

Kevin Christian - 1

Kevin Christian
radiationphysics@comcast.net

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indigo orbits

by

kevin christian

“And Ruth said, Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried . . .”

Ruth 1:16 - 17

indigo orbits

Part i

“unknown”

Chapter 1

The prostitute warned him this would happen. She traced his palm for an uncomfortable amount of time. But Chase didn't believe her. She said his lifeline was pulling away from his destiny line. *What does that even mean?* he had wondered, but he didn't have the courage to ask her. Was she right? Maybe she was right. Maybe this is it. Maybe. Beads of sweat began to form on his face, and a blunt pain stuck between his shoulders. His thoughts scattered about like frightened rabbits.

He had never been a man of violence. Certainly nothing like this. Truth be told, he was scared of confrontation, of any sort of fighting. When he was nine, a mean-eyed, skinny girl punched him in the knuckles on the last day of Sunday school camp. He tried not to cry. It hurt though. Everyone laughed. Since then, he avoided violence.

The crows up in the trees began to caw. He tried to look up into the trees, but he could hardly move. All he could think about was a riddle he heard once. "The barber shaves all the men in the village who do not shave themselves. Who shaves the barber?" *Who shaves the fucking barber?* Chase was trying to silence

the substantial pain which was coursing through his body. His mother told him once when he broke his arm that if he solved this riddle, the pain would vanish. He had tried to solve the riddle his entire life. But now it wasn't funny anymore. *Who shaves the fucking barber?*

“It’s going to be okay,” he whispered to the little girl, over and over again like a mantra. “Don’t be afraid.” The girl lay motionless on her back atop the stone floor of the courtyard, inches from the fountain. The bright silver moon cast uncertain shadows from the trees along the edges, and caused the water to shimmer as it splashed into the pool below. The girl’s face shone in the moonlight.

How peaceful, he thought, staring at the girl, studying her closed eyes and expressionless face. *It’s almost like she’s sleeping,* he thought. “I’ll get us out of this,” he whispered.

Chase Komley slumped over the girl, trying to prop himself up with his elbow. His lungs ached, and the air he sucked in felt thin and useless. His other hand was pressed to the ground, a little shaky. The stones to the

courtyard felt cool below his palm. A sudden breeze rustled the leaves above the courtyard, pushing the shadows this way, and then that. Chase peered back over his shoulder, and could see the orphanage lit in the moonlight, and how the shadows swayed along the cracked and mossy walls. From within the darkness, a solitary figure stood poised like a beautiful serpent. Sometimes, when the shadows tilted, Chase could make out something of the man's face.

The man was screaming in a language that Chase could not comprehend. Chase turned once more to the girl, the girl he vowed to protect.

Is a life well-lived measured by the countless minor decisions that we make each day? he asked himself. Or is it measured by the lone major decision that we throw our entire being behind when time and fate collide? He pondered this, listening to the man's footsteps shuffling toward them from the dark boundaries of the garden.

Life is easy to read backwards, he thought. I won't know if this was my truly big decision until tomorrow, maybe the next. I'll know then, he thought. Then I'll know.

How odd, he thought. In just ten days, so many seemingly random decisions led to this moment, so far across the planet. Ten days. But where did it start? Which one choice shifted the momentum?

Was it to go to the zoo? He asked. Surely not. Surely it was not the decision to go to the zoo. Damn rundown zoo. But that is where the message came. For that matter, maybe it started at the Indigo. No. That was five years ago. Maybe.

In the days that followed, sacred things were taken. Pointless dreams were given away. Secrets that could no longer be kept fell from their lips and burned like flames. All of the hidden places they kept folded like fortunes trapped within a cookie were now lying vulnerable under the gaze of the harvest moon.

Chase heaved in belabored breaths, looking into the small child's face. *It does not matter now*, he thought. *I am here now. And I have found this child. And I have done all that I can.*

"I promised you," he whispered in her ear. He began to cough. The taste of iron coated the back of his tongue. "Promises . . ."

In the corner of his eye, the figure now stood beside them both, wild-eyed and spitting out cold black curses which shot into his back. He tried to look up into the man's face. The full moon sat perfectly over the shoulder of the man. Chase's ears began to ring. For a moment, he thought the ringing was emanating from the moon.

From the bell tower above them, the old monk cried out, "Stop that man!" Seconds later, the wooden door to the garden was kicked off its iron hinges, and men with rifles swarmed into the courtyard and surrounded the fountain.

Chase turned from the face of the stalker, and could see that pools of blood were forming around the shoulder of his beloved. *How peaceful*, he thought to himself, looking at the image of the moon reflected in the pool of blood.

Who shaves the fucking barber?

Chapter 2

Chase stepped out of his Range Rover, listening to the cooling engine ping and click. His eyes were on the sign to the zoo's entrance, but his mind was stuck in the staff meeting he had just stormed out of. "Unbelievable," he muttered.

The city zoo had been lost over the years as one skyscraper after another nudged in along the perimeter of its property. Tourists were shocked when they turned the corner of the downtown garment district on their way to the capitol, and bam, here's a zoo. It had been neglected over the years, sure, but it was still Chase's favorite hiding place.

He took a deep breath, trying to calm down. Things had not been going so well lately.

"Unbelievable."

Chase trudged toward the turnstile with his hands buried in his pockets, and approached the ticket counter to the zoo. A teenage girl sat on a stool with a book held inches from her glasses. She wore braces and had a sloppy ponytail hanging from the side of her head. Chase stood there and watched her chomping gum. She was reading a rather large book with the picture of a female Vampire on the cover.

How is that gum not all tangled in her braces? he thought.

Chase cleared his throat. She turned a page. Chase pulled his laminated zoo pass from his wallet and placed it upon the glass with a crisp slapping sound. The girl jumped.

“What the hell! Shit, man,” she spurted out, dropping her book. “Sorry,” she finally said, looking up at him. “You scared the shit out of me, man.”

“I’m sorry,” Chase said, “I wasn’t sure you saw me.”

“I know,” the girl replied, leaning toward the glass to get a closer look at the photo ID. “Totally my fault. I was at a scary part,” she said.

“Is it good?” he asked.

“The book?”

“Yes.”

“No,” she said, looking from him to the ID and back to him again. She pointed at his birthday. “My dad is thirty-five too.”

“I see.”

“Small world.”

“Hmm.”

“Why did you cut your hair off?” she asked.

Chase looked at the ID. “You like the long hair better?” he asked.
He sounded genuinely surprised.

“Maybe,” she said.

The picture was from a couple of years ago. He was still with Maggie back then. *I look younger in this picture*, he thought. This was the first time he noticed that he had aged over the last couple of years. He had been running back then, and his face was thinner. *I need to start running again*, he thought. Chase rubbed his stubbly neck and chin. He rarely shaved anymore. The face on the ID was so smooth.

“Yeah, maybe I like the longer hair, too,” he mumbled.

Chase couldn't stop studying the ID. *That was a great cut*, he thought. He used to spend hundreds on his haircut at *Chelsea du Chez*. He used to transform his look all the time. Strangers told him he looked like some actor, always a different actor. He constantly changed his hair color, kept his eyebrows trimmed. Facials. Manicures. Skinny suits with pointy Italian loafers. Metro, all-in.

He looked up at the glass which separated him from the girl, and tried to see his reflection in the glass. He didn't look like that picture any more. He sheared his own hair these days. There was nothing metro about him now. Now, no one ever said he looked like anyone. In fact, no one even noticed him anymore.

“You didn't answer my question . . . Why'd you cut it?” the girl asked.

“New start, I guess.”

“I get that,” she said. “That’s why I got the braces.”

“Oh,” Chase said.

“You don’t owe me anything. We close in thirty minutes,” the girl finally said, reaching for her book and returning to her hobbled-over reading position. “Gonna rain though,” she said as Chase walked into the zoo. The girl thumbed through the book, trying to find her lost place.

Chase looked up into the darkening sky. The gathering winds rippled through the canvas awning, toppling over a metals trashcan. Chase ran up to the rolling can and sat it upright.

“Where did this come from?”

The morning had been cool and bright, and the air had been crisp. *Fall will be here soon*, he had thought to himself as he stood outside the bar that morning.

The name of Chase's bar was Sappho's. But before it was Chase's bar, it had been his and Maggie's bar together.

Ten years had passed since he left the engineering firm to start Sappho's. Ten years of bar life. That is like 40 people years. In the beginning, the whole allure of owning one's own bar is romantic, and full of possibilities. He had thought it would be the life for him. But things had changed, the way that spring gardens gradually turn into hot, weed-infested burdens when August finally arrives. Eventually nights and days switch somehow, melting into each other and become a new thing that is not at all like either separately.

In the end, Chase reasoned, all you are left with are years of fuzzy memories, conditional friends, and an uninterrupted chain of regrets.

After the divorce, and after the bar became his alone, a change began to occur. His staff [which had been his and Maggie's dear friends at one time] had grown distant. Chase, for the life of him, could not retrace the steps that led them there. Once thick as thieves, these days, they no longer made eye contact.

He should have seen it coming. The signs were there. Last April, the staff and some of the patrons of Sappho's approached him and asked if he wouldn't mind taking Friday nights off. They wanted one night with Maggie and her partner Isabella. One night without any awkwardness. "You know," they said to him in a tender voice, "we love Maggie . . . too . . . and we miss her . . ."

"Sure," he said, trying to sound unaffected. "I get that."

That first Friday night, he lay in bed in his loft above the bar, with Camper his cat curled on his head, purring. Music poured in from the floor below his bed, louder than usual. The baseline was constant. Thump, thump, thump. *We never play house music anymore*, he thought to himself.

I should insulate these floors. The laughter in the bar was constant, and he could hear Maggie's laughter, unmistakable above the rest.

That sounds very much like the old days, he thought. *Yes. The old days were loud like that.*

Sleep refused him that night. He glared at the ceiling. The tree of life had been hacked down, and he was suffocating underneath.

But today, just moments before he fumed out of the Saturday afternoon bar meeting, he inadvertently overheard that the entire staff had gone to a particular art movie the day before. Chase felt the tiny pieces of himself becoming not-so-casually undone.

This was an art movie that he had told *them* about . . . an art movie that he had heard a review on *This American Life* . . . on NPR . . . from Ira Glass. And Chase had told them - all of them - that he was dying to see the film and that they should all see the film together.

He was now certain that whatever friendship existed in the past had drifted away from him like balloons slipping freely from a child's hand. And in that moment, he made the awful realization that he had become a thing to bear.

Chase tried to start the meeting, but stopped. "No meeting today. I'm going to the zoo."

"What?" he heard Kathryn, the bar manager, blurt out from behind him as he reached for the door. "Why?" Chase slammed the door to his Range Rover, screeching his tires as he pulled away.

Standing now in the entrance to the zoo, Chase's phone began to ring, vibrating against his leg. He snapped out of his daydream, and pulled the phone from his pocket. The screen read: "*unknown*".

He watched it ring a few more times, and thought about sliding it back in his pocket. He was in no mood for a telemarketer today. But then he changed his mind.

“This is Chase,” he said, already primed for a fight and sounding defensive. No one said anything. “Hello?” The line hissed. “Hello?” Chase could hear something coming across the line. The sounds were jumbled and far away. A few moments later, the call dropped.

Chapter 3

A small Indian girl sat on a tattered blanket, tucked in the corner of the laundry room, wearing the same dress she wears every day. The dress had been a gift from her mother on her last birthday, her fifth. The girl loved the sunflowers in the print, and the way the dress twirls when she spins.

Several rows of industrial washers and dryers spun so many colorful things around and around in a churning blur. The child played with toys she had found along the way, and was taught to stay hidden from the rest of the workers. Two delicate women, soaked through with sweat, chattered back and forth as they reached into a canvas bin and separated bedspreads from towels. Beside them, a dark-skinned man with crooked fingers stood on a stepladder and poured detergent into the top of a washer. Instantly, the room smelled blue.

The band of workers talked above and around the girl and did not sensor their conversations. The oldest worker, a vociferous woman, gave

the daily update of her husband's addiction to hashish. The rolls of fat behind her arms flapped back and forth as she shook her fist into the air.

The woman beside her had faded henna paintings on her hand from her wedding two days before. She did not listen to the hashish update. Instead, she cursed and spat on the ground as she handled the stained sheets from Room 409. Room 409 was reserved for the boss, who had a proclivity toward twisted, forbidden things.

The child in the corner sat on the tattered blanket and paid little mind to the workers. She only looked up occasionally, when her mother would push a canvas bin into the laundry room. She knew to stay quiet and had figured out so many things about invisibility.

The girl taught herself these tricks: By focusing all of her concentration into a person's eyes, while imagining herself to be transparent, the person could not see her. Once, she imagined herself inside of a pink bubble of light, and she walked right up to one of the workers and spoke directly into his ear. To her dismay and

wonderment, the man could not hear the words that she spoke. She had perfected this magic with much practice.

The girl loved one book in particular. She snatched the book from the bottom of a canvas bin when no one was looking. The book had been left in one of the rooms. And at night, the girl's Baba would read the book to her. Night after night, she pointed to the pages and asked many questions, until she knew how to read the book all by herself. This was her favorite book.

Day in and day out, she passed time with no friends to speak of, and no friends to speak to, and with nothing to comfort her, apart from for the stories in this book.

More or less, this all changed on the morning of an otherwise ordinary November day. The girl's father tore into the laundry room like a bull released into the streets of Pamplona.

This cannot be right, she thought to herself. Her father worked in the restaurant at the front of the hotel. Only her mother was allowed in the laundry room.

The man snatched the girl up into his arms, and raced out of the laundry room.

“What is happening, Baba?” she asked.

“Be quiet, darling,” he whispered. “We have to find your mother.”

“Why?”

“Be still.”

The girl looked back in the direction of the laundry room as they ran through the carpeted halls of the colonial hotel.

“What is happening, Baba?” the child asked.

Chapter 4

Chase's next move was uncertain. The sky had changed from gray to dark blue in a matter of moments. The winds had summoned great powers, and a late summer storm hung menacingly above him.

Maybe this isn't a good zoo day after all, he thought. Maybe I will go sleep. Maybe this is a good sleeping day instead.

Chase looked from the sky back to his phone again. He pulled up his recent call list and pressed: "unknown". The phone would not allow him to recall this number. Chase shoved the phone back into his pocket and turned toward the exit.

Just then, far off in the distance, the Howler Monkeys began to yelp, back and forth, one to another.

"What is that?" he muttered, turning.

Chase began to walk in the direction of the haunting sounds. Some of them were sharp, throaty, and abrupt like a German shepherd, but others were long and doleful like the call of an exotic bird.

With his head tilted to the side, Chase moved methodically past the enclosure for spotted leopards, searching. He moved past the dark-watered Koi pond. The prehistoric red and white fish moved up to the surface, and followed him until they reached the end of their pond. He passed the albino Bengal tiger with gray eyes the same color as his.

A sudden trance came upon Chase as he moved through the empty zoo. A janitor with a wrinkled head like a turtle stopped as Chase passed by.

“May I help you?” he asked.

“Where is that coming from?”

“There,” he said, bending his finger toward the bamboo-lined entrance to the primates.

“Yes,” Chase said. “Yes. That is where it’s coming from.”

“Storm’s comin’,” the old man said. “Gonna be a big’en.”

“Yes,” Chase said, walking in the direction the man was pointing.

The path was dark, as it was lined on either side with bamboo stalks that were thick as small trees. The bamboo on either side of the path grew so high that they formed a single canopy. The wind bent the bamboo in the same direction.

The sharp barks were getting louder, and changing constantly in both pitch and intensity. Something was building.

Chaos is man's inability to see patterns, Chase thought. That is what I read, yes? We do not see deeply enough to find patterns. So we call it chaos. Is this chaos? Surely this is not chaos.

Just then, as the bamboo above him hissed, a white light flashed quickly all around him, hot white green. For an instant, he could see the rings in the bamboo. Chase hunkered down.

A thunder clap shook the ground. But this did not stop him. Chase emerged from the bamboo path, and before him, swinging along the tops of the trees were four Howler Monkeys, three black, and one white. At last he found the source of these cries. Chase stood, peering up into the trees. The white Howler was filling his throat like a balloon as he yelped. Immediately thereafter, the three black ones did the same.

Sheet lightning, like webbed arteries, ran randomly along the dark gray clouds which hung just inches above the trees.

“*What is this?*” he thought, watching the Howler Monkeys bend branches as they swung from limb-to-limb with their long, sinewy arms.

“Is this God?” he asked quietly to no one.

The trees were now swaying hard. The Howlers carried on their call and response as they swung through branches. They moved at great speeds without error, without effort, brushing up against one another while gliding past each other in midair. And the cries never stopped and no two cries were ever the same.

They were free.

A sudden bolt of lightning struck close to the zoo.

In seconds, the sky cracked open. Chase could see the rain rushing in from the entrance of the zoo. He watched the wall of rain sweep over the bamboo path,

moving toward him. When the wall crashed over him, he could hardly see through the deluge.

Chase stood in the rain.

The howling had stopped. The monkeys were gone. He looked back over his shoulder to the bamboo path, and found the lights to the path had automatically winked on.

Chase tilted his face up toward the rain. With his eyes closed, he felt the rain washing over him.

Something has to change, he thought. He did not move for a considerable amount of time. There was nowhere to go. He tried to look up into the falling rain, but it was too painful. He cupped his hand in front of him as if blocking the sun, and watched the rain fall on each side of his outstretched hand. *This will no longer do.*

At last, the time had come to leave. But as he turned, he could see that he was being watched by a gorilla. The gorilla sat on the edge of its habitat, on a smooth, mossy boulder. A swift stream broke around this boulder, forming two twin waterfalls that dropped 20 feet into a ravine that separated the gorilla from the zoo watchers. The gorilla sat on the boulder with its legs crossed.

The gorilla and Chase watched one another, only blinking occasionally when rain hit their eyes.

“Hi,” Chase said.

Chase moved through the rain and stood under an arbor covered in wisteria. This was as close as the two could get to one another. Vines were wrapped around the arbor, collecting and releasing the rain in steady droplets and broken rivulets. The gorilla breathed in. So did Chase.

“We’re wet.” Chase said. “How long have you been there?” The gorilla snorted out a humph sound. “Yep. I’m standing in the rain talking to a gorilla. This is happening.”

The gorilla turned from Chase, looking into the distance.

“You have friends?” Chase asked the gorilla. “No? Yeah? Yeah . . . I bet you have friends. Not worth it. Right? You know what I’m talking about. Doesn’t last. I’m sure you’re like me. Right? Like why waste your time with it? You and me, we get it. The best moments are when you just stand alone in the rain.”

Thunder shook everything. Chase ducked down for a moment, before looking back at the gorilla. The gorilla looked old and confused. It did not seem concerned by the storm.

The sign to the enclosure caught Chase’s eye. “Kimba is a female western Lowland Gorilla who was rescued from poachers when she was a

baby. She is on loan via the Pondicherry Zoo in India, and was trained to speak sign language by her handler, Naomi Violet, Ph.D. in conjunction with the Ethology and Animal Behavior Clinic from Stanford University.”

[Can you understand me?] Chase signed to the gorilla.

The gorilla watched Chase sign and looked away.

The sheets of rain fell hard between them, and the twin waterfalls were building in strength.

“Hello?” Chase shouted out to Kimba, trying to get her attention. The gorilla did not look at him. She seemed to be searching for something. “Hello?”

Chase’s phone began to ring once again. Chase watched the gorilla as he dug back into his pocket. His pants were soaked and clinging to his legs. Retrieving his phone was not easy. The number was “*unknown*” once again.

“Hello?” Chase shouted out over the sounds of the storm. He could not hear anything. He covered his other ear with his free hand. “Hello?”

“... hear me? ...”

“Hello?”

“Chase?”

“Yes. This is Chase.” The voice was breaking up badly, and the sound of water crashing into the ravine was getting louder by the second.

“Hello?”

Chase looked up at the gorilla, which was now looking out in a different direction, occasionally blinking when water struck her eyes.

“ . . . an accident . . . ”

“What? I can’t hear you!”

Thunder struck again, and the call went dead. Chase looked at his phone, now covered in droplets. He wiped the face of the phone off on his shirt. This was pointless. His shirt was soaked as well.

In the distance, Chase could hear the sound of an electric engine whining above the sound of the rain. The gorilla rose from its boulder and started to walk back into its habitat.

“Kimba,” Chase called out.

The whine of the electrical engine grew louder. “Sir! The zoo is closed.” Chase turned and saw two men sitting in a covered golf cart with a flashing yellow light above it, and water streaming over the canvas top.

Chase sat on the backward facing seat of the security golf cart. He could see Kimba knuckling away from the boulder. His phone made a strange beeping sound. *I think it's ruined*, he thought. The face of his phone was covered in beads of water, and still read “*unknown*”.

Chase looked up from the phone and watched the great bamboo entrance to the primates shrink smaller and smaller as they wove through the park, and then finally disappear.

Chapter 5

The morning light had carved out shadows between the narrow alleyway. A man in his late twenties, an American, sat quietly at the wooden bistro table. A half-empty beer bottle sat before him, and a couple empties beside. The man had dark brown hair, sitting unevenly on his shoulders. He had not shaved since he had arrived in India, and was now sporting a sort of beard-thingy that had grown down his neck like an untended lawn.

He gazed across the alley, through the light and into the shadows. His face was peaceful. The buzz was nice.

He watched his wife in those shadows, kneeling down beside a young Indian girl wearing a bright floral dress. The girl looked to be about nine or ten. He could not hear what they were saying, but he could see that the small girl had a hacked-up haircut. *Perhaps she cuts it herself*, he thought. The bangs were cropped too closely and were pinned down with a pink bobby pin, to save them from flying about like a Dr. Seuss character.

The man was curious as to what his wife was up to. She was bent before the child, holding the girl's small hand between hers. She was fully present with the child. The man took another swig from his beer.

His wife was still wrapped in the sarong that the medicine woman had given her the day before at the Temple of Hanuman. They had spent the previous day exploring this temple, the sixth of their summer tour of temples, ashrams, and shrines. Three more were on the list, before heading to the Taj Mahal. This would be the grand finale of an entire summer in India.

She was still wearing his white wife-beater that had turned dingy orange from all of the dirt kicked up from the motorcycle. She had shaved the left side of her hair before they came to India, and streaked the right side red. The rest of her naturally wavy blonde hair was tied back with a scarf.

The Indian girl waved her hands high above her head in a grand circle. Then she looked over her shoulder, jumped, and placed both hands quickly on her belly, and jumped again, shouting. They both started

laughing. He was uncertain what they were laughing about, but laughed also.

The streets were crowded with impatient motorists, passing, honking, and waving fists. Some dodged women with children on their backs or merchants with bulging sacks slung over both shoulders. A group of boys crossed quickly, and resumed kicking a soccer ball back and forth to one another once they reached the other side.

Both sides of the streets were lined with rows of shops. Some with tiny carvings of household gods and some with crates of fruit stacked like a DJ's records. This was not the market for the tourists, but for the locals.

They had arrived in India at the end of May, and had moved from village-to-village, setting up a hub out of which they could daytrip. In two more days, they would be leaving this village and making their final trip to Agra, about a week's journey by motorcycle. They hoped to explore Agra and the Taj for a few days before their September flight home.

Each day of the last two weeks, they had started their mornings in this exact café in the middle of the local market. Today, they were going to travel to an ashram less than an hour away. There, at this ashram, the patrons practice a form of meditation yoga that neither had tried before. They planned to return by nightfall.

The woman embraced the girl tightly, lifting her off of the ground and swinging her around and around. The girl's tiny legs bent upwards as she twirled.

The woman looked both ways, up and down the alleyway, carefully navigating her way back to their table. She looked back across the street once more, and saw that the little girl was waving at her and blowing her kisses.

“Oh,” she said, “Bye, my love, bye!” She blew kisses back to her. “I will see you here tomorrow!” The little girl yelled something back, but it was lost in the traffic sounds. The girl turned, and ran down the street with a bag full of fruit in her hand.

“Well?” he asked. She sighed, and fiddled with the silver elephant bracelet on her wrist. She took a sip of his beer. Without warning, she leaned across the table and pressed the tip of her nose against his. She kissed him, not hard, but casually, with a smile still on her face.

“Dan, honey,” she said. “I have to confess something.”

“Oh?”

“I love her . . . and she might be going home with us.”

“Who is she?”

“She is a business woman,” she said, easing back into her seat.

“That little girl is a business woman? Ah . . . I could tell by the haircut,” Dan said. “Derivatives or currency futures?”

“She sells pictures of tourists from the cruise ships . . .”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa . . .” he stopped her, holding his hand up. “Who the hell does she sell them to?”

“To anyone who will buy them, of course.” Her tone underpinned the obviousness of it all.

“Why would people buy their cruise pictures from her and not the cruise ship?”

“She takes the unclaimed pictures that the cruise ship throws out and sells them . . .”

“To whom?” Dan asked incredulously.

“To anyone”

“What sort of moron buys another person’s cruise pictures?” he asked. His face was furrowed in equal proportions between confusion and amusement.

“Well . . . for your information,” she said, “apparently a lot of people because she is only ten, and according to her she is one of the best business women around here.” Dan laughed.

“Well, smart ass. I’m glad you think it’s so funny.”

“Come on,” he said. “It’s sort of funny.”

“Oh yeah? Well she also works at a library, *and* she takes tickets at the zoo.”

“She’s a baller, that one,” Dan said, looking down the street in the direction the little girl had gone.

“Well guess what your wife just found out.”

“Oh, I can’t wait to hear. Do tell.”

“She knows Seeta.”

“Really?” Dan said, sounding serious. “Seeta, Seeta? From yesterday, Seeta?”

“Yep. The reincarnated guru herself.”

“Really? I thought the medicine woman was just spinning a yarn yesterday.”

“You did? Why?”

“I don’t know. All of the Hindu stories seem a little out there. I think they’re beautiful . . . they’re just . . . they’re just a lot.”

“Not this story. Seeta lives right here.”

“Here? In this village?”

“Yes, that’s what I’m saying. That girl said she can take us to where she lives. She’s going to meet us here tomorrow.”

“Really?” Dan sounded excited. “How did that come up?”

“She recognized my sarong and asked if I got it at the Temple of Hanuman. Apparently she runs this joint. It sounds like she pretty much knows everyone.”

“How random,” he said, sipping his beer. He handed her the beer. “Should we try to catch the girl and go today? I have to see Seeta for myself now.”

“Right?”

“Do you want to go back today?” he asked.

“No. Today is lucky number seven on our tour. We’ll keep our plans, and then meet up with the girl tomorrow.”

“Okay.” Dan finished the last sip. “Who knew that little business woman would come in so handy?”

“I think she’s perfect. She’s everything I came to India for.” She turned from him, smiling.

“And I assume you remembered our deal?” he asked.

“Um . . . sort of.”

“Shelby,” Dan said, irritated.

“What?”

“We talked about this. You promised.”

“It wasn’t much.”

Dan gave her a suspicious look. “How much?”

“Well,” Shelby said. “Not really that much. . . .”

“Not really that much? Exactly how much?”

“Well, the thing is,” she said, sitting up, shifting in her seat. “You have to factor in the value of the rupee versus the dollar. And the exchange rate is really quite remarkable these days. . . .”

“Jesus, Shelby,” he said. “We aren’t going to have enough money to get to Agra if you keep giving it all away.”

Shelby reached in her pocket and placed a picture on the table between them. A freckled woman with big, permed hair and blue eye

shadow was standing next to a gray headed man with jowls wearing a tuxedo. They were standing in front of a backdrop of a pirate's ship, heads tilted toward one other.

"I can't fucking believe you," he said.

"I don't know what to tell you."

"Shelby."

"It's a good photo. Look at it."

"Seriously, Shelby."

"You're not even looking at it. Don't be so judgy."

"You're killing me," he said.

Shelby gave him a coy smile, before standing and grabbing her helmet. “You look handsome today.”

Dan stood up as well, dug into his pocket and placed a few bills beside the empty bottles. “You’re killing me,” he repeated.

Dan placed the helmet on his head and reached for their motorcycle. Shelby had other plans. She snatched the keys like a ninja, and had the bike started before he even knew what was happening. His first instinct was to protest, but she already had the bike in gear. Dan jumped on the bike behind her.

Shelby steered them through the back alley, merging into the chaotic thoroughfare, and out towards the fringes of town. On either side of the orange dirt road were rows and rows of houses that had been built onto and into one other with scraps of tin roofs, discarded advertising boards, graffiti-covered awnings, and all manner of materials that had been salvaged from

the landfill. At the speed with which they were now passing, the structures seemed all jumbled and confused, like the thoughts of a crazed mind.

Shelby nearly wrecked when the traffic in front of her parted, revealing a Brahmin bull in the middle of the road. Dan looked back at the bull who was chewing his cud obliviously. Dan knew he was drunk, and he laughed. He turned and looked at Shelby in the bike's mirrors. Her tongue was poking tersely out the side of her mouth. This was her "concentration face", the one she made while drawing.

Dan lifted his head back and gazed up into the sky. A thumbnail moon hung directly above them. He loved the daytime moons. For that matter, he loved the feel of her waist, and he loved the warm air blowing in his face, carrying with it the earth smells of India, and he loved the rumbling sounds of the motorcycle's untuned engine. Everything about this moment seemed perfect to him. Over his shoulder he watched the entire village receding from them like the evening tides.

Perhaps it was the three breakfast beers that were working on him, but the next thing he knew, Dan jerked up from sleeping. He caught his balance and

realized that his head has been resting between Shelby's shoulder blades. He was uncertain how long he had slept, but he saw that the thumbnail moon had moved in forward angles.

Dan leaned in closely. With his free hand, he parted her hair to the side, and eased forward to kiss the back of her neck. She smelled like warm skin when you first wake up in the morning.

At this exact same moment, the bike became unsteady.

Shelby shouted, "Watch it!"

A long blue bus swerved over the middle line toward them. Shelby went for the brake and for the soft shoulder at the same time, but the back of the bus had already slapped up against them like a whale against a tiny lifeboat.

The bus came to a complete stop. The bus driver looked in his rearview mirror and saw two motionless bodies on the road behind them, and a motorcycle with a back tire that was still spinning.

Chapter 6

Night had fallen and the rain had stopped. The bar was empty. Chase had walked down to check the locks one last time. The moon hung on the horizon. *The moon will be full next week, he thought. I am sure that explains many things.*

He stood outside the bar, watching wisps of glowing clouds move quietly across the moon's face. Droplets fell from the corners of the roof, and the night was cool as it can only be after a hard rain.

Chase scanned the streets outside the bar, and the historic houses which spread out in all directions. Everything was quiet under the streetlights in this recently gentrified city district. He turned and went back into the bar and locked the door behind him. The rope lights that lined the liquor shelves provided light. Chase reached over the bar and grabbed a XX Dark Amber out of the beer cooler and grabbed a Crown bottle from the shelf besides. He took these with him as he climbed the stairs at the end of bar.

The apartment above the bar was an open space that extended the exact same length and width as the bar below. Nine support beams connected the floor to the 16 foot ceilings above. A row of windows ran across the front of the building, providing a direct view of the city on the other side of the river. The hardwood floors were in awful condition. Each year, their restoration made his New Year's resolution list. Because of this, the floors looked like an MTV unplugged set with overlapping Persian rugs.

His apartment had a futon bed which was always down, and never made. A flat panel TV was fixed to the exposed brick wall, and a farm table sat in the open kitchen with two high back chairs on either side of the table. An exposed claw foot tub stood on the opposite side of the room near the front windows with the view of the city.

There were three pieces of art on the wall: 1) a folk art painting of Camper sitting on a yellow tractor that Maggie had painted; 2) a black and white blowup of James Dean at a jazz concert in Greenwich Village; 3) a hand drawn blueprint

that Chase's grandfather had used to build Chase's grandmother a farmhouse in Iowa. This farmhouse is where Chase had inherited the table in the kitchen.

Tonight, Chase slid without effort into the deep steaming water of the bath, listening to music from the bar below. For the first time since standing in the rain at the zoo, the penetrating chill in his bones was starting to thaw. Chase sank below the water, listening how the music changed under water. He blew bubbles from time-to-time, and felt the shot of whiskey work its way down to his feet. Having held his breath as long as he could, he emerged from the water and looked out to the downtown skyline.

He thought about how much he had loved the loft when they first renovated it. He told Maggie that he honestly believed people could become better by the surroundings they placed themselves in. "I can't imagine ever being unhappy again," he had told her.

Now he wished the floors were soundproof. For that matter, he could never keep the apartment warm enough in the winter. And no matter how many times he had a roofer come out, the ceiling still leaked in bad storms.

Chase took the beer bottle from the floor and drank it in one guzzle. A feeling came over him; the painfully isolated comfort that only comes to a person while drinking alone.

Just then, Chase noticed that Camper was sitting by the tub, looking at him. Camper was a small cat, completely black except for her white paws. “Well hello,” he said, sitting up in the water. Camper was kneading the spot on the floor beside the tub.

Camper was purring.

Chase pulled the plug from the bottom of the tub. “Okay, you’re hungry,” Chase said. “I hear you.” Chase stood up out of the water, and wrapped himself in

a towel. He carried Camper under his arm and set her on the kitchen counter, before peeling back a can of tuna.

Chase dropped into the futon, and watched the cars in the distance going back and forth over the bridge to downtown. He was sleepy. He was restless.

Chase held the remote control in his hand, and stared at the television on the wall. He didn't have the energy to turn it on. The bottle next to him only had a swig left in it. Chase downed the last bit and went back into the bar to grab a full bottle of Pernod, before returning up into the loft.

In the back corner of the apartment was a black wrought iron staircase that led to the roof above. With the bottle in one hand and his phone in the other, Chase climbed the stairs to the green space.

Each spring he would try to keep the rooftop gardens alive, in spite of the grand effort it takes to get bags of mulch from the back of a truck at street level, through the bar, up the stairs to the apartment, and around the winding stairs to the roof. But as the summer trudged on, he would proceed to neglect the gardens and would let them die.

The green space had been Maggie's idea. And she did help out the first year they bought the building. By year two, she had mostly delegated the work to him. By year three, Maggie had hired Isabella and her contracting company to redo the rooftop gardens.

They were both so excited at first. "This garden is the greatest thing that ever happened to me," she said that night to Chase as they sat by the rooftop fountain, sipping wine.

Chase had not been up to tend to the garden in some time now. Earlier in the summer when he had to go up to the roof to flip a breaker after a storm, he saw that the garden was mostly composed of interstate weeds now, with fuzzy purple flowers and ragged thistles covering every stalk and every leaf. The pump on the

fountain had burned out some time ago and what remained of the water was green and had tiny black tadpoles swimming around just below the surface in pulsating, jerky motions. The green water smelled like something rotting in a person's mouth. "Really?" Chase muttered, kicking the fountain.

Chase plugged in the strand of dragonfly fairy-lights that were strung between wooden poles along the edge of the roof. Most of the lights still worked. He slid into a lounge chair and peeled away the plastic safety seal to the bottle of Pernod. He poured a large, full glass over ice, and set the bottle on the concrete floor beside him. He took a long drink of the clear green liquor. His breath immediately smelled like black licorice.

Everything about this garden reminded him of her. The Pernod was working on him, or perhaps it was an unbearable loneliness. Perhaps the two were working against him.

Chase took his phone and dialed the number. The phone rang. And rang again. Before the third ring could finish, she answered.

“Chase?”

“Hey,” he said. His tongue felt heavy.

“Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

Chase sat up and sucked in a quick breath. He didn’t want to sound slurred. “Nothing.” Calling Maggie didn’t seem like a great idea anymore. They hadn’t talked – really talked – in months now. They texted from time-to-time when she wanted to let him know that she and Isabella would be at the bar. But that was about it.

“It’s late.”

“Yeah . . . I’m sorry about that. I just got this strange call today and I wanted to make sure . . . it wasn’t you or something. You know.”

“A strange call?”

“Yeah . . . it’s probably nothing. You know. I just got two calls from an unknown number. The line was breaking up. I thought they said there was an accident or something. I don’t know. I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

Chase could hear Isabella over the line, asking Maggie who it was. He could hear Maggie cover the phone with her hand, followed by a mumbling sound.

“No. It wasn’t either of us.”

“Okay then. That’s good. I . . . I just thought I should check and make sure. You know.”

“Are you okay, honey?”

“Uh . . . yeah. No, I’m great. I’m doing really, really well right now. You know.”

“You sound upset.”

“Oh, no. No. I didn’t mean to give you a bad impression.” Chase pulled the phone away from his face and checked the time. 12:08. “Oh, Jesus, Maggie. I’m sorry. I just looked at the time. I had no idea it was this late.”

“That’s okay.”

“I should go. I shouldn’t have called so late.”

“That’s fine, Chase. You can call whenever.”

“I should go.”

They both sat there for a moment, both listening to the other breathe.

“Okay,” she said. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I am. I promise. I just wanted to make sure you guys weren’t in an accident or something like that.”

“We’re fine.”

“Okay, then.”

“Goodnight, Chase.”

“Goodnight.”

Chase hung up the phone, and sat for a while. He turned up the bottle.

Chapter 7

The small Indian girl ran down the uneven, cobbled path. The monsoons had passed, and the unbreathable sticky heat had settled into everything. The sounds of slapping sandals on stone echoed all about. The path sloped downward under a train overpass. The overpass was held together unevenly with railroad ties of dubious capacity.

The child ran under the bridge, and ascended quickly on the other side, passing a concession stand.

“Your usual?” a man cried out from behind the counter. The man had yellow eyes.

“No, thank you!” the girl cried out as she ran by.

“No?” the man called after, but the child did not hear.

She turned a corner and stopped in front of the primate enclosure. In the distance, she saw a brown cave made of thatch and mud, held together in places with wire mesh and worn out tires. Next to this cave was a long iron fence. The girl ran up to the fence, and pressed her face between two of the bars.

