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The Paradise Guest House

Written by Ellen Sussman

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The Paradise Guest House

A Novel

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Part One

2003



"And you?" the man says. "What takes you to Bali?"

The plane breaks through the cloud and there it is—an island full of dense jungles, terraced rice paddies, and glorious beaches. Jamie flinches as if someone's laid a fist into her heart.

"Vacation?" her seatmate asks when she doesn't answer.

"Yes," she lies. "Vacation."

He's already told her about his silent meditation retreat, how he can't wait, how he needs to unwind, and she thinks: Start now. She curses herself for talking to him in the first place. It was the second scotch that loosened her tongue and made her break her rule: no chats on airplanes. You can't escape.

"All by yourself?" he asks.

Jamie turns toward him. "There's an event," she says. "I was invited to attend." She absentmindedly runs her finger against the long, thin scar at the side of her face and then buries her hand in her lap.

"A wedding?" he asks eagerly. He's already told her about his wonderful Australian fiancée who will meet him at the retreat in Ubud.

"No," Jamie says. Her mind's a muddle of thoughts now. There's no reason to tell him anything. And yet she's been telling the world: I'm going back to Bali. She's loved watching the

astonished faces of her friends. How brave, they've said. How bold.

The plane shudders as it passes through a cloud, and Jamie grips the arms of her seat.

"What are you drawing?" her seatmate asks. "You're good."

Jamie looks at the pad in her lap. She's sketched the island from an aerial view. She uses a light hand and few strokes—she's self-taught, and it shows. Sometimes she gets it right and sometimes—like this time—the lines don't add up.

"Doodles," she says, covering the paper with her hand. The plane tilts to reveal the southern coast of Bali. "That's Kuta Beach."

The white-sand beach stretches for miles. The center of the island is all mountain and jungle. The color is astonishing—iridescent lizard green. Then it's gone and they're immersed in a thick cloud.

"You've been here before?" he asks.

"A year ago," she says. Her palms are slick with sweat.

"When my fiancée told me to meet her here, I said, No way, José. Hundreds of people were killed in the terrorist attack last year, right? Bombs at nightclubs? But she keeps promising me it's paradise."

How the hell will this guy survive a silent meditation retreat, Jamie thinks.

And like a man who doesn't know what to do with a momentary silence, he plunges on. "Why would terrorists target Bali? I get the World Trade Center—it was the core of the economic world. But kids dancing at a club on some remote Indonesian island?"

The plane bumps along the runway. Jamie releases her breath.

"You don't have to go," Larson, her boss and her best friend, had told her yesterday when he drove her to the airport from Berkeley. "You've been through enough."

"I have to do this," Jamie told him.

"Me, I avoid pain."

She watched a sly smile appear on his craggy fifty-seven-year-old face. He had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer three months before. His life was pain.

"You'll be okay without me?" Jamie asked.

"Who needs you? I've got two dates this weekend."

Jamie put her hand on his bald head. She calls it her Wishing Dome. She'd rub it and make three wishes. Live longer. Live better. Live.

"Call me while I'm away and charge it to the business," Jamie had said. "Don't tell the boss."

"The boss never misses a thing," Larson told her. "I know what you're up to in Bali. And it's not all about the ceremony."

"It's all about the ceremony," she insisted.

"You're going to try to find that guy," Larson said. "Gabe."

"Wrong," Jamie told him. But her voice wobbled and she turned away from him.

Now loud static fills the air, and the pilot says something inaudible over the intercom. The man next to her pats her hand. She swings her head back toward him.

"You take care now," he says. He is already standing and gathering his things. The passengers fill the aisles. When did the plane come to a stop?

Jamie nods. She doesn't move. The man disappears down the aisle.

She looks at the drawing in her lap. A couple of the lines—palm trees, though she can't remember if there even *are* palm

trees in Bali—look like monsters standing guard over the island. I'm back, she tells them. Don't mess with me.

Finally she pushes herself up and out of her seat. She's the only passenger left on the plane. She reaches for her bag in the overhead bin and then moves down the aisle, rolling the suitcase behind her. A flight attendant, her vest already unbuttoned, mutters, "*Sayonara* my ass," to herself. When she hears Jamie's bag knock against the leg of a seat, she looks back.

"Oh, sorry," the young woman says. "I thought everyone was gone."

"I'd fallen asleep," Jamie lies.

The flight attendant steps aside and finds her cheery smile. "Your first time in Bali?" she says sweetly.

Jamie hesitates, then nods.

"Spiritual journey?" the woman asks.

"God, no."

