

THE DEPTHS

A novel
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for my mother

“Consider the subtleness of the sea; how its most dreaded creatures glide under water, unapparent for the most part, and treacherously hidden beneath the loveliest tints of azure. . . . Consider all this; and then turn to this green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself?”

—Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*

CHAPTER ONE

The fog appeared after they passed over Mount Kinabalu. At first, it looked like a tuft of dirty cotton. Then it looked like a spreading ink stain. Before long, it filled the horizon. It rolled over them like a slow, gray wave, swallowing them whole.

Marah Lenaerts sat in seat 7F, staring out the window. It seemed as if she were looking into her own soul, somehow; since her third miscarriage, she'd felt like she'd been drowning in a thick, gray sludge. At the advice of a colleague, she'd begun counselling at one of Shanghai's international hospitals, but it hadn't helped. The psychiatrist

had recommended an antidepressant to her, but she'd declined, ashamed at seeking help in the first place and worried it might hinder her chances of getting pregnant again.

After a moment, the sound of her husband's voice snapped her from her daydreaming.

"Prawn or crab?" he asked.

She turned to see Eden returning to his seat, holding two bags of Malaysian junk food. Despite his expensive haircut and Hugo Boss shirt, his blue-collar Belgian upbringing shone through in his clipped speech and brusque manner.

"I asked what the locals like," he said, his slight cleft lip bisecting the top of his grin.

"Prawn, I guess," she said.

"Smart choice."

He gave her the prawn crackers. Then he tore into the crab chips, stuffing a handful into his mouth. Marah stared at the cartoon shrimp on her bag; even in animated form, it reminded her of a fetus, curled up and undeveloped. *God*, she thought to herself, *why does everything remind me of babies?*

"These movies are shit," said Eden, scrolling through the options on the seatback screen in front of them before selecting an action film.

Marah looked over at him with her wide, glassy eyes.

There was so much she wanted to say, but she was afraid that if she opened her mouth, it would all come crashing out like the waters from a burst dam and carry him away.

Instead, as she'd done so often in recent months, she said nothing and glanced back out the window, where hazy shapes merged and broke apart in the fog. She saw a cell splitting into two, and then imagined a grenade exploding.

Then she saw a school of koi fighting over some bread and, finally, a misshapen skull.

Tawau's airport stood in a clear-cut section of jungle situated near the Jalan Utara access road. A few short- and medium-range jets taxied toward its sole runway, awaiting clearance for takeoff.

Marah waited for their luggage at one of the airport's three baggage claims while Eden got a cart. Throngs of Chinese and Malay passengers waited with her, talking and checking their smartphones. Despite the sweltering heat, most of the Malay women wore long-sleeved shirts and hijabs, while the men were dressed in short-sleeved shirts and slacks. An older man wearing a purple *songkok* stared at Marah's shorts and bare shoulders; she looked away, only to see another man glaring at her.

Growing uncomfortable, Marah took a sweater from

her backpack and pulled it on. A baby cried out nearby, its reedy wail piercing through the noise. Marah turned to look, noticing that the baby's teenaged parents were practically children themselves. It didn't seem fair, somehow—children having children—whereas she'd had two D&C procedures, met with Shanghai's top fertility experts, and tried a number of expensive diets and drugs, but still couldn't manage to carry a child into the second trimester. Feeling a bout of sadness coming on, she took out her cell and scrolled through her emails; there were a few from her students as well as one from her mother, Carolyn, who'd sent photos of the turning leaves in northwestern New Jersey, where she'd been living for the past fifteen years with Marah's wealthy stepfather, Tom. Marah sent her mother a quick reply—"Beautiful! xoxo"—before responding to her students' emails. Most of them were wealthy Chinese teens with self-chosen Western names like Mars, Rolex, and Ice, studying English in preparation for life at American universities. Teaching ESL was far from where she'd thought she'd end up after graduating from NYU with a double major in art history and English. Marrying a Belgian was far from what she'd envisioned as well, but she'd met Eden at a time she'd needed an escape from the life that she was heading toward. He was different than the guys she'd dated in college, more confident and exotic, yet in a safe way (he was from Belgium,

after all, and not Bolivia or Baghdad). When he'd gotten a job offer in Singapore, she'd gladly left her publishing job to go along with him; Asia seemed like the future, whereas the publishing industry seemed like it was on its last legs. Eden's two-year assignment at HSBC's trading desk in Singapore had become a four-year assignment when a promotion brought them to Hong Kong, though, and when he'd left that for a position with Credit Suisse in Shanghai, she'd taken up teaching English at the Happy Bridge International School in Shanghai's Min Hang district. It wasn't exactly what she'd planned, but life had had its way of making its own plans, a fact made painfully clear to her when her father had succumbed to cancer at the age of forty-one.