An old diesel truck sat in the middle of the enclosure. The truck was faded red, and falling apart, and was secured into place by four positioning legs, buried down into the mud. On the back of the truck was a crane. The engine to the truck sputtered out loud revving noises, occasionally stopping to gasp and backfire.

The girl shielded her eyes from the sun, looking up and watching the crane lift a rusty metal cage off of the ground. The cage started to spin like a bowling pin that cannot decide whether it wants to fall over or to stay aright. Up in the air, black fingers clenched the bars of the cage tightly.

“Kimba,” the girl cried out to the cage above her.

The little girl heard a rustling in the bushes near her. The truck sputtered out another loud back-fire. Now the bushes began to shake violently.

“Seeta?” the little girl asked, surprised. “Is it you?”

Chapter 8

The evening sky was clear and the air was cool. Chase was lying on his back atop a weatherworn lounge chair on the roof of the bar. He looked up at the stars, and listened to the wind chimes dangling beside the fairy-lights, dreamy and peaceful.

He took a lengthy drink of Pernod, feeling the cold ice cubes on his upper lip. The weeds had taken over the planter boxes. They were in various stages of dying, and rustled occasionally when a wind would arise.

He reached over and placed his phone on the table. Chase's thoughts kept falling about in no certain order, stacking up in messy piles.

Chase took another drink, down to the bottom, before topping his glass off. The ice cubes were now skinny and pointed on the ends.

Chase peered out over the roof of the bar and could see the skyline of the city in the distance, and the red brake lights of cars crossing the bridge into downtown. Below the bridge, set up by the river was a street festival. Chase watched the Ferris wheel go around in circles. He took another drink. The ice had now melted away and the glass was sweaty.

I am alone in the world now. I am connected to no one, and perhaps this is how it shall always be.

Chase listened to the music from the bar below, and to the laughter. None of it meant anything to him any longer. Chase downed his drink, and reached for the bottle to top it off. The laughter from the bar came out in bursts and grated on him like biting down on aluminum foil.

“So pointless,” he muttered. Chase downed the full glass in one guzzle, and leaned back in his chair.

Chase's eyes started to lose focus. The red brake lights ran into one another in a haze, and blurred into the lights of the city. The revolutions of the Ferris wheel appeared crooked and out of sync.

“Pointless.”

Chase pulled up his phone and started to search. His fingers were sluggish and uncooperative, and he had a hard time typing, and then re-typing in the search line. His mind was mixed up.

Finally, he found what he was looking for and dialed the number. He sat up and cleared his throat as the woman on the other end of the phone answered. He slurred to her when he spoke. Chase slid the phone in his pocket and stood up after he had disconnected the call.

The roof, in its condition, occurred to him now, as if for the first time. He felt like a person who just got a surprise call from their parents saying they are in town on a last minute meeting, and stopping by in five minutes. His first thought

was to grab the pruning shears and start cutting back weeds, maybe refill the fountain before his guest arrived.

Instead, Chase walked over to the ledge of the roof and descended the metal staircase. With some stumbling effort, he made his way to the mirror, and began to wash his face. He changed into a black T-shirt, but did not notice that it was inside out. Chase took a pen and paper and jotted down a note, and went down into the bar.

To his surprise, the bar was much busier than he had expected. Chase got Kathryn's attention. She slid two beers across the bar to a longtime patron they called Salty Dog. He was an ex-judge, well-traveled, knew no enemies, and had the best stories in the entire bar. Salty Dog took the beers, before Kathryn came over to Chase.

"Can we talk?" she asked, sort of loud and close because of the music.

Chase shook his head. “Here,” he said, handing her the note. His tongue felt thick as he said this.

Kathryn took the note and opened it. After she read it, she looked up, but Chase was already half-way up the stairs.

“Chase!” Kathryn called out to him above the music. “Can we talk?” He did not stop.

Chase checked the mirror one last time before climbing to the roof. He tried to catch his breath after he had slid back into his lounge chair. The stars above him were now fuzzy and out of focus. He took the neck of the Pernod bottle and swished down a drink, and a few seconds later, another.

Chase was startled out of sleep by the sound of stiletto heels clicking upon the roof. Standing before him was a slender girl with black, shiny skin wearing a leather vest and a short red skirt.

“Hello, sleepy,” she said, sitting down in the lounge chair beside him. Chase sat up and looked all around. For a second, his head was foggy and he couldn’t remember exactly where he was. Then he looked back at her. She had copper eyes and glossy lips. Chase felt woozy.

“You okay?” she asked.

Chase scratched his head. Like a weird dream, it all came back to him. All of the sudden, this was a terrible idea. “Uh . . . yeah,” he said, smacking his lips together and tasting the stale licorice taste in his mouth.

The girl reached down and took the mostly empty bottle of Pernod and brought it to her lips. He tried to collect his thoughts.

“Yes?” she asked, unbuttoning the top button of her vest. Chase wanted to stop her. Instead, he watched her. Her fingers worked the buttons effortlessly, and within seconds, her vest was completely opened. She leaned back on her hands, letting the vest open up around her unnaturally

large breasts. “You like?” she asked. His eyes were transfixed on them. He could make out the edges of the implants around one of the breasts. “Do you talk?” she asked, laughing.

Chase cleared his throat. “Here’s the thing,” he started. He wanted to finish his thought, but he didn’t. Instead, he reached forward and grabbed one of her breasts, the way a blind person would reach out to feel the face of someone they just met.

He pulled away, and grabbed the bottle again, but she stopped him. She leaned over and pressed her lips up against his. Her lip gloss tasted like artificial strawberry. She took his hand and placed it back on her breast, and she squeezed the outside of his hand for him, teaching him.

She reached down for his zipper, and he froze. Before he knew it, she was in. He pulled back, tense. He looked into her copper eyes. His stomach was sinking.

“Is he not interested?” she asked, just above a whisper.

“I don’t want to do this,” Chase said. He pulled her hand out, stood up, and began digging in his pockets. He pulled a handful of bills out and extended them toward her. “I’m sorry,” he said. “This was a mistake.”

The girl started buttoning her vest. “You’re an odd cat,” she said. “Anybody ever tell you that?”

“I’m sorry. This was awkward.”

The girl stood and reached for the bills in his outstretched hand. She took them, but did not release his hand. She pulled it closer and began to inspect it. She traced a line in his palm with her long painted fingernail.

“I’m not the kind of guys who does this,” he said, but she did not reply. She continued to trace lines in his hand. “I mean, not that there is

anything wrong with it . . . I mean, with what you do . . . you know. It's just that I'm not exactly that kind of guy."

"There are two times in your life when you could die," she said. "You already passed one of them."

Chase waited for her to continue but she didn't. Chase wasn't sure if he was supposed to respond. Finally, "I was hit by a car once when I was in grad school. I was on a run." She didn't reply. He continued, "I was in a coma for two days." She still did not reply. "They were test driving the car."

"You have a destiny line," she said.

"Is that good?"

"It is pulling away from your lifeline," she said.

“Is that bad?”

She took the bills he had given her and placed them back in the palm of his hand. “Who knows?” she said.

“No . . . you take the money,” he said, looking at the ground.

“You will need it,” she said, turning and walking away

Chase watched the girl as she walked away, before dropping back into the lounge chair, and shoving the bills back in his pocket. He opened his palm, and tried to read the lines.

Chapter 9

“This seat still taken?” Kathryn asked all at once.

“Shit,” he said, pulling his palm away quickly from his face. “You scared me.”

Kathryn had two beers in her hand, and handed one over to him. An uneasy silence settled between them. Chase was the first to lie back in his lounge chair. Then Kathryn followed. They both sipped their beers, listening. The city had begun to quiet down now.

“I wasn’t gonna let her up on the roof,” Kathryn finally said. Chase shook his head. “But you’re not said . . .”

“I know,” he cut her off. “It’s okay. It was stupid.” He hated saying this out loud.

“Maggie called me.”

“Yeah?”

“She asked if I’d come check on you.”

Chase looked at her, but did not reply.

Kathryn had long white bangs that framed her face. The rest of her hair was black like ink, and porcupine short, and gelled stiff. She had a tiny silver hoop in her right eyebrow, and wore cobalt blue contacts.

Kathryn’s outfits were, more or less, a daily variation on a single theme: Graphic t-shirt with the sleeves cut off, jeans with holes throughout, and rows and rows of bangles and bracelets and strands of bandana wrapped around both wrists. This uniform showed off her sun tattoo on her right shoulder and her moon tattoo on the left.

One time when they were both way too drunk, Chase asked Kathryn why in the world people like her never saw the irony in claiming to be anarchists and gothic anti-socials, but in reality, they all bought their clothes at the same Hot Topic in the mall. She pursed her lips and started to refute it, but he butted in, “But your type are like that, aren’t they? You trash the Twinkies in Forever 21, while you shop at the store right next to them.” Chase started laughing loudly in contempt.

Without warning, Kathryn slapped him. She slapped him hard. Then she threw her head back and imitated his laugh, with matching contempt. That had been a few years ago. They never really drank at the bar much together anymore.

In the bar’s heyday, she had been the main attraction. Everyone loved Kathryn because they wanted her. Her look was dated, true. But she had been pressed up against so many dark corners of this bar, by both men and women, that no one cared to count any longer. However, over time, both Sappho’s and Kathryn’s heat had cooled in equal measures. She was no longer the girl you had to have at the end of the night, but rather the girl you wanted to get your back when the chips were down.

Kathryn was faithful. She remained in spite of the losses. These days, she was all things: bartender, server, bus-girl, bar-back, security, cleaning crew. Only she and Jimmy remained from the original crew.

“Hey,” she finally said. “I just want to say . . . it was a totally shitty thing to not ask you to go with us to see the film.”

“I know,” he said, not looking at her.

“It wasn’t on purpose . . . I promise you that . . . but it was a dick thing to do.”

“I told you guys about it. You think I didn’t want to see it?”

“I know,” Kathryn said. “It just came up all at once. The plans were so spontaneous. But I should have thought to ask you.”

A car horn honked in the distance. Both of them sipped their beers.

“I don’t know what happened to us,” Chase said.

“I don’t think any of us have figured out where we all fit in here anymore .
. . Even you.”

“My life is really weird right now.”

“Wanna talk about it?”

“I doubt it,” he said.

The night had gone cold. Kathryn pulled her hoody over her head, and turned up her bottle.

“One time,” he said, after finishing his beer and setting it on the ground beside him, “when I was in undergraduate at Emory . . . I was at this club with some of my friends. It was the early nineties and X was a big deal back then. But at the time, I hadn’t tried it yet. I really liked this girl I was with, and she said I should try it.”

“So of course you did,” Kathryn said.

“It was me and her and two of her friends and this buddy I worked with at the time, and we all did it. I remember thinking I wish we could ditch the group. I just wanted to be with her. You know?”

“Yeah.”

“Then of course the X kicks in and I’m sort of falling crazy in love with this girl. I don’t remember her name now. Isn’t that stupid?” Chase paused, and looked like he was trying to remember her name. “So I ask her

if she wants to leave the dance floor and go out to this courtyard that the club had. Nice open-air courtyard with this huge fountain in the middle. I'm talking one of those big Italian fountains. So we go out there and we're talking and all I can do is look at her lips and think, I really, really, really want to kiss this girl."

"Did you?"

"That's the thing . . . right when I was about to lean in, this group of people start saying, 'Do it. Do it.' And I look at them, thinking they are talking to me. Like they can read my mind or something. X is weird that way, you know?"

"Yeah."

"But they weren't talking to me. They were talking to some guy who had just stood up on the edge of the fountain."

"Why?"

“I don’t know. I look over and this guy is just standing on the edge of the fountain with his eyes closed. And I’m just watching this guy wondering what in the world he’s doing. Then I’m all intrigued. I didn’t know what he’s concentrating on, or what he’s about to do, but I find myself rooting for this guy. He was like in this trance or something. I was thinking . . . like . . . is this guy about to levitate or walk on water or something? He stood so still and seemed to emit . . something. It was so pure. He was so beautiful there.” Chase shook his head from side-to-side. “He was like a matador before he dies or something.”

“What did he do?”

“He jumped in the fountain.”

“Jumped in the fountain? What happened?”

“His feet hit the bottom . . . it was only a foot or so deep. Then he fell back over the edge of the fountain . . . just fell on the courtyard right next to the fountain.”

“Was he hurt?”

Chase ignored her. “He just laid there . . . I wanted him to make it so badly. I know it’s dumb. But I was rooting for that guy. He seemed so certain.” Neither one said a word. “He seemed so cock-sure of himself. I’ve never felt that way . . . I’ve never felt that certain about anything.”

Chapter 10

The morning sun was obscured by a heavy fog that rolled in overnight. Chase had slept poorly. He was stiff. He was irritable.

Sappho's did not open until five on Sundays. The bar was perfectly quiet downstairs, and he sat up on his futon feeling gross and hung-over. Camper was lying on her side with one paw covering her eyes.

With effort, Chase managed to make his way through his morning routine, before descending the stairs to prepare the bar to be opened. Camper followed and jumped up on the bar. She ran one paw over and around the top of her right ear and brought it to her mouth to lick clean. She did this over and over again.

Chase turned on the lights and went through the swinging doors that led to the kitchen. He moved through the kitchen, turning on the water supply valve to the ice machine, flipping on the switch to the coffee maker,

then stopping to count the loaves of bread. Before he left the kitchen, he peaked into the trash to see that it had been emptied from the night before.

Sappho's was not a large bar. The ceiling had been covered in tin tiles, so that the S's in conversations lingered in the room longer than they should have. Three antique chandeliers hung from the tin roof, and the walls were covered in dark wine-colored wallpaper with a vintage design. Sappho's had a modest stage for live music, but they had not booked a band in years.

Chase had started to count out the register, when a canary yellow Hummer drove up through the fog, and parked in front of Sappho's. Printed on the hood of the Hummer, and on both doors was a logo: "Moxie Brew Co." A squat man emerged from the driver's side. He had a belly like the Buddha (not the cool skinny Buddha), and had thick, blue-black hair, curly like a sheep.

The man walked into the bar. "Dude."

"What's up, Stanley?" Chase said.

“Dude, you have got to get me a beer. My head is killing me,” he said running both hands up into the sides of his bushy hair. “No, you know what? I’ll get it. That was rude. I can see you are busy, and that was rude.” Stanley walked behind the bar.

“Okay . . . help yourself. Don’t mind me.”

“I just drove twelve hours to get here,” Stanley said.

Stanley grabbed a Red Stripe, popped the cap, and sat at the bar. Stanley used to be their beer rep for years. Now he owned his own small brewery.

“From where?”

“We sponsored that bluegrass festival in Florence.”

“How was it?”

“In the middle of nowhere. I think I took too many No-Doz on the drive here. My head is pounding.” Stanley turned up the beer, and then looked at Chase. “That is like the lamest T-shirt I’ve ever seen, Dude,” he said, pointing to Chase’s shirt, a vintage “Coke Adds Life”. “I know you’re terrified of women but god bless. . .”

“I’m not terrified of women . . .”

“Dude . . . you own a Lesbian bar and wear a T-shirt that smells like feet . . . you are definitely afraid of women.”

Chase walked around the bar with a bucket of ice. He knew it would be pointless to argue.

“I tried to call you a couple of times yesterday,” Stanley said.

“There’s no reception in those mountains.”

Chase dumped the ice over the quick grab bin and turned to Stanley.

“That was you?”

“Yeah. I couldn’t get through. Thought I’d just swing by this morning when I got back in town.”

“I thought I heard you say accident,” Chase said.

“Yeah. There was an accident.”

“What happened?”

“Do you remember the party I threw five years ago when I was repping for Heineken?”

“The one at the Indigo?”

“Yep. Do you remember that girl I introduced you to?”

“Shelby?”

“Dude, you remember her name?”

“Yeah . . . I . . . Yeah.” Chase moved back around the bar and set the bucket down.

“That girl’s in a coma, dude.”

“What?” Chase said, all the air rushing out of him. “What happened?”

“Seriously, dude. Get this. Her and her husband have been in India all summer touring the countryside on a motorcycle. And three weeks ago, they were in a wreck. I’m talking bad.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah, dude. She’s sort of trapped there, too.”

“What do you mean?”

“They’re stuck in this really small Indian hospital in the middle of nowhere, and it’s gonna cost something crazy, like \$150,000 to get them home. I don’t think she’s gonna make it.”

“How’d you hear about this?”

“I found out from a guy I know at the bluegrass festival.”

“Are you serious?”

“Dead serious. Her friends set up a website. It’s like . . . www.bringshelbyhome or bringshelbystartinghome. I can’t remember. Look it up.”

“I will.”

“It’s crazy,” Stanley said, getting up. “Good lord, I gotta piss.” Stanley walked away from the bar toward the restroom.

Chase could see Shelby’s face in his mind’s eye. Everything about that night at the Indigo had been, well, magic. Truth be told, it was the night everything started to change.

He remembered standing outside the Indigo after the night was over. The night sky had started to turn purple, and it was cold outside, the end of November. *The sun will rise soon*, he thought to himself. *I wish it would hold off a little while longer.* Chase stood across the parking lot and watched as Shelby leaned into the cab, giving instructions. She turned to him and waved. They had already said good-bye. He watched her open the door to the cab, and then it occurred to him what he should do. Chase ran across the parking lot to try to catch her before she drove off. He was shouting, waving his arms. The cab started to pull away.

“Wait!” he shouted again.

Brake lights came on. Chase ran up to the back door of the cab and swung it open, breathless. Shelby had a look of surprise on her face. “What are you doing?” she asked.

“Here,” he said, panting. “I want *you* to have it.”

Chase handed her the bracelet. Shelby took it carefully, rubbing her fingers along the surface.

“Really?” she asked quietly.

“Yeah,” he said, trying to catch his breath.

“I don’t know what to say. That’s one of the nicest things anyone has ever done for me.”

“That’s really sad,” he said. “You should keep that one to yourself.” He smiled at her.

She reached up and took his arm. “Thank you. I mean, really thank you. You don’t know how much this means to me at this point in my life.”

“It’s nothing.”

Neither knew what to say. They fumbled through an awkward hug, before the taxi pulled away. Chase remembered standing alone for quite some time, shivering, and watching the spot where the taxi had disappeared.

“I am so tired,” Stanley said when he returned. He finished off his Red Stripe. “I have got to get some sleep.”

“I’m gonna look up that website.”

“That sounds good. I’ll call you if I hear anything new.”

“Do,” Chase said. Stanley stepped away from the bar.

“I am so tired, dude.”

“Go sleep.”

“Yep,” Stanley said, turning and walking out of the bar and back to his Hummer.

The chimes above the door jingled as he left the bar. Chase minimized the screen on the register and pulled up the search engine. “Shelby Starling” brought up quite a number of hits, including www.bringshelbystarlinghome.org. Chase followed the link.

This site is dedicated to bringing Dan and Shelby Starling home safely from India. On August 10th, while driving their motorcycle outside of Pondicherry, India, a tour bus travelled across the centerline and struck their motorcycle.”

“Why does that sound familiar?” he muttered, rubbing his forehead to try and make his hangover go away.

Information has been slow in coming. What we do know is that she has been in a coma since the accident, and that she is in small Indian clinic outside Pondicherry. Her husband Dan sustained non-life-threatening injuries, and is expected to make a full recovery. From what we gather, this facility does not have a lab or a radiology department. I think at best the facility she is in is more like a walk-in clinic of sorts. The facility has said over and over that they are not really set up for her type of condition and will need money to get her transported to a better facility. Columbia University has agreed to treat her for free if she can be transported. A medical plane is required that is equipped to deal with Level I trauma, and it has to be staffed with a nurse and an emergency physician. The cost associated with this is a little over \$100,000.

His mind drifted. The Heineken party that night at the Indigo was to showcase the launching of a new product line. Stanley had organized it. Everyone in the industry was there that night: bar owners, bar managers, bar tenders, servers, you name it.

Maggie couldn't come to the party that night, and Chase (who wasn't sure whether he wanted to go to the party without Maggie) was running late. The party was held in an old train depot that had been converted into a hotel. The hotel did not have many rooms, but it had an expensive restaurant, a trendy bar, and a magnificent, gilded ballroom.

Chase was looking down at his watch, restless, bored numb, and about to leave the party, when he spotted Stanley talking to a woman next to an ice sculpture.

Chase's first thought was that she must be a dancer. Shelby had an effortless sense of motion. He watched the way she laughed, and the way she lightly touched Stanley's arm when she spoke. Even the way she nodded to let you know she was listening seemed poetic somehow. All of it was pure grace, pure fluid motion. Ballerina-esque. When she burst out into laughter, he laughed also, even though he was out of earshot of what they were laughing at.

Then all at once, she looked up at him. She was across the room, but their eyes locked. He was surprised. He felt caught in the act. People moved obliviously between them, but they did not look away from one another.

The woman had platinum white hair, blown back in a faux-hawk, and she wore skinny jeans with a pair of bright red Chuck Taylors, and a scarf that wrapped twice around her neck. The scarf fell casually around the V neck of her long-sleeved white t-shirt.

Chase took his drink from the top of the bar and drank in down in one long smooth gulp as he watched Stanley lead her over to where he stood.

Her skin was smooth like the curved edge of an unused bar of soap, and her hair was textured and shiny. The blood red lipstick tied in with the shoes, but somehow worked for her. Everything worked for her. She exuded life. She was so effortlessly put together.

“Chase,” Stanley said, “I want you to meet Shelby Starling. We went to college together.”

“Very nice to meet you,” he said, taking her hand.

“This is Chase Komley,” Stanley continued, “He owns Sappho’s. It’s a bar on the East Nasty side.”

“I love your hair,” she said, still shaking his hand.

“Yeah?”

“It’s like . . . I don’t know. It’s like you’re a corporal from World War I or something.”

Stanley stepped back.

“I spent this entire fall reading Hemmingway. I just finished *Farewell To Arms*, and I guess I wanted to be . . . I don’t know.”

“Tenente Henry?”

Neither noticed that Stanley had walked away.

“Huh . . . yeah.”

“That is the only book I ever cried throughout the entire last chapter,” she said.

Chase cocked his head to the side. “Me too,” he finally said.

Chapter 11

The priest leaned back in his chair, facing the opened window to his chamber. The shutters were unfastened, and afternoon sounds drifted in from the street below. He exhaled his clove cigarette and watched the gray smoke float through the opened window. Outside, the palm trees framed the ornately tiled dome of the ashram which sat in the middle of the secluded provincial village.

Someone knocked on the door. The priest rose to the window, and waved away the smoke. "One moment," he said, calmly, in a deep voice, while smudging his clove cigarette out. He tucked the ashtray into his desk drawer, while he sprayed a clove scented room freshener around his desk.

The tall, thin man stopped momentarily in front of the mirror next to the bookshelves. He checked his teeth. The priest's hair had gone gray when he was 19. Two years later, most of it had fallen out. Now he had gray stubble around his bald spot which ran down his face to form his tightly clipped gray beard. The priest pushed his Buddy Holly glasses up on his nose, and turned to open the door.

Before him stood a young Indian girl wearing a floral dress with poufy arms. She had both hands behind her back, rocking from heel-to-toe. “Good morning, Dakini,” he said in a gentle voice.

“Oh, good morning to you as well, Father Chadwick.” The girl spoke in a thick accent that rose and fell on every syllable, and she spoke enthusiastically. “I trust you slept well last night?”

“Yes.”

“Did you enjoy your morning walk?”

“I did.”

“I would not like to bother you, but I feel I need to speak to you. Would this be possible?”

The priest studied the girl, and then turned to invite her in. “Of course, Dakini.”

The little girl walked directly into the room and climbed up into the soft leather chair across from his desk. Her feet did not touch the floor. The priest sank back into his chair, resting his elbows on the arm rests. He folded his hands in front of his black cassock.

“Let me say, your study always smells like very fine old spices.”

“Thank you, Dakini.”

“Okay . . . I will get to the point. I cannot tell you how sad I am that I will no longer be able to fulfill my post in the library. Something very bad has happened, and I will be going to Mercy Hospital in Chennai.”

“Oh? That is quite a distance from here.”

“That is true. But do not worry. I think Arvind Patel would be the best candidate to replace me at my post in the library. He has followed me around every day in the library for two years now, and I am certain he knows where all of the books go by now.”

“It is not the library I am worried about, Dakini. Do you realize that Chennai is over two hours away by train?”

“It is?”

“Yes.”

“That will be fine.”

“That is fine?”

“Yes. That is fine.”

“And why to do you need to go there?”

“It is my friend, Father. She had an accident and is at Mercy Hospital. I must go to her. I must help her.”

“And how do you plan to get to Chennai?”

“Sister Teresa can take me.” Dakini kicked her legs back and forth in her chair while the thatched blades of the ceiling fan above her spun slowly around.

“Tell me something, Dakini.”

“Anything.”

“How do you know this person?”

“We met in the market. She asked if I could take her and her husband to see Seeta. When I came back to the market, people were talking about a motorcycle wreck.”

“The Americans?”

“Yes. The Americans.”

“Why did she want you to take her to Seeta?”

“They had been to the Temple of Hanuman the day before and heard about Seeta there. I suppose they were curious.”

“Ah.”

“I told her I would take her, but they are hurt now.”

The priest hesitated, thinking. He swiveled in his chair to face the open shutters. Two men were yelling something unintelligible at one another in the street below. His Punjabi was not good. An emerald lizard moved suddenly across the windowsill and looked down at the study.

“How long would you want to stay in Chennai?” The priest did not turn around as he asked this.

“I want to stay until I am no longer needed.”

“Yes,” he said. The lizard scurried away. The priest turned. “I will make some phone calls,” he said at last.

Chapter 12

Chase stood on the roof of the bar. Camper was sitting on the ledge of the roof beside him. A heavy fog had settled in by the river. He could barely make out the lights of the street festival through the mist.

His mind went back to the Indigo.

“Where’s your wife?” she had asked him that night.

“My wife? Oh. Yeah, she’s back at Sappho’s. We have a loft above the bar, and she hired this lady Isabella to install a rooftop green space.”

“That sounds fantastic.”

“I think it will be. They have been working night and day together on this project for the last month.” Chase looked down at her hand. “Aren’t you a little young to be married?”

“I’m twenty four. That’s old enough, no?”

“How long have you been married?”

“Since pre-school.”

This caught him off guard. He laughed. “I see. You must be from the south.”

“Actually we’ve been married two years. We met the first day of college.”

“Ah . . . you guys are *that* couple.”

“Something like that.”

“Where is he?”

“Home. He’s not well this evening.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“How did you and your wife meet?”

“Uh . . . okay.” Chase looked from Shelby, over to the barman. “Do you want a drink?” he asked her.

“You have no idea,” she replied with a smile.

Chase went back down into his apartment and made a sandwich. He went over to his laptop while he ate the sandwich. Chase went back to www.bringshelbystarlinghome.org. No new updates. Several people had posted on the blog. He sat for some time and read what people had posted.

Sending you love and energy, Shelby. I know you are strong and that you will pull through this. You have inspired so many of us, and we will do everything in our power to bring you home – Darcy

Down below this was a link to a benefit concert to be held near the Golden Gate Bridge to raise funds to help bring her home. An art gallery in South Chicago was holding an auction to help raise funds as well. In the right hand corner of the site was a dollar amount. When he logged on earlier, the total was \$90,278. Now the total was \$89,919.

Chase sent an e-mail to the contact link, trying to get more information. From there, he followed several other links and found that she had a Facebook page and a fan website. Chase sat for a couple of hours, reading everything he could find.

His e-mail icon lit up. Chase opened the e-mail and found that he had a reply from his earlier e-mail. He read the e-mail twice, thinking about what to do. Most of the information he already knew, but for the first time, he finally had a phone number. Chase reached for his phone and dialed the number, listening to the line crack and hiss, before ringing.

After the third ring, someone answered. The voice sounded hopelessly far away, and he could not understand what she was saying.

“Hello?” he said loudly. “Hello, can you hear me? Do you speak English?”

The woman responded, but Chase did not understand her.

“Do you speak English? I’m calling about Shelby Starling.”

“Shelby Starling,” the woman said. Shelby’s name sounded different under the influence of such a heavy accent.

“Yes. Yes. Shelby Starling. Does anyone speak English?”

The phone went silent. He wasn’t sure if the connection was lost. Moments later, a man’s voice came over the line. “Hello?”

“Yes,” Chase said eagerly. “Hello. My name is Chase Komley and I am calling from America. Who am I speaking with?”

“I am Rajan Prakash.”

“Thank you, Mr. Prakash.”

“You can call me Rajan.”

“Okay, Rajan. I am calling to see about Shelby Starling, the American girl . . .”

“I know Mrs. Starling.”

The line popped loudly and went dead for a second. “Hello?”

“Yes. I am here.”

“Do you work in the clinic?” Chase asked.

“Yes. I am the janitor at the clinic.”

“I see,” Chase said, thinking. “Is there a doctor available?”

“No, sir. The doctor is only here once a week.”

“Is the nurse there?”

“I am the only one who speaks English here.”

“Okay. Is Shelby there at your clinic now?”

“No, sir. She is not.”

Chase’s stomach sank when he heard this. He sat for a second listening to the poor connection. “Where is she?”

“They transported her two days ago to a larger facility two hours north of here in Chennai.”

“They did?”

“Yes, sir. She opened –“ The line went blank.

“Hello? Are you there?” Silence. “Rajan? Are you there?” The phone line started beeping, and then went dead. “Damn it.”

Chase dialed the number again, but the phone line beeped the same way. A third time resulted in the same annoying beep. Chase replied to the e-mail and told them what had happened. He asked if they knew about the transfer, and where she was now.

Chase turned off his computer. The Tylenol was in the cabinet beside the spices. He took two pills and went and laid on the futon. Hearing

an Indian voice across the line from a place that sounded impossibly far away brought a whole new level of reality to this terrible thing. He felt overwhelmed and helpless. But mostly he felt sleepy.

Chapter 13

Her eyes were groggy. They felt glued shut. She fought to open them. Maybe it was simple curiosity. The noises around her were at once familiar and altogether foreign. There was a heavy mechanical breathing that sounded like Dark Vader lurking somewhere above her. There were voices speaking, but nothing they said made sense. There was a beeping sound beside her that sounded like the Atari game Pong from the 70's.

She could not remember what words were.

Her good eye peeked open, but everything was blurry. Washed out light. Dull earth tones. Something bright and colorful right in front of her. Something was in her throat.

“Oh my,” she heard, coming from the colorful thing in front of her. “I would like to tell you that this is such good news for you indeed.” She tried to open both eyes, but only one would cooperate. The bright light forced her eye to roll in the back of her head, and eventually close. “Do not

worry! I am here to help you. I will get you help. You are my friend and I will help you.”

She closed her eyes, and listened to feet shuffling away. All at once, she slipped out of consciousness.

Chapter 14

Chase stood at the windows after his long nap. The afternoon was nudging in, and the fog had lifted. Chase put on a hoody. He laced up his shoes and stepped out of the bar.

I will not work tonight, he thought. No. I will go for a walk instead. No, not that either. I will walk to the street festival. Yes.

The air was cool as he strolled away from the bar, and the shadows were getting longer. Sappho's sat in a historic district. All of the houses had been built between 1890 and 1930. The sidewalks were made of cobblestones, and ran along both sides of the streets. The streets were divided by planted medians with large old oak trees and elms trees and a few tulip poplars. The afternoon was quiet. The bridge to downtown was a little less than a mile away.

The bartender had brought Shelby and Chase a couple of drinks that night, and Chase opened a tab. They both took a drink at the same time.

“Okay,” he said. “Her name is Maggie. We met when I was in engineering school.”

“You’re an engineer?”

“Uh, well, sort of. I mean, I have the degree, but it isn’t what I do.”

“Okay, go on.”

Chase took another drink before he continued. “We met at an airport. I was flying to Vanderbilt to start the engineering program there, and she was flying back home from a marathon she had just finished in Sicily.”

“Sicily?”

“Yeah, she came in third place for females. She’s fast. But she missed her flight . . . “

“So she’s fast. Just not fast enough to catch her flight?”

“Yeah, that sounds about right.”

“So . . . you just, what? Get married right there in the airport?”

“No, she was heading back to Oregon, and I was heading to Nashville, but I managed to talk her into coming to Nashville with me.”

“Wow . . . how romantic. She just ditched her life?”

“Not really. She was already on a year-long sabbatical from being a chef. She wanted to see if she could make a serious go at competitive running. So I convinced her she could do that anywhere on the planet. So why not Nashville?”

“So why not Nashville?” she repeated.

“Yep,” he said. They both drank.

“So tell me, how does an engineer open a bar?” Shelby said. “Tell me everything. What, why, how?”

Chase started to laugh. “Geesh. Ok.” He went for his glass but it was empty. So was hers. “Do you want another?”

“Definitely.”

The bartender returned with two more drinks, and two shots of Grappa. “Here’s the ten second summary. Ready?” he said after they slammed the shot. Shelby nodded. “Killed myself getting through engineering school. Got out. Got a big salary, high profile job with a consulting firm. Got a year into it. And it’s like, something didn’t feel right. I was restless. I felt like I’d sacrificed so much of my life to become an engineer . . . but it just didn’t feel right. So . . . Maggie and I started to try to shake things up a bit in our life. We started going out more. I thought maybe we had just been cooped up too long. Maybe getting out would fix things. We fell in with a new group of people. We all went out every weekend. And it was like, every week I was looking around at these bars we were going to, and I felt like I could do better. So . . . finally I thought, I’m gonna open a bar.”

“Just like that? You ditched it all to start completely over?” she asked, staring hard at him.

“I did. All in. Go big or go home, right?” he asked. “Now it’s been a little over five years since we opened it, and it’s doing great. We just

expanded, and I like I said, we're adding a green space on the roof. Life is working itself out here.”

They both downed their drinks. “That’s really, really, really fucking cool,” she finally said.

Chase wandered into the street festival. A stage was set up on the river and a band from the nineties was playing. The grassy knoll was sprinkled with a few hundred people, spread out on blankets. Some kids chased each other, while a dog watched. Chase stood with his hands in his pockets and listened. The band was playing *Sex And Candy*. Most of the crowd was singing along.

I wonder what those guys do for a living now, he thought. What would it be like to be visible to the whole world? What would it be like to return to invisibility?

Shelby and Chase sat at the bar for hours that night. All thoughts of leaving had vanished, just like all of the guests, one-by-one.

“Me?” he asked, taking a drink. “I’d have to think about that . . . wait. I got it. I passed out in health class my senior year in undergraduate when we talked about STD’s.” Shelby had started to drink, and spit it out as she laughed. He laughed at her. “Whoa, kiddo, you might have to count that as one for your list.”

She was still laughing, grabbing a napkin and whipping the bar down. “That was classy,” she said, smiling. Chase signaled for more drinks.

“The professor – she’s old as dirt – and she starts talking about a painful discharge when you urinate. . . and bam! Lights out. When I came to, all of the desks had been scooted away from me, and the professor is

holding my head to the desk. And she's asking me, 'Did you eat this morning?'
But she's asking me all loud and slow like I don't understand the language."

Shelby covered her face with both hands and kept laughing. "Holy shit, I
would have died."

"I fell right into the desk in front of me. I cut my head open."

"Oh, wait. That's not funny anymore."

"That's how I got this scar," he said, taking her hand to feel above his
eyebrow. Her hands smelled like lavender. "They stole my pen."

"What?" she asked, rubbing the scar one last time before taking her drink.

"Yeah, when I finally got up to leave the class, I looked for my pen but it
was gone. They stole my pen."

“Who did?”

“I have no idea. I never understood what type of person steals a pen from a man that’s passed out.”

“Did you ever get it back?”

“Nope. Went straight to the registrar’s office and dropped the class.”

“You dropped it?”

“Who could possibly go back and face the class after that? I’d walk in all like, ‘Uh . . . yeah, sorry I got all weird about the wiener discharge’.”

They both laughed again. “Your turn.”

“Let’s see,” she said, tapping the side of her cheek with one finger over and over again. “What is my most embarrassing sober moment? Got it. Two years ago at my graduation ceremony we were all in the practice gym before the ceremony, lining up. We hadn’t put our caps and gowns on yet. And I was walking around talking to everyone. People I didn’t even know. I was saying stupid shit, like , ‘Hell of a ride’ to perfect strangers. I told this one cute guy’s parents: ‘Our big journey ends here tonight.’ I was telling jokes. And I am not a joke teller. I was working the crowd, I’m here to tell you. But when I went to put my cap and gown on, I noticed that I never cut the tag off of my dress. It was dangling there by my side the whole time!”

He laughed at her. Mostly he studied the way she laughed. “Two more Grappas down here,” he called out to the bartender.

Chapter 15

Dusk was starting to settle into the street festival. Chase walked away from the river stage once the band had stopped playing. He stood in line at a concession stand next to the carnival rides. AC/DC's *Back In Black* blared from a stand of speakers set up at the Orbiter. Kids stood in line, watching it tilt up and then back down, spinning in a grand circle, while all of the individual seats spun around one another in their own little orbits.

“Give me an Amstel,” he told the lady in the concession stand.

“Don't got it,” she said, scratching her hair through a hair net. “Bud Light, Bud, Miller Light, and PBR.”

“I'll take a PBR.”

“Tall one or a short'en?”

“Tall . . . wait, make that two. I’ll get one for my friend.”

The foam ran over the rims of both plastic cups and down her greased-stained fingers as she pushed them across the counter. Chase paid the lady, and immediately downed one of the two beers in three long gulps. The plastic cup dropped into the trash as Chase blew out all of the carbonation. He walked past the Orbiter, and the game stands, and got in line at the Ferris wheel.

Blue and white lights ran in alternating blinking patterns around both sides of the giant wheel, and the wheel spun slowly, making a clicking sound from time-to-time. Chase gave a ticket to the carny, and climbed into his seat, alone. The safety-bar clanked in place, and the wheel moved slightly forward and stopped for the next two people to board.