The woman laughs. "Good," she says. "So you won't be disappointed. I can't tell you how many of them get on the return flight and they're surprised that they've still got all the same miserable problems they came with. I don't know what they're looking for."

"The sun," Jamie says. "That's all I'm looking for."

"That you'll find," the woman assures her. "Happy tanning."

Jamie steps through the door of the plane and pauses before heading down the metal staircase to the tarmac. The heat wraps around her and stops her breath. She's blinded by the sun, and she remembers the moment after the club was washed in a hot white blankness as if it had been erased—sound, too, had stopped—and then it all came screaming in—color, noise, pain.

"Can I help you?" the flight attendant asks Jamie.

"No," Jamie says, and she takes a step forward, into Bali.

When the taxi jolts to a stop, Jamie's eyes fly open and for a startled second she catches a glimpse of Gabe in her dream—no, it's something more tactile than visual. His fingers drawing circles on her hip. The smell of the sea in his hair. She clears her mind with a shake.

"This is the street," the taxi driver says, patiently waiting for her.

Jamie had been wide awake at the start of the hour-long taxi ride to Ubud. She watched the hordes of motorbikes fill the streets, rolling down the windows to let in thick tropical air. And then sleep kicked in. Hours on international flights and she couldn't doze for a minute. Ten minutes in a beaten-up jalopy without air-conditioning and she was comatose.

"Lady," the taxi driver says. He is young and smells of ginger. On the dashboard are prayer offerings, probably to the gods of potholed roads with too many motorbikes.

"Thank you," Jamie says, paying the man and hauling her suitcase out of the car.

She stands on the sidewalk and looks around. She hadn't visited Ubud a year ago. She'd stayed in Seminyak for the first few days. And then she spent three days in a beach cottage somewhere until she could flee the country.

But Ubud is the home of Nyoman, her host for this trip down memory lane. The foundation that organized the one-year-memorial event sent her a packet with his name, his address, and an itinerary of events leading up to the ceremony on

Sunday. She'd also received a plane ticket, a gift from the government of Bali. She'd been promised a new Bali.

Jamie looks around. People swarm the streets, and she feels the immediate exhilaration that always marks her first day in a new country. But it's mixed with something else, something that chills her skin, despite the damp heat. I can do this, she tells herself, in the same way she has argued with her mother for weeks. I have to do this.

She reads the name of the inn on the piece of paper in her hand: *The Paradise Guest House*. She walks by a series of modest cottages, some of them with stone gates and elaborate carved entrances, none of them with names.

She feels someone's eyes on her and glances across the street. A young boy sits on the dusty curb with a dog. The boy is mangy; the dog is mangier. The boy boldly keeps his eyes on her, and, after a moment, his lips curl into a grin.

Jamie offers him a weak smile in return but thinks: Leave me alone.

The boy stands, and within a second the dog stands, too. The boy is probably twelve, Jamie guesses, and wily. He looks smart and vigilant, and she suspects that he's a street kid. Or maybe all kids in Bali look like this—she has no idea. She doesn't know this country. She doesn't want to know this country.

But isn't that why she's here?

"I help you!" he calls from across the street.

"No, thank you!" Jamie calls back. She hurries down the road, pulling her small suitcase behind her.

But in a quick moment, he's beside her, offering to take the suitcase, his hand on hers. She pulls away.

"I'm fine," Jamie insists.

"You want nice hotel?" he says.

Do kids speak English here? Is it possible that last time, in one whole week, she never saw a kid in Bali? She saw the inside of her hotel room, beachside bars, a mountain trail. She saw Gabe, standing in a garden, his feet lost in a sea of orchids and gardenias.

"I don't need help," Jamie tells him, her voice a little sharp.

"Everyone need help," the boy says, smiling. In fact, he has not stopped smiling. He is tall and he smells like earth and rain. His dog walks at his side like a shadow. It's a skinny pup, some handsome mix of black Lab and border collie.

Jamie sees a sign outside a gate: THE PARADISE GUEST HOUSE. The sign is painted gold with black letters. She turns abruptly down the path, hoping to lose the boy. But he's quick and again reaches for the suitcase. He must be looking for a tip.

"I've got it," she says testily. "Goodbye."

"You are tired," the boy says. "Tomorrow you will be nicer."

She nods, unsure how to answer him. He opens the gate for her and lets her pass through.

"I see you tomorrow, miss," he says.

As he closes the gate, she takes a deep breath. Jasmine. The gate shuts out the noise from the street, the boy and his dog, the hot sun, the dust. Her eyes adjust to the cool darkness, and a tropical garden emerges, thick with banana trees, ferns, and hibiscus. She follows a path through the dense foliage to a small stone cottage with a carved wooden door, where she lifts a knocker in the shape of a monkey and lets it fall. A hollow booming sound interrupts the silence. She waits. After a moment she knocks again, louder this time.

