked. "I was planning a reunion tour tonight."

"Stew first then singing," Lucas says. "And apparently an inquisition somewhere in between."

"Tell me," I say, "How's the family, and business?"

"All good things. Little John just had his art picked for an international competition. The new store is doing so well. The tourists have been enjoying our artisan experiences. We're booked solid for months."

"Are you sure you have time for dinner?"

She grins. "I always have time for you and Lucas."

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After we finish our delicious meal, Ronaldo and Lucas go out for a walk. I help Laurentina get the littlest ones for bed. At eight pm, their neighbor Hilde comes by to watch the boys so they can join us at Sabaoke. The four of us walk to Scout's Place down The Road. The air is still warm, and my shoes are comfortable. Lucas sips from a beer and holds my hand as we walk. The island has already transformed him. His chinos are rolled up and he's wearing a black t-shirt from Ronaldo that's honestly a bit too small for him, though you won't catch me complaining about the fit. My mind flashes back to the plane and I have to take a calming breath. I'm wearing a festive dress that I bought earlier in the day from Laurentina's new shop. It's fuchsia and yellow and green, and I feel beautiful in it. I feel even more beautiful when I catch Lucas looking at me.

"What are you planning to sing?" Lucas asks.

"I don't know," I say. "We could do a duet. We've never done that before."

"I like that idea. I've always wanted to sing with you."

"You have?"

"Of course. Your singing is one of my favorite things."

"We always duet," Laurentina says.

"Love Shack!" Ronaldo hollers into the cover, and we all join him.

Scout's is packed tonight, and I watch as everyone lights up at the sight of Lucas -- the prodigal son-- back in town. Some people I know, greet me as well; I'd almost forgotten how warm and welcoming everyone is here. We get drinks and find a spot with a good view of the stage.

"Endless love?" Ronaldo suggests.

Lucas and I both shake our heads. *No*. Picking a duet is harder than I expected. Half of the options in the book have a rapping component and while Lucas is musically and linguistically talented, rapping is not his jam (Ken's words). "What about Beauty and the Beast?" Ken says.

"Thanks a lot, friend." Lucas smiles and takes a sip of his beer. "I'm a beast now?"

"I didn't say you."

"You better not have meant Marin. I'd like to not have to disown you tonight."

"Of course it's not Marin. She's a complete Belle. She's even into books."

"What about Ain't No Mountain?" Laurentina offers.

Lucas and I look at each other. "That's it," I say.

"Yes. We're doing it. I'll go put it on the list."

"So, now that Lucas is out of earshot," Laurentina says. "We can all discuss the elephant in the room."

"Huh?"

"Why aren't you two married yet? It's been three years?"

"It's fine. We're good. We're totally committed to each other. I guess neither of us has really thought too much about it."

Laurentina fixes me with a look. "You've thought about it."

Had I pictured Lucas in a tuxedo and me in a gown, feeding each other cake, a top a mountain once or twice? Okay, yes, the dress had tiny organza butterflies that fluttered in the breeze and the cake had a limoncello drizzle. A hundred times. My face flushes.

"What's the hold up? Even Ken's settled."

"Not everyone wants or needs to get married, Laurentina," Ronaldo says. I think back to the walk that he and Lucas took after dinner and my mouth goes dry. "I don't mean me. I'm team happy wife, happy life. What I mean to say is stop pestering the girl."

"I'm not pestering. I'm just asking what Marin wants. If she doesn't want that, I will drop the subject."

Lucas arrives at the table and everyone gets quiet. He eyes us suspiciously. "What'd I miss? You all look very intense. What's up, is someone else doing Love Shack already?"

Behind him, the stage lights come on and the music starts. The DJ welcomes someone named Amanda to the stage. Amanda is in a sequined tube top and hot pants and based on her sunburn level was clearly a tourist. She has a group of friends who dance on stage while she belts out a rendition of "Truth Hurts" by Lizzo that is surprisingly good considering her level of inebriation. "What do you say, fam? Should we American Idol this?" Ken asks.