With each passenger, Chase rose higher and higher, until he was at the top, staring out across the river to the bright city lights that felt so close now. Chase took another long gulp of his beer.

“Wow,” Shelby had said. “That is so beautiful.” Chase had taken his coat jacket off and placed it on the back of his barstool. Once he had rolled up both sleeves, Shelby immediately grabbed his wrist and pulled it close to inspect it.

“Oh . . . yeah. That’s my elephant bracelet. I’ve worn that for almost eleven years now.” Both of them looked at the bracelet. The silver bracelet was less than an inch wide, and had nine elephants, nose-to-tail, following one another around his wrist. “It’s the only piece of jewelry that I never take off.”

“Where did you get it?”

“It was a gift. It’s from India.”

“You went to India?” she asked, tracing her finger over each elephant.

“No. I want to go. I will go someday. Have you?”

“No. I want to go too. But I don’t think India is the kind of place you can go visit. I want to go do an immersion there. Like three or four months.” She turned the bracelet over to look at the back. “I would walk out of this bar right now and go to India.”

“Exactly. Me too.”

Neither spoke for a while. “Huh,” she said finally, releasing his wrist.

“What?”

“India is following me today.”

“How so?”

“Well . . . of course the Mumbai attacks today.”

“What are you talking about?” he asked.

“You didn’t hear? There was a terrorist attack in Mumbai today.”

“Like a bombing?”

“Like men went through the city like Columbine, just shooting and attacking people. Over 150 are dead so far. They attacked a hospital for women and children. They went into one of the old colonial hotels and killed maids, guests, anyone they could find.”

“That’s horrible.”

“I know. It is,” she said, taking her glass and sipping. “And now this is the second time India has come to me today. I have to watch for the third.”

“What does that mean?”

“Synchronicity.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know when something will keep coming across your path from completely different random places?”

“I guess, yeah.”

“I used to be completely obsessed with it. I wanted it to guide my life.”

“Synchronicity?”

“Yeah.”

“How?” he asked.

“Okay, so like one time I was following a fire engine across town and I happened to notice that it was engine number 451. Then I stopped at a bookstore that afternoon and *Fahrenheit 451* was on the very first end cap that I came to. So I bought it and read it.”

Chase thought about this for a second. “Like you took that to mean that you were supposed to read that book?”

“Yeah. It’s like a guiding force, I guess.”

“Does that work for you?”

“Well . . . yes and no. I got a little nutty with it for a while. I used to look for it in everything. Eventually, I came to realize that it isn’t a force that can be abused. Now I just take it as a wink from the Universe.”

“What does that mean?”

“Just an affirmation that I am right where I am supposed to be. That is,” she said, taking her drink and swigging it down to the bottom. “That is unless you have three things cross your path.”

“Then what?”

“Then you listen. Then the Universe is trying to get your attention.”

“Interesting,” he said.

“I could go for another drink,” she said.

“I like the way you think.”

Chase rode the Ferris wheel twice in a row while he finished his beer. At last, he decided to walk home. As he passed the carnival games, Chase noticed something in one of the game stands. One of the prizes was a stuffed gorilla. He thought about how he stood in the rain with Kimba, before the call came.

Chase wandered over to the booth. To win the game, a player had to toss a ring successfully on one of the milk bottles. A few bucks would

get you three tries. No one was playing, and the lanky teen who was supposed to be drawing in players, was instead watching the television sitting on the stool beside him. Chase stood for a moment, looking at the gorilla.

I will let the rings decide, he thought to himself. Yes. The rings will decide. No. That is childish. Maybe I should not test things I do not understand, or do not even believe in. Yes. I will let the rings decide.

“I’ll play,” he told the kid, who did not turn around all at once.

The kid took Chase’s money but did not greet him or even speak to him whatsoever. He kept glancing over his shoulder to the television as he handed Chase the three rings. Chase held all three red rings, twisting them around in his hands.

“Have you seen this?” the kid finally asked, breaking Chase’s intentions.

Chase looked at the television, and saw a woman with dreadlocks speaking to an interviewer. She had skin like caramel. The caption at the bottom read: “Dr. Naomi Violet: ‘Gorilla tries to escape zoo, dies’.”

“Can you turn that up?” Chase asked.

“It appears to be an attempt to leave her enclosure,” the woman said. “But I can confirm that Kimba died immediately from injuries she sustained from the fall into her ravine. I will be returning her remains to Pondicherry, India tomorrow so that she can be buried at her home . . .”

The woman continued to speak, but Chase’s mind wandered. *Pondicherry*. In that instant, he could see Kimba in the rain. He remembered now what the plaque said: Pondicherry.

Chase looked at the three rings one more time, before setting them on the counter, and walking away from the booth, and through the tree-lined streets back toward Sappho’s.

“Find her,” he muttered to himself.

Chapter 16

Camper crawled up on Chase's chest and began to meow. Chase sucked in a quick breath and sat up in bed, rubbing his eyes. Camper eased up beside him, watching him. Chase stretched and pulled Camper in his lap. He leaned down to kiss her tiny black head. He felt surprisingly good considering he had not slept well. He had been all brain, all night.

In one fluid motion, Chase poured food into Camper's bowl, and emptied her kitty litter box. He filled the sink by the tub with steaming hot water. Grabbing an old Thelonius Monk album, Chase put it on the turntable and shaved to the music. When he had finished, he opened up the windows to his apartment and felt a morning breeze rolling across his smooth face. The curtains moved slightly in the breezes as if quiet whispers were moving through them.

Chase slid on a pair of shorts and laced up his Mizuno's. Digging in a drawer, he pulled out a shirt that he had bought in Barcelona which read "Correr Rapido". Camper had finished eating, and now sat on the lid to the record player, looking back and forth between the spinning album and

Chase. Dressed now, Chase stood before the open windows and stretched up into the air. Bending over slowly, he tried to grab the back of his ankles and pull his head to his knees, but the pain was immense, white hot. He could barely touch his toes.

“Jesus,” he muttered. “Really?”

Camper jumped down off the turntable and followed Chase down the stairs. Camper brushed up against his leg as he opened the beer cooler and pulled out a bottled water.

Camper tried again to get his attention. Chase did not notice this as he chugged the water, and headed out the door. He was locking the door, when he heard a voice.

“Good morning,” Kathryn said, sounding less like a greeting and more like a question. He nearly jumped.

“Oh!” he said. “Oh, hey, yeah.”

“I’m sorry,” she repeated.

“It’s fine,” he said, shaking his right leg to loosen it up, then his left.

“I just didn’t see you there.”

“What are you doing?” she asked, looking at him hard, maybe with a hint of suspicion. She tucked one of her blonde bangs behind her ears and crossed her arms over her chest.

“I’m gonna go for a run.”

“Why are you running?”

“Why does anyone run?”

“You haven’t run in years.” Neither said a word for a second.

“Yeah. I know.”

“Well . . . okay . . . have a good run.”

“Okay,” Chase said, turning and running away from the bar, and away from Kathryn.

Kathryn stood for a second and watched, listening to his feet steadily slap the pavement, sounding like a bird when it first flaps its wings to take flight.

Chase could not believe the extent to which his breath was gone. The breathing burned in the back of his throat and his breaths were gaspy. Nothing about his motion was graceful or fluid. He was not even a mile into the run when he hit the bridge that crossed over into the city. His ankle felt like it was mile ten.

The sun was to his back, and when Chase finally started to get on top of his breath, he looked up into the city's skyline and could see the sun's reflection broken up unevenly along so many mirrored windows. Ventilation stacks from the Suntrust building released traces of smoke, lingering, rising, and finally dissipating. Mostly the streets had cabs passing infrequently, followed by the wayward cop. There was a certain magic to running in a large city so early in the morning, before the madness of Monday converged.

As he came down the back side of the bridge, feeling the relief of a downhill slope, Chase felt good in his run for the first time. The Ferris wheel from the night before had already been dismantled and was sitting in pieces on a flatbed truck. The river stage, now missing, must have been barged down the river.

He stepped off of the side walk and ran right into the middle of Broadway. Nothing was coming from either direction. He ran down the

middle of the empty street for several blocks. He smiled, and the pain in his ankle quietly began to give way.

This is good, he thought. This is what I needed.

Stoplights were flashing yellow as he ran through a normally busy intersection. He loved the architecture that lined both sides of the hill he was climbing. On his right was an Episcopal church with the “circa 1869” etched into the cornerstone. Across the street was the Custom’s House with all of its gables.

In the distance he saw the old train station that was now a hotel. Indigo. And like that, Shelby was back in his mind.

“I should leave,” Shelby had finally said that night, rubbing her eyes.

For the first time, Chase thought about the time. He looked at the windows across the bar and saw that the sky outside was not exactly black any longer. “Yeah,” he said, sounding deflated. “Where are you going now?”

Shelby looked up at him, studying the question. “I’m going home now.”

“Oh,” he said.

“We start packing tomorrow.”

Chase cocked his head at her. “What?”

“Yeah. Dan and I are moving up to Chicago for a while.”

“Why?”

“We’re staying with some friends. A little change, I suppose.”

“How sad.”

“Yeah.”

Chase opened his arms and Shelby stepped in and wrapped her arms around him and placed her head on his chest. Neither knew that the other had their eyes closed.

“But,” she said, “I am going to start practicing more of your life philosophy.”

“How so?”

“I will have more courage.”

“I’m not very courageous,” he said.

“Nonsense. There is no greater courage than to find the life you really want to live.”

“And I will practice more of your life philosophy as well. I will watch for winks from the Universe more often.”

“Deal,” she said. “And when we do, we will always remember this night?”

“Always.”

Chase tipped the bartender a one hundred dollar bill, and Shelby and Chase fumbled through an awkward goodbye. Chase stood outside the

Indigo, watching her wave at him from the cab she was about to enter. Then it occurred to him what he should do. He ran, shouting, waving his arms. The cab started to pull away.

“Wait!” he shouted again.

Brake lights came on. Chase ran up to the back door of the cab and swung it open, breathless. Shelby had a look of surprise on her face. “What are you doing?” she asked.

“Here,” he said, panting. “I want *you* to have it.”

Chase handed her his silver elephant bracelet. Shelby just held it in her hands, rubbing her fingers across each elephant one at a time.

“Really?” she asked quietly.

“Yeah,” he said, trying to catch his breath.

“I don’t know what to say. That’s one of the nicest things anyone has ever done for me.”

Chase could still see the look on her face as she sat in the cab that night.

He took in a deep breath, now running past the Indigo. He was steadily picking up speed as he came out the other end of the city. Downtown was now to his back and he was on a steady downslope. He could see Greenfield Historic District up ahead.

Within two blocks, Chase took a right on Carter Lane. The sun was now blocked. He was running beside the towering elm trees that lined both

sides of the street. The houses had been built in the 20's and 30's and had been restored over the years. Many of them had been painted, olive shutters and mocha siding; or mustard yellow with distressed brown shutters. He ran past a Denver square with white washed brick.

Chase brought his run to a walk, and placed both hands on his hips, cooling down. Even from three houses away, he could see his mother, already out in her front yard pulling weeds from around her tomato plants. Chase had almost caught his breath when he entered the picket fence, and closed it behind him. At once, she stopped picking weeds and began to smile.

Her gray hair was pulled back in a braided ponytail. The ponytail was course and unruly, and was held together with three separate rubber bands. She wore delicate white glasses, and had silver bracelets on both wrists, and a silver necklace with a turquoise amulet hanging around her neck. Chase noticed the crow's feet that formed in the corner of her eyes as she smiled at him.

[Hi, mom.] Chase signed.

[Hello, my beautiful.] she signed back.

Chapter 17

Thelma Komley lived in a bungalow built in 1922 with high ceilings and windows with leaded glass. The wooden planks had been painted a salmon color, and the front porch was propped up by large white posts. The front yard was surrounded by a picket fence, and had no grass to speak of. The mounds of planted soil around the trees stretched out and became rows of tomato plants. The tomato plans extended out next to the porch and flowed into a wildflower patch on either side of the walk. Most of the things that grew in her yard were so wild and so grand that they stood taller than the wildest grown man.

Every inch of the yard she had planted with the intent of instilling magic into the mind's eye of her grandchildren, which she was certain - at this point in her life - were never to be. The gardening, which had only been a hobby for most of her life, had now become a fulltime job after she left the publishing house two Christmas's ago. She kept the same sun-cycle with her gardens: up as the sun peered over the downtown skyline, and finishing when the sun etched a path down behind the temple. And all throughout the day, her work area moved in time with the shadows.

Thelma Komley was fiercely independent. When Chase's father had slept with her sister, she kicked him out and changed both her and Chase's last name back to her maiden name. That was the last they heard from his father, and the last time she entertained the foolishness of a man.

Her home did not have many things in it. But the things she did have were simple, and perfectly placed. She valued clean lines, and uncluttered spaces. A Tiffany lamp shone on a small prayer rug that was hung above the fireplace, and somehow, that was all that spot would ever need. She only had three towels, but they had come from the Waldorf when her grandmother had stayed there for her 19th birthday, the day the stock markets crashed in 1929. Only the things that truly belonged on her journey were ever allowed to enter her space.

Chase stood by his mother in the kitchen as she crushed cardamom pods on the side of the boiling water. Churning around the pot were slices of ginger, whole peppers, cloves, and two cinnamon sticks. After she crushed the pods, she dropped black tea in the pot and set the timer on the stove. The stove was robin egg blue and vintage.

[Why are you here?] she signed to him.

Thelma was not born deaf, but became deaf when she was thirteen in a reaction to an inoculation she received. Chase had always loved his and his mother's secret language. When he was little and his fifth grade teacher asked him questions, he would sometimes sign the answer back to her in front of the class. Most of the kids would laugh at him, but he didn't care. Chase always adored the silent nature of the language. There was something about communicating without sound that naturally put him in a calm frame of mind.

As he got older and talk of a universal language was discussed, he had always thought that sign language was the obvious choice. In spite of the different ways that all the world's citizens say "Bird", they would all sign it the same. How many wars could have been prevented by simple clarifications of language?

Chase smiled. [What do you mean, 'why am I here'?]

[Go outside,] she signed, [and set the table.]

Chase knew not to argue with her. Taking two cups and two saucers, Chase walked through the house and back to the front porch. His mother had a sun faded table that sat on her porch with four chairs around it. She entertained guests often on the front porch, and played bridge on the table every Thursday night.

Chase sat and watched a lemon butterfly clinging to a pink cluster of flowers by the porch. The butterfly's wings flapped almost imperceptibly back and forth as if imitating flight. The butterfly did not let go of the flower even though it swayed in the wind.

With a rusty hinged sound, the front door opened, and Chase's mother emerged with a platter of butter cookies, and a steaming pot of Chai tea. She poured them both a cup, and they both blew on the surface of the tea to cool it down.

[Well . . . spill it.] she signed, after setting her teacup down.

[Spill it?]

[I know you are up to something. I can see it in your face.]

Chase nodded. [Yeah. Something strange has been happening to me.]

[Go on.]

Chase told his mother everything. About Kimba. Shelby. The Pondicherry connection. He started signing too fast and his mother had to ask him to slow down more than once. Chase always signed too fast when he was confiding to his mother.

[You are going to find Shelby?] she signed.

[Yes.]

Thelma reached for her tea and took a sip, watching him over the top of her glasses. She set it back down. [India?]

[Yes.]

[You don't really know this girl.]

[I know her enough.]

[The bar?]

[The bar runs by itself.]

[You look certain.]

[I am.]

[Good.]

[Good?]

[Yes. You have not tended your own garden in a long time.]

[I thought you would try to talk me out of it.]

[No you didn't] she said, standing. [You would not have come to me unless you knew you would get my blessing.]

Thelma Komley gathered up the teapot and the platter.

[Mom.] he signed. She tilted her head and looked down on him.

[Do you think I have made a good life for myself?]

She set everything back down. [Do you?]

[I'm not sure.]

[I'm not sure either.]

Thelma Komley leaned across the table and kissed her son on the forehead. Chase watched his mother go back into the house. He turned out to face the yard. The tiny lemon butterfly had flown away.

Chapter 18

Sounds first. Shuffling. Eyes heavy. A beep. A second. Darth Vader sounds were still somewhere, lingering. The drone of an old air conditioner came to her from somewhere, occasionally pinging and clinking.

One eye opened lazily. Everything was blurry. Some light passed. The bright thing was still in front of her. She felt wind on her face. The one eye would not be still and constantly rolled up into the back of her eyelid like a child who is shy, hiding behind her mother's apron when asked to meet a strange relative.

“This is such good news for you,” someone said. She tried to force her eye straight, to seek the voice. The eye refused. She thought maybe it was coming from the bright, colorful thing in front of her. “This is a very good day for you. And because I am your friend, I will be with you all the time now.”

She tried to speak, but nothing happens. She tried to clear her throat. Nothing. A flash of something crossed her mind. A vague knowing. Something she only grasped for a moment, before it was gone, like trying to grab a fistful of

water from a stream. Perhaps it was the voice. Certainly it must be the voice. All at once Shelby recognized the voice.

“I am going to take care of you. Would you like? Yes. I know you would. Do you like stories? I love stories. I bet you would like to hear a story. I will tell you one if you like.”

Shelby tried to focus. She tried to nod.

“Do you want to hear it?”

Shelby thought maybe she could feel some pressure on her hand, maybe a squeezing. Everything was swimmy. Nothing felt quite right, as if she was feeling things through a rubbery membrane that insulated against sensations.

“This story is my favorite, and I think you will like it. This story takes place during the rainy season in the month of July. A shepherd is looking for his lost cow along the edges of the forest. But the night is

growing dark, and the shepherd is losing all hope of finding her. The small calf beside the shepherd cries out into the forest, looking for her mother as well.

“Together, the small calf and the farmer wander into the forest crying out for the cow. But in time, they find they have become lost in the forest. Black clouds gather, and night falls, and both the shepherd and the calf give up all hope. The shepherd sits on the ground beside the calf and begins to weep.

“Just then, a firefly spots the shepherd and the small calf and feels compassion for them. The firefly approaches the two lost souls, and tells them, ‘Follow me. I believe I can help you find what you have lost’. The shepherd wipes away his tears and follows the blinking light through the dark forest.

“Up in the distance, the farmer sees a glowing light. He looks down at the small calf beside him who seems equally uncertain. As the firefly leads them closer to the light, the farmer at last can see that it is the Sembar tree, glowing like a flame in the night. On every leaf and on every branch sits a firefly, each one blinking to their own rhythm.

“Sitting below the tree, bathed in the soft glow of this magical tree is the cow they had been searching for. The baby calf moves quickly to its mother, and they both begin to moo quietly to one another.

“So to this day, we know that good spirits live in the Sembar tree. And this is why the cow and the firefly will always be friends.”

Shelby tried to open her eyes again. Through a slit, she could see the girl beside her for an instant. She could see that she was wearing a bright colorful dress with poufy arms. In the effort, Shelby’s eyes closed once again. She drifted away.

Chapter 19

As night fell, Chase stood before the mirror above his sink. He had booked his flight. Two hour flight to New York City. Nineteen hour flight to Chennai in the southeast corner of India, on the Sea of Bengal.

If India were the United States, Chennai would be Charleston, SC, geographically.

Monday nights had always been big nights at Sappho's. Unlike most bars, they had decided years ago to be open on Mondays to help attract industry people: bar tenders, servers, stylists, etc. But tonight the bar was louder than it usually was. Maggie was down there somewhere, and probably Isabella, along with the many patrons who would only come to Sappho's when Maggie was there.

Chase studied his reflection in the mirror. The sink was full of hot water, and the steam was moving up the mirror and retreating back down in patterns like waves on the shore. The smell of lavender and cedar wood was carried on the steam.

His hair had needed to be reshaped a long time ago. He had been cutting his own unruly hair for far too long now. The blonde streaks he had placed in his hair a year ago had grown out, and he could see that he had more than a little gray now in his roots. His hair could not decide what color it wanted to be.

Energy is carried in your hair, he thought. I do not wish to carry this energy with me any longer.

Chase grabbed his clippers, removed the guard, and went to work.

An hour or so later, Sappho's was body-to-body. The DJ, a tiny girl with a face full of piercings, was spinning a dance remix of Chris Isaak's *Wicked Game*. In this corner a soccer chick was dancing up on a girl in a red miniskirt. Their faces were close, kissing and whispering, bodies intermingled. Leaning against a wall, two women who wore cut-off jeans

and Jimmy Buffy T-shirts, laughed loudly, with their arms around each other.

The room was filled with the usual eclectic mixture of individuals. Lesbians, of course, and some gay men, but also plenty of straight people (and couples). The swingers always stood out amongst the rest. The husband would sit at the bar and watch his wife slow dance with a woman. By the end of the night, she would have repeated this with several other women. Some she would kiss. Other's she would make promises to. But Chase always knew what the husband at the bar could not know: his wife and that woman would prefer for the husband to go away.

Chase stopped at the top of the stairs leading into the bar. The crowd was kinetic tonight, talking and dancing closely, and brimming with sexual tension that was ripe like a cherry just waiting to be picked. Kathryn was leaning over the bar, head tilted toward a customer, her ear toward the customer's mouth. Both laughed. Kathryn grabbed a beer and popped the top and slid it down the bar, holding up all 5 fingers as she stood by the register.

Kathryn had help tonight. Immanuel, a delicate musician, gay-skinny, and painfully sarcastic was cocktailing for Kathryn. She had a bar back tonight as well. Behind the bar, Latoya, the quarterback for the women's football team was replacing an empty bottle of Galliano on the top shelf.

Jimmy had just arrived. He was taking off his Levi's denim jacket and hanging it on a hook by the door. He had one ear bud in his ear, and the other dangling in front of his chest. Jimmy had chestnut hair parted exactly down the middle, and he had two large white-pink ears peeking out on either side through his hair. He wore a wispy mustache that would never quite fill in.

Jimmy's grandparents had owned the hardware store that was in the building that is now Sappho's. A month after Maggie and Chase had bought the building, they found out that Jimmy's grandparents had died in a carbon monoxide accident. Maggie suggested that they hire Jimmy as a dishwasher at Sappho's.

At the corner of the bar, he saw her, Maggie, with Isabella next to her, both listening to Stanley.

Maggie wore a vintage Puma t-shirt, threadbare to the point of transparency, and she wore a pair of dark jeans, cuffed at the bottom. Her hair was down tonight, showing off her thick auburn curls. She had always been this type of woman: walk into a room, heads turn, conversations slow, conversations stop altogether. She could eventually make a room go dumb with staring. Her Irish skin was pale and smooth. Maggie was tall, nearly 5' 10", and she had eyes that focused in like a hawk.

But since she had been with Isabella, Maggie was now also glowing. They were meant for each other. Chase knew that. Everyone knew that. This was painful. Before Isabella had been hired to create the rooftop garden on the bar, everyone had thought that Maggie and Chase were meant for each other.

But Isabella was from Brazil, and she was funny, and her choice of words was always wrong, but always perfect. And Isabella was 5' 10" also. When they

stood next to each other, they were like two Beings from another reality, from some future race whose genes had been engineered for perfection.

Isabella had been all over the world. Although she majored in economics, her passion was for art. After Wellesley, she interned at the Louvre. She wrote a published article last summer explaining why the inflation rate in Germany in the 1920's led to the rise of Hitler, and how the collapse of the Eurozone could give rise to a new world conqueror.

But she had also cultivated a mastery of the trivial. She knew the genus-species names of all the trees, for Christ sake, and could name the year-published and record label of almost any song recorded between 1950 and 1990.

She knew everything it seemed, including how to take his wife.

This is a particularly difficult thing to compete with. Chase had always been a fighter and had always been up to a good challenge, but with

Isabella, there was no competition. No need to fight at all. He was doomed from the beginning.

To make matters worse, this was for both Maggie and Isabella their first gay relationship. To everyone, it was easy to see that their relationship had a destiny quality to it. Every time the two of them looked at each other from across a crowded room, they did so like explorers spotting an uncharted island on the horizon. Everyone rooted for them. Even Maggie's fundamental Baptist minister of a father rooted for them. He always used Dick Cheney and Cher as his excuse for defending his daughter's relationship.

And now, on this Monday night, with the bar so alive, Chase watched Maggie from the top of the stairs. At that moment, Maggie looked up at Chase. She was mesmerized. Stanley did not stop talking to her at first. But when he saw both Isabella and Maggie looking past him with a look of shock in their eyes, he finally stopped, and looked up the stairs as well.

"Ladies and gentleman," the DJ said over the microphone, "I would like to direct your attention to the newly bald, newly sexy . . . Mr. Chase Komley!"

Chase was taken aback by the sudden rush of eyes in his direction. All at once, everyone in the room started clapping and whooping. This surprised him. Chase smiled and reached up and rubbed his bald head while the clapping continued. In time he made his way down the stairs as the dancing rhythmically eased back into motion. Several people made comments as he passed. The ex-judge, Salty Dog, asked if he could rub it for good luck.

Chase snaked through the room, looking up from time-to-time to find Maggie's gaze was unbroken.

"Your eyes are wicked gray now," Isabella said, reaching over to hug him. Her skin was soft and smelled of coconut butter. "This is less bad."

"Thanks," Chase said, smiling at her, kind of embarrassed to be getting this much attention.

“What are you drinkin’?” Kathryn hollered out from behind the bar. She leaned out, ear first

“I’m good,” he said in her direction.

“What?” Stanley yelled. “No way, Mr. Clean! He is definitely drinking,” he told Kathryn. “Get this man a gin and tonic on my tab.”

Chase leaned over to Stanley’s ear. “I’m going to find Shelby.”

Stanley was taking a drink, and choked when he heard this. “What?” he blurted out, wiping his chin. Isabella and Maggie looked over at them.

“Don’t say anything. I’ll explain later.”

Kathryn brought the drink that Stanley had ordered and Chase took a sip, before placing it back on the bar. “Maybe we should do a shot,” Maggie finally said. Chase looked over at her, a little puzzled. Maggie was never out of control at nighttime, because 5 AM held her next run. This almost always ruled out shots. Isabella looked at her puzzled as well.

Then Isabella shouted, “Yes! Lemonchello!”

“Oh . . . really, no,” Chase protested.

“Kathryn,” Maggie shouted, lifting her hand up and waving Kathryn over. “Four shots of Lemonchello . . . make that five. Join us, Kathryn!”

“I like how this cowgirl rides,” Stanley said, throwing an arm over Chase’s shoulder.

Chase leaned over and tried to say quietly in Maggie's ear, "Look I'm sorry I called so late the other night. Do you think we could . . ." Just then Kathryn came to the end of the bar with five shots of Lemonchello.

Maggie lifted her shot into the air, and pronounced, "Here's to the one's you can't live with . . . here's to the one's you can't live without . . ."

Kathryn, Stanley, Isabella, Maggie, and of course Chase all tapped their shot glasses to the bar and then up to their lips, downing the shots, and slamming the empty glasses to the counter.

A buzz settled in all at once. Chase had always supposed that a good buzz shared between enemies could end so much human tragedy.

"Would you guys mind too terribly," Chase asked over the music and all of the random bar-noises, "if I stole Maggie from you for a few?"

Maggie looked at him, nonplussed, then looked to Isabella. “Take her,” Isabella said, “She is such a bore anyway.”

“Don’t be mad at me,” Stanley said to Maggie, “If you come back and I’m tappin’ this ass.” He reached over and placed his arm around Isabella. Isabella wrapped both arms around Stanley’s neck and looked up at Maggie, making her best kissy, pouty face.

Chase took Maggie by the hand and led her through the crowd. Kathryn, who was pouring cranberry vodka into three rocks glasses in front of her, watched them move across the room and up the stairs.

Eventually Chase led Maggie up to the empty garden.

They settled out on the edge of the roof. Maggie looked all around the garden. “Looks good,” she said. “I like what you’ve done with the space.” She leaned in and tried to smell a wilted yellow flower growing out of the dried-up fountain. “What is this flower called?”

“Hey,” he said.

“Did you kill this one because it was bad?”

“Hey.” He repeated. Finally, she turned and faced him. Neither said a word.

“I’m leaving.”

“What does that mean?”

“I’m going to India for a while . . .”

“What?” she asked, shaking her head sort of quickly, like one would do if they just found out that their father was a spy for the sea creatures.

“Yeah.”

“Yeah? That’s all you have to say? You’re going to India and that’s all you got?”

“Well,” he started. “Shelby Starling was in an accident in India. She’s stranded there . . . I’m going to go try and help her get home.”

“Shelby Starling . . . huh.” Something strange flashed across her face for just an instant. “Is that the girl you stayed at the bar with all night?”

“Yes.”

Maggie didn’t respond at first. “Is she okay?”

“I don’t know. The information is sort of sketchy right now.”

“You don’t even really know this girl. Why go? Why now?”

Chase thought about this. “I just feel like I need to go and try to help get her home. She’s stranded there. She’s in a coma, and no one has gone to try to help.”

“What can you possibly do?”

“I don’t know exactly. I just sort of feel like I’m supposed to be there.”

“Wow. I don’t know what to say.” Maggie reached up and put a hand over her mouth. “I feel like I could cry.”

“What?”

“Holy shit, this is crazy.” Maggie swiped away a tear quickly from her eye.
“How long will you be gone?”

“I don’t know. My plan for now is to stay there until she can make it safely back home. I don’t have a clue how long that will take.”

“This is so sudden.”

“I know.”

Maggie looked at her feet for a long time. “Why?”

Chase didn’t answer her at first. He watched her trying to hold back the tears. He had not seen her cry in a long time. A lump welled up in the back of his throat unexpectedly. A tear rolled down the side of his cheek. He wiped it quickly, hoping she didn’t see it.

“I’m not like you . . . Maggie . . . this all comes easy to you. But it doesn’t to me. People love you. They laugh when they are around you.

And they used to love me. But something changed. Somewhere something changed. I don't know when and I don't know why. But it did. And now people . . . now they just sort of deal with me. It didn't used to be like this. I used to be the first one everyone called before a party was planned. Not anymore. I don't know why that's the way it is, but you have about a billion Facebook friends and I have 49 . . . I have nothing here. Nothing." No one said a word. Chase sniffled. "I feel like I need to find a new thing to live for. I feel like going to help her might just be that thing."

"You barely know how to live here. How will you possibly make it in India?"

"Maybe I will find my life in India."

"That sounds like you might not come back. Why do I feel like you won't be coming back?"

"I need this. I think she needs this."

“This isn’t like you.”

“How would you know?” he said quietly. Chase glared into her eyes and resented her for all of the secret places within him that she never cared to find.

“Are you scared?” she asked.

“I’m sort of scared,” he said.

“You are?”

“A little.”

Chase thought that a tear was forming in her eye again. He pulled her into his arms. He held her tightly for a long time. No one spoke. They both tried to hide their tears from the other.

Chapter 20

The next morning, before she opened the bar, Kathryn tiptoed up the stairs to see Chase one last time. After her third knock, she peeked into the door. His bed was empty. The bed was made, perfectly pulled back, exposing the white sheets below. The white sheets were seamlessly tucked under the edges of the mattress.

Kathryn moved into his room, and looked around. Chase was gone.

Kathryn walked quietly over to his bed and sat, looking around. Camper jumped up and into her lap, nudging her head into Kathryn's chin.

"Hey, sweetie," Kathryn whispered. They both sat in the empty apartment for some time. "I didn't get to say good-bye."

Part ii

the Tiger and the Boy

Chapter 21

On the connecting flight at JFK, Chase stood in line to get his boarding pass. The man in front of him was wearing a suit that was too small for him, and had his tie loosened, and hanging crooked from his neck.

“I don’t understand why every goddamn time I fly out of this city, I get pulled for a routine search,” he said, making air quotes when he said ‘routine’. “Do I look like some fucking middle easterner?”

Everyone in the line collectively clinched. Chase looked around. Two men standing nearby with dark aviator glasses took notice.

“Sir,” the woman behind the counter said. “I will have to ask you to calm down or I will not be able to allow you to board.” The woman was from India, tall, with thick shiny hair and bright eyes. She was striking, and Chase couldn’t help but stare.

“Well I’m just asking you,” the man said, still agitated.

“Why do lines bring out the worst in people?” the lady behind Chase whispered over his shoulder.

“I know,” he whispered back. “We’re all going to get where we are going in the end.”

“I know,” she whispered. “What a jerk.”

“But look at me, lady,” the man said, “Do I look like some foreigner to you?”

The lady pursed her lips and glanced at the two men who were stepping closer, trying to listen. Her face returned to its previous professional demeanor.

“Sir, as you know, two days from now will be the anniversary . . .”

“I’m sick of this anniversary already, lady. Enough already. It’s been twelve years. They already took our economy. I doubt they want another fucking building.”

The two men stepped on either side of him. “Sir, can you please come with us?”

“What?” he said. “What did I do?”

“Now.” The men took his arm and led the reluctant man away from the counter.

“What? What did I do?”

“What a jerk,” the lady behind Chase said.

“Next please,” the Indian lady said, trying to restore normalcy. Chase handed her his ticket, while she typed into the computer. “Oh,” she said, mostly to herself. She looked up at Chase. “I am sorry,” the Indian Ms. Universe said to him in a voice that sounded dreamlike. “But we have overbooked this flight.”

Chase looked at her mouth. He became self-conscious, and forgot to listen to the point she was making. He wondered if she could tell that his bald head was not as tan as his face. He sort of nodded, biting the inside of his cheek. “I see,” he finally said, drawn out.

“But we at Air India would like to offer you a complimentary upgrade to first class for your flight to Chennai if you will accept our apologies.”

“Really?” Chase asked. “You’re an angel,” he said, followed by a throaty laugh. She did not laugh, but politely smiled and then looked down at her monitor and began to type.

You're an angel? He thought. *Stupid.* Within seconds, the sound of a printer could be heard from behind the counter.

“Here is your boarding pass, Mr. Komley, enjoy your flight to Chennai,” she said, smiling.

“Thank you,” he said. “That is really great of you.”

She looked past him. “Who’s next?”

“Oh . . . of course,” Chase said, taking the pass and looking over his shoulder. He moved out of line, and through the tunnel, toward the first class cabin.

The chairs in the cabin were in couplets, and had their own flat panel television attached to the arm. Several people had already taken their seats.

One lady had pulled a divider screen up from the floor for privacy and was already asleep.

“Nice,” he muttered, finding his seat. He sunk into the seat and felt it wrap around his entire body. “Nice.”

And that is when Dallas - big blonde hair with the hint of black roots - walked in with a tight blue sweater and tighter boobs, chomping gum, followed by an older man (looking tired of taking orders) and a fat kid, about seven, in a sailor’s outfit. “Excuse me,” she said in a crazy-country, oil-money accent. “Could I get a martini, and could you show Regan here to his seat?”

A soft-spoken Indian man with messy hair turned toward Dallas. “Yes, ma’am, may I see your boarding pass?” The flight attendant had no hint of an accent whatsoever. Looking it over, he said, “Come with me, Regan, you are right over here.” Regan followed the man.

“Sir . . . what about the martini?”

He looked back at the woman. “Yes, ma’am, we will be serving cocktails as soon as the plane is boarded.”

“And how long will that be?” Dallas asked. The older man behind her held all of their baggage, his whole body slumping forward under the weight. The man hardly blinked, looking at the floor.

“That will be when everyone is on the plane and in their seat . . . ma’am.” Without waiting for a response, the flight attendant turned and led the kid in Chase’s direction.

The closer the flight attendant and the fat kid came to him, the more Chase started to mumble, “No, no, no, no . . .” But it was as if the ‘no’s’ only brought them closer, until at last the kid sat in the coupled chair next to Chase. Chase frowned at the flight attendant, who walked away. Full of dread, Chase turned to look at the kid next to him.

Regan had red hair in a crew cut and splotchy red skin. Regan smiled at Chase. Regan had something sticky and green on the side of his mouth.

“Hi, Regan,” Chase finally said. The kid did not reply. “Do you like kids?” Chase asked. Regan nodded. “Good for you.”

Chase reached down to the floor and took the divider screen and began to slide it upwards. Regan peaked around the screen just as Chase was placing the blinders over his eyes.

“Good evening, this is your captain. Welcome to Air India Flight 113 leaving JFK to Chennai, India. We are expecting a smooth flight for the next nineteen hours. So look around . . . you have plenty of time to get to know your neighbor . . .”

Chapter 22

When Chase was in sixth grade he had gone to a lock-in. All week long, the only topic of conversation amongst the boys in his class was about the fun that Friday night would hold. They planned out everything they would do, down to the finest detail: kickball, hide-n-seek, a movie, ping-pong, and so on. They would do nothing whatsoever with the girls. Within the first hour of the lock-in there were certain disagreements to the rules of the Nerf football game. Chase tried to point out that the Nerf football game had not been on the agenda at all, but no one listened. A squabble ensued which caused the group to split in two.

Within a couple of hours, the two groups divided again into four, like cells in mitosis. By the time midnight rolled around, the cell had divided countless times. By 2 AM, one of the cells had decided to sleep, and was promptly covered in whip cream within an hour. By 4 AM everyone wanted to sleep, but no one would because of the now infamous whip cream incident. Before the sun rose, Chase thought he was seeing things in the corner of his eye, and a couple of his friends thought they were

hearing voices. When the sun finally came up, they were all elated that the lock-in was almost over and they would soon be going home.

When his mom, at last, pulled up in front of the gymnasium and picked Chase up, he immediately placed his head on the window of the back seat. He felt the weight of sleep finally crash in all around him and suck him deeply into its vibrating blue sea.

This is how Chase felt now, sitting in the taxi, in India, with his head resting on the back window, dodging through the traffic on the streets of Chennai just outside the airport.

In spite of the pill he had taken before lift-off, sleep had only come to him in fits and starts, thirty minutes here, an hour there. None of it was satisfying. He spent most of the flight in a twilight haze. Chase thought now that he would give anything to collapse into any bed, anywhere, right now. In a dreamy trance, Chase stared at the streets of India as they drove.