Finally, in slow motion, the door creaks open. A man stands

there, his hair tousled, his clothes rumpled. Did she wake him? He blinks at her and runs his hand over the front of his shirt.

"Can I help you?" he asks. His accent is better than the boy's. He adjusts his crooked glasses and peers at her.

"I'm looking for Nyoman."

"You have found him."

"I'm Jamie Hyde."

He stares at her.

"I received a letter from the organization that—" Jamie pulls open her small backpack and rummages in it to find the letter.

"Yes," he says even before she finds it. A smile breaks through the creases of his face. "Welcome."

"Were you expecting me?"

The man is silent for a moment. His hand goes to his head and he rubs it vigorously. When he's done, his hair swirls on his head, making him look a little crazy.

I should leave, Jamie thinks. But, oddly, she takes a step closer to him.

"Tomorrow you are coming," he finally says.

"I'm sorry. I thought it was—"

"You are welcome in my house. I am often confused." His smile transforms his face. He's probably around forty, Jamie guesses, and though he's badly in need of some grooming, he's a handsome man.

"I can find someplace else to stay tonight." Jamie unconsciously touches the scar on her face, and then she tucks her hand in her pocket.

Nyoman reaches for her suitcase. "Follow me."

He walks past her and out the door. But instead of passing through the gate and delivering her back onto the unfamiliar

streets of Ubud, he walks around the house and toward a series of small cottages behind his own. Two young boys stand in front of one of the cottages, both with toy trucks in their hands. They stare at Jamie openmouthed and then turn and run, screeching as they disappear into the trees.

"Nephews," Nyoman says. "One is loud and the other is louder."

He is still walking, past one cottage and then another. A very old woman, her skin brown and wizened, sits on the ground in front of one door. She smiles a toothless grin at Jamie.

"Grandmother," Nyoman tells Jamie. He says some quick words in Balinese to the old woman, and she giggles like a young girl.

At the fourth cottage he stops. Wisteria spills over the front of the small house, its pale violet blossoms filling the air with a pungent scent. The ground in front of the wooden door is covered with petals from the flowers, a blanket of color as a welcome mat.

"Your home," he says.

Jamie feels something unwind inside her, something that had been knotted tight since she agreed to this trip. "Thank you," she tells him.

"Now you rest. The flights are very long. I come to get you when it is time for your dinner."

He pushes open the door and light pours into the single room. Jamie can see a four-poster bed with mosquito netting draped over the top. A wooden bureau with a mirror above it sits next to the wall. The room is simple and clean.

She takes a step inside. When she turns around, Nyoman is gone.

Standing in the doorway, she gazes out at the garden. There are lights in every cottage. His family, she assumes. She smells incense and she hears a rooster crowing. It is as if she stepped behind the wall of Ubud and found a different country.

My home, she thinks. Her real home in Berkeley is a room in a ramshackle Victorian house that she shares with three other adventure guides, all of them usually somewhere else in the world. And her mother had just moved out of the Palo Alto home Jamie grew up in. "I don't want all those memories of life with your father," Rose said when Jamie begged her to keep the house.

"I was there, too," Jamie said, like a pouting child. She's thirty-two; it shouldn't matter where her mother lives. Maybe it's her homelessness that makes her pine for that childhood bedroom. Or maybe it's a yearning for all those dreams only a kid can have—parents who stay together for a lifetime, boyfriends who don't die, nightclubs that don't explode.

She hears the sound of someone singing. It's a woman's voice, high and sweet. The words must be Balinese or Indonesian—Jamie can't tell the difference between the two languages. But she hears something so haunting in the song that she feels herself back away from the door. The woman's heart is broken, she thinks.

She closes the door and the sound stops.

"I made it," she says, and her mother sighs dramatically. "I'm fine, Mom."

"I know you are."

"I'm in a mountain town. I haven't seen anything yet. I slept through the taxi ride."

"And the place you're staying?"

"It's a family compound. I've got my own little cottage. Very sweet."

"Is it safe?"

"As long as the chickens don't take up guns."

"Jamie."

"Bad joke."

"What happens next?"

"I sleep."

"When is the ceremony? Do you have to go *there*?"

There is the bomb site. Jamie's mother speaks in euphemisms. *Since Bali* means since the bombing. *Did you sleep okay?* means did you escape the nightmares that chase you.

"Not till Sunday. And, no, I don't have to go to the bomb site."

