

prologue

LEESIE'S MOST PRIVATE CHAPBOOK

POEM #24, WHAT DOES IT MATTER?

What does it matter if
another jock pinches me
as I walk down the hall to physics
and high-fives Troy, celebrating
like he just scored
the season's first touchdown?

As I stalk past
the architect of my torture,
I'm frozen, a block of ice—
not a single drop melts.

All hail the Mormon Ice Queen.

What does it matter?

I know the commandment,

but I don't even consider
turning the other cheek.

And yes, it hurts, but
life without pain
isn't much of a test.

This feeling can't be lonely—
I'm not alone.

I walk with His hand on my shoulder,
His voice whispering in my soul,
His love soaring in my heart,
His suffering
my
salvation.

What else could possibly matter?

chapter 1

BEFORE

MICHAEL'S DIVE LOG—VOLUME #8

DIVE BUDDY: Mom

DATE: 9/2

DIVE #: 748

LOCATION: Lighthouse Reef, Belize

DIVE SITE: Corky's Wall

WEATHER CONDITION: cloudy

WATER CONDITION: flat calm

DEPTH: 107 ft

VISIBILITY: 100+ ft

WATER TEMP.: 88°F

BOTTOM TIME: 4 min. FREE DIVE

COMMENTS:

The dive starts perfect. Perfect water. Perfect sky. Perfect wall. The ocean, warm, flat, perfect. I leave my wet suit drying on the *Festiva's* dive deck. Salt water slips silky over my skin like Carolina's caress.

Jeez, I miss her. *Caroleena*. She insisted on Spanish pronunciation. I thought this trip would help, but I can't forget lying in the sun, curled together, my face lost in her thick black hair, holding on. Three months. Every day. More when she felt like it. I always felt like it, but I didn't want to use her.

She dumped me on my butt when I took off to dive all summer at the condo. I wanted to bring her to Florida. Keep her close. Keep her safe. But she had to stay in Phoenix and work. Her family's got nothing. And Mom flipped when I mentioned it was a shame the sofa bed in the living room would be empty. Dad was cool with it. He's cool with everything. It should have been Carolina and me all summer, diving.

The creep b-ball jock she's with now is after one thing, as much as he can get. Possessive, too. Freaked when I called her from the Keys. And when we were all back at school, she wouldn't even look at me. Dad knew something was up, let me cut a week for the club's annual "hot deal" hurricane season trip. So, I'm scuba diving my brains out, free diving whenever I can get a spotter, trying not to think about that jock pawing my Carolina.

Love. Makes me crazy. All of it. You get so close, like she's part of you. And then she's gone. You ogle the smiling waitress on the boat, who has your girl's hair and wears a loaded bikini top and a sarong slung dangerously low. You appreciate the view while she serves you a virgin piña colada, but you still ache inside because now you've got a hole in your rib cage that won't fill, a gash that heals way too slow.

Salt water's my therapy of choice.

I swim my makeshift free-dive raft, Dad's old scuba vest packed with everything we'll need, out to the wall. Mom's late.

Lame. I know. Diving with Mommy. But she's missing her scuba dive with Dad this a.m. to lie facedown on the water all morning watching a breath-holding fanatic sink headfirst into the ocean. I got to give her props for that.

Spread out, Dad's BC, the scuba vest, makes a decent place

to hang between dives. I blow air into it until it bounces on top of the water and wonder if I'll get that dive kayak I want for Christmas. I tie my diver-down flag to the BC raft and hook it all up to the buoy marking the edge of the reef. The ocean floor drops off hundreds of feet here, forming a sheer coral wall. Still no scary pink slashed shark bait wet suit jumping off the *Festiva* and finning toward me. It's okay. We've got all morning.

Good old Mandy in Florida used to spot me. That was in no way lame. I faked shallow-water blackout all the time so she'd have to swim down, wrap her sexy body behind mine, pull me to the surface, and resuscitate me. Mandy. Another hole in my guts.

Suddenly, I'm tired of waiting. I sling my weight belt around my hips and cinch it tight. A few more pounds of muscle mass to my core and I won't need the weights. I've got my body taut and toned. I can hold my breath forever. My heartbeat even goes slow-mo when I free dive. Total control.