To his surprise, palm trees the size of telephone poles were everywhere, towering above most of the houses and some of the buildings. Jacaranda trees soared nearly as tall, mottled with bright purple flowers. There were also banyan trees and sycamore trees and several other types of trees that he had only seen pictures of in books.

The street traffic was congested with motorcycles, and most of them had more than one passenger. He saw a woman in a sari sitting on the back of a motorcycle, sitting sideways with her legs crossed at the ankles by the back tire. The motorcycles rode too closely to the buses, filled to capacity, and spilling over with people clinging to the tops and sides. Yellow motorized rickshaws could hardly negotiate the chaos, but everyone made room for the Brahmin cows pulling wagons.

There were no rules to the road. There were only the rules that would naturally govern a stampede out of a burning club. The largest take the right-of-way by sheer force, followed in turn by those with speed, next would be the dexterous, and finally those with creative intelligent. There would be nothing left for the unfortunate and the unlucky.

Like a torpedo, a bus would glide down the center of the street, and everything else would part effortlessly around it. Motorcycles rode inches from the back tires of the cycle in front of them, constantly engaged in a dance of quick, jerky motions, of braking and accelerating. Pedestrians darted in and out, narrowly dodging bumpers. Horns of all pitches honked out endlessly.

Chase thought the city looked like strips in Miami. Not like the Miami of today, but rather the Miami of the 50's. Stucco buildings lined both sides of the streets. Most were pink, but some were painted apricot or jade or lemon yellow. Some were covered with advertisements, now peeling away from the walls along the roof. A small building with a bamboo-thatched roof, painted bright red sat between these buildings, with rows and rows of motorcycles for rent.

The buildings along the streets were broken up by narrow alleyways, littered with debris. Above the street level, each building had rooms for rent. Towels and t-shirts and an occasional flag clung to the patios of these apartments, flapping lazily as the traffic whizzed by.

People walked in swarms up and down sidewalks on both sides of the street. The streets were loud, and unsettling, and Chase now felt altogether out of his element. A lonely feeling came to him all at once, like the feeling one gets the first night alone at summer camp.

Chase nodded off several times, brought back by a sudden braking, or a horn, or someone slapping the cab and yelling. When Chase was finally checked into his modest room with a view of the Sea of Bengal, he did not unpack, but fell asleep in his clothes.

Chase began to dream. In this dream he was standing in the backyard of his childhood home. A storm had swept away the fence that was in the backyard, and the water was so high that the Koi fish in his childhood pond were now swimming throughout the flood waters. But they were huge now in his dream. And on a boulder several yards away from him was a large gorilla holding a smaller monkey, perhaps a chimpanzee, by its neck, suspended in air. Both the gorilla and the monkey were looking at him, without expression.

Chase took one step into the water, thinking that he needed to swim out and save the chimp. But just then, the gorilla reached into the mouth of the smaller monkey and pulled its tongue out. Chase, in his dream, cried out and looked away. Chase awoke.

The room was dark and swelteringly hot. His bed was soaked through with his sweat. Chase looked over at the clock beside the bed and found that it was almost 4 AM. “Shit,” he muttered, wiping his face. He had slept for sixteen hours. He was groggy, and his stomach was sour.

Chase reached over for the phone and dialed zero. “Front desk,” a male voice said.

“What day is it?” Chase asked in a dry, broken voice.

“It is Friday, sir, just after 4 AM.”

“Thank you,” Chase said, hanging up the phone. “Holy shit.” He had lost two days in the actual flight due to time zones, and now an additional better part of the day due to sleeping.

Chase flipped on a light, and stretched, and made his way into the bathroom to unpack his luggage. In time, Chase took a shower and changed his clothes. The lobby was empty when the elevators opened, but someone had already started to put out bagels and yogurt and some sort of flat rice cake.

The hotel was part of a western chain. Chase had accumulated several years’ worth of reward points with this chain. The hotel had once been under British rule. British officers used to bring their families here for holidays. Most everything was made out of mahogany or balsam wood, most of it etched out, heavy paneling, bright wallpaper, and elaborate molding everywhere. The lobby had been laid with a coneflower blue ceramic tile that was chipped away in places revealing the terra cotta underneath. Above the two elevators in the lobby were brass arrows that moved when the elevator moved. In the 70’s, when the hotel was bought

out, many modern upgrades were added. Carpet was placed over the original hardwoods in each room, working telephones were installed in some floors, and window air conditioners were installed in some of the nicest suites.

Chase took a bite of his bagel, as he walked out of the hotel into the pre-dawn light outside his hotel. He had a backpack thrown over his shoulder with a few necessities. He did not know what to expect once he was in the hospital. His hotel was only two blocks from Mercy Hospital – Chennai, and so he decided to walk to get the blood pumping.

The streets were quiet at this time in the morning, mostly empty. Some of the buildings he had seen in the daylight, now had steel gates pulled down and locked over their patios. Most of them had graffiti on them. Most of the graffiti was bad, but one had a large grey elephant, sitting up on its back haunches, holding a red balloon. The Sanskrit symbol for OM was written on the red balloon.

Chase turned a corner and could see the sign for the hospital. As he did, Chase stumbled over the outstretched foot of a man. Chase steadied himself and looked at the man. The man was slouched into the sidewalk, up against the wall.

Chase could see that he was Indian, and that he held something in his hand that was burning, or at least smoldering.

“You okay?” Chase asked. The man did not reply. Chase kneeled down closer. “Hello?” Chase shook the man’s ankle, but the man still did not reply.

The man had no shoes on, and his feet were black and tough, with a few sores on them. He wore heavy black work pants with stains on the knees, and a black t-shirt with the British flag on it. The man had his head falling precariously onto his shoulder, up against the wall. His hair was thick as a wild boar, and coarse, with a part on the right side, and a shock of untamed hair that curved up and out from that part. The man’s mouth was open, and Chase could see he was missing one of his canine teeth. He was mouth-breathing.

Chase leaned down to study the thing that was smoking in his hand. A few wisps of smoke rose out of the white ashes that sat in the center of the aluminum foil.

“You okay?” Chase asked, shaking his foot again. The man did not move, and Chase stood up. He looked at the man again, and then over to the hospital.

The sliding doors to the emergency entrance slid open and Chase walked up to the information desk. Sitting quietly, reading a paper, was a middle aged lady wearing a turquoise sari.

“There’s a man sitting out there,” Chase said, pointing outside. “I don’t think he’s well.”

The woman did not look pleased by this. She looked sternly at Chase and at the door, before rising and walking over to where he was pointing. She regarded the man in the British flag t-shirt and looked up at Chase, perturbed.

“I have no more time for that old man,” she said, returning to her seat and taking her paper.

“Is he okay?” he asked.

“He’s fine,” she said. “We put him out an hour ago. Now if you don’t mind.” The lady popped out the creases of the paper loudly, folding it around to read the back.

Chase explained about Shelby. He started from the beginning, and tried to tell the woman everything. She did not listen. Finally, without looking up from her paper, she gave him the number to Shelby Starling’s room, and told him that it was just down the hall to the left.

“Can you give me an update on her?” Chase asked.

The woman darted her eyes up to him. “Do you think that here in India we let our doctors sit in the emergency room lobby and read papers?”

“I . . .”

“I am not her doctor, you will have to wait. Now go,” she said, shoeing him away dismissively.

Chase turned and walked away. The hospital was eerily quiet at this early hour. Only a few wayward beeps from monitors could be heard from time-to-time.

Canister lights were set into the ceiling every few feet apart. They cast rings of light down the hallways, dimly lighting the doors to the rooms on either side. Most of the rooms he passed smelled of urine and antiseptic.

He kept walking, and passed a nursing station, without anyone there. A television sat on the nurse’s desk, turned down quietly. A black and white American movie was playing, subtitled in Hindi.

At last Chase came to room 130, and warily pushed the door open. The room was softly lit by an X-ray light box behind Shelby’s bed. He stood there in the entrance and watched her for a long time without moving.

Most of her head was bandaged in white gauze. One eye was uncovered, but closed. Her arms lay atop the covers, fully stretched out. Her left arm had an I.V. attached to it, and around the wrist, an ID bracelet. Poking below the bracelet was his silver elephant bracelet. The part of her face that was not hidden in the gauze was puffy, and was yellowish purple in places, like when a bruise is starting to heal.

Chase walked over to the empty chair beside her bed. He could see her closer now in the dim light. For a few minutes he watched her chest move up and down.

Something in Chase stirred as he looked at her. She looked so little and quiet, fragile. Carefully, he extended his hand over to hers and softly touched his index finger to hers. He then moved his hand on top of hers and could feel that it was cool to the touch.

Shelby was still beautiful to him. Chase released her hand for fear of waking her. His first thought was to go find a nurse or her doctor to get information. He walked back out into the hall and looked to the empty nurse's station. In the distance, he could see the woman in the turquoise sari still reading.

Uncertain what to do, he decided to go in the room and wait. He partially closed the door behind him, allowing a small crack of light to come into the room.

Chase settled back into his seat with his back to the door and watched her breathing. A shiver came over him, and a rush of something that he could not exactly place. He looked down at his arms which had goose bumps on them. In time, Chase looked on both sides of his chair to find his backpack.

Carefully unzipping his bag, Chase pulled out his tattered, dog-eared copy of *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver. Randomly he thumbed through the pages, and began to read. Time passed, and Chase only stopped reading twice: 1) when he could see that the sun was coming up outside; 2) when he heard two voices right outside her door. The door started to open while they spoke. Chase stood up and turned to the door. But the door soon closed all the way, and the

voices trailed off as they walked down the hall. He started to walk toward the hall to ask questions, but she spoke.

“Is that my copy?” a throaty voice asked. Chase turned quickly. Shelby was staring at him with her one good eye, forcing a curled smile on the corner of her lips.

“Hi,” he said, smiling. She blinked slowly.

“That’s the greatest book written in the English language,” she said.
“Have you read it?”

He nodded. “Yeah, this is my copy.”

“That’s your copy?”

“Yeah . . . it’s my favorite book in the world. I read it once a year,” he said.

“That’s not my copy?”

“No, sweetie,” he said, wondering about her pain medication situation.

Shelby thought about this for some time. Her face became perplexed, like that of a child who is trying to figure out if the block she is holding will fit into the star shape, the circle shape, or the box shape. “What part were you reading?”

“Oh,” he said, looking down at the book and then sitting up close to her and taking her hand. “Ruth May just died, and her body is outside. And the rain just started, and all of the kids in the village are watching. Nathan just baptized the child . . . “

“Mah-dah-mey I?” she said, smiling.

“Mother may I,” he whispered with her. They both fell silent, smiling at one another.

“Chase Komley, my hero.” She forced a painful smile. “You came.”

“How are you, sweetie?” he asked, holding her hands and staring into her one opened eye. “You look a lot better than I thought you’d look . . . no offense.”

“How did you find me?” she asked. “Why are you here?”

“I’m here for you. I want to help get you back home.”

“You came all the way to India for me?”

“I did . . . I heard about your accident. I also heard that you had no one here, and I thought I would come see what I could do.” Silence. Beeping noises. “And if nothing else, I thought I would sit and read to you, or listen . . . whatever.”

“Can I tell you something?” she asked. He nodded. “I’m having a really strong déjà vu right now.”

“Really?” he asked.

“Strange things happened to me when I was in my coma. I’ve tried to think about how to explain them, but I can’t. But I feel like I knew you were coming or something. I wish I could explain it better.”

“I was in a coma once,” he said. “I know what you’re feeling.”

“You were?”

“I was hit by a car when I was on a run in grad school. I remember when I was there, when I was in my coma, it all felt like a familiar dream.”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“When I started to come back around, I tried so hard to hold onto what had happened. I wanted to be able to tell someone.”

“Yes.”

He trailed off. “But I couldn’t. It became fuzzy. Then it became all jumbled up in my head. Eventually it just sort of went away.”

“I don’t like that,” she said.

“Every once in a while, I get a flash of it. Like a feeling. Or something like that. Hard to explain.”

“I’m glad you’re here,” she finally said. Chase fiddled with her ID bracelet and pulled the silver elephant bracelet from under it.

“You still wear it,” he whispered with a smile.

“Yep,” she said, smiling back. “Every day.” Footsteps could be heard in the hallway, approaching, passing, then fading. “Everything’s going to be okay now, isn’t it?”

“Yep,” he said, kissing her on the side of the face that was not covered. Neither said a word, and Chase watched as her eyes became heavy and unfocused. She blinked once, very long. And again, but did not re-open it. She was going back to familiar places.

Chapter 23

The medication had pulled Shelby back into a deep sleep. Chase watched her breathing for some time, before he, too, fell asleep in the chair beside her. This did not last long. Chase was aroused from sleep by three quick pokes in the chest.

Before him stood a small Indian girl with both hands down by her side. She was wearing a colorful dress with a floral pattern, and poufy arms.

The girl eyed him suspiciously. Chase studied her haircut. Her bangs were too short, and had to be held down with a pink bobby pin.

“Hi,” he said softly, his voice gravelly from the sudden waking.

“Where is Dr. Pathcotti?”

“I’m not sure,” he said.

“Do you replace her?”

“No.”

“But you are here for her?” she asked, pointing to Shelby.

“Yes.”

The girl reached in her pocket and pulled out a piece of folded paper. They both stared at the paper as her nimble fingers worked its unfolding.

Finally, the yellowing paper was opened, and she began to read: “Hello. My name is Dakini Guntherpalli . . . and I am so pleased that we have met. I have come to Mercy to watch after my friend.” Here she stopped and extended her right arm toward Shelby like a hostess on a game show revealing a prize.

She continued: "If it is pleasing to you, I will assist you and your staff in whatever way is necessary to help my friend in her recovery." Then Dakini folded the paper and tucked it away.

"Hello, Dakini," Chase said after a pause. "But I'm not a doctor."

"You are not a doctor?"

"No."

"Then why are you here?"

Chase looked at the little girl in front of him and guessed her to be nine or ten. Her arms were skinny like broomsticks, and her two front teeth were a little too large for her mouth, and maybe a little too gapped. Her eyes were wide open, and bright.

“My name is Chase Komley . . . and she is my friend. I came to help her.”

“I think we should get along just fine then,” she said, nodding.

“How do you know her?”

“I met her the day before she was in the accident.”

“Did you see the accident?”

“No. Thank goodness,” she said. “I faint very easily.”

“Me too,” he said. “Do you know much about the accident?”

“She was driving a motorcycle and a bus ran her off the road.”

“I see. How long have you been here, Dakini?”

“Twenty-eight days.”

“That’s a long time. How has her recovery gone?”

“I did not think she was going to live when I first got here,” she said.

“She looked very bad. Much worse than this.”

“I heard that they thought she might die.”

“Yes. But she just woke up last week.”

“Just woke up?”

“I was here when it happened. I told her a story.”

“I’m sure that was a nice way for her to wake up.”

“Yes.”

“Do you live here?” he asked her.

“I have for twenty-eight days.”

“Are your parents here?”

“No.”

“Where are they?”

“They are dead.”

“Oh . . . I’m sorry.”

“For what? You did not know.”

“So you are alone here?”

“No. I am with you.”

“I see. Who takes care of you?”

“I do.”

“By yourself?”

“No one takes care of themselves alone.”

“Who feeds you?”

Dakini looked puzzled. She held up her hands toward his face. “I feed me. You ask very strange questions.”

“How so?”

“You do not ask the right questions.”

“I don’t?”

“No.”

“What is the right question?”

“Who are you?” she asked.

“Yes. I see what you mean.” Chase studied the girl, trying to figure her out. “I like your dress.”

“Me too,” she said, twirling. The bottom of the dress spun out. “I love the flowers.”

“Those flowers look nice on you. Why are you so dressed up?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” he paused, thinking about what to say. “I mean are you going somewhere special?”

“I’m already there.”

“Ah. Well it’s a very nice dress.”

“It is my favorite one. Sister Teresa made it for me.”

“She did? Who is that?”

“She brought me here.”

“I see. That was nice of her.”

“It was. She surprised me with the dress.”

“She did?” he asked.

“Yes. I was too big for my real favorite dress.”

“You grew out of it?”

“Yes. My mother gave it to me for my fifth birthday. But then I got too big.”

“That happens.”

“But this one is very much like the other one.”

“I see.”

“Maybe you like stories?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Do you like to hear stories?”

“I do.”

“Would you like to hear a story?” she asked.

“Uh . . . okay. Sure,” he said, sitting back in his chair.

“This story happens in the country you are from.” She paused and stared deeply into him. “One night two Indian men are sitting alone at a bar on the top of the Empire State Building . . . have you ever been there?”

“Yes.”

“Is it tall?”

“Very.”

“Good. That makes this story better.”

“Ok.”

“It is a beautiful night,” she continues, “and the patio is open, and people are singing and dancing and they are drinking. The taller of the two Indian men watches a group of loud American’s across the bar. ‘What jerks,’ he says. ‘Why must they be so loud?’ His friend tells him to disregard the loud Americans, and enjoy his night. But as the night wears on, the Indian man becomes quite agitated . . . Do you know this story?”

“No,” Chase said.

“Do you know what is going to happen?”

“No. I don’t.”

“Okay. The Indian man walks over to the Americans, and asks, ‘Do you know that in India, we have an elixir that will make you fly?’ The Americans look at the man, and burst out into laughter. ‘I will show you if you like.’ Everyone continues to laugh. The Indian man calls the bartender over and orders a shot of Indian rum, mixed with crushed mint, and poured into a Lion beer. The bartender brings the drink, and the Indian man swallows it all in three large gulps. ‘I will show you how to fly,’ he tells the Americans. So the Indian man walks over to the ledge of the patio, high above the streets of New York and stands on the ledge of the building. Everyone gathers around, and watches as the Indian man leans into the wind, and falls over the building.”

“He jumps?”

“Yes,” she said. “He jumps. Do you know what happens now?”

“He flies?”

“No.”

“No?”

“Well, he sort of flies.”

“How do you sort of fly?”

“The Indian man falls very quickly toward the busy streets below, but begins to slow as he reaches the sidewalk. Eventually, he comes to a complete stop and lands gently on both feet.”

“Did the Americans see this?”

“I will tell you what happened. The Indian man walks back into the Empire State Building and takes the elevator back up to the bar. Everyone gathers around and asks how this is possible. ‘I told you,’ he says. ‘In India we have discovered the elixir for flight many years ago.’ Then one of the drunken Americans laughs at him and says that Lion beer is from America and that he is sure that they had invented it. ‘You should try it then,’ the Indian man says. The American agrees, and the bartender brings him the drink. The American drinks the concoction and runs up to the edge of the roof and leaps out into the night sky.”

“Does he fly?”

“Of course not.”

“Of course not? What happens? He dies?” Chase asked.

“Yes.”

“He dies?” Chase asked.

“Yes.”

“He was tricked.”

“Yes. He was tricked.”

“That is a . . . weird story.”

“It is not over,” she said.

“Oh . . . okay. Go on then.”

“Just then,” she said. “The Indian man walks back over to his friend at the bar. His friend has had his back turned to the whole situation the entire night. Neither said a word for a very long time. Finally, his friend says, ‘Lord Vishnu, you are mean as a snake when you get drunk.’”

Dakini throws her head back and laughs and holds her belly. Chase watches her laughing, and he laughs too.

Who are you? he thinks.

Neither of them had noticed that Shelby was awake now, sitting up, and smiling as well.

Chapter 24

A petite Indian woman walked into the room. She had short hair with sweeping bangs, and wore a white lab coat with a stethoscope around her neck. She was tired, and her large black glasses could not conceal the dark rings under her eyes. The sound of the bangles around her wrist sliding into one another could be heard as she came to an abrupt stop at the foot of the bed.

“Good morning, Dakini,” she said in a high, airy voice. “How is our patient today?”

“I think she is going to have a good day, Dr. Pathcotti,” Dakini said, reaching over to the foot of the bed and taking Shelby’s chart. Dakini handed the chart to the doctor, and continued, “Her blood pressure is down from yesterday which I think is a very good sign.”

“Thank you, Dakini,” Dr. Pathcotti said, looking over the top of her large black glasses to Dakini, and then to the chart, and then to Dakini again.

Dakini had her hands behind her back and was rocking back and forth on her heels.

“And who is our new friend, Dakini?”

“Oh,” Dakini said, extending her arm toward Chase, “this is Mr. Chase Komley, and he is from America, and he is not a doctor.”

Chase stepped forward and extended his hand. “I am a friend of Shelby’s,” he said. The doctor took his hand and studied him over the tops of her glasses. Her lips were pursed.

“When did you arrive, Mr. Komley?”

“Last night.” Chase placed both of his hands in his back pockets.

“He came to read to me,” Shelby said in a hoarse voice. All eyes turned to her.

“Dakini,” Dr. Pathcotti said, “they just put the sweet buns out in the cafeteria a few minutes ago. Why don’t you go and help yourself.”

“Ok,” she said, scooting past the doctor and through the door. They could hear her sandals slapping the hall floor for quite some time, and could hear someone down the hall say, “Good morning, Dakini.”

Dr. Pathcotti continued to gaze at the chart before taking the stethoscope from around her neck and placing it to Shelby’s chest. “Breathe deeply and hold it.” Shelby did as she was instructed. The doctor moved the stethoscope to a second location. “Again.” This went on a few more times, before the doctor stood and said, “Good.” She scribbled something on the chart. Without looking up, “That sure is a long trip to read books, Mr. Komley.”

“Too true,” he said with a smile. “Actually I came to see what I could do to help Shelby. It was my understanding before I came here that she was in a deep coma and probably wouldn’t come out.”

“Are you part of the family?” she asked.

“No, ma’am.”

“Where is the family?”

“I’m not sure,” he said.

“Neither are we,” Dr. Pathcotti said, shortly. “And do you think this hospital is providing sub-standard care also?”

Chase looked as if he didn’t understand the question. “Excuse me?”

“All day long we get calls from your friends in America. They do not think that we are running a real hospital here, Mr. Komley. Does this seem like a real hospital to you?”

“Of course, doctor . . .”

“I would like for you to report back to your friends in America that Shelby would have been dead if it was not for the care that we provided her . . . [Chase started to speak, but she continued] . . . okay, Shelby, this is what we are going to do. I am going to sedate you. This will cause you to sleep. Your recovery is looking good. With more rest, I feel certain I will be able to release you to fly home on a commercial flight and not on a medical flight. Do you understand what I am saying to you?”

Shelby looked surprised, and looked up at Chase and then back to the doctor. “Really?”

“Yes . . . but I do not think this will come all at once. I would like to run a couple of tests in the morning. And of course I cannot release you until I watch you walk these halls. But I am certain that is forthcoming.”

“How soon?” he asked.

“Soon,” Dr. Pathcotti stated flatly.

“Thank you,” Shelby said.

“You are very lucky . . . you should not be alive, you know this?”

“I do know this,” Shelby said, smiling genuinely at Dr. Pathcotti.

“Ok, so,” Dr. Pathcotti said, “I have made the appropriate calls to let everyone know we will no longer need a trauma transport back to the United States

for you. I will now go and prepare to have your tests run . . . Mr. Komley,” she said, extending her hand. “It is nice to meet you.”

“It is very nice to meet you as well. And thank you for saving her.”

“Yes.”

“I can assure you that I never thought she was getting anything less than excellent care here at your facility.”

“Very well,” she said, releasing his hand. “I will be back with the sedative.” Dr. Pathcotti turned and left the room.

Chase turned to Shelby and took the seat next to her bed. He took her hand and wrapped it in both of his.

“I think your doctor hates me,” he said, just above a whisper. She strained a smile. “Hi,” he said.

“Don’t you love Dakini?” Her voice sounded tired.

“I do. She’s fantastic.”

“She has . . . something. Like she . . . I don’t know . . . like she operates on a different level. Like she sees things from very narrow angles. I can’t put my finger on it.”

“I can see that.”

“Whatever it is . . . I love her,” she said. “I feel very connected to her.”

“Where did she come from?”

“I’m not sure exactly. I met her in a market in Pondicherry the day of the accident. I had seen her just before we headed out to visit a small village called Alivelumangarporum. She was selling pictures. She was so sweet, and so funny. We talked that morning just before we left. We were supposed to meet her back in the market the next day.”

“For what?”

“She said she knows where this guru lives and she was going to take us there.”

“A guru?”

“Yeah. Sort of. I think. We had been to a temple the day before and they worshiped what they believed to be the reincarnation of the Hindu god Hanuman.”

“And Dakini knows him?”

“Her. Dakini knows her. Seeta. Her name is Seeta.”

“Seeta?”

“Yes. But we had the accident after we left the market. And when I first came out of the coma, there she was, standing at the foot of my bed.”

“Seeta?”

“No,” she said. “Dakini.”

“Dakini was here when you woke up?”

“Yes. She’s been here ever since. It was weird. The whole thing is weird.”

“Where does Dakini live?”

“I don’t know exactly. Maybe Pondicherry.”

“She said her parents are dead,” Chase said.

“That’s what she told me too.”

“How did she get here? To the hospital?”

“Dr. Pathcotti said she asked for permission to come look after me. I think she lives in a home and someone from the home brought her here.”

“Like an orphanage?”

“I think so.”

“That makes sense. She said someone named Sister Teresa brought her.
How old is she?”

“Ten.”

Chase took in a deep breath and leaned in close to her. “So what happened?”
he said, brushing away a strand of hair from her face.

“The accident?” He nodded. “I don’t really remember the accident itself. .
. but I remember riding the bike and seeing this silver white light approaching. It
wasn’t like headlights . . . just a single light that kept getting bigger and bigger. But
it wasn’t like when a light gets bigger as you get closer. It was like it was fixed

right in front of me a few yards away and kept getting wider and wider in that fixed spot.” Shelby stopped. “Is that crazy?”

“No . . . that’s amazing.”

“Is that what happened to you when you were in a coma?”

“No. I don’t think so. I don’t remember very much about actually going into my coma.”

She nodded. “Then the next thing I knew I was standing in . . . in this place. I can’t describe it. There were all of these voices talking to me at the same time. It was like being in a huge stadium full of people and they are all talking to you at the same time. But the odd thing is that I could understand everything they were all saying, even though they all spoke at the same time. Does that make sense?”

“I think so.”

“But I had to stand perfectly still and concentrate as hard as I could to hear it all. I felt like I was filling up . . . it’s hard to explain.”

“That’s . . . beautiful . . .”

“It was . . . it was sort of scary, too. I kept feeling like I couldn’t hold it all. Like I was going to drop something.” Neither said a word. Shelby reached up with her other hand and placed it across her forehead. “It’s so frustrating. It was all so clear at first, but I feel like every time I fall asleep and wake back up, more and more of it keeps leaving me.”

Chase touched her arm. “It’s okay, sweetie. At least you’re safe now.” Chase could not believe how beautiful she looked, even in this condition.

She reached over and rubbed the top of his head. Then she held the back of his neck. "I'm glad you came." He smiled at her. Then her finger began to trace something above his left eye. "I like your pass-out scar," she whispered.

Chase could feel something turn in his stomach.

Just then, from behind them, a voice called out. "Good morning."

Chase turned around and could see a man standing in the doorway. He had long hair and an unkempt beard. He wore a gray T-shirt portraying Max from *Where The Wild Things Are* on it. His jeans hung loosely around his waist and were frayed at the bottom, tasseled around his sandals.

"Good morning, love," Shelby said. Chase looked back and forth between Shelby and the man in doorway.

“This is Dan,” she said.

Chase began to shrink.

Chapter 25

“Be open,” Chase whispered to himself as he wandered up and down the hospital corridor, his backpack sagging over his shoulder. Dr. Pathcotti walked in seconds after Dan had appeared. Dr. Pathcotti held a large syringe in one hand. Chase felt his hands clam up and a cool sweat form across his brow. He offered to leave.

Perhaps I should go back to my hotel, he thought. She will be sleeping. I had spent little time considering that I might be helping take care of her with her husband. That was a blind spot I had not checked. I should sleep.

“Hey,” a voice called out.

Chase turned and found Dan, leaning against a wall behind him, smiling.

“Hey,” Chase said. “How is she?”

“Out like a light.” Chase looked Dan over. Other than the fact that Dan’s wrist was wrapped, and that a cut was stitched up on his cheek, he looked unharmed.

“You look like you made it out of the accident okay,” Chase said. “I mean, all things considered.”

“I did,” Dan said. “She went over the handlebars. I sort of slid along underneath the bike. I had a really bad concussion and I sprained the wrist,” he said, lifting it up. “I was bedridden for a few days, but I’m good now. Mostly.”

“What was it like?”

“I thought she was dead.”

“What happened?”

“We were riding out in the countryside. And this bus just drifts across the center line. I guess the driver tried to pull back into his lane, but the back side of the bus cut right into our path. Shelby tried to brake. That was good. We didn’t hit them as hard as we could have.”

“Then she went over the handlebars?”

“Yeah. When she went over, her leg pulled the handlebars. The front wheel cut sharp, and toppled, dragging me along. That part is sort of fuzzy.”

“Did the bus bring you here?”

“No. I don’t remember anything after that, but they told me that the police came. I guess it took almost two hours. They didn’t have an ambulance anywhere near. Fortunately there was a student on the bus who

knew CPR. The police took us to a clinic in Alivelumangarporum. We were there for a few weeks before they transferred us here.”

“She looks better than I thought she would.”

“I know. She opened her eyes twice when we were in the clinic, so they decided to transfer her up here to Mercy. Then last Friday, she surprised us all by just waking up. Since then, she’s been on a dramatic upturn. They thought she would only make it a day or two when we were in the clinic. But I knew she would make it. She’s strong.” They both looked back toward her room.

“You must be relieved.”

“When did you get here?” Dan asked.

“A couple of hours ago . . . well, I got to India yesterday, but I fell asleep for sixteen hours.”

“That flight is brutal,” Dan said. “We did the same thing when we got here.”

“I’m still pretty much in a fog.”

“So,” Dan said, “I don’t know who you are.”

“Oh . . . of course,” Chase said, extending his hand. “My name is Chase Komley. I met Shelby at a party five years ago.”

Dan took his hand and squeezed it, studying Chase. “I take that back. I do know you.”

“You do?”

“Elephant-bracelet-guy.”

“I’ve been called worse.”

“Shelby told me about you.”

“She did?”

“You gave up the engineering career to open a bar, right?”

“I did.”

“Okay. I’m getting up to speed now. So . . . Chase,” Dan said. “I don’t really know you myself. And I really hate hospitals.” Dan looked over his shoulder and down the corridor toward the front of the hospital. “Do you want to get out of here?”

Chase looked back at Shelby's door. "Uh . . . sure."

"There is a great little pavilion across from the hospital where I like to go and think. Come on," he said, turning and walking away. "You'll like it."

Chase stood for a second. He had come to India to be with Shelby. He thought for a second that maybe he should stay with her in the room. He started to speak up, but Dan kept walking. Finally, Chase followed Dan.

Dan led them to a pavilion that was across the street from the hospital, with a large copper plaque at the entrance: "For Mahatma Gandhi." The sign had turned green over the years. The pavilion itself was situated alongside the Sea of Bengal, and could seat a few dozen people at most. White Greek columns defined the outer ring of the pavilion. They stood in a semi-circle all around the perimeter, reaching toward the sky, but holding nothing up. The semi-circle opened up to face the sea. In the center of the

semi-circle was a bronze statue of Gandhi holding a staff and smiling like a frog with his small round glasses. The base of the statue sat in a fountain which constantly splashed water around the feet of the peace-teacher. If you stared at it long enough, it almost looked like Gandhi was walking on water.

Throughout the pavilion were benches, mostly unoccupied on this morning. And where the semi-circle opened up to face the sea, stairs descended down to the sands below. They settled into a bench and leaned back, watching the waves crash in on the distant shore. The air was sticky and the smell of sea salts and dead fish was all about them.

“So why did you come?” Dan finally asked, gazing at the sea.

Chase thought for a second. The Sea of Bengal had sucked them both into a dreamy state. “I thought maybe I could help somehow.” No one said a thing. In the corner of Chase’s eye, he could see that Dan was nodding slowly. “Actually, I don’t know all of the reasons why I’m here.”

“That’s quite a trip to make.”

“Right?” Chase took in a deep breath, feeling the sweat break out on his forehead in the sweltering Indian heat. He had lived most of his life in the south, but this was a different heat altogether. It was more of a Presence.

Both men sat in silence as they watched a small boy wearing no shirt and tattered cut off pants. The boy had walked over to a fat man asleep on one of the benches. The boy was trying to wake him.

“I don’t know how to explain it,” Chase said. “I feel like there was something pulling me here.”

The large man sat up on his elbow and squinted as he listened to the boy say something that neither Dan nor Chase could hear.

“Something pulled you here . . .” Dan repeated, trailing off like he needed more. “What is something?”

“Circumstances, I guess.”

“The voice of god?”

Chase smiled. The two men did not look at each other, but at the small boy and the man.

“No. Not really.” Chase thought about it for a moment. “Have you ever been at a place where all of the doors in your life start to close, one-by-one, and you are like . . . going down this hall trying to find just one opened door? Then . . . finally, you come to the last door, and it’s the only one that is sitting open . . .”

“Yeah . . . I think I have.”

“That’s probably a bad way of putting it. But it’s like . . . when you get to that one remaining open door . . . you think to yourself: ‘This is it. This is the only door left to walk through’.”

“Not always easy to walk through that door though, even if it is the only one,” Dan said.

“So . . . I’m here.”

“Here we are,” Dan said. “She must mean a lot to you.”

“I think that night meant a lot to me.”

Dan looked over at Chase. “Yeah?”

“That sounded bad . . . what I mean is that her and I really connected that night. She seemed to be in touch with something that I didn’t have. It’s hard to explain.”

“I know what you mean,” Dan said, looking back to the small boy and the man.

They sat for a while without talking. Chase wasn’t sure what Dan was thinking. *Perhaps this is strange for him that a man has come to help his wife? How could you have overlooked this?*

“How did you and Shelby meet?” Chase finally asked.

Dan let out an unexpected laugh. “I met Shelby the very first day of our freshman year in college at a bonfire . . . and I fell in love with Shelby like I was in fifth grade.” He smiled. “It was actually sad. I would tell myself all the time that I was pathetic. But it didn’t help. And the thing is . . . I didn’t want a relationship. I was away from home for the first time and I was ready to forge out my own life.

I had been with my very first girlfriend Cory throughout high school, but she ended up with a severe drinking problem. Missed most of our senior year. Got kicked out. Started drinking all day long.”

“Ouch.”

“So we had no choice but to break-up. College was going to be the start of a whole new life for me. I was going to do anything and be anything that I wanted to be. No strings attached. No one to answer to. And my first big decision was to go to that bonfire.”

“And there was Shelby,” Chase said.

“And there was Shelby. I’ve come to realize that most of the time your life unfolds in spite of the plans you make.”

“Yes.”

The fat man was now sitting up and saying something to the small child, waving his hands dramatically.

“So then my life just went in this unexpected direction. Everything about me started to change when Shelby and I got together. We moved in within a month. This completely put me on the outs with her family. Do you know about her family?”

“No.”

“They’re in this really strict Christian community. It’s really sort of like a cult, I think. They used to be hippies. It’s all based on a type of communal, self-sustaining, off-the-grid sort of lifestyle. Just mix in the ten commandments and you have an idea.”

The boy watched as the man reached under the bench and pulled out a bag. He opened it and pulled out a gray and tangerine fabric. Then he pulled out a few sticks that looked like bamboo.

“What does Shelby think about it?”

“Shelby isn’t exactly against it. And I guess it started out sort of legit. They believe that modern society had promised us happiness with technology. But what we actually got was less happiness, less connectedness. So they set out to remove themselves from all the trappings of modern life.”

“Ted Kaczynski or Amish?”

“Maybe a little of both . . . minus the bombs, of course. But it’s one of those things in life where something looks really great on paper, but then it gets all fucked up.”

The boy sat in front of the large man and watched him take a string and tie the bamboo rods together.

“But Shelby isn’t the type of person to judge anyone. She’s the sort of person where if she’s with you . . . she’s with you for good, no matter what. So she stands by her parents.”

“Dr. Pathcotti indicated that her family hasn’t been able to be reached.”

“They were reached.”

“Oh, I misunderstood.”

“Not really . . . they were hard to find. They can’t use phones . . . but some of our friends paid a currier to go send the news to their compound about the accident. But they wouldn’t leave.”

“No?”

The old man took one bamboo rod after another and tied them meticulously, rechecking each knot. Then he took the fabric and spread it out like a picnic blanket on the ground in front of him. The boy sat cross-legged in the sand, watching the old man work.

“That sucks,” Chase said quietly.

“I haven’t had the heart to tell her yet.”

“I see.”

“So after college, we got married,” Dan said. “That was seven years ago. We’ve been to hell and back, her and me.”

“You have?”

“Yep.”

“How?”

Dan blew out a long breath, puffing his cheeks. “Wow. Where to start? Ok . . . so I got this great job working for this huge genetics company. Mostly paternity testing. I made a lot of money. Great benefits. Textbook start to a life, right? Shelby and I moved out of our crappy condo and bought a house, bought a pool. Had Koi ponds and streams and a waterfall . . . big arbors . . . this little paradise really . . . all in our backyard. We built it all ourselves.”

The man sat on the ground next to the boy and began to attempt to thread a needle. His belly flopped over into his lap. After his third attempt, he handed the thread and the needle to the boy, who threaded it in one try.

“Life was good then. But then one day I showed up at a staff meeting and found out that my superiors had forged my credentials to get me certified in crime

scene matches. That was the big moneymaking side of the business. But the thing is . . . I had told them for years I didn't want certification in that area. I had no training. There is too much liability in crime scene matches. I wasn't even interested in that area. The point is that they were clear on my stance with crime scene matches. But they went ahead and submitted my application to the state board to get me certified without my knowledge. I didn't even know they had applied. I only found out when I got my certificate saying that I was approved. Then I asked to see the application, and I found that it had been forged.”