"Good. Lou thinks that would be good for you, but I don't think it's something you should have to go through."

Lou is Mom's soon-to-be-husband, a psychologist and apparently an authority on Jamie, though he barely knows her. Jamie ignores most of her mother's offerings of wisdom from Lou. She's not thrilled about the marriage—Lou is twelve years older than her mom and seems like an ancient ruin to Jamie, parts of him chipping and peeling away day by day. Everyone else's mom turned cougar and caught a hot young thing. Couldn't Rose ever follow a trend?

When Jamie asked her why they were getting married, Rose said, "He's very good to me." Which means: *Your father wasn't good to me.* Which means: *He'll never cheat on me. I'll never risk getting hurt like that again, even if it means I marry a relic.*

"Will you promise me you'll be safe?" Rose says.

"I'll be fine."

"That's always been your gift and your curse."

"What's that?" Jamie asks, suddenly impatient.

"You're invincible," Rose announces. Jamie has heard it all before. She knows what comes next. "No one's invincible."

"Good night, Mom."

"I love you."

"Love you, too."

Jamie hangs up the phone, bombarded by the complicated swirl of emotions that she feels every time she talks to her mother. She climbs onto her bed in the cottage, tucks in the mosquito netting, and leans back against the wooden headboard. If she puts her head down, she'll be sleeping in seconds. Her arm hurts, a deep ache at the elbow that was broken. The doctors have told her that it healed perfectly. The pain comes when she's tired.

She reaches for her sketch pad at the side of her bed, then turns the page and looks out the window. A wall of wisteria drapes over the cottage next door. She tries to sketch it with quick strokes, the flowers a rush of smudged pencil—and when she stops she takes a look at what she's done. Not bad. She's captured something primordial in the drawing—the flowers consume the cottage.

For Larson, she writes at the top of the page. She gives the drawing a title: *Nature Wins*.

She lifts her cellphone and clicks on his name.

"Out climbing mountains," his voice message tells her. "Leave a message."

She smiles. He recorded that voice message the day he started chemo. Larson's the one who sent her to Bali in the first place, to scout out a new tour. "You didn't tell me to scout out

the damn nightclub," Jamie told him when he blamed himself for her trauma.

Now she leaves him a message. "I made it to Bali safe and sound. Why did I think this was such a hot idea? Listen, call me."

Larson won't tell anyone else he has pancreatic cancer and that he probably has about a year to live. His brother on the East Coast knows, but the guy is good for nothing but a weepy phone call every few days. Jamie has been Larson's best friend ever since he hired her ten years ago. She loves him dearly, but she's worried about what it means to be his only friend.

Jamie scooches down in bed and stares up at the ceiling. A gecko makes his way across the mosquito netting.

"Well, hello there," Jamie says to him.

He stops as if he hears her.

"Don't let me interrupt your travels," she tells him.

The gecko scurries on.

She picks up her cellphone one more time. She dials the number she has for Gabe in Bali, a number she has never called. After one ring the connection is lost and a recording in Indonesian follows.

She drops the phone beside her on the bed and turns on her side. She cradles her arm, pressing into her elbow to stop the pain. And then she sleeps.

Jamie's the only one at the table in the middle of the garden. It's a small wrought-iron table with a tiled mosaic top, large enough for a couple of people. She expected dinner with the family, but that doesn't seem to be the plan. Nearby, a stone

elephant spills water from its trunk into a basin. Lotus lilies float at its feet.

A teenage girl walks up to Jamie, carrying a plate of food. She wears a black miniskirt and a torn T-shirt with the words CAN'T GET NO LOVE on it. She's got long shaggy hair, bleached blond, and thick black eyeliner; she wouldn't look out of place in San Francisco. Jamie's pretty sure this isn't the Balinese way.

The girl puts a plate of rice and vegetables on the table and turns to leave.

"Thanks," Jamie says. "Are you related to Nyoman?"

"Niece," the girl says. She stands for a moment, looking wary.

"I'm Jamie."

"Dewi."

"Pretty name."

"Where you from?"

"The United States."

The girl's eyes open wide. Her disgust and boredom evaporate. "I love America music!" she says with girlish enthusiasm.

"Yeah, what kind?"

"Heavy metal. America very cool."

"How old are you?"

The question seems to upset the girl. She says, "Sixteen," under her breath and then marches off toward the kitchen.

Nyoman walks toward Jamie from his cottage. He's combed his hair and changed his clothes, but his glasses still sit awry on his nose.

"My niece is rebellious girl," Nyoman mutters.

"I like her."