The conveyor belt soon whirred to life, and the bags slowly began to emerge. Marah put away her cell phone and looked for their luggage, spotting their roller duffel bags first, which they used to transport their diving gear. Then she saw Eden's suitcase, a leather-trimmed Globe-Trotter he'd bought a couple of years ago, before the market had tanked. She reached for one of the duffel bags, but before she could grab it, Eden approached and lifted it off the belt.

"I got it, babe," he said. She watched as he put their luggage on a rusty cart, the knotty muscles of his arms moving like small animals beneath his skin. She felt a warmth slowly beginning to unfurl inside of her, then began

to grow self-conscious again and tugged her sweater down over the small bulge left by her pregnancies.

“You really think we should be doing this?” she asked.

“Come on,” he said. “We need a break.”

“We could’ve gone to the States.”

“Visiting family isn’t vacation, Mar.”

“I know, but still—”

“Don’t worry,” he said, interrupting her. “It’s gonna be great. I promise.”

He grinned again, and she forced a smile back. The vacation had been his idea; they were individually and collectively out of sorts, and they’d needed some time off, he’d argued. She’d reluctantly agreed—not because she’d wanted to go, but because she felt she’d needed to go. Eden had become distant since her third miscarriage, and she felt like she was losing him somehow, to work, to his hobbies, or worse—to someone else. He’d always been faithful to her, or if he hadn’t been, he’d at least been discreet, unlike her sister’s husband, Brent, a hedge fund manager who openly chased anything in a miniskirt. Eden had been pulling away recently, though, talking less to her in the morning while they got ready for work, making fewer dinner reservations for them, and going more often and later to the gym. He touched her less, and he made less eye contact with her. Every time his cell phone vibrated at night or he returned

home late from work, the engines of panic and doubt whirred to life in her mind.

Eden finished loading their luggage onto the cart and they started for the exit, where two young Malay soldiers armed with machine guns stood guard. Marah felt her mouth go dry, one of the precursors to the panic attacks she'd been having since her last miscarriage. In baggy navy uniforms two sizes too big for them, the soldiers hardly looked old enough to shave, let alone carry automatic weapons. Marah imagined them accidentally firing their guns, barely hanging on to them as they randomly sprayed bullets into the crowd. On their way past, though, the soldiers didn't even glance at them, more interested in a group of teenage girls milling about nearby.

They hit a wall of humidity as they stepped outside the terminal, a harbinger of the approaching monsoon rains. It was late September, off-season for tourists and one of the hottest times of the year in Sabah. Overhead, the sky was the color of setting concrete, thickened with the haze from the annual field clearance fires in nearby Indonesia. It reminded Marah of the Philippines, Vietnam, and some of the other countries they'd visited, though there was a palpable feeling in the air, some heavy sort of electricity that reminded her of the way it felt just before a storm.

After Eden got money from the ATM, he headed over

to a vendor's stall.

“Thirsty?” he asked, grabbing a bottled water from a refrigerated case.

Marah nodded, though what she really wanted was a vodka tonic, or at least a cold beer. Eden grabbed a second bottled water and paid the Pakistani vendor with some of the colorful ringgits he'd just gotten from the ATM. After he got his change, he gave one of the waters to Marah. Then he opened the other for himself and drank it in a gulp.

They crossed the parking lot and approached the shuttle bus to Semporna, where they'd planned to meet Hish, a local whose beachfront property Eden had arranged to rent. Eden preferred staying at out-of-the-way villas and guesthouses when they vacationed; they had character, he believed, and authenticity, unlike the large resorts and chains that didn't vary from city to city or even country to country. In Thailand, they'd stayed at an open-air bungalow fifteen minutes' drive from Hua Hin, and in the Philippines, when the market was bullish and Eden was making a fortune, they'd stayed on a private island near Busuanga. The uncertainty of the places he'd find and the people he'd rent them from always made Marah uneasy, but they were far more interesting and memorable than the generic Marriotts or Hiltons she would've settled for.