“Forged?”

“Yeah, they said I had five years of direct training in this field.”

The heavy man placed the fabric over the tied-up bamboo frame, and began to pierce the needle through the fabric, around the bamboo, and back through the other side. He did this over and over again while the boy watched.

“What did you do?” Chase asked.

“Nothing exactly, at first. I was in shock. I told them that I was against it in the board meeting, but they blew it off. I got home that night and I thought about it and started to get angry. For one, I was angry that my opinion didn’t matter to them. Then I got caught up on random things. Like how the hell could the state be fooled so easily? Made me think about people on death row. Mostly, I guess what worried me the most was that if it was discovered that my application was forged it would be my career at stake.”

“What did you do?”

“So that night I sat down and sent them a letter and told them that they had a choice: either they go to the state and undo this mess or I would. I sent the letter certified.”

The small boy slowly turned the bamboo and the fabric while the man stitched. When he was finished, the boy handed the man a large ball of twine that was sitting next to him.

“What did they choose?” Chase asked.

“So get this: I get a letter back in the mail that says that they are accepting my resignation, and that they would like to remind me of my three year non-compete contract. And when I say non-compete contract, I’m talking it covered the entire South. It didn’t cover Mississippi, oddly enough. I could have worked in Mississippi. Awesome. The point is that I was literally shut completely out of the field altogether. Now mind you, every bit of my education and training had led me to do one specific thing, and one specific thing only. Take that away, and I’m just an over-educated waiter.”

“Non-competes aren’t held up in court any more . . .”

Dan laughed.

The heavy man and the boy stood and walked out of the pavilion and down the stairs toward the beach, both carrying the tangerine and gray thing that they had just created.

“That’s funny. That’s exactly what I used to think. I figured that I would be covered under some whistle-blower law or something. So I wasn’t particularly worried about it at first. Shelby and I went out for sushi that night and I told her my game-plan. How I had already talked to an attorney . . . how everything was going to be fine. How we’d probably be able to sue their pants off. I noticed she wasn’t eating, just sipping her sake from time-to-time. I asked her what was wrong, and she nodded and said, ‘This isn’t good.’ I was so oblivious. I thought at first she meant the sake wasn’t good.”

Once the man and the small boy had reached the beach, they began to walk in the exact opposite direction of one another. The boy held the ball of twine, and the man carried the fabric and the bamboo. Moving away from one another, back-to-back, this could have been a gunfight outside a saloon.

After a long pause, Dan said, “We lost everything. The house, all of our possessions, our dogs. Everything.”

“How?” Chase asked.

“We went through our entire life’s savings in six months with attorney’s fees and that never even got us to trial. I mean we lost everything. We ended up renting an eight-by-eight bedroom from a friend in Chicago, barely getting by on what we were making as bartenders. Before this mess, I was making a great six figure salary, great benefits, insurance, everything . . . and now I was excited if I walked with \$400 in tips.”

“How is that even possible?”

“I learned a valuable lesson during that time in my life. The color of justice is green, and all of the American legal system is structured to ensure that those who have wealth can maintain that wealth. And if you

aren't wealthy, then you're fucked. They kept filing motion after motion after motion, knowing that I was slowly running out of money. They knew I would run out long before them.”

At that moment, the small boy began to run as fast as he could. And the old man took the tangerine and gray thing they had made and threw it up in the air with all of his might. From where they sat, Dan and Chase could hear the fabric flapping in the wind as it climbed higher and higher into the air.

“Everything in Shelby and my life changed in that moment. It was a very concentrated education. I learned a lot of things during that time in our life.”

“Like what?”

“The biggest surprise for me . . . I think . . . was to find that Life just sort of reshapes itself to accommodate the new space you're in.”

“How?”

“I mean . . . we always manage to survive . . . I mean as humans. It’s like, regardless of the job we have or what we have in our bank account, we manage to go on living. When I was a kid I always had enough money to buy a video game, and when I got in college I had enough to buy an outfit for a date . . . and when Shelby and I lost everything, we always had enough money to buy beer. So then I thought . . . fuck it. If life is going to accommodate any space I occupy, why not occupy the space I really, really want to be in.”

“What space is that?”

“This,” he said, pointing all around. “When I had everything, my life was regimented to all of the needs . . . the need for a deposit in the retirement account, the need for insurance renewal . . . all of it. In the meantime, I always said I wanted to get out and see the world . . . but did I? No. My old life required every ounce of my blood, my time . . . my spirituality . . . my joy.” A gull squawked as it hovered above them in the

ocean's breeze. "So I decided to go and find the Life that I really wanted to live . . . and let Life reshape itself accordingly."

"I'm not sure anymore if that's very realistic," Chase said.

"Isn't it? How am I here then?" Chase did not reply. "The Universe wants you to find your happiest Life. We have to find the people, the places, and the events that make us the happiest. Surround ourselves with them. Then Life will reshape itself around those choices." Several gulls joined the first one, hovering above Dan and Chase, perhaps thinking they were hiding bread from them. "The point is this: the Universe is conspiring for your happiness . . . you just have to wake up and join in . . ."

Just then, Dan and Chase could see that the small boy was flying a kite. The kite flapped in the wind out over the Sea of Bengal, and flew in figure-eights, forming a sort of infinity symbol. The man waddled back across the beach to stand next to the small boy. He placed his hand upon the boy's shoulder.

“But you know . . . the real shit of the matter . . . Chase . . . is that the company that fucked us over so hard was owned by my father.”

Chase took his attention away from the kite and looked over at Dan, who was still watching the kite. Chase processed this, and thought of what to say. He turned back to the kite, and could see for the first time that the kite bore the image of an elephant painted in elaborate tangerine tribal make-up.

“Well,” Dan finally said. “I could go for a drink.”

Chapter 26

The bar that sat near the ocean was not such a very large bar, and its faded turquoise shutters were opened up to face the Sea of Bengal. The breeze moved nicely through the bar. Black clouds had begun to form on the horizon, stirring up large, white capped waves that crashed the shore.

The bar was empty, except for the barkeep. He was a dark-skinned, undernourished man with sunken eyes and a thick beard. He wore a white oxford shirt with sweat-stains around the collar and a black bowtie that was not tied correctly. The walls of the bar were plaster, and were painted a buttery-yellow. The bar was filled with round mahogany tables surrounded by chairs of various colors.

Beside the bar was an altar, dingy red, with a picture of the blue Krishna sitting in the middle of a few burning candles. Beside this, two dried up flowers sat by a pan of bright orange powder, and a couple of unframed black-and-white photographs of an elderly Indian woman.

Through the open shutters, they could still see the kite in the distance, as well as the small boy, laughing with the man.

“And you will have what?” the barkeep asked after they took a seat at a table by the opened shutters. The barkeep had a towel thrown over one shoulder and used a second towel to dry a glass that was in his hand.

Chase looked blankly at Dan at this question. Part of coming to India was that he had vowed to stay sober for the duration of the trip. He didn't exactly want to share this with Dan. Dan returned the gaze, and when he saw that Chase had formed no opinion to the question, he told the barkeep that they would have two Ganeshes. The barkeep nodded and moved away from the table.

A stand of palm trees stood like watchmen beside the opened shutters. Their leaves whispered softly as the wind moved over the ocean and into the bar.

“So needless to say, you and your father aren’t on good terms?” Chase asked.

Dan thought about this, and said nothing for a long time. “So why did you cut your hair off?”

The barkeep sat both pints in front of them, and walked away. Chase rubbed the top of his smooth head as he downed half of his beer in one gulp. “Ah,” he said. “I wanted India to be a change for me.” Chase thought about this for a moment. “How did you know I cut it?”

“Your head is whiter than your face,” Dan said, looking back and forth from his scalp to his eyes. “So you came to help Shelby or to make a change?”

“I think maybe they are the same thing.”

“Interesting.” Dan thought about that. “No,” he finally said. “My father and I haven’t talked since then. I saw him once outside the courtroom for a motion hearing, but we didn’t speak.”

Chase accommodated the abrupt shifts in conversation. “Neither of you have strong family ties. What do you and Shelby do for the holidays?”

“We usually take a trip.”

Chase smiled and downed the rest of his beer. Dan did the same. “That’s sad,” Chase said, wiping the foam from his upper lip.

“No . . . it’s actually really great. We decided to embrace our lack of family.” Without asking, the barkeep put two more beers in front of them, and took the empties. “I mean the thing of it is, most people hate the holidays with their family. The pressure leading up to it, the travel, the shallow chit chat, the no one wanting to be in the same room with Uncle Larry. All of it. You get through it and you have a \$5000 credit card bill

that's due. I mean, who made these rules? Why do we keep doing the same miserable shit? For Shelby and me, our fucked-up parents sort of did us a favor. favor. We don't have to deal with any of that. We can do what we want."

The buzz started to make its way up through Chase, and his face felt warm. He looked out at the ocean and to the skies that were summoning great dark forces on the horizon.

"But the thing is . . . no, I haven't talked to my father since then . . . but sometimes I wish I could. I sort of want to tell him that not only do I forgive him, but that in a weird way, I am actually thankful for how everything went down."

"Thankful?" Chase asked, laughing. "Right."

Dan reached across the table and leaned in toward Chase. "No . . . really. That's the deal. It wasn't until Shelby and I lost everything that I figured out a way to make peace with the Universe."

Dan reached into his pocket and started digging around. “What does that mean?” Chase asked. Dan kept digging and didn’t answer, and they both looked out over the ocean when they saw a flash of white light in the distance.

“Whoa!” Dan said, pulling a bottle out his pocket, and fiddling with the cap. “We gotta storm coming . . . that’s rare when we’re out of monsoon season.” Dan opened the bottle and poured a couple of pills in his palm. He slid one across the table to Chase, and closed the bottle, putting it back in his pocket.

“What are these?” Chase asked, looking at the pill. The pill was yellow, roughly the size of a pinky-tip.

“Indian strength Percocet,” he said with a smile. “Go on.” Chase rolled the pill back and forth between his fingers, reading the stamp on it, thinking about his sobriety commitment. Dan downed his pill and waved at the barkeep, holding up his empty glass.

“Two Campari’s,” he called out. “And two more Ganeshes.”

“Oh well,” Chase muttered, taking the pill and downing it with the last of his beer. “It’s gonna do what it’s gonna do.”

Dan leaned forward, and started to talk with a different pitch in his voice, his head tilted a little differently, a new intensity in his demeanor. And he spoke a little faster.

“Ok, so at about this same time, I’m reading this book. And there’s a boy, and his ship sinks, see, and he’s stuck on a lifeboat with a tiger.” Subconsciously, Dan pointed out at the ocean as he said this. “So this kid is spending all of his first days at sea trying to think of ways to kill this tiger. But then it finally dawns on the kid one day that he can’t kill the tiger, he has to tame the tiger. He has to train him. He realized that their survival was intermingled. They needed each other.”

Dan stopped for emphasis, waiting for a light to flick on. “You lost me,” is all Chase said, feeling a sense of vibrating, numb, bliss working its way throughout his body.

“Okay, so the kid had to make a radical shift in thought process for his own survival. He had been thinking about things in a conflict scenario . . . of Us versus Them . . . of me versus the tiger . . .and in that type of mindset there can only be war and conflict. And the problem is that there has never been any amount of war that has ultimately brought about peace. So he shifted his mind out of combat into a mindset of collaboration . . . of working together . . . of seeing their destinies as being intermingled. So from there he came to realize that he needed the tiger. And eventually he came to love the tiger as well.”

Chase nodded slowly as the next round of beers and the two blood orange Campari’s were set before them. They both downed the Campari’s at the same time, and the better half of the two beers as well. A second flash lit up the horizon. The waves were larger, and kept crowding in on one another.

“Bam,” Dan said, slapping the table, “I was sitting in line at Krystal’s at 4 am after closing down the bar, when all the pieces started to come together . . . and it was like this new paradigm shift in the way I thought about things. Up until that time, our lives – Shelby and I - were consumed with the lawsuit and with losing everything and with the not-being-able-to-breathe . . . and then it dawned on me that all of this had come into my life so that I could come to see the world in a different way . . . to make friends with the Universe instead of always fighting it.”

The palm leaves were no longer whispering, but sounded more like a roaring waterfall, and the wind now blew so pleasantly against Chase’s face and over his scalp that he sometimes had to squint his eyes to focus on Dan.

“So then over the next couple of months I decided to take everything I thought I knew and toss it out the window, and attempt to look at everything with new eyes. I wasn’t going to allow anything to be safe, no matter how sacred it had been in my life. I wanted to try to see how the Universe actually moves, not the way I wanted it to move. I wanted to understand how I could break free from the mindset that if something was uncomfortable, I would have to kill it or run from

it.” Dan leaned forward and started to say something, then went for his beer instead, downing it, before slamming the glass to the table.

“The point is this: Was there a possibility that I had brought so much of my misery on myself in this life because I wasn’t in harmony with the way the Universe actually worked? I mean that kid in the book was terrified and miserable and scared until he came to the point that he no longer wanted to kill the tiger. Then when he started to tend to the tiger’s needs and to figure out ways for them to live in close proximity, a peace settled in on him.”

Chase downed the last swig of his beer and knew he was fucked up. Without missing a beat, two more beers just materialized before them, and two shots of absinthe. He looked at the new beers and then back over his shoulder to where the barkeep had retreated to. The light in the bar had shifted in intensity. For the first time, the distant sound of thunder could be heard.

Both men downed the shots of absinthe.

“The thing is, everything in the entire Universe is in some sort of orbit with everything else. Everything is moving in these circular patterns that just repeat on and on forever. I looked back on my life and saw that these repeating patterns kept coming around and around back into my life. And that’s when it dawned on me that this is the fundamental nature of the Universe. These repeating patterns are actually orbits. It’s like the seasons: winter always comes around . . . but no two winters are ever the same.”

“Like planets around the sun or some shit like that?” Chase slurred.

“Exactly like that. Electrons orbit protons. Moons orbit planets. Solar systems orbit through galaxies. From the smallest particle to the largest star, the principle is the exact same. Everything is in orbit with everything else. Don’t you see?”

“See what?”

“Focus, man. Here’s the way I used to see things: Someone comes into your life, maybe a parent, maybe a co-worker, a neighbor, who knows? Then some sort of relationship unfolds, then some sort of conflict arises, then the relationship ends. But then I started to see that when a person comes into your life, what is happening is a new orbit is forming in your life that will never go away. If they show up in your life, they will be there forever, even if the nature of that orbit is constantly changing. So I have learned to embrace it.”

“So like you spin around people or something?”

“Oh good lord,” Dan said, snapping his fingers. “Right here. Listen. If a person shows up . . . okay? . . . in *my* life . . . I know that a new orbit with this person is going to be formed in my life. We will journey together. Maybe it’s a really loose orbit, like Hailey’s Comet . . . maybe it’s a really close orbit, like the moon. Who knows?”

“So who is Hailey’s Comet and who is the moon?”

“Good question. Hailey’s Comet might be your aunt in Utah you only see once every twenty years. And your moon, well, your moon is like me and Shelby.”

“Dude,” Chase said, almost slurring, “What the fuck are you talking about?”

Dan laughed and killed the last of his beer. “Okay . . . I got it . . . here’s a perfect example. Cory, my ex-girlfriend. In a traditional situation, a break-up is nasty and ugly and people fight and they tell lies and they spread rumors. But you see, Cory isn’t out of my life. It’s just that the nature of our relationship has changed.”

“So what does that mean?”

“It means Cory and I still orbit one another . . . just a looser orbit than before.”

“Who the fuck is Cory?”

Dan laughed at him. “She was my serious relationship before Shelby. She became an alcoholic . . . I told you this already.”

They both laughed. “So you’re telling me that you and your ex still have a relationship?”

“That’s what I’m saying. She never really left my life. We still talk sometimes, and go get a bite to eat occasionally.”

“Shelby is okay with that?”

“Of course . . . they are friends too . . . and she wants the best for Cory as well. Now granted, it took a long time for this all to settle into good, and I had a lot of growing up to do . . . but now that we have it, it is actually a beautiful thing. Shelby and I have helped her out financially a

few times, we helped her move two years ago, we all trained for a 200 mile bike race once. You see the point is this: Cory and I, and for that matter, Shelby and Cory are in these strange orbits around each other. So instead of seeing things like that kid in the boat with the tiger . . . like, this is uncomfortable, I have to kill this tiger . . . we just figure out new ways to cohabitate this lifeboat that we all share.”

Chase thought about this. He actually thought about Maggie. He looked around the bar, and thought to himself about all of the months they spent arguing over the ownership of Sappho’s. Neither man said a word. They both looked out over the water and saw that the storm was not so far away any longer.

“That works?”

“Yeah . . . it’s not perfect, but it works . . . it actually relieves a lot of pressure knowing that every conflict does not have to end in an enemy. In fact I spent a lot of time going back to old enemies and mending bridges . . . “

“How?”

“How? By finding them. By figuring out where they were in the world. I got in touch with them. Some of them wouldn’t talk to me. Most would. I tried to meet in person when possible.”

“What was that like?”

“Hard. But it felt good. You know? I mean, here’s the deal: I’ve done a lot of fucked up things in my life, and a lot of those things hurt people that I really cared about. All I wanted to do was admit that to them, and ask for forgiveness.”

“Did they?”

“For the most part, yeah. That’s the thing. I think we all want this way of living. So I found people responded to it. It’s not like we jumped back into these deep friendships, but . . . it’s nice knowing things are good.”

“Just not you father?”

Dan shook his head slowly. “No . . . just not him . . . someday maybe. . . “

Rain began to pour onto the tin roof of the bar. They both looked up at the ceiling at the same time. “Whoa!” Dan howled. Rain sprayed in from the open window and felt like some form of lost magic as it struck Chase’s face. Dan walked over to the barkeep and handed him a wad of bills. The water fell in sheets over the tin roof.

Dan grabbed the back of Chase’s arm and helped him to his feet. “Come on,” he said.

Dan moved toward the door. “Where are we going?” Chase asked, but Dan was already outside. “Shouldn’t we wait for . . .” Chase trailed off. “Okay . . . this is happening.” Chase stumbled through the door of the bar and stood in the downpour, looking both ways for Dan.

Chase was astonished to see that Dan was running down the beach toward the Sea of Bengal. “What the hell is this ass-clown doing?” Chase held his hand over his eyes to shield from the rain. “Hey!” Chase yelled after Dan, but he kept running.

For no logical reason that Chase could work out in his mind, he started to run after Dan as well. He could see that Dan had stopped by the surging tides and was stripping out of his clothes.

Chase caught up. “What the fuck?” Chase was shouting to be heard over the rain and the pounding surf. Dan looked up at Chase.

“Come on,” he shouted. “Hurry.” Dan’s long hair fell in strands around his face, and water dripped in streams from his beard. Dan was now naked, with the exception of the brace on his wrist. Dan turned and started to rush into the ocean.

“This is crazy,” Chase said, as he stripped down as well. Chase looked back and could see the lights of the bar coming from the opened shutters. Then he looked back into the ocean where he saw Dan dive over a crashing wave and pop up on the other side.

Chase ran into the water. The Sea of Bengal was warmer than he had imagined it to be. The contrast of cold rain pouring down on his upper body while the warm sea embraced the rest was an unimaginable sensation. When he wasn't paying attention, a wave crashed into his back and knocked him to his knees. The ocean ran over the entirety of him as he struggled to his feet.

Chase stood, and felt the undercurrents moving back through his feet in the opposite direction of the waves all around him. Lightning flashed out over the sea. He wasn't sure if it was just in his mind or not, but for a second, Chase thought he could feel a sudden rush of low electricity.

Dan popped up out of the water right beside him. In any given moment, they were either standing in shoulder-deep or knee-deep water depending on the cycle of the waves that passed through them.

Chase saw Dan and started to laugh. Dan started to laugh. “What are we doing?” Chase shouted.

“We’re living!”

Dan dove over another wave and popped up a several meters away. He swam back to Chase.

“I need to tell you something!” Dan shouted. Chase tried to move closer to Dan but the Sea of Bengal had other plans. Keeping above water was the best he could do.

“What?” Chase shouted back.

“I’m leaving tomorrow.”

“What?”

“I’m going to find Shelby’s parents.” A wave slapped his back and sprayed water between them.

“But they are releasing Shelby soon. Dr. Pathcotti said so.”

“That’s what they’re telling her. It’s good for recovery.”

Just then, another flash of lightning burst into a maze of crooked tentacles in the sky overhead, illuminating the rowdy waves. Thunder boomed.

Chase watched Dan, as a wave crested over his shoulder. Dan shouted “Whoa!” and laughed up into the sky. Dan dove into the sea again, and disappeared.

Lightning flashed again. Chase looked back at the shoreline. He thought he saw someone standing where the tides came in. He heard the thunder that followed, and he could hear Dan come up from somewhere behind him.

But by the next flash, Chase was certain he could see a figure, a short man wearing a black t-shirt with a British flag on it. The man was standing perfectly still in the foamy shoreline of the troubled sea.

Chapter 27

The room was hot and stale. Chase awoke. Shafts of sunlight barged through the closed blinds, illuminating specs of dust. He sat up in bed, completely drenched in sweat. The sheets below him were wet in rings. Chase rested on one elbow, surveying the room. He did not remember how he got back to his hotel. His head felt stuffed with hot marbles that rattled one way and then the next, with every move. A burning nausea was in the back of his throat.

Through the skin-thin walls he could hear a couple arguing. Mostly the man yelled. Occasionally he could hear a female trying to protest, but the man bulldozed over her, always raising his voice.

Chase quickly got up from the bed and ran to the restroom. He slid down beside the toilet and fumbled with the lid. He felt his stomach contracting, and leaned in right as the lid was falling closed. Chase tried to lunge his face into the toilet, but as he did, his forehead cracked into the now falling lid. He tried to yell shit and vomit at the same time, and mostly missed the toilet and made a mess.

The heaving continued and he buried his face down in the toilet. He could taste Johnny Walker Red, and had no recollection of drinking scotch. He hated scotch. He hated all dull, salty brown alcohols. The thought of scotch made him vomit again. And later again. He was covered in sweat from the night before, and now a new cold sweat was breaking out on his forehead.

Slowly, the nausea subsided. *This is good*, he thought. *The vomiting will help*. He rolled over and placed his face on the bathroom floor. The tile was cold. Chase tried to breathe, and he tried to remember what had happened the night before. There was the bar. There was the ocean, of course. But then what?

Surely there is a difference in being open to life, and playing reckless games with it, he thought.

Then at once he was unclear of the time (or the day for that matter) and reminded himself why he was here in India in the first place. Was it still Friday? Or was it Saturday now? Chase fumbled to his feet, and began

to clean up his mess. Chase stood in the cold water of the shower and did not move. With unspeakable effort, he managed to hold himself up against the wall of the shower and feel the water on his face. Trying to stay upright was proving to be as difficult as trying to keep his balance in the ocean the night before.

Chase thought about his promise to stay sober in India.

They had just started to serve lunch in the hotel lobby, and Chase sat quietly at a table alone and ate naan and drank four glasses of juice that was freshly squeezed. He did not know what the juice was, but mixed with the Advil, a certain remedy was stumbled upon. He stepped out of the hotel, and managed to get one foot in front of the other, and make his way along the street.

Chase entered Shelby's room. Her head bandage had been removed. He could now see that one side of her hair was severely shorter than the other. Throughout her hair, red tips and red streaks peeked out of her otherwise wavy blonde hair. Some of the swelling in her face had gone down slightly. For the first time, he was getting a better look at her face. She turned to face him as he walked

in the room. Her right eye was patched, and she moved with a deliberateness that made Chase think she was coming out of sedation.

“Look at you,” he said as they came face-to-face. “You’re the girl who lived.”

Shelby reached for him with her free hand. He leaned in and kissed the side of her face. “I feel better,” she said with a smile. “Tired, but better.”

Chase smiled back, and adjusted his backpack on his shoulder. “I like your hair,” he said.

Shelby ran her hand in the long side, tussling it, and making it messy. “This is what you like?” Her hair looked like a rat’s nest. He smiled at her and straightened it back out for her. “How are you feeling this morning?” she asked.

Chase sat back in the chair by the bed. “I’m okay,” he said, nodding his head.

“You’re not a very good liar.”

“Wait for it,” Chase said as he opened his backpack. He retrieved their favorite book out from among its contents. He held it up to her. The book was bloated to over three times its original size, and the cover was trying to separate.

“Oh,” she said, looking painfully at the book. She sounded sincerely upset. “You killed *The Poisonwood Bible* . . .”

“Well . . . the key is . . . I pretty much let the rain do all the work.”

“Oh,” she said again, gently reaching up to touch the cover. “Just like Ruth May.” Chase placed the book back in his backpack.

“Sorry,” he said to her.

“No, I’m sorry,” she said. “I should have warned you about Dan. He can be . . . well, he can be a lot of fun . . . maybe too much fun.”

“You have a good man,” Chase said. *That sounded stupid*, he thought. *Don’t say things like that.*

“I do,” she said.

“Is he up yet?”

“He left this morning. He flew back to the states.”

“Is that right?”

“He’s going to go find my parents.”

“He mentioned that last night. When will he be back?”

“Depends. If I’m out within the week, he’s going to try to get them to be home for me when I get back. If it’s more than a week, he’s going to try to get them to come fly back with me.”

“He told me last night they haven’t been easy to find.”

“They live off the grid,” she stated casually, as if she were pointing out that the sky had clouds in it.

“Interesting.”

“Chase,” she said, hesitating. “How are you?”

“How am I?”

“Yeah, you fly all the way around the world to be here. No one else made that trip. And I didn’t even ask you how you are?”

He smiled at her. “Polite to a fault, aren’t you?”

“Seriously, tell me about your life. What’s been going on with you? How is Maggie? How’s the bar? Tell me everything. Don’t spare a single detail.”

“Actually Maggie and I are divorced now.”

“No!” she said all at once. “When? Why?”

“Good question . . . Jesus,” he said. “That goes pretty far back. Actually, it all went down right about the time I saw you at the Indigo.”

“Really? Am I a home wrecker?”

“A little,” he said with a smile. “Not really . . . sort of.”

“Sort of?”

Chase did not know how to continue or even if he should. “So the thing is, Maggie and I got in a pretty big argument the day after that party. She felt like I came in way too late, and she didn’t care very much for the fact that I went on and on about you.”

“You went on and on about me?” This fell heavy in the room and sat between them uncomfortably.

Chase stretched, and fiddled with his hands. He had broken eye contact with her. “You know . . .”

“What did you say?”

Chase looked back at her. “Just . . . what a great time we had, how good it was to meet you, how we laughed. You know. That I hoped I’d see you again.” He cleared his throat.

“I think I met her.”

“Maggie?”

“Yeah. Is she really tall with pale, pale skin?”

“Yeah. How did you meet her? When?”

“I came by Sappho’s the morning after we hung out at the party.”

“You did?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“I wanted to say good-bye. I wanted to thank you for the bracelet. But when I got there, a woman was behind the bar. I asked for you.”

“What did she say?”

“She said you were out. I thanked her and started to leave, but she stopped me and asked where I got the bracelet. I told her it was a gift.”

“You came back?”

“Yeah.”

“I never knew.”

“She didn’t tell you?”

“No. But that all makes sense now. The fight started because she asked what happened to my bracelet.”

“What did you say?”

“I told her I lost it.”

“Did she believe you?”

“She asked me if I lost it on some little hot blonde’s wrist.”

“Aw . . . she thought I was hot. That’s nice.”

“It was all a red herring,” he said. “Later, I found out that she had been having an affair with the lady who created the green space on the roof of the bar. I’m not sure if you remember, but that’s why she wasn’t there that night.”

“With the lady?”

“Yep.”

“What was that like?” she asked.

“Um . . . tough, I guess. Tough in the sense that it feels really unjust. Tough also because it’s one thing if you’re cheated on with someone of the opposite sex . . . but it’s a different type of pain when it’s someone of the same sex. It’s a categorical shift that you can’t really compete with. It’s not like you’ve just gone down in the score of the game and you can always score some more points and go back on top . . . it’s like the other person walked away from the game completely and joined a whole new sport.”

“Wow . . .”

“I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised. It was coming. The bar had sucked everything out of us.”

“Really? You seemed so in love with it when I saw you that night.”

“Bar life is tough.”

“Yes,” she said.

He started to pause, but continued, “You close at 4 am and someone still has to run payroll. Restock. Empty grease traps. Our whole life just became obligations. And I think she resented me for that.”

“Why?”

“I think because I was the one who had the vision for this new life. When she met me, she was falling for an engineer. She was going to train for the Olympic time trials. Then I talked her into opening the bar. Seemed like a great idea at the time. But it ended up being a mess.”

“Can I tell you something?” she finally said. He nodded. “If it hadn’t of been for that night with you at the party, I wouldn’t be here now.”

“So . . . I send one woman to a lesbian relationship and another to a coma? Nice.”

“No,” she laughed. The laugh sounded sincere. “That night - when we talked - I was so taken by the fact that you had the courage to give up everything and go in a different direction in your life. I came home and I talked to Dan about it for like a week solid.”

“So you were talking about me too?”

“I was,” she said. “Dan had been working for this company and had been making great money. But he had lost his job, and we were slowly drowning financially. In fact, the night of that party, we had just had my car repossessed, and had been served papers for foreclosure on the house as well. Dan was literally at home that night on Valium and Xanax having a nervous breakdown.”

“He was?”

“I couldn’t deal with any of it. I told him I had to get out of the house. So I called Stanley and he told me about the party. But after we talked that night, I went home the next day, and while we’re packing to leave for Chicago, I started in on a campaign to change our life. If we were losing everything anyway, why not rebuild it however we wanted. I used you as, literally, my only example in every conversation we had about it.”

“How did he take it?”

“A little resistant at first. I think he was just in panic mode for a long time. But as we started to lose one thing after the other, I think we both started to see that starting over was going to be our only option. So why not make our life what we wanted it to be.”

“What did that mean for you guys?”

“Well . . . I guess the first step was embracing the stripping down process. At first, I think, you’re terrified because you have built all of this comfort into your life, and you feel it slipping away. But then we shifted our mindset toward using this as an opportunity to make our life lean, compact. We started living by the Lao Tzu concept that, ‘If a man carries more than a rug to sleep on, he carries too much’. Then we both got jobs as bartenders, because we felt like that was something we could take with us anywhere in the world. And yes, bar life is tough.”

“Ug,” he said. They both nodded.

“On the road trip up to Chicago, we came up with a 5 year game plan. Both of us always wanted to travel, but never had. I told him right there that in five years we would come to India for the summer.” Neither said anything. “You giving me the bracelet was my third thing.”

“What do you mean?”

“I told you that night that when something crosses your path twice, it is just the Universe giving you a nod. But if it crosses a third time, it’s the Universe trying to get your attention.”

“How was I the third thing?”

“Remember? I told you India had crossed my path twice that day, and then you gave me the bracelet. You were my third thing. And now I’m here. So you see? You helped tip the course of my life.”

“Are you happier now?” he asked.

Shelby thought about that, and was about to answer, but was interrupted.

Chapter 28

Dr. Pathcotti walked in the room. “Good afternoon,” she said, walking up to the bedside and taking the clipboard. “Hello, Mr. Komley,” she said to Chase. “How is our patient today?”

“I’m tired today,” Shelby said, flatly.

“That is good. This is what we want. We want you to sleep. I’m going to give you more sedative today. Okay?”

Shelby nodded. “I haven’t seen Dakini today.”

“Dakini is packing up her things. She has to go back to the orphanage.”

“What?” Shelby asked. “Why?”

“Father Chadwick from the orphanage called and said that he feels like a month away from the home is probably enough. I told him you would be going home soon. It seems like the right time. Besides, he said that she had a friend call on her who wishes to see her. It is time that she goes back to being a child for a while.”

“May I ask you a question?” Chase asked.

“Of course,” Dr. Pathcotti replied.

“How did she become an orphan?”

“Her parents worked at one of the large hotels in Mumbai when the city was attacked by terrorists. They were shot during the attacks. Dakini witnessed her mother’s death.”

“Oh no,” Shelby said. “I didn’t know that. That was the night we met.” Chase turned and looked at her. “That was how India came up in the first place.”

“That’s right.” he said. “How strange.”

“Her parents were killed in that attack?” Shelby asked.

“Her mother was killed. Her father was shot as well. He was shot in the back, carrying Dakini to safety. But he lived.”

“Where does she live?” Chase asked.

“In Pondicherry.”

“Where is her father?” Shelby asked.

“Let’s just say he never really fully recovered from the attack.”

Dr. Pathcotti turned to the second page in the chart, and then pulled her stethoscope from her lab coat and placed them in her ears. “Deep breath in,” she said. “Another.”

When Dr. Pathcotti had finished, Shelby asked, “Would it be alright if Chase takes the train back with Dakini to see her home?” Both Chase and Dr. Pathcotti were taken aback by this request. Shelby turned to Chase. “Would you mind?”

Chase shook his head. “I can do that. Sure.”

“The thing is,” Shelby said, “I care about that little girl like she’s my own, and I would feel better if someone I trust could escort her back. I don’t mean to impose on you, Chase.”

“Not at all. I’d love to take her back. Are you sure you won’t need me here?”

Dr. Pathcotti cut in. “She will be sleeping mostly,” she said. “There is nothing to do here. It would be good for you to take her. I will make arrangements.”

“May I ask you another question?” Chase asked.

“Certainly,” Dr. Pathcotti said.

“Do you know much about Pondicherry?”

“Some. Why?”

“Do you happen to know of a gorilla named Kimba that used to be at the Pondicherry Zoo?”

“Of course. Everyone knows of Kimba . . . the magnificent gorilla who knows how to use sign language. She lived there until a year ago.”

“Did you ever see her?”

“Of course.”

“Did she ever sign to you?”

“No. Why do you ask?”

“Kimba died last week at my zoo back home.”

“No,” Dr. Pathcotti said, sounding shocked. “What happened?”

“They are saying she tried to escape and fell down a ravine.”

“That is quite sad. Pondicherry will be sad to hear this news. She was adored. Why did she try to escape?”

“I don’t know. I saw her the day she died.”

“You did?” Shelby asked.

“Yes. It was a very strange day for me. I see Kimba an hour or so before she dies, and then I find out that Shelby was in an accident on the very same day.”

“How awful.”

“Then I find out that Shelby was in an accident in Pondicherry and that Kimba is being returned to her home in Pondicherry. So . . . I decided to come too.”

“So I influenced the course of your life as well,” Shelby said.

“Yes,” he said.

“It is good that you came, Mr. Komley,” said Dr. Pathcotti. “And it is good that Kimba will be coming home too.”

Dr. Pathcotti took a syringe from her pocket and slid it into the I.V. “Sleep now, child. We will talk later.”

Dr. Pathcotti left the room, dismissing herself, and Chase moved closer to Shelby's bed. He brushed her hair from the side of her face.

"Thank you for taking Dakini," she said in heavy voice.

"Anything for you," he said, looking down upon her. Chase watched her eyes droop, then open, then droop again.

"Maybe she's your thirthig," she said, slurry.

"What?" Her lids were closing.

"Maybe she's . . . " She fought it, but eventually her eyes closed, and her head tilted heavily to the side.

Chapter 29

Dakini stood packed. Everything she needed was stuffed into a *Rocko's Modern Life* backpack which hung loosely over both shoulders. Chase held her hand tightly as they stood on the platform, waiting to board the train. He looked down at her at least once every minute, making sure he could trust the feeling of her hand in his. The platform was crowded, with people moving like ants all around them.

I will not lose her, he insisted. I am in India, and I do not know where I am going. But I will not lose her. If I only do one thing right, by God, it will be this.

Small boys walked through the people with trunks on their heads, and women with baskets did the same. An old fellow with a hunched back and a green wool suit walked with great difficulty through the crowd, carrying a cage full of chickens, all flapping and leaving a trail of feathers in his wake. Chase watched a towering woman in a yellow sari pass by in conversation with an equally towering Indian woman in a black suit. Once every few minutes a child would come up to them and offer to sell them something: a map, a book, a pack of playing cards with the pictures of deities on the back. One child offered to sing them a song for two

rupees. Dakini was impatient with them and would wave them away like an annoying fly.

In time, their train boarded, and Chase and Dakini settled into a private compartment that had a sliding glass door to close them in, and an open window with a view of the platform. Chase took his single rolling luggage and both of their backpacks and placed them in the overhead storage. Dakini took one seat, while Chase took the one opposite her. She looked out the window.

“I am wanting you to know that I will miss my friend very dearly,” she said, watching the people scurry about on the platform just below. She did not look at him as she said this.

Chase looked away from her and out the window to the things she watched. “Yeah . . . me, too.” Chase looked back at Dakini. Something had shifted in her today. The first Dakini he had met was no longer there. This was another person altogether, weighted down, reflective. She had her

hands folded in her lap, and her legs swung slowly back and forth under her seat.

A wiry man entered their compartment. He wore a black barrel hat and asked for their tickets. Dakini studied the man and then looked back outside. Chase stood and handed the man the tickets, which he tore, and handed the stubs back to Chase. The door closed and the sound of a whistle and of pressurized steam could be heard. The coach lunged forward, and the platform outside the window began to move.

“Dakini?” Chase said once the train was out of the station. She looked over at him. “You are from Pondicherry?” She nodded and looked back out the window.

“Did you ever go to the zoo there?”

“Oh, yes sir,” she said. Her eyes widened. “I worked there.”

“You did?”

“Oh yes,” she said.

“What did you do?”

“I took the tickets.”

“I see,” he said.

“Look,” she said, pointing out the window. “We have those in the zoo.”

They were crossing over a narrow bridge that stretched over a rust-colored river. On the banks on either side, children splashed and women washed clothes. Two old bulls sat in the shallow water, looking at the train as it passed overhead.

Chase thought about that day in the rain, reading the plaque: Pondicherry Zoo.