Laurentina gives her a 10. Knowing her and her generous spirit, she's giving everyone a 10. Ronaldo abstains. Ken makes a face and says, "A 3. And I'm being generous. Where is her flute? Where is her swagger? Just no."

Lucas and I give it a 7 out of 10. After that, Ken hustles up to the stage leans over the microphone and says "It's Britney, bitch." He then proceeds to bring the house down with "Oops, I Did it Again". I give it a 10, but Lucas is a harsh judge and holds up two fingers. I grab his hand and pull it down. "A 2?!" I cry over the music. "He was magnificent. Way better than our Lizzo wannabe. He deserves at least a 9."

"His choreography was sad. You can't pick a Britney song and not bring it 110%."

"Are you still mad about the beast comment?" I say, rubbing his arm.

"10!" Laurentina says.

"Okay, 9.5," Ronaldo concedes. "Lucas, you're the odd man out. And I thought you two were brothers."

"Our turn," Ronaldo says as the DJ calls their names. He takes Laurentina's hand and they head for the stage. Ten seconds into "Love Shack", and everyone in the place is on their feet. I snap a picture of them with my phone. They're so vibrant and loving, having so much fun together. Lucas glances at me and I look up at him. I want to ask if he thinks we can maintain a love like that, but I hold back. He steps behind me and wraps his arms around me as if sensing my nerves. I relax immediately.

"We were here," he says. "You were singing, and I was standing in this exact spot when I knew beyond any doubt that I loved you. My heart was practically pounding out of my chest. You came to life up there under the lights with the music and I thought I will give anything to be able to stay by your side."

"I didn't know that," I say.

"I took that picture of you, so I'd never forget how I felt in that moment."

I've seen the picture, on his desk at work. He keeps it next to the picture that Sadie took of Ba. Laurentina and Ronaldo finish to wild applause and Lucas and I move to take our spot on the stage. I let the words sink in as we sing them...nothing will keep me from you, I think, and let the lights and the music and love take over.

When we return to our group, they give us 10 out of 10s across the board. This moment, this life together on Saba? I give it a 10 out of 10. Only one thing could make it better and my heart squeezes a bit at the thought.

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Lucas wakes me before sunrise with a brush of his lips on my bare shoulder.

"Let's go for a walk," he says.

And I oblige him, slipping on a pair of cutoffs and one of his t-shirts that I commandeered long ago. He feeds me a slice of ripe mango while I lace up my sneakers. I lick the juice from the corner of my mouth. "Delicious," I say, my voice still a little thick with sleep.

"I know better than to ask you to hike on an empty stomach." And I know right away where we're going.

At the start of the trail to Mt. Scenery, I stop and trace the wooden sign with my fingers. I never wanted to climb that mountain, but that was where I got my first taste of what life could be like if I stepped outside my comfort zone. Lucas had gotten me up the trail by appealing to my proud, competitive nature, along with my love of mini muffins. Now, I'm the one that leads, grabbing his hand, and heading toward the path in the darkness. We don't talk much, we don't need to. I'm living in memory and the present all at once. We make steady progress up the steps, in the darkness following the beam of the flashlight.

"C'mon," he says when I slow, "we're nearly there."

Then we emerge at the top and I lose my breath. Not from worry. No. This is a different sensation altogether. When you know something is coming, but there's no trepidation or fear. There's hope and magic and maybe a little bit of disbelief. It's still dark, but ahead of us, twinkle lights shine warm against the dark sky, suspended from a small makeshift pergola that seems to be made out of bamboo. Gauzy, translucent fabric hangs from the structure and flutters in the breeze. Beneath it, there's a blanket littered with colorful pillows. I step closer, speechless. On a small

wooden table, there's sliced fruits and pastries, and coffee, steaming hot in a French press. Lucas takes my hand in his and leads me beneath the lights.

"How did you do this?" I ask him.

"Let's just say you and I have very caring friends."