Eden loaded their luggage and gear into the shuttle

bus's baggage hold. Then they boarded the bus, entering a cloud of diesel fuel, curry paste, and sweat. The passengers were mostly Malay, Chinese, and Indian, and their possessions spilled from their bags and seats and into the aisles. The only other Westerner aboard was a middle-aged German backpacker with a much younger Thai girlfriend.

They approached a pair of empty seats near the back and sat down, and a moment later, the driver boarded the bus and pulled out of the station. While Eden checked emails on his cell, Merah stared out the window at the vast palm oil plantations as they scrolled by. There wasn't much else to see along the pocked, two-lane road from Tawau to Semporna, other than a few small ramshackle villages, a windy, tea-brown river, and a crumbling Chinese cemetery.

Her thoughts soon began to drift again, back to Shanghai, to work, and before long, to her ovulation cycle. She wondered if she'd been timing things wrong, then wondered if she was taking the wrong fertility medications, or not enough of them. Not wanting to sink back into the quicksand of despair, she tried to think of something to say to Eden, some benign conversation starter.

By the time she finally did, though, she looked over and discovered that he'd fallen asleep.

A traffic jam clogged the center of Semporna. Scores of honking *kereta sapu* and yellow vans offered rides to the arriving tourists, their drivers shouting offers in a slurry of English and Malay.

Marah turned off the Sharon Van Etten album she'd been listening to as they pulled into the station, and Eden woke as the bus lurched to a shuddering halt. They got off the bus and got their luggage from the hold, then made their way toward the center of town. Local teens loitered outside the Milimewa supermarket, laughing and sharing Texas 5 cigarettes, while a group of Muslim men congregated outside a whitewashed mosque.

After buying some groceries at the Milimewa, they headed toward a roundabout where Eden had agreed to meet Hish. Marah looked toward the seafront, where dozens of diving outfitters and tour operators with hand-painted signs clustered around a group of jetties. In the distance, the emerging moon shone above the Celebes; it reminded Marah of a communion wafer somehow, even though she hadn't been to church since she was a child.

They soon passed a malnourished young mother and her three children sitting on a flattened cardboard box. The children looked tired and hungry, and the youngest was crying and rubbing his dirty, bloodshot eyes. Something ached inside Marah, and she turned to Eden.

“Give me some money,” she said.

“What for?” he asked.

“Come on,” she said. “Just give me some money.”

Eden handed Marah some ringgits, which she immediately gave to the woman.

“Softie,” said Eden.

Marah shoved him, grinning, and he shook his head but couldn't help but laugh. As they walked off, she reached for his hand, and he took her hand in his. His palm was larger than hers, and his calloused skin felt like old leather. She always felt safe and protected in his grip, the same way she'd felt holding her father's hand as a girl.

They soon reached a roundabout with three giant concrete prawns in its center. No one was there, though, other than a toothless beggar sleeping on a bench.

“You sure this is where we're supposed to meet him?” asked Marah.

Eden nodded. “He said to meet by the giant shrimp. How many can there be?”

Marah glanced around at their surroundings as Eden dialled a number on his cell. She noticed a trio of rough-looking locals watching them from a *mamak* stall across the way. They wore long shorts and stained tank tops, and their thin, muscular arms looked like machetes. One of the men wore a baseball cap and had long, ratty hair and a sparse

beard. *Bunga terung*, *ukir rekong*, and other tribal tattoos covered the torso and arms of another, and the third had a long, puckered scar running down the side of his face.

She turned back to Eden. “Well?” she asked.

“He’s not answering,” he said.

Marah glanced back at the young men as Eden hung up and dialled again, and a knot began to form in her stomach. She looked up the street, toward the Semporna seafront, where she saw the six-story Seafest Hotel, the largest and most modern-looking building in town. It looked completely out of place with its surroundings, like it had been airlifted in from Omaha; it also looked completely familiar and safe. Marah imagined herself sitting in a hot tub in one of the Seafest’s suites, blissed out while reading some trashy magazine.

“Maybe we should stay there,” she said, practically feeling the pulsating jets of the hot tub drumming against her skin.

Before Eden could reply, they heard a voice behind them.

“Mr. Lenaerts?”

They turned to see a young local in baggy jeans and a Cleveland Cavaliers T-shirt, followed by a much-older man wearing a more traditional black *songkok* and *baju melayu*.

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The young local smiled wide, revealing a cemetery of bright, crooked teeth.

“Welcome to Semporna,” he said.