I wonder if she knew Kimba. Of course. Dr. Pathcotti said everyone knew Kimba. Perhaps the child does not know about Kimba's death, he thought. Dr. Pathcotti did not know. I should tell her. No. I hardly know her. Perhaps it is not my place. I do not want her to think of bad things when she thinks of me. She will find out soon enough.

“Will you take me there?” she asked, looking up at him.

“Where?”

“The zoo.”

“In Pondicherry?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“When we get there?”

“I would love to take you to the zoo, but we will have to get permission first.”

“I think they will say okay,” she said. “They are pretty nice to me.”

“How long have you lived there?” he asked.

“Since I was five.”

“Do you like it there?”

She thought about this for a while. “They are very nice to me at the orphanage.”

“Does your father ever visit?”

“I already told you, my parents are dead.”

“Your father too?”

“My parents are dead,” she repeated.

“Do you remember it happening?” She nodded her head. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“I don’t mind.”

“What do you remember?”

“When I was little, I would go to work with my parents every day. I would have to spend all my days in the laundry room. Then one day, Baba runs in and grabs me. I knew this was a very strange thing, because he worked in the restaurant and I never saw him during the day. He grabbed me and I asked him where we were going, but he told me to be quiet. Then we ran up the stairs until we found mother. But it was too late. One of the bad men was standing at the other end of the hall.”

“One of the bad men?”

“Yes.”

“How did you know he was bad?”

“By the way he was dressed. And by his gun. I was scared.”

“I would be too.”

“He had on a mask that covered his face but not his eyes. It was very scary, and we ran. I closed my eyes tight. I was very scared. Then the bad man started shooting his gun. I covered my ears.”

“That’s what I would have done too.” Dakini looked out the window. “Do you want to sit over here next to me?” he asked her.

Dakini crawled up and sat beside him. They sat quietly for a while, both watching the world pass outside the window. For a moment, she rested her head on his shoulder. She smelled of patchouli and her eyes were doleful, heavier than they had been before. She kept it there for quite some time before sitting upright again.

It is good that you did not mention Kimba, he thought. Yes. This would be a very sad trip for her.

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” he asked her.

“Me,” she stated, still staring out the window. “What do you want to be?”

Chase thought about this. “I’m not really sure.”

“But you are already grown up.”

“Maybe,” he said.

“I hope I figure out how to keep in touch with Shelby.”

“You will,” he assured her.

“Will you show me how?”

“I will, kiddo.” She rested her head on his shoulder again. Neither said anything for a long time. “May I ask you a question?” he finally asked.

“Okay,” she said, keeping her head on his shoulder.

“This may be a question you don’t want to answer. I totally understand if you don’t.”

“Okay.” Dakini sat up and looked up at him. “What?”

“I was told that there was a chance that your father is not dead.”

“I have heard that too. But it is not true.”

“No?”

“No.”

“How do you know?”

“I saw him bleeding on the ground the day the bad men came. I saw it. I was there.”

“Maybe he lived?”

“No,” she said.

“Are you certain?”

“I am certain. Why did you ask me that?”

“I thought I heard someone say that he survived the bad men. That he was hurt, but that he lived. Do you think that could be true?”

“Are you talking about the man who keeps following me?”

“You know of the man?”

“Yes. He is not Baba.”

“How do you know?”

“I know.”

“Does it not look like your Baba?”

“He is not Baba.”

Dakini looked out the window and watched the tall grasses pass out in the fields. For a while, Chase did the same.

“What was your Baba like?”

“He read to me.”

“He did?”

“Yes, and he cooked for me, too.”

“Your mother did not cook?”

“No. She didn’t know how. Baba worked in the restaurant and he learned from his friends.”

“Was he a good cook?”

“Yes.”

“What did you like best?”

“His rice pudding.”

“I like rice pudding,” Chase said.

“Me too.”

“Do you remember him still?”

“Sometimes.”

“What do you remember?”

Dakini looked back up at Chase, thinking. “Mostly I think of my best day.”

“What was your best day?”

“The day I turned five.”

“What happened?” Chase asked.

“They had taken the day off.”

“Your parents?”

“Yes. They were only allowed to take one personal day in the year, and they both took it off for my birthday. That morning I was sleeping and he woke me up and asked if I wanted to go to the beach.”

“That sounds nice.”

“It was. But mother wasn’t with him. He said she was sleeping and that it would just be the two of us. I remember it was very early, and we walked to the ocean. He carried me on his shoulders.”

“That sounds fun.”

“Do you know what was at the beach when we got there?”

“No.”

“A celebration.”

“What kind of celebration?”

“One with lots of people and animals.”

“Like a circus?”

“I don’t know what that is,” she said.

“It is sort of like what you are describing. Did you go to it?” he asked.

“Not at first. At first we just walked around the outside. Then I saw hundreds of kids my age standing in a crowd behind a rope. They were standing standing with their fathers. Do you know what it was?”

“No.”

“It was a real race.”

“A race?”

“Yes. With prizes and everything.”

“What kind of prizes?”

“Medals you could wear around your neck. I asked Baba if we could try to win.”

“What did he say?”

“He said we could if I wanted. So we got in the line with everyone.”

“What happened?”

“I had never run in a race before. Running is very hard.”

“I know.”

“You have run?”

“I have,” he said.

“It is hard, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Very hard at first. How did you do?”

“We ran together. The race was on the beach,” she told him. “He told me funny jokes.”

“Baba did?”

“Yes. He said it would make me not think about the pain.”

“Did it help?”

“Sometimes.”

“Did you win?” Chase asked.

“I beat one person.”

“Who?”

“During the whole race this one girl would run up past us, and then we would run past her. This happened many times in the race. But then when I could see the finish line, I asked Baba, ‘May I?’”

“May I? What does that mean?”

“May I try to beat her?”

“Oh. What did he say?”

“He told me to go ahead.”

“What happened?”

“She was up ahead of me but I ran after her until I passed her.”

“That must have been exciting.”

“It was, but that wasn’t the most exciting part.”

“No?”

“No. When we got home, my mother had made me a twirling dress with sunflowers on it. It was the first dress I ever had before. It had poufy arms. I always wanted a dress, but my mother didn’t know how to sew.”

“She bought it for you?” he asked.

“No. She made it. The woman she worked with taught her how to sew on their lunch break. I didn’t even know she was doing it.”

“That must have been a nice surprise.”

“That was my best day.”

“I can see why,” he said. “That sounds like a pretty good day.”

“I liked that day.”

“I would have, too.”

Without asking, Dakini eased up into his lap and rested her head on his chest, just below his chin. She felt warm against his chest. He wrapped

his arms around her. He could understand why this girl meant so much to Shelby. She had an easy way.

I like this kid, he thought. Yes. Very much so. It might be hard to leave her. Do not think about that now. There are too many things to think about now. Just do this one thing for Shelby. That is your only concern now.

The train rocked rhythmically on the tracks, lulling them both into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Chapter 30

The sun was starting to set as they stepped into the high stone gates of the orphanage. They were greeted by a nun. She wore a white habit with beads around the waist and a cross that hung from the beads. Her face was large and shiny and perfectly round, and when she spoke, Chase could tell that she was African.

“Hello, Dakini,” she said. Her voice was deep and masculine. She patted the child on the head. “I trust your visit was helpful.”

“I hope so. Thank you for asking.”

“And who is your friend?” she asked.

Chase extended his hand. “My name is Chase Komley. I’m a friend of Shelby Starling. She asked if I would see Dakini back home.”

“Very well, Mr. Komley. Welcome to Pondicherry’s Home For Children. I am Sister Teresa. Will you be staying with us this evening?”

Dakini looked up at him and nodded her head. “I would love to stay if you will have me.”

“He is going to take me to the zoo tomorrow,” Dakini announced.

“I see,” the nun said. “Why don’t we get you settled in first, and we will see what Father Chadwick thinks of this plan?”

“Okay,” she said. The nun turned and led them toward the orphanage. The orphanage was made of stone, with a grand arched entryway. The walls were cracked in places and covered in ivy and patches of moss. The entire orphanage was enclosed in a stone wall. In the center of the building was a square bell tower, and near it, a round sapphire stained glass window. The orphanage appeared to have three levels, based on the three rows of windows that ran along the face of the

front wall. Most of these windows were open, and in some of the windows, children stood, staring down on them.

“Dakini,” one of them yelled. Chase looked up and saw a hand wave out the window. Then another. Several other arms waved and called out her name. She waved back, greeting them, calling their names back to them.

They walked along the tree lined path which led from the gated entrance, to the grand arched entryway. The front lawns of the orphanage were empty, but the sounds of laughter and playing could be heard in echoes, coming perhaps from the back of the orphanage.

Sister Teresa led them down a corridor with white marble floors, and then up and around a winding wooden staircase, until they came, at last, to Dakini’s room on the second floor. “Perhaps you will freshen yourself up for dinner, Dakini? And I will inform Father Chadwick of your arrival.”

“Okay,” Dakini said.

“And perhaps you will join Father Chadwick in chambers for dinner, Mr. Komley?”

“That wouldn’t be too much trouble?”

“Not at all,” she said. The nun took a key from her pocket and unlocked the wooden door to Dakini’s room. The hinges squeaked as the door opened. “Now if you’ll excuse me,” the nun said with a subtle bow of the head.

Chase and Dakini stepped into her room, and set their luggage by the bed. Dakini walked over to the window and pushed it open. A nice breeze came into the room, moving the curtains, and clearing the room of stale air.

“Do you like my room?” she asked him.

“Very much so,” he said, looking around and taking it all in.

Dakini had a miniature black wrought iron bed with ivory mosquito nettings hanging from the ceiling and covering the bed like a see-through teepee. Her room had plaster walls that were flaking away in places, and a wooden floor that had been painted shiny black like a grand piano. A green dresser sat in the corner with a framed picture upon it.

Beside her bed was a three legged stool which she used as a nightstand, and upon that nightstand sat a small lamp with a beaded shade. Dust from the shutters drifted in on the wind and could be seen floating in the heavy orange light of the setting sun.

He turned to see that Dakini was unpacking her *Rocko's Modern Life* backpack. Now unzipped beside the bed, all of her secret things were set out on the floor, vulnerable and unhidden.

Chase walked over to the dresser and studied the solitary black and white photo which sat upon it. In the frame was a short Indian man in a

white shirt with a white vest and a white bowtie around his neck. He was standing next to a woman much taller than him wrapped in a sari. Her hair was long and thick and in a braid that draped over her shoulder and around her neck. The photo was candid. The smaller man was looking up at the striking woman with glowing skin, and the man was saying something that made the woman laugh. She was trying to cover her mouth, and her eyes were closed.

Chase stepped back from the photo. Dakini was standing beside him now with a towel and some folded clothes tucked under her arm. “You will not forget to ask if we can go to the zoo tomorrow?”

“I will not forget,” he said.

“How long will you stay with me?”

“How long should I stay?”

“Do you want to always stay here?”

“That’s a good question. Do you want to always stay here?”

Dakini thought about that. “I don’t think so.”

“Where do you want to go?”

“I think maybe Spain.”

“Spain?”

“I think maybe Barcelona.”

“I’ve been to Barcelona,” he told her.

“You have? Why did you leave?”

“Why do you want to go to Barcelona?”

“It looks like a dream city from a book I once read.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Barcelona is like a dream city.”

“Will you take me there?”

“Me? How?” She shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t think they will let me take you that far away. The zoo, perhaps. Probably not to Spain.”

“Hmm. Too bad. I like you.”

“I like you, too.”

“May I touch your head?” she asked.

“Okay,” he said, leaning down on one knee. Dakini ran her hand over the top of his head, back and forth, like she was petting a dog. Chase studied her face, how full of fascination it was.

“Very prickly,” she finally said. “I think you should maybe cut the prickles off.”

“I think you’re right.”

Dakini walked passed him to the door. She opened it and looked both ways, up and down the corridor. She came back to him, and in a quiet voice, asked, “Would you like to hear a story?”

“Okay.”

“A Hindu man is washing the roof of the ashram and he slips and he falls. When he wakes up, he is in paradise. An angel says, ‘I am here to show you around paradise.’ The Hindu man follows his guide as she points to rivers and to trees and to a village full of Buddhists. But then she turns a corner and they come upon a group of people. The angel whispers to the Hindu man, and hides them both behind a bush. ‘Shhhh!’ the angel says. ‘You must be very quiet and careful not to startle them.’ The Hindu man asks why, and the angel says, ‘because they are Christians, and they think they are the only ones here’.”

“Better be careful telling that story here, huh?” he said, smiling at her. She shrugged. “You have a dark sense of humor.”

“You don’t like my stories?”

“I do. How did you learn all of these stories?”

“I had a book that I studied every day when I was in the laundry room.”

“I see.”

“But I don’t have it anymore.”

“Why?”

“I lost it the day the bad men came.”

“Maybe we can find you a new book?”

Dakini stepped forward, earnest. “Really? How could we do that?”

Chase was taken aback by her enthusiasm. “Maybe we can look on Amazon?” She looked at him, confused. “We’ll look on the internet?”

“Do you promise?”

“Okay,” he said.

“Really promise?” she said, reaching for his pinky.

“Yes,” he said, wrapping his pinky around hers. She crossed her finger over her heart two times and looked at him. Chase stood for a while, and then did the same. She nodded, and they released pinkies. He bent down and picked her up. “I really promise.”

Careful, he thought. This is not the time to throw around promises that might be impossible to keep.

“Oh my,” she said. “This is turning out to be a good day.”

“May I ask you a question?” Chase said, still holding her. She nodded. “Why did you go to help Shelby for an entire month? Why didn’t you want to stay here and play with your friends?”

“Because Shelby needed me.”

“But didn’t you just meet her the day she was hurt?”

“Yes.”

“So you didn’t really know her that well?”

“I knew her enough.”

“That’s a pretty nice thing to do for a stranger . . . especially for a ten year old. Wait, that was dumb. That is a pretty nice thing to do for anyone . . . at any age. How’d you get to be so thoughtful?”

“I like to help people.”

“You do?”

“Yes.”

“My mom said that is what I am here to do.”

“What you are here to do? Like with your life?”

“Yes. She taught me things.”

“Like what?”

“She said that one day there would be a lot of confusion in the world and that people would look to me for answers. She said the only way I could learn to have these answers was if I dedicated my life to helping people. All of my life. Help people. Just do this, she told me. Then when people turn to you, you will have the answers.”

“Wow,” he said. He said this not in the way adults say wow to kids when they see their drawings, but in the way adults say wow to one another when they find out they have given away all of their possessions to the poor.

“I think this has been the best thing for me to do with my life so far,” she said.

“Your mom sounds like she was a pretty amazing woman.”

“I miss her.”

“I bet.” After a few moments, he leaned over and kissed her on the forehead.

“I like you, kiddo. You’re one of the good ones.” Chase lifted up a hand, and she gave him a high five. “You better go get ready for dinner.”

“Yes, this is true,” Dakini said. “You will be at dinner too?”

“I think maybe I will eat dinner with Father Chadwick.”

“You will be here after that?”

“I will be here after that.”

“Will you stay in my room?”

“I don’t know where I’ll stay, but I’ll come to your room to say good-night either way. Is that a deal?”

“Oh yes, that will be a very good deal.” Dakini started to walk out of the room, but turned. “Where is your children Mr. Chase Komley?”

“You can call me Chase, if you like.”

“Okay. Where are your children, Chase?”

“I don’t have any.”

“Why?”

“Hmm,” he said. “The timing was never right, I suppose.”

“Aren’t you lonely?”

“Sometimes.”

“Is it too late?”

“It is probably too late.”

“Does that make you sad?”

“I cannot live a life *with* children and one *without* children at the same time
. . . so I do not know which would make me happier.”

“Okay,” she said. “Chase?”

“Yes?”

“That means you are a backwards orphan.”

“Hmm. I never thought of it that way. I suppose it does.”

“Okay,” she said, and turned and walked away. Chase listened to her steps getting fainter and fainter as she moved down the hall. Twilight was coming, and Chase walked over to her nightstand, and flipped on her lamp.

He was standing by her window and looking out at the purple sky with traces of pink clouds on the fringes. Her view overlooked the front lawn of the orphanage, the walkway, and the entry gate which separated the orphanage from the street and the town beyond.

The streets were not nearly as busy as they had been in Chennai. An occasional taxi would pass, followed by several refurbished motorcycles. The second floor view allowed him to peer over the shops across the street,

to the alleys, to some of the side streets, to an open plaza, to a petrol station, and to a dome that stood above them all, even above the trees. Shimmering pink clouds were broken up on either side of this dome, which emitted wisps of smoke that vanished into dusk.

Just then, all at once, streetlights and sidewalk lights up and down every street winked on at the exact same instant. Moments later, lights all over the front lawn of the orphanage came on as well, some surrounding the trees, others lining the walkways, others still shining upward along the stone wall.

The lanterns which hung on the gateway to the stone wall lit up as well. Only then could Chase see a man wearing a black cassock and Buddy Holly glasses. The man was standing by the gate, holding it open with one arm and talking to a man standing on the other side of the gate. Chase could not make out what they were saying. The conversation went on for quite some time, each man listening while the other spoke. Finally, the man on the other side of the gate started to gesture with his hands, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

As the man moved from side-to-side under the streetlights, Chase could see that the man was wearing a black t-shirt with the British flag on it.

“What the hell?” he whispered.

A knock came from the door behind him. He was not expecting this. He turned and found Sister Teresa standing in the entryway.

“Mr. Komley,” she said, “Father Chadwick would be happy to have you dine with him in chambers in thirty minutes.”

“Thank you,” Chase said. “Thank you very much.” The nun nodded, and started to turn, but Chase stopped her. “Excuse me,” he said. She looked back at him. “Could you tell me who that man is?” he asked, pointing his finger out through the opened window.

The nun walked over to the window. They both looked down to where Chase had been pointing, but the men were no longer there.

Chapter 31

The halls of the orphanage had high ceilings which arched gradually to a point. Every few feet a chandelier hung from these high ceilings. Tonight, they were dimmed, and several of the bulbs flickered and hummed. Chase walked quietly down the hall. On either side, doors stood closed. Chase assumed that children were sleeping somewhere behind these doors.

At various places, hanging on the walls, were faded oil paintings of Indian women who looked like nuns, each performing different tasks. One was wrapping a child's arm. The next one was rolling out dough on a long table. Yet another depicted a nun holding up a scepter, with a child sitting in her lap. And so on. Chase caught fleeting glances of the paintings as he made his way toward the last door on the right.

All at once, the doors along the corridor began to open, and dozens of children filed out of the rooms. Chase stood and watched them gathering, all dressed up, and talking quietly in hushed voices. The boys wore maroon blazers, and the girls wore navy and maroon dresses over white oxford shirts. One of them laughed, and was quickly shushed by another. They

began to form into a line that moved away from him toward the winding wooden staircase which led down to the main floor. As quickly as they had gathered, they were gone, marching in whispers toward the dining room hall.

Chase stood before a large door that was made of dark and weathered timbers, and was held together by thick, black iron bands. Chase reached for the wrought iron knocker at the center of the door and knocked it several times.

The door opened. Standing in the doorway was a tall, thin man with a gray stubble beard, and gray stubble on the top of his head, that ran in a ring around his bald spot. The man wore a black cassock, and Buddy Holly glasses, and Chase knew at once that he had been the man he had seen from the window.

“Good evening,” Chase said, extending his hand to the old priest. “My name is Chase Komley. I am the one who escorted Dakini today.”

“Why don’t you step into my chamber?” the man said in a calm voice. The older gentleman stood aside and let Chase pass into his chambers, before closing

the door behind them. “Won’t you take a seat,” he said, pointing to the chair on the other side of his desk.

“I’m Father Chadwick. I run the orphanage here.” Father Chadwick had his elbows on the arms of his chair and his hands folded over his stomach with his fingers interlaced.

“It’s nice to meet you. You have a beautiful facility here.”

“Thank you.” Father Chadwick opened the drawer to his desk and pulled out an ashtray and his clove cigarettes. “Do you want one?” he asked, extending the package toward Chase.

“Uh . . . sure,” he said, but then, “well . . . no. I don’t actually smoke.” Father Chadwick held the cigarettes in mid-air, seeing if this was the final word. “I sometimes smoke when I drink. The truth is I’m not a very good smoker.”

Father Chadwick struck a wooden match along the side of his desk, and lit the skinny, brown cigarette. The tip glowed orange. Chase had always loved the smell of clove cigarettes. “It really is a bad habit of mine,” he said with an exhale. “I picked it up when I was with the Jesuits in Africa in the 60’s.” He took another drag, and blew the smoke up toward the ceiling fan that made a whirling sound above them.

Chase nodded. “Did you like Africa?”

“No . . . not really. Most of the world’s atrocities are carried out in Africa in secret. I spent twenty years there working with war orphans. It was brutal.” He took another deep drag, and held it. “By the nineties, many of the orphans I had worked with went on to become child soldiers themselves. Then the cycle started over.”

“That sounds like impossible work,” Chase said.

“Indeed. One of the orphans I had raised as an infant eventually grew up and became a soldier. I loved that child. He later came back to our village and destroyed the orphanage.” Father Chadwick blew smoke up toward the fan. “The drugs they give those kids were quite powerful . . . I eventually decided to leave Africa.”

“That’s when you came here?”

“Eventually . . . yes.” Father Chadwick snuffed out his cigarette and placed the package and the ashtray back in his drawer. Then he sprayed a few quick puffs of a clove scented air freshener into the air above them, before closing everything back into the drawer. “So . . . thank you for bringing our Dakini back to us safely. How do you find Dakini?”

Chase smiled. “I have to say . . . she’s a remarkable girl. At first I was doing this as a favor to Shelby, my friend who was injured, but I’m really glad I got a chance to make this trip with her. Shelby had told me she was special. I agree. I feel very connected to her.”

“She has that effect on people.”

“I see,” Chase said.

“I have heard that your friend will be able to leave India to go back home soon,” Father Chadwick added.

“Yes. That’s what her doctor is saying. I was surprised. I had come to India thinking that I would be here for a few months, but I have only been here less than a week, and it looks like I wasn’t needed here after all.”

“I’m not so sure of that.” Father Chadwick stood and opened the wooden shutters behind him. The streets below were mostly quiet. Occasionally the hum of a scooter would pass. “Will you be staying with us in Pondicherry for a while?” he asked, walking over to a cabinet that was in the middle of his bookshelves.

“I’m not sure. Maybe another day or so. They’re keeping Shelby pretty sedated so that she can heal quickly. She’s kind of in and out. I’m not sure that they really need me there. I think I’ll go back and check on her on Sunday maybe. I was actually thinking about taking Dakini to the zoo tomorrow. That is to say, if it is alright with you.”

The sound of ice clinking glass could be heard. “Okay,” the man said as he filled two glasses with Cognac. He turned and handed one to Chase.

“Thank you,” Chase said.

“Salute,” the old man said.

“Salute.” Chase lifted his glass as well, and they both drank. The drink was warm going down. His hang-over had finally left him. *This drink is good*, he thought. *Yes. This is what I needed.*

“I believe Dakini is wanted at the zoo anyway,” the priest said.

“Oh?”

“Yes. Yesterday an old friend of mine, Naomi Violet stopped by looking for her.”

“Who?”

“Naomi Violet.”

“I know that name. What does she do?”

“She works with the primates at our zoo. Why?”

“Does she work with a gorilla named Kimba?”

“Yes.”

“I saw her on television back home.”

“Our Naomi?” the priest asked.

“Yes. When Kimba left this zoo, she came to ours. Did you know she died last week?”

“Kimba? Yes. That is very sad. Naomi told me. She came to tell Dakini in person.”

Both men took another swig. “Yes, it is sad,” Chase said. “And very strange at the same time.”

“Strange?”

“Yes.” Chase said.

“How so?”

“The timing of it all. My friend is in an accident in Pondicherry . . . and then this gorilla dies and is being brought here to be buried. I’m not sure what to make of it all.”

“What is there to make of it?”

“May I ask you a question?” Chase asked.

“Go on,” the old man said.

“Do you believe in fate?”

“No.”

“No?”

“I believe in the choices we make. I believe in how those choices sum up into consequences.”

“Do you believe that we can become – I don’t know – nudged into making some decisions more readily than others?”

“Yes.”

“And that is fate?”

“No. That is the consequences of previous actions.”

“I see.” Both men drank. “So there are no guiding principles? No greater order?”

“If you study the consequences of your decisions, the Universe will teach you the guiding principles.”

“And by following these guiding principles?”

“Your decisions will sync up with one another and begin to flow.”

“And this is fate?”

“No. This is finding the life you should live.”

Chase thought about this. Both men took another drink. “May I ask you another question?”

“Yes.”

“Who was the man you were talking to at the gate earlier? He was wearing the shirt with the British flag?”

Father Chadwick took another sip. “That man is Dakini’s father.”

“What? Her father? Dakini keeps insisting that both of her parents died. They were in the Mumbai attacks?”

“Yes,” the old man said. “They were in the attacks. Dakini was as well. Her mother, Soraya, was a maid at the Grand Mumbai Hotel in the old city. And her father, Bindy was a waiter in the hotel restaurant. The

hotel allowed them to bring Dakini to work. She was five when the attacks occurred.”

“What happened?”

“Two gunmen started in the lobby and climbed each level. They shot 63 people in that hotel. Twenty died. Soraya died immediately. Bindy was shot in the back. He was carrying Dakini to safety.”

“But he didn’t die?”

“No.”

“What happened to him?”

“He was hit twice in the back, but managed to carry Dakini down two flights of stairs and get her out of the hotel. He collapsed on the street.”

“I saw this same man yesterday outside of Mercy Hospital in Chennai where Shelby is at now. He was passed out. I tried to get someone in the hospital to check on him, but they said they had just released him.”

“I’m sure it was him. He follows her now. He showed up here about a year ago.”

“For her?”

“Yes.”

“How did Dakini end up here?”

“The day of the attacks, the rescue team found her wondering the streets outside the hotel in shock. She wasn’t crying. She was just walking in the middle of the street holding her hands over her ears.”

“Poor kid,” Chase said.

“I left for Mumbai the next day to offer my services. There wasn’t much for me to do . . . but I offered to bring Dakini back here to look after her.” Both men took another drink, and Father Chadwick arose and went back to the cabinet and retrieved the crystal decanter and topped off both of their glasses. “Her parent’s marriage wasn’t arranged . . . so none of the grandparents wanted her. That’s how she ended up here.”

“It wasn’t arranged? Isn’t that unusual?”

“Indeed. They were supposedly in love, her parents. Quite in love. Soraya’s father had started a software company and made millions. But they cut Soraya off when she started sneaking around to see Bindy behind their back. He was just a waiter. Soraya left her family and married Bindy. They were poor. Then they had Dakini. When Soraya was killed, her parents would have nothing to do with the child.”

“And Bindy? Why isn’t she with him?”

“He was in a hospital in Mumbai for almost a year after the shooting. When he was released, he had changed. He quickly developed an addiction to the pills they gave him. He had nowhere to go. He became homeless. Later he started to look for Dakini. This was not an easy journey for him. Mumbai to Pondicherry is over 27 hours by train.”

“But he came here?”

“Yes.”

“How did he find her here?” Chase asked.

“He told me that he found out through the family that she was here.”

“So she has family that visits her here?”

“No.”

“No? So her family knows she’s here, but they don’t see her?”

“No.”

“And Bindy? Can’t he take her back?”

“No. Dakini belongs here now.”

“What does Dakini think about that?”

“Dakini says that is not her father.”

“Why does she say that?”

“I think,” Father Chadwick said, stopping and thinking, and taking a drink. “I think she means that he has changed so much that she no longer feels connected to him.”

“Do you think maybe she does not recognize him?”

“I cannot know what she thinks. She talks about many things constantly, but she does not talk about this.”

“So now he just hangs around?”

“Yes. It is usually not a problem. If you are asking my opinion, I think he’s just distraught. And I think that he’s not come to grips with losing

his family. And I think that it is easier for him to get lost in drugs and to watch her grow up from afar.”

“That’s sad.”

“Yes.”

“He’s been through a lot.”

“They both have.”

“Could he get her back?”

“I don’t think he will have the courage to do what it takes to change. Most people do not have the courage to change.”

Both men drank again, and Chase could feel the warmth all over his body.

“What will happen to her?”

“What do you mean? It’s already happening to her. She will live here. We’ll educate her. Hopefully when she’s eighteen she’ll be ready for state college. If not, who knows? That will be for her to decide.”

“Does she like it here?” Chase asked.

Father Chadwick thought about that question. “Dakini seems to be the sort of child who will find life wherever it can be found. So, yes, I think maybe she likes it here.”

Someone knocked at the door. Father Chadwick called for them to enter. Sister Teresa entered, followed by two of the children. Chase and

Father Chadwick stood as they entered. The children carried trays of food that instantly filled the room with the rich smells of rosemary and curry. Sister Teresa carried a bottle of wine, and two glasses. They set the food and the wine on top of the corner table.

“Thank you,” the old man said.

“Will you need anything else?” Sister Teresa asked.

“No. This looks sufficient. Thank you.”

Sister Teresa led the children out of the chamber, and Chase and Father Chadwick took seats opposite of one another. Steam drifted above two large bowls of green stew, with a plate of rice and raisins beside the bowl, and a separate plate with four pieces of naan. Father Chadwick opened the wine and poured them both large glasses of red wine.

Both men ate in silence for some time, and drank their wine. Chase did not realize how hungry he had become. He was eating too quickly.

“What does it take to adopt a child from India?” Chase asked.

Father Chadwick sipped his drink and leaned back in his chair. “Hypothetically or Dakini specifically?”

“Well,” Chase started. He paused and thought about that. “I guess Dakini specifically.”

“Who would be doing the adopting?”

“Does that matter?”

“It does,” the old man said.

“Okay, what if I wanted to adopt Dakini? What would have to happen?”

“I don’t think you know what you’re asking, son.”

Chase looked up from his plate to the old man. “Oh?”

“What you’re talking about is a lifelong commitment to a traumatized child . . . a child you have known a handful of days. I have spent my whole life watching these sorts of things end up badly.”

“How so?”

“Eager foreigners come to India to save the children.”

“I’m not trying to save anyone.”

“The process is difficult, and it can chew you up and spit you out. Things in India are not the same as they are in America.”

Chase felt the pointy edges of the old man’s tone nudging up against him. “Okay . . . fair enough. But humor me for a second.”

“For starters the Indian government requires you to live here for six months while you go through cultural education classes. They want to observe you with the child over a period of time.”

“Can that time be shortened?”

“Probably not. At some point in the past, maybe, but it is difficult these days. India does not want to lose its children. There has been a brain-drain in India over the last two decades that the government is trying to curtail.”

“I see.”

“Now may I ask you a question?”

“Okay,” Chase said, sopping up the bottom of his bowl with the naan.

“Aren’t you here in India to help your friend?”

“Yes.”

“Then why are we talking about adoption?” Father Chadwick wiped his mouth after asking this and placed the napkin over his bowl.

“I’m not sure I will be very good at explaining this.” Father Chadwick did not reply. “But my life has taken quite a few unexpected turns lately. And I feel

like this . . . like this Force . . . has pulled me here. Maybe Force isn't the right word. It's just that one random event has led to another random event and then another . . . and now I'm here. But somehow all of these random events seem to be connected somehow. And they led me here. But I don't know what they mean. And I don't really know why they led me here. But I do have a deep sense that I am supposed to be here, I just haven't figured out . . .”

“Why you are in India?” the old man finished his sentence.

“Exactly.”

The old man laughed. “Don't go grabbing for explanations. India is measured. She will let you know when the time is right.” The old man reached for the bottle but found that it was empty. He set the empty bottle back on the table.

He stood. Chase stood. “In the meantime, you are welcome to stay here at our home for as long as you wish.”

“Thank you,” Chase said, extending his hand.

“Chase,” Father Chadwick said, “for many years, when I came to India, I was running from Africa. It took me a long time to realize that life cannot be lived by running *from* things. It has to be lived by running *toward* things.”

“I see,” Chase finally said.

“Sister Teresa has prepared a room for you on the first floor next to the dining room hall. You will find your things there.”

“Thank you,” Chase said, turning and walking away.

Chase walked down the hall. The walking was good. He was starting to get drunk. He did not want to be drunk. Not tonight. He found Dakini already in her bed, dressed in a white sleep dress with long sleeves. She appeared to be sleeping, with the lamp shining dimly beside her. He started to turn, but she opened her eyes.

“Would you sing me a song?”

“But I’m not a good singer. You might not like it.”

“I will like it.”

Chase walked over to her bed and sat beside her. He looked around the room, trying to think of a song. “Ok . . . I have one. This is one my grandmother sang to me when I went to her house in the summer.”

“Was she pretty?”

Chase thought about that. “In a handsome way, yes, I think she was pretty.”

“Good,” she said. “I think I will like this song.”

Chase cleared his throat and began to sing, “Baby fishy in the sky, fishing for a dream . . . sail baby sail . . . out upon the sea . . . but don’t forget to sail, baby, back again to me. . .”

He repeated this verse over and over again, watching her eyes fade. Later, long after she had fallen asleep, he continued to hum the melody.

Chapter 32

Chase found the room that they had prepared for him. He unpacked. He was not sleepy. His buzz was nice, and he felt restless, and above all, he wanted another drink. *Yes, he thought. Another drink and someone to talk to. That would be perfect right now.* Instead, he wandered around the first floor to the orphanage, until he found a side door, and beyond that, the rear courtyard.

The rear courtyard to the orphanage was surrounded by a stone wall nearly eleven feet high. In one corner, rows of benches sat facing a wooden stage with no curtain. In the opposite corner was a community garden, filled with plants of all sizes, some winding around wooden stakes, others bent low to the ground under the weight of fully ripened fruit. Next to the garden stood a tetherball pole. In the moonlight, the pole stood like a bored kid waiting for his friends to come out and play. In the center of the courtyard was a fountain that was large enough to wade knee deep in.

Chase came to settle into the only corner of the courtyard that had nothing in it, and sat with his back against the wall, and his knees pulled up. The nearly full moon above him had a perfect halo forming in the misty clouds.

Just as he had settled to the ground, a deep, resonant bell rang out from off in the distance. Chase looked in the direction that the sound had come from. The gong sounded again. The bell resonated so ubiquitously that at first, he wondered if it was coming from the center of the earth itself. Chase stood. The bell tolled a third time.

“What is that?” he whispered.

By the fourth gong, Chase ran to a doorway next to the community garden which led out to the street. Chase pushed the door open and stood for a second, looking up and down the streets. The bell rang out again, and Chase thought it might be coming from the center of town. Chase ran down the stairs and into the street, passing palm trees that arched over the open terraces.

He ran past a building whose top level had a balcony of scantily clad girls. They were sitting on dingy plastic chairs under a yellow bug light. They called for him as he ran by.

Chase turned off of the main street and ran through the alley, as the bell tolled out several more times. He looked up to see if he could see where the sounds were coming from. A spider web of clotheslines zigzagged back and forth between the buildings.

Chase came out of the alley and onto a side street, and ran along the front face of a medical clinic that was closed for the night. The bell then let out a final gong, louder than the rest.

Chase stopped running. He was breathing hard. Along the opposite sidewalk, he spotted a man wearing a tightly wrapped turban, and moved towards him. The man was a Sikh, and had beady eyes like two dots inked on a piece of paper.

“Excuse me,” Chase called out. The man stopped and looked at Chase warily. “Where are the bells coming from?”

The man looked up and down the street and did not answer. His eyes narrowed, studying Chase, making his dots-for-eyes nearly vanish altogether.

“Do you speak English?” The man did not reply, but rather started to walk away. Chase called out, “Gong . . . gong . . .” pointing upwards.

Lifting his arm, the man turned and pointed to a blue dome, glowing in the moonlight.

“Namaste,” Chase said.

“Namaste,” the man replied.

Chase's breathing had returned to normal as he approached the ashram in the center of Pondicherry. Chase looked up at the ornately tiled dome. He stood for a moment with his hands resting on the heavy wooden doors, feeling their contour and texture. Elaborate carvings were etched into the door's face.

Chase could hear strange chanting wafting through the opened slit. Chase pushed the doors open just wide enough for him to enter. He stood alone in the entryway. There before him was an open ashram with pillars that ran fifty feet into the air above him, holding up the dome.

The smell of incense drifted dreamily about, carrying in it the secret scents of roots buried deep within the earth and of orchids that had yet to bloom.

Before him was a stone statue of an elephant that reached nearly to the top of the dome. A chain of yellow marigolds hung around the neck of the statue and rested upon his bulging belly. The elephant was somber, sitting upright on his back haunches, and extending a human hand outward

before him, palms opened. The other hand fed a stone rat that reached up to him from the floor beside.

The statue was awash in light from the countless red candles that were lit before him. If you stared too long, and did not blink, it did not look as if the lights were moving, but rather that the elephant was moving, swaying effortlessly to the cadence of the chants that echoed all throughout the temple.

Sitting around the statue were several people dressed in crimson robes, chanting. They had their heads down, and some of them were rocking back and forth as they ran rows of beads through their fingers. They all dressed alike, and they all had their heads shaved, and Chase assumed they were monks.

Further from the monks, sitting in the shadows, were rows and rows of round pillows. Chase looked around and saw a few people sitting on these pillows. Some were running beads through their fingers as well. Some had their heads down and hands clasped before their faces. Others just sat and stared.

Chase felt drawn to this mighty elephant. He decided to stay awhile.

Chase walked past one of the columns and found a pillow near the back. He sat down quietly, away from anyone else, and listened. He looked at the elephant and watched the smoke drifting up from incense sticks all around its base like spirits rising out of the grave. Chase closed his eyes and began to regulate his breathing. He had fallen out of his habit of meditation sometime back.

He felt his chest move in and out, taking deep breaths. His mind began to drift. Chase could see the elephant kite from the day before, riding along the winds that blew off the Sea of Bengal. And he could hear Dan in his head . . .