I pop a quick sixty-footer down to the reef, bop with the juvie fish—yellow and black, blue, purple. Wish I could shrink down to their size and dart in and out of a coral mound happy, careless, flitting, free. Easy to be a fish. I wouldn't make a freak of myself like yesterday when I finally talked to that waitress. She looks eighteen, twenty tops.

I took my drink to the bar for a refill. "You want to hang out with me on your break?"

Chicks usually say, "Yes." Babes hit on me way more than I hit on them. Even the older ones. I think it's the hair. Boring brown, but it went wavy post-manhood. I keep it long. Girls can't resist. I don't take up their offers as much as I could. Mom's got this thing about respect.

But my waitress didn't say, "Yes." She pushed her own thick, black, sexy hair that whispered, "Carolina," out of her eyes and smiled to let me down easy. "I don't think so."

"Come on. There's nobody up on the bow. You could work on your tan."

"Tan?" She's Hispanic, gorgeous golden all over.

"Pretend." I ran my finger down her arm. We both felt it. That charge when it's right.

She didn't get uptight and jerk away from me. I was getting to her. "And what will you do?" She blinked slow. Her mouth opened slightly as she exhaled.

I traced her fingers. "I'm pretty good with lotion."

She laughed again, throaty, teasing. "Sorry." She pulled away then. "Next break the captain lets me call my kids."

No lie. She handed me a picture. Three brown faces tumbling over each other. They stay with her mom up in Belize City. She misses them pretty bad. I felt sorry for her. Wanted to do something. I mean here's this young, beautiful girl stuck serving drinks to creeps like me until her looks go. I wish I could get Dad to hire her, but I don't think she types. I laughed it off, hung out with her while my drink melted. The whole thing made me feel useless.

So much easier to be a fish.

I leave the juvies playing hide-and-seek in the coral's tiniest caves and swim over to the wall for a look. Nice. Steepest one we've been on. Blue, deepening to bluer, deepening to a thousand feet of blue. Perfect. I know I can break a hundred. Today.

Every time I tried at the condo last summer, either the waves were too high or the currents too strong. That's the Keys.

None of that here. I turn away from the promising depths and swim toward sunshine.

When I break the surface, Mom's all over me. "Dammit, Michael, you're supposed—"

"Just warming up. Not a real dive." I suck up. "Never without a buddy." I duck under the BC raft, grab the weight belt I brought for her from the vest's pocket, and surface.

"It looked like a real dive to me." Mom fastens the belt, kicking slow to stay afloat.

I grin and give her a saltwater kiss on the cheek before I move out along the line stretched between the buoy and raft, positioned so I can dive straight down the wall. I float on my stomach, blow through my nose to clear my mask, shoot a spout of water out of my snorkel, and inhale—fill my gut, hold it a few beats, then blow it out nice and slow, expelling CO₂, the waitress, Carolina, Mandy, even Mom through that handy tube stuck in my mouth.

"Take it easy this morning." Mom treads water instead of taking up her spotting position. "Don't go too deep."

I keep venting, soaking up the blue world under me, eager to immerse myself in it again.

"No blackout today, right?" She says that every dive. I was ten that one time. Get over it.

A pair of painted angels drift over the top of the wall, their fins waving in time to my slowing heartbeat. I blow up my chest and gut, nine more mesmerizing cycles.

Mom maneuvers into position, facedown on the other side of the line.

I advance to super-vents, stretch my head back so I can drive air into every chamber of my skull and torso, filling my

throat and nasal passages again and again until my fingers tingle perfect breathe-down. O₂ maxed, totally zoned.

I inhale one last time, packing every crevice, and then pack more air and more. Mom bumps my leg. Doesn't matter. I'm Mr. Zen of the Deep. Nothing can penetrate this lean mean free-diving machine.