I think of Laurentina's badgering and the way Lucas and Ronaldo disappeared for that long walk and I can't help but smile. "It's amazing, so beautiful. But they did this in the middle of the night? It's too much. Why, why would they do that?" My heart paces faster.

"One hundred seventy-seven."

I furrow my brow.

"That's how many sunrises I missed when we were apart."

I suck in a breath as Lucas sinks down to one knee. My heart is thrumming with anticipation now and my eyes are already filling with tears.

"I don't want to ever miss another sunrise with you. You're like the sun, you give me warmth and set my soul on fire, you help me grow. Every day I wake with you and want to see you before anything else. You helped me view the world and myself differently and you pulled me out of my grief and shared yours with me. We've been through so much together, and every day you are more beautiful, more loving, more wonderful than the day before. Honestly, I can't picture a life without you by my side. I love you more than anything. So, I want to ask you is if you'll be mine, for every sunrise and sunset, until the end of time. *Marin Cole, nǐ yuàn yì jià gěi wǒ, ma?*" Lucas starts to translate, but I drop to my knees and press my finger to his lips. I know what this means. Not from my Mandarin lessons, but from all the Taiwanese dramas I watched when we first moved to Taipei, desperate to learn every romantic phrase I could. I'm nodding, wildly, pressing my lips together to keep from crying.

"*Wǒ yuànyì.* Yes. Yes. Every sunrise, every sunset, every moment."

Tears pool in Lucas's eyes. "Good," he says, and reaches for his pocket. "Then I can give you this."

He holds out a box with the logo of his bespoke jewelry line and slowly opens it. My hands drift to my mouth. Against a black velvet background, the ring sparkles. It's yellow gold, crusted with diamonds the entire way around and in the center is a lustrous pearl.

"I made it," he says. "If you want something else, a diamond maybe, I can--"

"It's perfect," I say. And I mean it. Everything about this moment is perfect. I'd found a pearl that day with Lucas and we'd found each other.

"I'm so relieved," he says, and kisses my forehead. "It took a lot of tries to get it right."

Lucas slides the ring on my finger, and I swipe the tears from my cheeks with my other hand.

We settle onto the pillow and nestle into each other. Ahead of us, the morning is dawning. A deep copper slice of light turns blazing gold in the distance. I lean over and kiss Lucas. "I love you so much," I say. "I can't believe it. I didn't want to push you, but I've been hoping for this."

"I have too, love. I've been planning it for a very long time...I just, I probably should've bought the ring. I could've asked you much sooner. Turns out this project was a bit beyond my skill level. I had quite a few false starts."

I laughed. "It was worth the wait."

"*You* were worth the wait."

I rest my head against his chest, listening to the rhythm of his heart, my future husband's heart. "I'm so happy."

"You're going to be even happier, when I tell you the rest of the surprise."

I rest my head against his chest. "There's more?"

"Let's just say if you didn't want to wait to have the wedding, Felix would be available to walk you down the aisle. He called me last night; he's arriving in a few days."

"Finally," I say, feeling the distinct possibility that one iota more of joy might cause me to burst.

"So, what did you have in mind?" Lucas asks. "The beach? Next weekend? The yacht? Bungee jumping off Victoria Falls Bridge?" He has that mischievous twinkle in his eyes that I love, even when he's rattling off my top 10 most horrifying hypothetical adventure experiences.

"Well, I am sure of two things: First, I don't want to wait. Second, if bungee jumping is a requirement, I may have an existential crisis. But I'm not totally opposed to a view. How do you feel about a mountain top, a strapless dress with butterflies, and cake with limoncello drizzle?"

"If you're there, then I'm in for all of it, though I'm not completely convinced I can pull off the strapless with these shoulders."

I let the sun warm my cheeks, while the sky transforms around us. In the peach light, a gorgeous bright white Red-billed Tropicbird, a seabird native to Saba, swoops over us, showing off. Lucas sees it too, and squeezes my hand, and I swear, I swear I hear her laughing with sheer delight.

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