“So I decided to go and find the Life that I really wanted to live . . . and let Life fill in the details.”

“The Universe wants you to find your happiest Life.”

“One of these days you will realize that the Universe is conspiring for your happiness . . . you just have to wake up and join in . . .”

He thought about Shelby. *When the third thing crosses your path. You better listen. The Universe is trying to get your attention.*

There was Dakini in his mind’s eye. *“You don’t ask the right questions.”*
“What is the right question?” “Who are you?”

“Life cannot be lived by running from things. It has to be lived by running toward things.”

His mind drifted on the chants.

Maybe I will stay in India for some time, he thought to himself. Maybe I will stay even after Shelby leaves. Maybe she will stay? She cannot stay. You

cannot think this way. She will leave. You know this will happen. It is right that it should happen. She has Dan. Yes. She will leave. But maybe you will stay. There is the girl now. Perhaps the old priest does not believe in Fate, but maybe I do. I do not know if I do, but perhaps I do.

All of these thoughts came suddenly to a halt when a voice called out.

“Do not be afraid,” a high shrill voice said from next to him.

Chase was startled. He turned and found a man sitting on the cushion beside him, looking straight ahead at the elephant. His hair was completely white, and was short on the top and sides, but long in the back. He had a wispy white goatee hanging down to the middle of his naked chest.

“Excuse me?” Chase said, trying to be quiet.

The man turned to face Chase. Chase was startled. The man had two fake glass eyes, wide and bulging and unflinching, and an amber smudge of ash on his forehead. “Do not be afraid.”

“What makes you think I’m afraid?”

“You do not know how to breathe.”

“I have forgotten how to breathe, I suppose.”

“You have forgotten many things.”

“I have?”

“You are a god. See?” he said in a very high voice that cracked as he said this. His artificial eyes peered directly into Chase. “You have forgotten that you are divine.” The old man held his gaze and did not speak.

“I’m not a god,” Chase said after a while, thinking perhaps the old man was confused. “If I am a god, I am a poor god.”

“You have forgotten your divinity . . . and this has brought you much unhappiness.”

“I don’t think I ever knew that.”

“It is just a memory that you have misplaced. But now it is time to remember. Simply wake up and be divine in all of your human actions.”
The old man turned to face the elephant again.

“I don’t know how,” Chase whispered.

“Create.”

“Create what?”

“It is the nature of a god to create. You must remember how to create.”

“What should I create?”

“Create life.”

Chase watched the reflections of the candles in the old man’s glass eye. “I guess,” he said. Both men listened to the chanting without saying a word. “I’m sort of lost right now.”

The old man leaned back and began to laugh. Chase was nervous and started to look around. Several people on other mats were looking in their direction. Chase reached for the man, perhaps to shush him. But then the old man slowly stopped laughing and turned to peer into Chase with his unmoving glass eyes.

“You are lost? Are you lost now? Would you even know what being *Found* felt like if it stared you in the face?”

Chase started leaning back away from the man. “But I don’t know what to do,” Chase stammered.

“There is nothing to do, child. You are a god. Just be. Just be a god in everything you do. This is your destiny.”

Without warning, the eyeless man arose, and took a staff from beside his pillow and leaned on this staff. The staff stood a few feet taller than the old man, and made a tapping sound on the stone floor as he shuffled away.

“Wait,” Chase said.

“Go create a life,” the old man said, but did not stop shuffling away.

“It is your birthright as a god.”

Chase started to reply, but could say nothing, and simply watched as the shadows of the ashram gently pulled the seer back into the unknown.

Chapter 33

Chase remained in the ashram until the monks stopped chanting. One-by-one, the monks arose, and ambled away from the elephant in single file, robes dragging the floor behind them. He sat on the cushion for a long time, considering what the blind man had said.

I have been here before, he thought. I have reached dead-ends before in my life and decided to make my life anew. Yes. I have done this before. I do know how this works. Is this what the blind man meant? Is this what I have forgotten? You need sleep. Sleep will come easily tonight.

In time, Chase left the Ashram, trying to retrace his steps back to the orphanage. He started down one alley, but nothing looked familiar. He went back to where he started and tried another alley. Again, this did not feel right either. “Where am I?” he muttered, peering down the empty street looking for a familiar sign.

A hand grabbed Chase's wrist. Quickly, Chase turned, tense, perhaps ready to swing.

"Hello, uncle," said the short Indian man. Chase stepped back and studied the man. His hair was thick as a wild boar, and coarse, with a part on the right side, and a shock of untamed hair that curved up and out from that part. The man wore a black t-shirt with the British flag on it. "Can you help me, uncle?"

"What do you want?" Chase asked, coiled, looking over his shoulder back down the alley. He wasn't sure if this was an ambush. He tried to calculate an escape route should one be necessary.

"I need your help."

"I don't know what I can do for you. Why are you following me?"

“You are American. I think they will listen to you. But I need you to help me. Do not be afraid, uncle. I am your servant.”

“I know who you are,” Chase told the man.

“Then you probably know why I need your help.” The man smiled at Chase, and Chase could see that he was missing one of his incisors.

“You can’t have Dakini,” Chase said. “I know that’s what you want. But they won’t let you have her.”

“You are wrong, uncle. They will. But you will have to help me.”

“I can’t help you with that. I’m in India on other matters.”

“Do you know what they did to me? They have taken away everything from me.”

“How is that my concern?”

“Just listen to me, uncle. All I ever cared for was my wife and my daughter. I almost lost my life trying to save them. In the end, I lost them both. It would have been better if I lost my life. For I have no life anymore. My life is gone. It is gone. Do you hear me, uncle? But it does not have to be this way.”

“I’m not sure you should have her back.”

“And why is that?”

“Look at you. You have no home. No stability. Your life is completely directionless. What can you give her? What can you possibly offer that girl?”

“Her family.”

“No. You cannot offer her that. She has outgrown you now. She needs more than you can give.”

The man’s voice flattened out. “So now you are an expert on family and on what children need? Is this how it works? You Americans think you can take one quick glance at the affairs of your neighbors on this planet and wave a hand . . . and Poof! . . . decide their fate. What do you know? What could you possibly know about me? What could you possibly know about the things I have been through? What gives you the right to stand here before me and say that it would not be better for me to be with my daughter?”

“I don’t know you at all, but I do know your daughter. And I know that she is at a crucial stage in her life. She needs stability. She could do something really big with her life. Ending up on the streets with a drug-addicted father will not get her there. I know that much. That much I know . . . uncle.”

“What a gift. What a gift you have. To be so sure. To be so certain in life. To have all of the answers. What we would all give to trade with you and be in your shoes, uncle.”

“I do not have the answers. But I have seen all I need of you and of your daughter to know that she will not be able to lift you up, but I am damn certain you will be able to drag her down.”

The man took a small step toward Chase. Chase did not move. “Tell me this, uncle. What if you were given the opportunity to do something truly remarkable with your life? What if you were given a chance to do something so grand that the rest of your life would be defined by that one action? Would you take it?”

“I don’t believe helping you get Dakini back would be such an action.”

“Because I was given that chance. And I took it. And do you know what has come of that?”

“No.”

“I lost everything. I lost everything that I ever truly loved in this world. And I am asking you, uncle, to give me a chance.”

Chase took a step backwards. “I can’t do this for you. Only you can fix this. You want to get Dakini back? Do the hard work. Get your life in order. Stop drowning in your own self-pity and get out and make a life that is worthy of her. No one can give that to you. Only you can do that.”

Chase turned and walked away from the man. “The problem with you, uncle,” the man said to Chase as he walked away, “is that in your lifetime, you have never helped anyone but yourself. I am sure you would rather throw the crumbs of your sandwich in the trash rather than give it to the bird sitting beside you. You can walk away from me if you like, but you cannot walk away from that truth. I know your type. You live only to protect your own wellbeing. Someday, you will pay a price for this, uncle.”

Chase did not reply. At the end of the alley, he looked over his shoulder,
but the man was gone.

Chapter 34

“We will be able to walk from here,” Dakini told Chase as they stood outside the stone walls to the orphanage. Chase had awakened to find her standing by his bed, dressed, and ready to go to the zoo. They had shared breakfast at the same table with Arvind Patel. Arvind was not quite as tall as Dakini and wore round glasses. Mostly Arvind spoke to Dakini the whole time, telling her about the new books they had received at the library, and how he had arranged them just like she had taught him.

Chase and Dakini walked down the sidewalk. They passed a large woman in a red sari who sat on a bench. Her eyes were closed, and two little boys ran around her and around the benches, yelling in one constant shrill drone as they chased the other. Dakini stared at the boys as they passed, and reached up and took Chase’s hand.

Chase looked down at her as he held her hand. He thought about his run-in with her father. He wanted to know why she insisted he was not her father. For several blocks, he weighed this out, and almost asked her. But she spoke up.

“I cannot wait for you to meet my friend.”

“Your friend?”

“Dr. Violet,” she said. “She will be in the zoo today.”

“How do you know?”

“Sister Teresa told me she is in town and has already called on me.”

“Is she nice?”

“Oh yes. You will see how nice she is. She was always my friend until she went to America. I’m sure you might have met her since she is from your country.”

“Perhaps.”

This will not be an easy day for the girl, he thought. Maybe this woman will not want to tell her just as I had not wanted to. Perhaps the matter will not need to be discussed.

They passed the train depot. Most of Pondicherry had been sleepy and quiet, but as they came closer to the train station, the same dense traffic they had experienced in Chennai was buzzing all about.

Taxis screeched to a stop by the train depot, rolling down windows, whistling. Luggage was thrown carelessly about. Doors were slammed with unnecessary roughness. Commands were being barked out, misunderstood, and then repeated.

A bazaar was situated directly across the street from the train station and stretched out as far as Chase could see. Some of the vendors sold carvings, others rugs. One stand was filled with silver bracelets and

necklaces. Another vendor had Tibetan prayer flags strung across his booth, flapping in the wind. The whole market had grown organically around the palm palm trees everywhere.

Chase was looking at all of the traffic whizzing by. He felt Dakini squeeze his hand three times. He looked down at her, and could see she was studying him. She made the universal finger symbol for “Come here.” Chase knelt down on one knee to get to her level.

Dakini took his face in both of her hands. “Where are you?”

“I am here.”

“No you are not,” she said. “Where are you?”

“I will be here now.”

“Okay,” she said. “Do not look so worried. The zoo is fun. I will show you.”

“Okay,” he said. Dakini released his face and turned and pointed.

“That is where we are going.”

Chase followed her finger. Chase had not noticed until then that the market was divided by a path that led between. He could not be certain where the path ended, for it was overgrown with mango trees.

“There?” Chase re-iterated, pointing to the path.

“There. It is the back entrance. Only special people can enter there.”

“Well . . . okay then.”

Dakini took his hand and started to lead him.

They moved through the bazaar. People were clambering over themselves, shouting out prices. “Are you trying to bamboozle me?” he heard someone call out above the rest. Chase was surprised to see Americans in the market. The smell of Nag Champa wafted through the air, but changed quickly to the smell of goat. A mother goat was tied to a stake with two newborn goats sitting in the hay beside her. They bleated, but no one cared.

Dakini led Chase through the swarm of people, until they reached the path. When his eyes adjusted, he could see that they were in a forest of crooked branches. The sounds of the forest were enclosed and muffled. Chase looked back and could see the light of the market retreating behind them. Dakini did not say a word. A blue and yellow Macaw squawked and flew across their path.

Dakini looked over her shoulder at him when she felt him jump. “Too scary,” she said.

The path was only wide enough for the two of them, and he thought he could hear the trickle of water somewhere up ahead. Chase saw two torches off in the distance, carving out unruly shadows before them.

Dakini stopped. “Look,” she said pointing. “We’re here.”

In front of them was a sign, lit by the unsteady light of the torches. Below the sign was an open gate wrapped with yellow police barricade tape. “Pondicherry Zoo – Employees Only.”

“Come on,” Dakini said, pulling away from his hand and running under the yellow tape.

The Macaw squawked again from somewhere behind him. Chase glanced over his shoulder, and then back up at the sign, before entering the Pondicherry Zoo. Vines the size of a man’s wrist wound around the bars of the empty cages. The zoo was eerily silent. Chase followed the sound of

slapping sandals, and for an instant, could see her colorful dress. Through the shadows, he could see that Dakini was receding from him around the side of an empty enclosure filled with weeds and wild flowers.

When his ears adjusted, he could hear a distant sound of bongo drums, dreamy and full of echoes. They pounded out African rhythms.

“Dakini!” His voice fell from his mouth, but did not travel far, sounding dull and close, muffled by the overgrowth.

The Pondicherry Zoo was no longer a zoo. Last year, the owners converted the zoo to a rescue facility for retired carnival and circus animals. The zoo was mostly empty these days. Several elephants. An arthritic tiger. Two brown bears. Others.

Mostly, the zoo was overrun with vegetation and shadows. In the distance, Chase heard the call of an elephant. He looked up to find a rusted PA speaker nailed haphazardly to the branch of a mango tree, from which the tribal music came.

“Dakini!” he shouted.

“I’m here,” he heard the voice call out. He couldn’t tell where the voice was coming from. Chase continued along the path as it sloped downward, and under a train overpass propped up precariously with railroad ties. He passed a concession stand that was boarded up.

“Dakini!”

“I’m here!”

“Where are you? I can’t find you!” he shouted. “Dakini, where are you?”

After a few moments, “I’m here!”

But this time, at the exact same moment that Dakini called out, a second voice called out as well. “You’re here!”

This startled Chase. “Dakini?”

Chapter 35

“I know you,” the woman said as Chase approached. Dakini had both arms wrapped around the woman, her face buried in her waist.

“This is my friend,” Dakini said, beaming. “I can’t believe my eyes. I have not seen you in a very long time.”

“Hi,” Chase said, extending his hand hesitantly. “My name is Chase Komley.” Chase took her hand and shook it, studying her. The woman had caramel skin, and looked to be in her late thirties, maybe younger, and had dreadlocks tied back in a yellow scarf. “I recognize you from television.”

“Ah,” she said.

“How do you know me?” Chase asked.

“I saw you last week. You were standing in the storm at the zoo.” Chase’s eyes widened. “I’m sorry. I have not properly introduced myself. I’m Naomi Violet,” the woman said.

“Very nice to meet you.”

“You were outside the habitat for a gorilla named Kimba.”

“Kimba!” Dakini shouted. “Where is she?”

“Wait a minute,” Chase said. “I *was* at the zoo last week. But I didn’t see you. Where were you?”

“I was watching Kimba from an observation platform the day you were there.”

“And you saw me?”

“Yes.”

Behind them were three sinewy workers with skin the color of coffee. Two of them were clearing out vines and small trees that had grown up around a boulder. The third man, the one with a large hat and no shirt, was digging a hole. He was standing in the hole – now up to his waist - scooping small piles of dirt, one at a time, onto an ever-growing mound of earth that sat beside the boulder. Next to the hole was a large wooden crate covered with many stamps and stickers. Behind the workers was a brown cave made of thatch and mud, and held together in places with wire mesh and old tires.

One of the workers shouted out to Naomi from behind them. Chase did not understand what the man had said. Dakini called back to the worker in what must have been Hindi. The man laughed, and Dakini waved at him and laughed. Naomi said something to the man in perfect Hindi as well. He nodded, and started gathering up the medium sized smooth stones that

were sitting under a tree. Carrying them on-by-one, he stacked them next to the hole.

“Where is Kimba?” Dakini asked. Chase and Naomi looked at each other.

“Dakini,” Naomi said. “How do you know Mr. Komley?”

“Oh,” Dakini said. “I met him in Chennai while I was helping Shelby and Dan in the hospital.”

“The Americans?” Naomi asked.

“Yes,” Chase said.

“He is friends with the girl who was hurt,” Dakini said.

“And you two met there?” Naomi asked, looking at both of them.

“Yes,” Chase said.

“I stopped by the orphanage two days ago to see you, Dakini, and Father Chadwick told me you were in Chennai with the Americans. And now you came together to Pondicherry?”

“Yes,” Chase said.

“Where is Kimba?” Dakini asked again.

Naomi heaved a deep sigh, and looked at Chase, and then looked at her. “Dakini, I have to tell you something which I think you will find difficult to hear. But I feel like I should just tell you directly. Kimba died last week.”

Dakini pushed away from Naomi and brought a hand up to her mouth. “No!” she blurted out. “No! Why?” As she said this, the corners of her lips began to tremble. “Why?” she asked again, this time her voice cracked, and sounded shaky.

“Honey, I am sorry. I know this is hard for you,” she said, pulling her closer. “It has been very difficult for all of us, I can assure you. I came to tell you in person two days ago. This was very shocking and took everyone by surprise.”

“What happened?” Dakini asked, face buried in Naomi’s hip, bawling.

“There was an accident,” she said. “Kimba slipped from the ledge of her enclosure.”

“But he saw her last week,” she protested.

“It happened the same day as that.”

“Why didn’t anyone help her?” Dakini asked.

“It was too late,” Naomi said.

Something began to rustle up in the tree above the workers. Two of them looked up, talking among themselves. They pointed up into the tree. The shirtless man in the hole looked up for a moment, but did not seem to care. He resumed his digging.

“Did you know this?” Dakini asked, looking up to Chase.

“Yes.”

“You didn’t tell me.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“I wasn’t sure if you knew her very well.”

“I told you I worked at this zoo.”

“Yes, but I did not know she meant this much to you. Maybe if I had known you were this close, I would have told you. I am sorry, Dakini. I really am sorry. I am very sad with you.”

“Then why aren’t you crying?”

“It is hard for me to cry. But I am sad with you.”

“Why would you bring me here without telling me Kimba was dead?
Was this some sort of surprise?”

“No,” he said. “I figured Naomi would tell you. Father Chadwick told me she had come to tell you in person. I did not know if it was my place. I thought it would be best if she told you. I am sorry if I did it wrong, but I have no experience at this sort of thing.”

Dakini turned and placed her face in Naomi’s hip again and continued to cry. She was having a hard time catching her breath, the way kids do when they cry too hard. “Why?”

“I know this is hard,” Naomi said. “But she will be here now with you and with Seeta.”

“I don’t understand,” Dakini cried. The workers stopped working and were watching the three of them as they worked out terrible things.

Then the rustling in the tree recommenced. The shirtless man crawled out of the hole and stood by his compatriots. They stepped back from the hole, watching the tree.

A noise suddenly came from where the men were working. Chase and Dakini and Naomi all turned to find the three workers stepping backwards, holding their shovels up in front of them.

Naomi shouted something at the men. They looked at her as if they didn't believe what she said.

Chase could not see at first what the men were afraid of, until he saw a small chimp climb onto the wooden crate beside the mound of earth.

“Seeta,” Dakini said, sniffing.

Chapter 36

[I see you.] Dakini signed to Seeta.

Seeta was looking at the workers, and then back to Dakini. The chimp was stooped over on the crate, and had bristly gray hair all along its face. She had lost most of the hair on her scalp, giving way to the bumps and imperfections along her creased brow.

[I see you.] Dakini signed again, but the chimp looked down into the hole the men were digging.

“That is Seeta?” Chase asked. Then immediately he turned to Dakini. “You can sign?”

Naomi and Dakini looked over at Chase, who had a puzzled look on his face.

“Yes,” Dakini said. “That is Seeta.” She pointed to the chimp on the box.

“Seeta is a chimp?” he asked, craning his head forward all of the sudden as if this struck him in the back of the head.

Naomi assured the workers in Hindi. The workers looked at each other, uncertain. Dakini called out to them as well. The men took a moment to consider their next move. One of them shrugged. The shirtless man cautiously crawled back into the hole and began to dig again.

“What did you think Seeta was?” Naomi asked.

“I thought she was a woman.”

“Why would you think that?”

“I was told that she was an incarnated guru or something like that.”

Naomi laughed. “Oh. You have been to the Temple of Hanuman, I presume.”

“No, but my friend Shelby had went and they told her that they thought Seeta was an incarnated guru.”

“Yes,” Naomi said, “That is what they think. Hanuman is the monkey god in Hinduism.”

“Okay, so . . . that makes sense now. I didn’t know that,” he said.
“Dakini, how do you know how to sign?”

Dakini turned from facing Seeta. “She taught me,” she said, pointing to Seeta.

“What? Really? How?”

“It’s true,” Naomi said. “Well . . . mostly true.” Naomi looked over to Dakini. “Would you like to show Mr. Komley around our facility, Dakini, and tell him about Seeta?”

“I think I would like to go sit with Seeta. Would that be okay?”

“Certainly,” she said. “Do you mind?” she asked Chase.

“Not at all.”

“Okay,” Dakini said, walking away from them, toward the entrance to Seeta’s habitat.

Chase and Naomi strolled along an uneven path, past an enclosure for an old Bengal tiger. They watched the tiger move about anxiously in her grassy

environment, panting. As the tiger paced, her back hips hitched from side-to-side, out of sync with her front paws.

“You’ll have to forgive me,” Chase said. “I’m at information overload here.”

Naomi laughed at him and placed her hand on his back. “I am sure. Tell me what you would like to know.”

“You saw me at the zoo?”

“Yes,” she said. “I saw you in the rain. I saw you trying to sign to Kimba. How do you know how to sign?”

“My mother is deaf.”

“Ah.”

“Why were you there?” he asked.

“Perhaps I should start from the beginning and tell you everything?”

“Okay.”

Naomi and Chase came upon a vast open field. In the distance, three olive-colored elephants stood beside a pool of dark water, blowing the water up into the air from their snouts. Chase and Naomi came to rest upon a bench that looked out over the elephants.

“The short answer to your question is that Kimba was very ill. That is why I was at your zoo.”

“What was wrong with her?”

“Malaria.”

“Gorillas can get malaria?”

“Yes. They believe that gorillas carried malaria before humans did. It’s believed that humans caught malaria from gorillas. But Kimba was old and her immune system was not great. We decided that we should take her to America. They are doing an experimental blood transfusion therapy there. It was our last hope.”

“Was it working?” Chase asked.

“It was showing promising signs, but that wasn’t our real problem.”

“What do you mean?”

“Kimba was grieving. She missed Seeta. They had lived together here at Pondicherry for over ten years. And once we got her to America, she seemed lost. Everyday Kimba would go out to the same bolder by the stream and look around for Seeta. All day long.”

“It’s funny you say that. When I saw her that day in the rain, I thought she looked like she was searching for something.”

“That was the day she tried to escape. It happened right after you left actually.”

“What happened?”

“I was watching Kimba from our observation platform, and I saw that she was out in the storm. I knew that was not like her. She was rescued from poachers when she was a baby, and she saw her mother shot. She was very afraid of loud noises. Especially thunder. I knew something was wrong.”

“How do you know that she saw her mother shot?”

“She told us.”

“What?”

“Yes. She learned sign language. Once she had progressed, I asked her about the day she was rescued. She made the sign for [Loud noise], then the sign for [Mother]. Then she made the sign for [Sleep].”

“Are you serious? That is horrible.”

“I know the story is true because I know the woman who rescued Kimba. In fact, that is how Seeta and I ended up here in Pondicherry.”

“Okay . . . go on.”

“I used to work for the Ape Language Institute. Do you know of them?”

“No.”

“They are a research facility that has been experimenting with teaching primates to sign since the early sixties. I started with them as a graduate student, and stayed with them throughout my doctorate. I wanted to see if high functioning primates and autistic children could develop their own language if they were left alone.”

“Interesting. Did they?”

“I’m not sure. I never got a chance to pursue it.”

“Why?”

“Well . . . while I was working at the Institute, we got word of a travelling sideshow in West Virginia. They had twenty or so chimps in their show. They travelled around to circuses. But the owners were using it as a front to deal meth.”

“Meth?”

“Yeah. Apparently the sideshow was started during prohibition as a front for moonshine. It just evolved as time went on. The owners abandoned the chimps on a dirt logging road on a mountain in West Virginia. We got word that they needed to be rescued.”

“Did the Institute do rescues also?” Chase asked.

“No. But I did,” she said.

“What did you do?”

“I flew to the site in West Virginia the next day. That’s where I found Seeta.” Naomi stopped and looked out at the elephants. “I can’t explain it. To this day, I still have a hard time explaining it.”

“Explaining what?”

“Explaining what happened to me that day.”

“What did happen?”

“When I got on site, the Fish and Wildlife Department had set up a camp for them – the chimps. They had caught most of them.”

“Not all of them?”

“No. They found eleven of them. They had been in the forest alone for nearly a week. They were scared and confused. They were hungry. A few of them were sick. The wildlife agents had set up a temporary holding site for the chimps. They had them in the back of horse trailers.” Naomi paused for a second. “And when I saw Seeta . . . I don’t know. I just knew.”

“You just knew what?”

“I knew she was mine.”

“What do you mean?”

“I remember it was drizzling that day, and I remember walking up to bars to her trailer. I looked in there, and she was sitting on the hay. She was the oldest one, and I think really she was the most confused. She looked up at me and I know this sounds crazy . . .”

“What?”

“She looked at me . . . and I could tell she knew I was her only hope. I can’t explain it. But I know that is what she was thinking. She was so helpless. I remember standing there for a long time, listening to the rain hit the leaves. We were way up in the mountains of West Virginia. I mean the middle of nowhere. And I just knew that I was supposed to help her. She needed me. I knew I was the only one who could do it.”

“What did you do?”

“Fortunately for me, being at the Institute, I had a ton of connections. But the problem I kept running into is that there are no ideal facilities to take in rescued chimps. Not really. The best one I could find was in a retirement home.”

“Like a retirement home for humans?”

“Yeah. They had converted it to a primate retirement home. But it was painfully sad. They were doing the best they could. But it was so depressing. There is a gibbon’s monkey there that used to be a dealer in a casino who refused to wear anything but his suspenders and his dealer’s visor.”

“What?”

“Yeah. All of the primates had been trained to do very human things and it was all they knew. Many of them smoked.”

“Smoked?”

“It’s just too depressing. I couldn’t take her there. Then of course there is the primate preserve in Gambia.”

“What is that?”

“It’s an island dedicated to re-introducing some of the chimps back into the wild. But Seeta was so old for that, I think. I don’t believe she would have survived that transition.”

One of the elephants called out in the distance, throwing it’s trunk up in the air. The other two took a step away. The small one picked leaves from a tree, eating them.

“That’s when I came across Shya Bowles,” Naomi continued. “She is the woman who had rescued Kimba. One of my colleagues put me in touch with her, and she told me about the zoo here in Pondicherry. It’s one of the few facilities set up to take rescues. Kimba had been here all of her life. Shya assured me that Kimba had made a good life for herself. I made some calls, and they said they would take Seeta.”

“So you just left the Institute?”

“What else could I do?” Naomi asked, turning to face him.

Both Naomi and Chase turned from the other and looked out to the elephants. The three elephants had moved closer, and were tossing dry soil up into the air.

“How did that work?”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“You find Seeta . . . you find this zoo . . . then you just move to India?”

“Yes. Well, mostly yes. It didn’t happen all at once. I had to get permission to stay in India from the government. I had to prepare Seeta to make the move. I had a house to sell. It took time. But that was ten years ago. I don’t regret a minute of it.”

“How did Seeta and Kimba react to one another?”

“The day that Seeta came here for the first time, Kimba came right up to the glass that separated them. They sat and stared at each other for a long time, and neither I nor Shya was quite sure if this was going to work. Then Seeta reached up and patted her hand over her heart three times, and Kimba did the same. Neither one of them had ever done that before. We decided to let Seeta in with Kimba. And as soon as Seeta was released into her habitat, they moved right up to one another and sat by each other.”

“They shared the same habitat?”

“Yes. They just wanted to be with one another. Every day they were inseparable. After a while, Shya decided that she would go back to Malawi, and I decided I would stay with them. I decided I would take what I had learned from the Institute and try to teach it to Seeta and Kimba.”

“Did they learn?”

“Some. Not much. I worked up a cooperative with the Ethology program at Stanford. They sent a team. But I think they were too old to learn. They did have a few signs that they did all the time.”

“Which ones?”

“Shya had already taught Kimba the traditional Zulu greeting: ‘Sawubona’.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means ‘I see you’.”

[I see you?] Chase signed.

“Yes. Then the other person responds: ‘Ngikhona’, which means ‘I am here’.”

[I am here?]

“Exactly.”

“I like those.” Chase thought about them. “I see you and I am here. That’s nice.”

“That was pretty much their favorite signs. They always greeted each other with that. They learned a few other things. That is how some of the locals came to think Seeta was the reincarnation of Hanuman. They would see Seeta and Kimba signing and assumed they were gods.”

“Ah. I see.”

“That is how Dakini learned it as well.”

“From them or from you?” Chase asked.

“Well . . . both. One day I saw her watching them sign, and then she started to sign what they were signing.”

“Did she know what they were signing?”

“I don’t think so. Not at first. I just observed for a few days. Then I offered my help. She learned it very quickly. She has a knack for language. I actually think that once she picked it up, both Seeta and Kimba learned more signs from Dakini than from me. The three of them had a tender bond.”

“How did Seeta deal with Kimba leaving for America?”

“Not well at all. The day we were scheduled to move Kimba out of Pondicherry, they were both sedated and separated. Seeta was placed in one cage and Kimba in another. Apparently they did not latch the cage for Seeta properly, because she woke up and came into the enclosure right as the crane was lifting Kimba up to be loaded. Seeta went haywire and started jumping up and down.”

“Oh no.”

“Yes, that day was a mess,” Naomi said. “I didn’t see Seeta at first. Then all at once some of the workers started pointing. Seeta charged out of the bushes toward the crane. She was waiving a stick. This startled everyone. Then in the confusion, they shot her with a tranquilizer gun. Dakini had just walked up and saw the whole thing. I started yelling at the workers to put the gun away.”

“Was Seeta hurt?”

“Some. But she recovered. Physically that is. Not emotionally. She stopped signing altogether when Kimba left. That was a year ago, and she has gone almost completely gray around her face now. A lot of her hair has fallen out too. She just hasn’t been the same.”

“Why did you go with Kimba to America?”

“I had no choice.”

“But Seeta was here. How did that work?”

“I have invested my life into these two creatures. And as difficult as it was, I had to split my time between America and Pondicherry to help them both through this transition.”

“You commuted?”

“Yes.”

“Good lord, that had to be so difficult.”

“No. Not at all. There is nothing too big for someone you love.”

“Hmm.”

The elephants were lumbering in a side-to-side motion toward the railing where Naomi and Chase sat.

“So what happened after I left the zoo that day? I know you said she tried to escape, but what happened?”

“The day I saw you, Kimba walked back to me and signed to me.”

“What did she sign?”

[I can't find her]

“Seeta?”

“Yes. All last year that was the only thing she would sign. If visitors stood long enough, she would sign [I can't find her] to them.”

“I tried to get her to sign but she wouldn't.”

“Yeah . . . I don't think that when she signed [I can't find her] that it was really like communication. I think it was more like talking to herself.”

“I see.”

“So she signs that to me, and I start walking out to her in the rain. But she turns from me toward her boulder. So I stopped.” Naomi’s voice cracked. She pressed a finger into the inside corner of her eye and cleared her throat. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

“She climbed on her boulder and stood up. She just stood there for a long time. I called for her.” Naomi wiped the back of her hand across the other cheek. “Then she tried to jump across the ravine.”

The elephants stopped just short of the edge of their grassy fields. They swayed their heads backs and forth and bumped into one another.

“That must have been hard to watch.”

“It was,” she said, sniffing.

“You don’t think . . .”

“No,” she snapped, cutting in. “She tried to escape. I saw it.” Naomi brought both hands to her face. She started to cry. “I shouldn’t have taken her away from here.”

Chase leaned over to Naomi and placed his arm around her. Naomi did not cry loudly, but in gentle shaking motions. In time, Chase pulled her face into his shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

The elephants now towered over the low rail that separated Chase and Naomi from them. Naomi pulled away from Chase quickly, and began wiping both eyes.

“No, I’m sorry,” she said. “I don’t know where that came from. I didn’t mean to . . .”

“It’s okay,” he said. “I understand. It’s okay.”

Naomi arose from the bench and walked over to the elephants and patted them on their heads. Chase sat for a second and watched her stoking their faces. She was saying something to the elephants, but he did not understand it.

“You can pet them,” Naomi finally said, turning to Chase. “This is one here is Ashok. He’s very friendly.”

Chase stood and walked over to the three large beasts. Each one moved the ends of their trunks toward him, sniffing, and trying to pry into his pockets and into his hands.

“Hello, Ashok,” Chase said as he rubbed his hands along the tough cool skin of the elephant in the middle. The elephant’s big eyes were watery, and looked directly at him.

“May I ask you a question?” Chase asked.

“Certainly.”

“Do you believe in destiny?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think we choose our destiny or do you think it chooses us?”

“Both.”

“Both?”

“Yes. Both.”

“It cannot be both.”

“I will show you how: When I was very young,” she said. “I came to do research with the Ape Language Institute. This, I chose. Finding Seeta lost in the world, this I did not chose. Choosing to commit my life to her . . . That I chose. Everything from that moment on began to choose for itself.”

“That is destiny?”

“Yes. That is destiny.”

Chapter 37

When Chase had returned with Naomi from the elephant sanctuary, he found Dakini sitting on Kimba's box next to Seeta. He stood for a while, and watched how the chimp looked down at Dakini's mouth, and back up into her eyes. Dakini was talking to the chimp in a low voice. Seeta looked at Dakini like she was listening. Dakini said something that made herself laugh.

Seeta looked away from Dakini and down into the hole, and Dakini placed her arm around Seeta's shoulder.

Chase had asked if he could help the men dig the hole. No one objected, and Chase removed his shirt and asked to relieve the man who had done most of the digging thus far.

Seeta jumped down from the box and moved with some difficulty toward the tree out of which she had climbed.

“You don’t have to leave,” Dakini said. But Seeta reached for a low-hanging branch, and climbed steadily back up into the tree.

Chase and Dakini passed their day in the zoo with Naomi and the three men working to create a space to bury Kimba in.

Dakini sat on Kimba’s box and watched Chase dig the hole. Naomi said she would go get what they would need for dinner. She handed two of the men several bills and spoke to them in Hindi. When she was finished, the two men turned and walked away.

“Would you like me to pick anything else up?” Naomi asked.

“Yes,” Chase said, standing up from the hole and wiping the sweat from his forehead with a dirty glove. “Would you bring Ganeshes? I will pay you when you return.”

“There is no need for that. I will pick them up.” Naomi turned to the girl. “And for you?”

“Rice pudding if that is okay.”

“That sounds perfect,” she said. “Do you want to go with me?”

“I want to stay.”

“Okay. I will be back later.”

Once Naomi had disappeared down along the path, the man who had dug the hole thus far walked over to a tree and pulled his hat down over his face. Dakini said something to the man, who lifted his hat up and laughed, and then placed it back over his face.

“What did you say to him?” Chase asked.

“I told him he was a lazy goat.”

Chase fell into the rhythm of digging. He started by jumping on the edges of the spade to break up a spot of earth. Then he repeated this several more times, circling around the first spot. Then he would shave off what had been loosened to get a feel for how deep into the earth he had gone. Once this was completed, he would start the whole process over by jumping on the spade again.

Occasionally, he would have to climb out of the hole and grab a tall iron pole with a very sharp point at the end. When he did, he would look up into the tree, and catch glimpses of Seeta watching him from one of the branches.

The pole was taller than him and he used the pole to jab into stubborn rocks to break them up. With each downward jab into the rock, the cracks grew. Eventually the rock would crumble and the gravel could be removed by hand.

I am a part of something that is happening, he thought to himself as he drove the pointed edge into a rock. I do not know what is happening, nor do I know where I fit into it. No. I am not sure of that. But I have been called here. Not called here. That sounds too big. Those are the thoughts of a lunatic or a person who is too far gone into religion. But I did find Dakini. Who cares how? I did find her. Maybe that is the point. Maybe that is the only point of the matter. I shall no longer attend to what came before, nor what will come after, but shall only attend to what is here now.

Chase stopped and rested on his shovel. A couple of hours had passed. Maybe more. His back was getting sore, and his forearms were so numb that he could hardly make a fist. He looked up at Dakini. She was sitting beside the box now, and her eyes were closed. The zoo was silent as light. The man under the tree was asleep. So was Dakini. Now it was just him, standing there, waist deep in the soil of India.

Something turned in his stomach as he looked at Dakini. Something turned in his stomach like when you first realize you are in love. Or like

your stomach turns when you lose control of your vehicle. The feeling was desperate and it ached, full of yearning and terror.

Chase slid down into the hole and rested his sweaty back against the cold earth. He looked up into the thick trees above him, smelling the iron-rich earth all around, and feeling the womb-like silence of the hole he was within.

Unexpectedly, Seeta knuckled over to the edge of the hole and looked down at Chase. Chase felt defenseless, but unafraid. Seeta's eyes were sunken, with drooping bags underneath. She placed a hand on her head, scratching. She held her gaze on him and did not blink.

[I see you.] Chase signed to Seeta, still resting his back against the cool soil.

Seeta took her free hand and brushed some loose soil into the hole. Chase felt the clumps fall upon his sweaty chest. He did not brush them away.

[I see you.] he signed again, but Seeta turned and knuckled away.

Part iii

that trick for flying

Chapter 38

Chase awoke to find that he was surrounded by people standing over him from the edges of the hole he had helped dig. A few seconds passed, before he came back into himself.

“I fell asleep,” he said, grappling to get to his feet. “I’m sorry.”

Two of the workers reached down and helped Chase out of the hole. Chase looked around. The sun was starting to set, and the light had changed significantly.

“It’s time to wash up and eat, sleepyhead,” Dakini told him. Naomi led them out and around Kimba and Seeta’s old enclosure to a two story building directly behind it. The building was painted in browns and greens to be in harmony with the habitat. The building had been empty since Naomi accompanied Kimba to America. Since Naomi had returned three days ago, she had made her old office into a make-shift studio apartment.