I slip the snorkel out of my mouth, bend at the waist, kick my massive free-dive fins skyward, and shoot down through the water. One kick, two. My buoyancy slides negative at fifteen feet. I streamline it, conserving my hoard of O₂. Don't need to kick now. Pinch my nose and clear my ears—easy. I zoom past the top of the wall, equalize my mask, glance at the dive computer strapped to my wrist, seventy feet, clear again, eighty. The deeper I go, the faster I fall. I blow past ninety. Hit a hundred before I know it. The water's so kicking clear.

I pull up hard, flip so my head points skyward, and work my fins to stop sinking. I want to celebrate. Kind of a deadly idea. A massive crab, all blued out, sits in a crevice sliced into the wall. He waves his claws in my direction. It took less than a minute to get down there. I have plenty of oxygen packed in my body, but I need it all for the ascent. No time for underwater fans.

I begin kicking for real, powering my giant fins back and forth. Don't go anywhere. Freak. Ditch my weights? No way. Dive won't count. My depth gauge reads 99 feet. Good. I'm moving—just doesn't seem like it. I paste my eyes to the blaring pink triangle that is Mom and kick harder. Ninety feet, eighty.

I make the top of the wall with upward momentum. Acid scalds my leg muscles. My lungs weep for air. Still, I don't

chuck the weights. I keep eye contact with Mom so she won't think she has to save me and wreck this dive. My chest vibrates with the effort of holding on to the last dredge of O₂. My legs get stiff. I force them to keep wafting my heavy fins back and forth.

The drowsy warmth of blackout creeps over me at fifteen feet, but I don't give it any room. I blow my CO₂. Positive buoyancy propels me to the surface. I blast through, plastering Mom. She squeals.

My starving lungs kick back mounds of fresh salt air.

"Your lips are blue, baby." Her eyebrows draw together.

I suck O₂ to my brain and stick my computer-strapped wrist in her face.

107 feet. Perfect.

"Whoa." She doesn't yell it and give me skin like Dad would have. "From now on you're going to need a lot better spotter than me." Mom starts untying the diver-down flag from the buoy. "Let's head back."

"We've still got tons of time." I fin over to her. "I'm going again in a few minutes."

"No way." She struggles with my knots.

"Yes. Way." My mask fogs up. I rip it off my head. A few strands of wavy brown chick-bait hair come with it.

Mom gets the rope loose. "You need to work on your knots."

"I just got started." I hock a ball of slime into my mask and rub it around with my finger. "What am I going to do back on the boat?"

"You've got yesterday's dives to log."

"I'm staying." I swish my mask around in the water.

“Not without a spotter.” She winds up the rope and hands it to me.

I hook the scuba-vest raft with an elbow. “Then spot me.” I put my mask back on, mess around clearing it of my wild hair, remembering how Carolina clutched at it the last time we were together.

Mom turns her back on me. “You’re diving way out of my league.” She unlatches her weight belt, lifts it out of the water by one end, and sets it on the BC raft. “You know I’m lucky if I free dive to thirty.”

“This is stupid. You always spot me.”

“Not anymore.”

“One more dive. Just to the reef. A baby could make that dive.”

“Can I trust you?”

How can I answer? We both know I’ll be down that wall again—freaking *should* be down that wall again.

“I’m not going to lie there and watch you drown. End of story.” She pulls her still pretty face into a crease. “You’re not free diving unless you’ve got a qualified spotter at the surface and a scuba spotter at depth.”

“Give me a break.” Nobody does that for a hundred feet. “It’s not like I’m riding a sled to 450.”

“Don’t give me nightmares.”

Right on cue, like Mom foresaw all and paid off the captain to get her way, the horn on the *Festiva* blares, over and over.

Mom frowns back at the boat. “Let’s go.” She starts swimming.

I hang back.

“Get a move on,” she yells. “They don’t blow that thing for nothing.”

MICHAEL'S DIVE LOG—VOLUME #8

DIVE BUDDY:

DATE:

DIVE #:

LOCATION:

DIVE SITE:

WEATHER CONDITION:

WATER CONDITION:

DEPTH:

VISIBILITY:

WATER TEMP.:

BOTTOM TIME:

COMMENTS:

MICHAEL'S DIVE LOG—VOLUME #8

DIVE BUDDY:

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