"In Bali, when a baby is born," he says, "the umbilical cord is buried in the ground in the courtyard of the family com-

pound. As the child grows up, she might wander far from home. But in the end the umbilical cord draws her home. Dewi might wander, but she will come home."

Jamie feels a yearning for such a place.

"You like food?" he asks, smiling.

"I was hoping I could eat with the family," she says.

Nyoman laughs heartily, as if she has told a joke. "Bali family does not have dinner like on American television. We take food and eat by ourselves. No big deal like in your country."

"Are there other guest rooms here?"

"Just one. We rent out to tourist. Mostly empty now."

"Does Dewi live here?"

"Dewi is the daughter of my sister. She lives in the compound of her father, not far from here. In this compound lives my grandmother, my mother and father, my brother and his wife, and my nephews."

"And this is how Balinese families live? All together?"

"You do not live with your family?" Nyoman asks.

Jamie shakes her head. "I share a house with a bunch of friends. My mother lives about an hour away from me."

"All alone?"

"For the past eighteen years," Jamie says. "But now she's got a boyfriend. They'll get married soon."

"You have no father?" Nyoman asks. He looks bewildered.

"I've got one, all right. He ditched my mom and me and moved across the country with a pretty young thing. Now he's got a brand-spanking-new family, all little kids running around the farm." Her dad's place in Connecticut is more country manor than farm, and the little kids are now teenagers. But Jamie has been telling her father's story this way for so long that she hasn't learned how to tell the new version.

Hard to put all those people in a family compound, she thinks.

"You don't have to eat it," Dewi says. She's back at the table, and Jamie picks up her fork.

"I like it," Jamie tells her.

"Miss Jamie," Nyoman says, his voice loud.

She looks up at him. He squints at her as if he can't see her clearly. "You come alone to Bali. Do you have husband?"

Dewi giggles.

"No," Jamie says. "I'm single."

Nyoman rubs the bridge of his nose, pushing his glasses further askew. He looks baffled.

"In the States it's not so unusual for a thirty-two-year-old to be single."

"But you will have children?"

"I think so. Did my mother tell you to give me a hard time?" She smiles, but Nyoman just stares at her. "Only kidding," she says.

"I have many clients from the West. I know that the ways of the world are very different."

"What do you do?" Jamie asks.

"I am tourism guide. I take tourists to all the parts of Bali and show them our country. It has been a very bad time for my business. Since the bombing. But soon the tourists return."

"Uncle has no work for a year," Dewi says.

"And now my business begins to grow," he insists.

"I'm in tourism, too. I work for an adventure-travel company," Jamie says. "Since 9/11 we've had to develop a lot of trips in the United States and Canada. People don't want to leave the country."

"What does this mean—adventure travel?" he asks.

"Our clients want to be active while they travel. So we set up hikes and bike rides and river-rafting trips. They get to see the country in a more intimate way instead of driving through it on a tour bus."

"Is that reason you were here one year ago?" Nyoman asks. "With adventure travel tour?"

"I was setting up a new tour. I had been here only a couple of days."

"Which club were you in?" he asks.

"I was heading into Paddy's Pub."

"My wife, she was in Sari Club."

Jamie puts her fork down. The sound it makes against her plate reverberates in the quiet garden.

Dewi retreats a few steps, then turns and walks away.

A blackbird perches on the edge of the table, and Nyoman swats at it. It flies away, squawking.

"I am so sorry," Jamie says finally. Of course, that's why he's a host. There are so many of them. Widows. Widowers. Survivors.

She closes her eyes and sees the face of a blond Australian girl, her mouth open in an unending scream that still pierces Jamie's sleep. The girl's dress caught a lick of fire from a burning wall, and in an instant she was consumed by angry flames. Jamie pushes the image from her mind.

"My wife will come back to me another time," Nyoman says, his voice cheery. "Perhaps as my child."

"The Balinese believe in reincarnation?" Jamie asks. She should know. She should have learned about Bali. But she has kept herself busy, trekking in Chile, in Morocco, in Bhutan.

And then she remembers an evening on the beach when Gabe explained the Balinese belief in reincarnation. His voice

was soft in her ear, and all around them candles flickered in the dark night. The moment fades as quickly as it appeared. Maybe that's why she can't trust her memory of Gabe. It's as hard to catch as a lightning bug. And yet she feels the weight of it, pressing on her.

Nyoman clears his throat. "Yes. Children are the reincarnation of their ancestors," he tells her.

"And that helps you in your loss?" Jamie asks.

"Yes," he says. "But there is still a small hole inside me that reminds me I am alone when once I was a man with a beautiful wife."