The office was on the second floor, and was lined in knotty pine paneled walls. The floors were covered with orange shag carpet, and there were plenty of windows which would provide enough viewing for Seeta and Kimba while she worked. A small light fixture hung from the ceiling and provided sufficient light when the sun set. She had a green metal cot, and a folding table and chairs, along with her luggage and a stack of reference books.

Naomi showed Chase where the restroom was so that he could wash up. And having done so, they sat around the table and ate together. Naomi shared her vision for the memorial for Kimba here in Pondicherry. She sipped on wine while they ate. He drank his first Ganesh in two long gulps, and drank his second and third over dinner.

“I have something for you, Dakini,” Naomi said, rising from the table and walking over to a duffle bag on the floor. She rifled around, pulling a few things out, until she found what she was looking for. Naomi returned to the table with a picture frame and handed it to Dakini. Chase leaned over to look at it as well.

“Oh!” Dakini said, drawn out. “This is for me?”

The picture was of Dakini standing next to Kimba with her hand on the gorilla’s shoulder. The gorilla towered over both Dakini and Seeta. Seeta was so slight and delicate sitting next to both of them, staring up at Dakini. Kimba was looking straight up, and Dakini was laughing. She had her eyes closed in the picture.

“Do you recognize this picture?” Naomi asked.

“No,” she said.

“I didn’t think so. I never told you I took it. It is my favorite photograph, and I want you to have it.”

“Thank you. Thank you,” she said, getting up to hug Naomi around the neck. “May I go outside and look at it while they dig?”

“Sure,” Chase said.

Dakini left, and they watched her through the windows, showing the men the picture. Later, she sat back on the box and rubbed her hand along the wooden frame. Chase reached across the table and filled Naomi’s glass.

“So Kimba just killed herself?” he finally asked. “She just jumped in the ravine?” The question came out clunky and fell flat on the table.

Naomi started to drink, but stopped. “No. She was trying to escape.”

“Too bad about that,” Chase said.

“Yes.”

“Why did she do it?” he asked with a thick tongue.

“I told you . . . I think she wanted to escape. Maybe she thought she could find Seeta. She was grieving, I suppose.”

“Yep,” he said, downing the beer.

Naomi studied his face. She set her wine down. “So tell me. How long will you be in India?”

“Who knows?” he said, stuffing some bread in his mouth. He chewed loudly, and looked down at his plate. He washed it down with beer.

Naomi waited for him to continue, but Chase said nothing else on the matter. “I can tell Dakini likes you,” she said after some time had passed.

“Yeah?” he replied, grabbing another beer. He looked around the table for a bottle opener. “Did’jou see where I put the open’r?”

Naomi watched him as he looked all around. “Are you feeling well?”

“Yeah, why?”

“You don’t seem quite yourself. Perhaps we should call it a night.”

Chase looked outside and could see that dusk has settled into the zoo. The walk back to the orphanage was not far, but he was completely exhausted. He set the unopened beer back on the table.

“Yeah . . . I guess so,” he said, standing. He had to find his footing as he stood, and toppled over the half-empty bottle of wine that was sitting on the table. “Oh God! I’m sorry,” he blurted out, reaching down for it.

“No. no,” she said, stopping him. She lifted him upright and steadied him. “I will get this. You have had a long day. I think a walk would do you some good right now. Let’s go get some fresh air.”

“I’m really sorry,” he said as they walked outside. “I’m really not drunk. That was just an accident.”

“Say no more,” she said.

They made their way back to where Dakini sat. “Welp, kiddo,” Chase said in a loud voice. “I think it’s time for you and me to make our way back down the yellow brick road.”

Dakini smiled at him. Chase sounded happy to her.

“I want to come back tomorrow. Can we?” she asked.

“Don’t ask me,” he said, “She’s the boss.”

“Of course you may come back,” Naomi said. Dakini hugged Naomi around the waist.

“Gentlemen,” Chase said to the workers, “Enjoy your hole!” The men smiled at him, completely clueless to what he had said. Chase laughed at this. Chase turned and wrapped both arms around Naomi’s neck and gave her a bear hug.

“Oh, okay,” she said, “Yes.”

“Thank you for everything,” he said. “I mean it. I do.” He squeezed her tightly.

Naomi pulled him away, and smiled at him. “Thank you. And listen to me. Are you listening?”

“Yeppers.”

“You get this child home safely, or I will dig a second hole right there,” she said, pointing to the earth, “and it will be just for you.”

“I promise,” he said, laughing. “Hey, where’s Seeta?”

“There,” Dakini said, pointing up into the tree.

“Later, Seeta!” Chase shouted up into the tree. Seeta peered down at him through the leaves, and looked away.

Dakini waved one last time, and Chase and Dakini took hands as they retraced their steps through the back entrance of the zoo.

“Why do you seem so happy tonight?” she asked, looking up when they walked.

“I’m happy cause of you there, kiddo. We had a good day.”

“It was a sad day for me,” she said, looking at the picture in her hand.

“I bet,” he said. “You know what we should do when we get back?”

“I do not know.”

“We should play tetherball. I haven’t played that since I was a kid. Are you good at it?”

“Not really,” she said.

“We should play. Don’t you think?”

“I guess,” she said, as they passed through the back iron gates with police tape wrapped around it. The two torches were the only light, and did not extend the full path back to the bazaar. The forest up ahead was murky and filled with unfamiliar noises.

“It’s dark as shit back here,” he said, not exactly to anyone.

“I know where we are. Just follow me.” Dakini let go of his hand, and walked ahead of him. Chase looked back over his shoulder and was transfixed for a moment by the flames from the torches. When he turned, he found that Dakini was walking faster than him.

“Hold up,” he said, just as she stepped out of sight.

Chase heard the sound of glass breaking. Dakini screamed.

Chapter 39

Bindy knelt down beside Dakini in the darkness, and held her wrist. Dakini screamed again. The picture sat beside her on the stone path, tiny pieces of glass sitting all around.

“Dakini,” he said to her in a desperate voice. “It’s Baba. Look at me.”

Chase rushed toward Dakini, who was attempting to recoil away. They were not far from the bazaar now. Traffic could be heard moving in all directions less than 50 meters away.

“You are not my Baba,” she screamed, yanking her wrist in an effort to free herself.

Adrenaline pulsed through Chase. He shoved Bindy to the ground, hard.

“Let her go!” he shouted at the man. With his free hand, Chase reached for Dakini and moved her behind him, and made sure she was pressed close into his back.

“Listen to me, uncle,” Bindy said, lying on the ground.

“No, you listen to me. I don’t know what you’re trying to do here . . .”

“I just want to see my daughter,” the man said, trying to ease himself up off the ground. “Please, I just want to talk to her.”

“She doesn’t want to talk to you,” Chase barked. He was still panting hard, not from the running. He could feel his heart throbbing in his neck.

“Dakini,” the man said, now standing to his feet. “I know you don’t remember me, but I am your Baba. I saved your life. I just want to talk to you.”

“No,” Dakini said, quiet and uncertain.

“There,” Chase said. “See? She doesn’t want to talk to you. Now get up and walk away or you and I are going to take this thing to a whole new level.”

“Please!” Bindy cried out. “She is all that I have in this world.”

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” Chase said. “We’re going to walk away. And you are going to stay right there. This is over. Are we clear?” The man did not reply. “Go back to Mumbai,” Chase said, taking a few cautious steps backwards, easing Dakini back as well. “Look at you. You’re pathetic! I’m sure you’re wasted. You’re a grown man reduced to hiding in shadows and scaring children.”

Chase reached down and took the picture with the broken glass. He turned and moved Dakini along the path toward the bazaar and the train

depot. He kept an eye over his shoulder as they moved away. “You’re pathetic,” he repeated.

“We both miss her, Dakini,” said the man from behind them. “We both do. I miss her every day. I know you do, too. But we don’t belong here, Dakini. Let’s go home. Let’s go back to Mumbai and start over.” The man’s voice cracked.

Dakini did not look back, but only looked forward. Chase was certain that she was crying. He handed her the picture back, and whispered to her that everything was going to be okay.

“Only a coward would try to steal another man’s daughter,” Bindy said.

Maybe it was an instinct. Perhaps at the last minute Chase heard something from behind him. Either way, just as he and Dakini had reached the opening of the path to the bazaar, Chase turned in time to see that Bindy was running with all of his might toward Chase.

Chase released Dakini's hand to face the man. In an instant he burst forth a full heave in the direction of the charging man. Like two dark clouds colliding in the sky, Chase lunged at the chest of Bindy with an unspeakable rage. Both men toppled back and rolled to the ground. Dakini screamed, and the two men grunted and panted heavily, both struggling to control the other.

At last, Chase stood over Bindy, directly over his head. "I'm going to crush you!" Chase screamed. "If I ever see your face again, I am going to destroy you! Do you understand me, you stupid, fucking worthless piece of shit!"

Chase remained over the man, panting. He reached up to feel if his mouth was bleeding. Chase could taste iron in his mouth, and felt the slippery, sticky blood on the back of his hand. He stepped back, and turned and reached for Dakini. To his surprise, a curious crowd had gathered and was watching. Chase walked toward Dakini with his hand extended. His footing was uncertain and he stumbled and almost fell. Dakini did not reach for him.

Maybe I should sit down, he thought to himself. Perhaps it is not best to kill four beers and then get in a fight. Steady yourself, man. Get this girl back home safely. That was what you promised.

The crowd around Dakini was talking among themselves in a language he did not know. Dakini stood amid them, hugging her broken picture to her chest. Chase took a few uneasy steps toward her. “It’s going to be okay,” he told her. “Let’s get you home.”

“You will not stop me from getting my daughter,” the man said from behind them. Binky took two determined steps toward Chase. “You are a drunken coward, and you will not stop me from taking my daughter.” The man spit at the feet of Chase.

Chase turned and charged the man once more. He grabbed the man by the throat, gripping it tightly, and shoved him backwards by the throat. Chase took charging steps into the man, never releasing his grip around the man’s throat.

Within a few steps, the man had stumbled on the stone path and fell, clinching at Chase's hands, trying to breath. With a dull cracking sound, Chase drove the man's head into the stone path. Chase stood over the man, who no longer appeared to be conscious. Chase watched him for a while, trying to catch his breath. The man did not move.

Chase took the side of his foot and nudged the man's cheek. Bindy's head rolled from one side to the other. He remained unconscious. "Fucker," Chase said under his breath. The taste of stale beer was thick in his mouth. Chase cleared his throat and spit down on the unconscious man. The weighty spit landed on the man's neck, and on the lobe of his ear.

A look of complete horror was on the face of Dakini when he turned. "It's okay," Chase said, moving toward her. But he could see that Dakini was flexed into a tight ball, clinching her picture with white knuckles.

"I want to go home," she said in a hateful voice.

“Yeah,” he said. “Okay.” Chase extended his hand to her but she just looked at it.

Two tan Yugo’s with flashing blue lights screeched to a halt next to the crowd that had gathered. Out of each, officers in khaki brown pants and short sleeved shirts stepped out of the cars. Three of them approached, all placing their hats on their heads at more or less the same time.

The tallest of the three, a young kid with a thick mustache, spoke first, “What seems to be the problem here?” He asked this in English, with a thick Indian accent, and he asked this in the direction of Chase.

Chase pointed to the man lying motionless behind him. “That man tried to snatch this girl. I had to stop him.”

The officer stepped closer to Chase. “You stopped him? How?” Chase explained the fight. The officer considered the explanation. He moved his nose closer to Chase. “Have you been drinking tonight?”

“No,” Chase said. The officer turned and looked at Dakini. Chase did the same. Dakini leveled a cold glare on Chase. The officer nodded to his two colleagues. One of them introduced himself to Dakini and led her away from the crowd. Chase watched as the two walked. The officer was asking her questions.

The other officer walked over to where Bindy lay and knelt down beside him. He felt for a pulse on his neck. The officer looked back over to his superior and nodded. “It’s Bindy Guntherpalli,” he said.

“Ah,” the young man with the thick mustache said. He moved out of Chase’s face and went over to have a look for himself. “Did he hurt the girl?”

“No. I don’t think so,” Chase said, his voice sounding slurry. “He had her by the wrist. But I don’t think she was hurt.” Chase turned and looked down the street to where Dakini was talking to the officer. She was

pointing back in his direction and saying things. The officer would nod from time-to-time, listening.

“Here we go,” said the officer on the ground by the unconscious man. He handed his superior officer a clear baggy with four tiny white rocks in it. He had pulled the baggy from the dark workpants that Bindy was wearing. The officer held the baggy up toward the street light, studying it.

“You are from America?” the officer asked him, turning the bag around in the light.

“I am.”

“Did you see Pakistan and India play last year at Yankee’s stadium?”

“I saw the second day of the match.”

“Not the third?”

“No.”

“You missed the best day.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“Do you know cricket?”

“Not as well as I’d like.”

The officer turned the bag over one more time in the light. “Too bad. You should learn to play.” He studied Chase, head-to-toe. “You look like you’d be a good bowler.” The officer slid the baggy in his pocket. “Maybe not.”

The two officers lifted the man to his feet. Chase watched as they carried the man past him, head slumped forward, feet dragging the ground. Dakini walked silently in front of Chase once they were released. He tried to get her to talk. She wouldn't.

Once they had crossed the street and were passing in front of the train station, Chase looked back one last time. Bindy Guntherpalli was slouched against the back window of one of the Yugo's. Blue lights circled through the gathered crowd. Chase could see blood trickling down the side of the Bindy's face.

Chapter 40

Shelby was not in her room when he arrived at Mercy Hospital - Chennai. The bed was not made, and the monitors were still beeping. Chase knocked on the restroom door. No reply. Chase walked out into the hall and looked both ways. The nurse's station was empty, and no one could be seen.

Chase walked back into the room and up to the only window. Chase had not stood at this window before. The view overlooked an interior courtyard with dark green grass and several benches. A few patients were standing in the courtyard, still in robes. Some of the people in the courtyard appeared to be employees, others family members. A couple of trees stood tall in the courtyard. Sitting under one of the trees was Shelby.

Chase made his way down the corridor until he found a glass door which opened up into the courtyard. Shelby spotted him as he walked across the yard. Most of her swelling had gone down now, and she no longer had the patch over her eye. As Chase approached, he could see that

the eye was quite bloodshot, with yellowish bruises around the eye socket and the cheekbone.

“Hey you,” she said, looking up at him when he stopped and stood in front of her.

“Hi,” he said softly.

“Wow,” she said. “You look like shit.” She smiled at him and reached for his hand and pulled him down beside her. The shade of the tree was nice. She looked at him again. “I mean you really look like shit.”

“I really feel like shit,” he said. The blood was crusty around his lip.

“What in the world happened to you?” she asked, emphasizing each word. She reached for his lip.

“I should have showered before I came over here. But . . . I just wanted to get here.”

“Chase, seriously. Talk to me.”

Chase had a deer-in-a-headlight look on his face. “I think I fucked up,” he said, rubbing his hand around the back of his neck.

A real look of concern came over her. “Where is Dakini? Is she alright?”

“Yes. Dakini is safe. She’s at the orphanage.”

“Okay . . . so . . . you have dried blood on your mouth . . .”

Chase explained about the fight, and about the police.

“What? Is she okay? Is she going to be safe there?”

“I think so,” he said. “I talked to Father Chadwick last night after I got her home. He assured me that Dakini would be fine.”

“How is she? The poor thing. She must have been terrified. Did she seem okay before you left? What did she say?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? What does that mean?”

“She wouldn’t talk to me.”

“Why? Is she just traumatized? Why’d you come back? You can’t leave her there like that.”

“No . . . I think she’s mad at me.”

“Mad at you? No. You saved her. I’m sure she isn’t mad at you. Why do you think she’s mad at you?”

“I fucked up,” he said, looking over at her.

“Why? How?”

“I just fucked up,” he repeated, looking away.

“Chase, tell me what happened.”

“I don’t really want to say.”

“You have to. I’m leaving in two days, and I need to know if I need to go back to Pondicherry before I go home . . .”

“I got sort of drunk last night,” he cut her off.

“In front of her?”

“Sort of . . . yes. It happened all at once. I was helping dig a hole at the zoo all day – that’s another story – and I guess the alcohol just hit me all at once.”

“You dug a hole at the zoo?”

“Yes. A hole. It was in Seeta’s habitat.”

“You dug a hole in the zoo in Seeta’s habitat?”

“You didn’t tell me Seeta was a monkey.”

“I told you they thought she was the incarnation of Hanuman. You didn’t know Hanuman was a monkey?”

“No.”

“Why were you digging a hole in Seeta’s habitat?”

“It was for Kimba . . . that gorilla I asked Dr. Pathcotti about.”

“Are you fucking with me now?”

“No. Trust me, that’s another conversation entirely. I’ll explain everything . . . but . . . that isn’t really part of how I fucked up.”

“What did you do? Did you, like, pass out in front of her?”

“No. I didn’t. But I was still pretty drunk when we ran into her father last night, and I . . . I hurt him pretty badly.”

“No,” she said. “She saw it?”

“Yeah.”

“How bad?”

“I rammed his head into the ground and knocked him out.”

Shelby gasped. “Oh no.”

“To be honest, I thought I killed him.”

No one said anything for a while. “Let’s think about this,” she finally said. “The man is clearly no good. He tried to snatch her in the middle of the night. You had to protect her.” She reached over and placed her hand on his arm. “You did what you had to do in the moment. You know? Don’t beat yourself up about that.”

“I don’t know.”

“I’m sure you did what you had to do.”

“I didn’t have to run his head into the ground. Dakini knows that too. She’s mad at me.”

“She’s probably just scared. It will settle. She’s a kid. She’s very resilient. What did she say when you told her good-bye?”

“I didn’t.”

“What?” All of the comfort that had been building in Shelby’s voice now spilled out and washed away. “You didn’t say good-bye? Are you kidding me?” Chase just shook his head. “For the love of God, why would you end such a traumatic event for that child without saying good-bye?”

“I told you, she wouldn’t talk to me last night.”

“But I’m talking about this morning. You could have said good-bye this morning. What did you do, just walk out?”

“I didn’t stay there last night.”

“What? You just dropped her off and left her there? You don’t even know if she *would* have talked to you this morning. You didn’t even give her a chance.”

“Look . . . Shelby. I feel like shit about this. I slept – or at least I tried to sleep – in the train station last night. I just felt like I had made a mess of everything, and that I just needed to walk away.”

“Walking away never fixed anything, Chase. Never. In like . . . in like the history of all human contact, walking away only gives comfort to cowards.”

“I’m not a coward, okay?”

“Walking away without cleaning up your mess . . . *your* mess . . . that *is* cowardly.”

“Look. I get what you’re saying, but all I did was offer to do you a favor by taking her back to Pondicherry. I was just trying to help you out. I didn’t sign up for the rest of this.”

Something twisted in her face. “Really? Really? Did you just say that? Do you hear yourself? That had to have felt gross saying that out loud. You can’t possibly be that person. I don’t believe it.”

“Jesus, Shelby.”

“Don’t Jesus me, goddammit.” Shelby stood up and started pacing under the tree.

“Don’t get so . . .”

Shelby stopped pacing and looked down at him. “Don’t tell me not to get angry. I love that little girl, Chase. I love her,” she repeated, patting her hand to

her heart over and over. “I love her like she could be my child. And right now, I’m sure she is scared and confused. And you just left her there.”

Chase stood up and started rubbing his temples with both hands. He took in a deep breath as she resumed her pacing. “Look,” he started, then stopped. Shelby stopped pacing and looked at him directly, with her eyebrows up, as if she was more than eager to hear whatever B plan he had concocted. “Let me go back to my room and shower. Let me get a little sleep. Then I’ll call the orphanage.”

“Huh,” Shelby breathed out contemptuously and resumed pacing. “Yeah, you just do that. Meanwhile, I’ll ask Dr. Pathcotti if she will clear me to catch a train down to see Dakini face-to-face. You know . . . to hold her? To let her know that just because everything she has ever loved in her young life gets brutally taken away from her . . . that I am not like that! That I am not that person!” Her voice was raised so loudly now that some of the employees on the bench across the courtyard rose, looking at them directly.

“Listen,” Chase said in a quiet voice, trying to calm the situation. “You’re right. Okay? You’re right. I fucked up, and I was wrong . . . and I’ll fix this. Just . . . just let me fix this.”

Shelby looked at him. “You have got to fix this, Chase. I cannot leave India and go home with things left in this condition. I can’t. I just can’t.”

“Just let me fix this,” he said. He took a step toward her, but she just held her gaze fixed intently on him. “Okay,” he whispered. “I get it.”

Chase turned and walked away, happy to end the excoriation.

Chapter 41

Chase went back to the hotel and took a shower. After the shower, he took a nap. He slept for a long time, and when he woke up, he took another shower. This time, he stood under the hot water and felt it wash over him. He did not want to get out of the shower, and it was while he was in the shower that he came to realize all of the things he was about to do.

He shaved his head again after the shower, and cleaned up the cut on his lip. The cut was sore to the touch, dull and throbbing. After he had done this, he packed a lesser bag and headed to the train station.

Things were relatively quiet for a Sunday afternoon at the train station. Less than a dozen people sat in the benches, waiting for their trains to arrive. Most of them were in suits. Chase checked the schedule and bought his ticket to Pondicherry. The trains arrived on time, and Chase found a seat near the back, away from anyone else.

I do not want to do this, he thought. I am not good at these things. I am bad at these things. I do not want to do this.

The train pulled away from the station with a jerk, and eased into a rocking motion. His mind drifted, and his eyes became heavy, and he slept for the two hour train ride back to Pondicherry. The conductor nudged him out of sleep and told him he would have to leave the train. This did not register with him all at once. He looked out the windows, and saw that they had stopped.

“Yes,” Chase said to the conductor. “Thank you.” He took his lesser bag of belongings and left the train.

The end of the day was nearing, and Chase stood on the train platform and looked across the street to the bazaar. Most of the vendors were in the process of collecting their things from the tables and packing them back into boxes. Others were almost finished packing up and were closing up their booths altogether. Something had caught his eye the first time they had passed the bazaar, and he hoped that he could find it again, and that it was still open.

Chase crossed the street in a jog, and moved into the bazaar. The smell of ginger lingered as he passed a vendor who sold only roots and herbs. Chase came to the thing that had caught his eye the first day, and was delighted to see that it was still open.

A middle-aged woman with a large piercing in her nose was stooped over, placing books into a crate that she was loading onto a wagon.

“Excuse me,” Chase said. The woman stood up to face him.

“May I help you?”

“Oh good. You speak English.”

“Yes,” the woman said with a smile.

“I am looking for a book, and I was hoping you could help me.”

“Of course,” she said, turning and leading him into the narrow spaces between the bookshelves in her shop.

Chase wrapped the book in one arm and held it close against his chest, the way he had as a child on the first day of school. He walked out of the bazaar and into the passageway that leads to the back entrance of the Pondicherry Zoo. As he passed, he looked down and saw several smatterings of blood. He could not tell which were his and which belonged to Bindy.

Winding around the familiar path, Chase came to where he had been digging the hole the day before. No one was there. The hole was no longer there. The place where the hole had been was now covered back over with packed earth, and was outlined with medium-sized smooth stones. Chase looked all around.

“Hello?” he called out. “Hello?” he said a second time, louder.

From the back of the enclosure, from the direction of her make-shift flat, Naomi Violet emerged.

“What a surprise,” she said.

“I suppose,” he said. They both stood by the burial mound. “Looks like you guys completed the burial.”

“For now,” she said. “I have commissioned a statue for Kimba. It will take a while.”

“I see.”

“I am thinking about buying the zoo,” she told him.

“You are?”

“Perhaps. I would like to bring life back into it. We will see.”

“How does a person go about buying a zoo?”

“As you can see, the owners are barely surviving as it is. To be honest, I believe they will be glad to be out from under it. The first step is to call in favors and start getting benefactors.” She smiled. He sort of smiled back at her. “So . . . how are you?”

“I’m okay.”

“You just missed Dakini.”

“I did?”

“She helped here all day. I think she was getting tired.”

“I was hoping I would find her here. Did she tell you about the incident?”

“She did,” Naomi said, nodding.

“I thought he was going to hurt her.”

“He wouldn’t do that.”

“No?”

“Bindy is troubled. He has his own demons to fight, but he loves that girl more than anything in this world.”

“You know him?”

“We have met, yes. He came here a little over a year ago, just before we left for America.”

“Looking for Dakini?”

“Yes. He had been looking for her for nearly three years.”

“How did he find her?”

“Dakini has an aunt that lives in Alivelumangarporum.”

“She does?”

“Yes, it is her mother’s sister. Bindy found her and found Dakini through her.”

“What is her name?”

“Tantra Chakraborty.”

“Why isn’t her aunt in the picture?” Chase asked.

“It is complicated. Dakini’s grandfather is a wealthy man, a Brahman. He wrote off Soraya when she decided to marry Bindy. That whole side of the family wrote her off.”

“Then why did she tell Bindy that Dakini was here?”

“I am not sure. I was told that she moved as far away from Mumbai as she could after the attacks. I believe she turned her back on her father. Perhaps she blamed him for Soraya’s death. I don’t know.”

“Does Dakini know she has an aunt that lives so close? Has anyone ever tried to contact her?”

“No. Not that I am aware of.”

“Why?”

“I am not sure, but I would imagine that it would be too painful for Dakini to realize that she is not wanted.”

“I see.”

From somewhere in the distance, an elephant called out.

“Well . . . I should go,” Chase said.

“She should be back at the orphanage by now. Will you stop by?”

“Yes. I will go there now. Listen,” he said, looking up from the burial mound. “I want to apologize for my actions last night. I got really drunk, really fast, and I feel terrible about it.”

“Well . . . you are here now. Yes?”

“Yes.”

“Broken things can always be fixed, Mr. Komley.”

“I hope.”

“Well.” Her voice trailed off.

“I think I will go to the orphanage before it gets too dark.”

“That will be good.”

“Um,” he said, looking around, and scratching his head. “Is there a front entrance to this zoo?”

“Of course,” she said. “I will show you the way out . . . oh, I almost forgot. Dakini left her picture here today. Will you return it to her?”

“I will. She brought it back with her today?”

“Yes. She kept it with her the entire day.”

“She loves that picture,” Chase said.

“I will go get it for her.”

Chase watched Naomi walk back toward her make-shift apartment behind the enclosure. Chase looked up into the trees, looking for Seeta. The sky had begun to darken, and the outline of the leaves could barely be traced against the evening sky. He scanned the trees, but she was nowhere to be found.

When he looked down, there was Seeta, sitting by the smooth stones around Kimba’s grave.

“Oh, I didn’t see you.”

Seeta did not move. Chase walked up to the railing and watched the frail chimp. Seeta looked from Chase to the stones beside her. Seeta nodded her head up and down a few quick times, and opened her lips wide.

Seeta turned to Chase again. [I see you.] she signed.

This took Chase by surprise. Seeta signed so quickly that he wasn't sure if it had happened at all.

Chase let out a burst of surprised laughter. "Wow, you do sign, huh, girl?"

[I am here.] he signed back.

Seeta looked away from Chase, and patted the smooth stones again and again.

Chapter 42

Chase stood alone in Dakini's room in the dim lamplight. He studied the photograph that Naomi had given her. All of the glass had been removed from the frame, and there was nothing there to protect it any longer. Chase was moved by the way Dakini was laughing in the picture. Something about the timidity of Seeta, and the somber knowing on the face of Kimba, gazing up into the sky; the picture had captured a sort of magic that was unfolding before the camera lens. He set the picture on the dresser. He looked around. The picture of Dakini's parents was no longer there.

"Mr. Komley," a voice said from behind him.

Chase turned and found Sister Teresa standing in the open doorway of Dakini's room. "Oh. Hello. The gate was open."

"Very well," she said, watching him.

“I called out once I came in but I didn’t see anyone. I went to Father Chadwick’s chamber, but it was empty also.”

“Everyone is down in the dining room eating dinner.”

“I see. I am looking for Dakini. Is she down there too?”

“Everyone is there. Will you be joining us for dinner?”

“I would love to. Would that be okay?”

Sister Teresa nodded and moved out of the doorway, pointing in the direction they would be walking. She followed right behind Chase, and did not say a word as they descended the wooden stairs and crossed the marble corridor that led to the dining hall.

Chase opened the door, and all of the chatter and laughter stopped immediately. In the room were eight long tables, four on the left of the on the right, and each with long benches on either side. Filling the benches children, all dressed in the same outfits he had seen them wearing the night before as they marched to dinner.

Spoons stopped mid mouth. All eyes turned to the opened door. Father Chadwick was the first to stand. “Children,” he pronounced. “We have a visitor.”

All at once, all of the children stood at the same time. They stood perfectly erect, at attention. “Thank you, children,” Father Chadwick said, and they all sat down.

All, that is, except for Dakini. As the children took their seats, she climbed up on her table and faced Chase. All at once, a collective gasp went out. Arvind Patel started to clap, but stopped when he realized he was alone.

“You left me,” she said. Father Chadwick hesitated as if he might stop her. Instead, he sat down, and turned to look at Chase like all of the others.

“I know. I know I did,” he said, looking all around the room. Not a whisper could be heard.

“And you lied to the police. You had been drinking and you lied to them.”

Chase felt his face becoming warm. “Uh . . . ok. True.”

“How can I trust you if you lie? And how can I trust you if you just walk out without explaining why you are leaving?”

“Um . . . can we go talk outside?”

“No,” she snapped. “This is my family, and whatever you can say to me, you can say to them, too. In fact, when we woke up this morning and you were

gone, we all had questions. I'm sure everyone in here would like to hear what you have to say for yourself."

"Okay . . . okay. I get it. You aren't going to make this easy on me. Fine. Look . . . I am not coming here to defend myself. And I'm not coming here to make excuses. There is no excuse for what happened last night. The truth is this: I was scared. I was scared for myself. I was scared for you. And I don't know how to do those sorts of things. And I went too far."

"Yes you did. But that doesn't explain why you lied to the police."

"Okay, I lied to the police because I didn't want to get arrested. I made promises that I would protect you, and I was afraid that if I got arrested, I wouldn't be able to protect you."

"Maybe you should have thought about that before you got drunk. Yes? You told me it had been a great day when you were drunk. But it wasn't a great day. Did you not see that I cried all day?"

“I shouldn’t have got drunk. I just shouldn’t have. I’m sorry. I do that. I said I wouldn’t when I came here to India. But then I did. And that is completely my fault. I put us both at risk, Dakini, but if I didn’t love you, I wouldn’t come back here today. I would have just . . . walked away. That’s what I’ve always done. But I’m not doing that with you. I want to make it right with you.”

“How can you possibly make it right?”

“Here,” he said, extending the book that he held by his side.

“What is that?”

“It’s for you. I just wanted to bring you a small token so that you know that I really do know how to keep my promises. That you really can count on me when I say you can.”

“What is it?”

“It’s the book you lost when you were five.”

Dakini crawled down off the table to take a look for herself. She took the book from his hands. “It is the book from the laundry room.”

“I know. I told the woman at the bazaar all of the stories you told me from the book, and she knew the book I was looking for.”

Dakini looked at the book and at him and back at the book. She handed the book back to him.

“Please, Dakini, don’t stay mad at me.”

“Take the book and go up there and read us a story.”

“Now?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“Over there,” she said, pointing. “Go stand on the table I was just standing on.” Chase looked over at Father Chadwick, who just shrugged. “Why should I be the only one reading you stories? Now you can give back. How nice.”

“Okay,” he said. “I guess we’re doing this.” Chase walked over to her table and crawled up on the surface. Arvind Patel clapped, but again had to stop because no one joined him, and someone shushed him. “Which one?” he asked, looking back across the room to where she stood.

“You choose.”

“Okay,” he said, thumbing through the pages, flipping forward, and then back, reading small bits, the thumbing through again.

“Go on,” she said.

“Okay,” he said, clearing his throat. “One time there was a man who flew to India. And when he got to India, he found a very beautiful and wonderful and funny princess.” Chase closed the book and looked across the room at Dakini. “And the thing is, for the first time in his life, the man started to see life from a completely different perspective. He started to find meaning in things for the first time in his life where there had been no meaning before. And he started to remember how to be happy. But then one day, the man carelessly lost the princess’s golden tiara.”

“I bet the princess was very angry at the man,” Dakini interrupted.

“She was . . . and she had every right to be. But do you know what the man did? He went to the princess and he said, ‘I lost your golden tiara. I did. It was my fault. I take full responsibility. I’m a jackass.’”

Father Chadwick cleared his throat, and a few kids started to snicker. Arvind Patel clapped again.

“Sorry,” he said to Father Chadwick. He continued, “But he asked the princess just to grant him one thing.”

“Can you believe this man?” she said, with her arms crossed. “He loses the girl’s tiara and then he comes and asks her to grant him one wish. Typical.”

“He asks the princess, ‘If you will just allow me, and give me a chance. I won’t be able to get your old tiara back, but if you let me stay at your kingdom, I will go to the goldsmith and train under him. And then I will sail across the ocean and mine the finest gold that I can find. And I will bring it back, and I will take what I have learned from the goldsmith, and I will forge you a new tiara, greater

than the one I so carelessly lost. It will take time. A thing such as this cannot be repaired in one day, or one week, or even a year. But if you let me, princess, I *will* make this right'." Chase stopped. "So please tell me, Dakini . . . what did the princess say?"

All of the eyes in the room shifted away from Chase and landed on Dakini. She took her time. "The princess says . . . get off of the table because you look like a jackass."

Dakini covered her mouth suddenly with both hands. The children began to laugh in the way children laugh when something wildly inappropriate has occurred.

"Children," Father Chadwick said.

"Give me a second chance?" Chase asked.

“Okay,” she said, nodding her head.

Arvind Patel started clapping again, but this time, he did not stop.

Chapter 43

The next morning, Chase accompanied Father Chadwick on his morning walk through the streets of Pondicherry. Chase asked Father Chadwick if he could spend a final day with Dakini before returning back to Chennai to see Shelby before she left India. Father Chadwick conceded, and the two men talked back and forth as the sun began to rise. As they returned, before breakfast was to be served, Father Chadwick thanked Chase for returning to the orphanage.

For some time, Chase and Dakini sat quietly while they ate their breakfast, neither knowing exactly what to say. “I was thinking we could go on an adventure today,” Chase finally said, setting his napkin on his empty plate.

“An adventure?”

“Yeah. Does that sound fun to you?”

“What type of adventure?”

“Maybe a road trip?”

“What is a road trip?” she asked.

“You don’t know what a road trip is?”

“No.”

“It’s when you pack a bag, and go with a buddy on a trip. Maybe just one buddy. Maybe a few. And maybe you go for a day, or a week, or maybe all summer long. It depends. But road trips are very popular in America.”

“Will we be the buddies?”

“Yes.”

“How long will we road trip?”

“I was thinking a day trip.”

“Okay.”

“Yeah?”

“Where will we go?”

“It’ll be a surprise. Deal?”

“Okay.”

“I’ll go to my room and pack a bag, and you do the same, and we’ll meet outside. What do you think?”

“Okay,” Dakini said.

Chase stood in the grand arched entryway to the orphanage. After a few moments, Dakini walked up. “Hey,” he said. “You don’t have your favorite dress on.”

“No. I thought if we were going to do something American, I should dress American.”

“I like it,” he told her. Dakini wore a pair of jeans and a t-shirt with Coca-Cola on it. She had her *Rocko’s Modern Life* backpack on her shoulder, and wore a baseball cap. She held the book that Chase had bought her under one of her arms.

“I have a shirt like that one,” he told her.

“You do? You never told me that. I like it.”

“I like it too. Are we ready?”

“Let’s go on a road trip,” she said.

“Let’s do it.” Chase took her hand and led her out of the front gate, and along the street. They went to the bus station, which was across the street from the ashram in the center of town. Chase had not seen the front gardens of the ashram in the daylight. The gardens occupied a city block and were surrounded by a low wrought iron gate. The gardens were wild but well-tended, with little winding paths that ran between, and benches to sit upon and reflect.

Dakini stood behind Chase as he stepped up to the ticket counter. “Two tickets for Alivelumangarporum,” he told the pregnant woman with thick glasses behind the counter. The woman took his money and handed him the two tickets.

“What will we do when we get there?” Dakini asked. “Can we eat in a special place?”

“A special place?”

“I have never eaten at a table that sits by the street before.”

“Like a café table?” Dakini nodded. “You’re telling me that you’ve never eaten on an open patio?”

“No.”

“Well . . . this is your lucky day, little lady” he said. “That is exactly what we will do today.”

“Oh my,” she said. “This is so exciting. I am so nervous.”

“Nervous? Why?”

“What if I do not know what to do?”

“I will show you what to do.”

“That is good, because I am nervous that I don’t know what to do on an outside table.”

“It is just like an inside table, but you have more things to look at,” he assured her.

“Will the birds get us?”

“Unlikely.”

A bus pulled to a stop outside the depot. The bus looked quite old, like the buses Chase had ridden in to get to soccer matches when he was in high school. The bus was painted in yellows and blues, elaborately detailed like the painted hands of Indian brides.

Chase handed the driver two tickets, and led Dakini to the back of the bus. They sat their bags in the chair beside them, and settled in, waiting. A few minutes later, a young father with twins boarded and took a seat near the front. Behind them came a man and a woman, holding hands. They took a seat in the middle of the bus. Everyone sat quietly, until the driver honked the horn three times, closed the door, and drove out into the streets of Pondicherry.

Chase tried to make chitchat. She told him about her day in the zoo helping Naomi get Kimba's box buried. She told him how Naomi was going to try to get the zoo opened again, and how she wanted her to work with the new monkeys that she would be bringing in.

The conversation stalled after a few moments once the bus pulled to the edge of town.

"I shouldn't have got so drunk," Chase finally said, getting to the point.

"I know," she said, looking up at him. Her baseball cap was pulled too far down. She tilted her head up to look at him from under the bill of the cap.

"I bet you were pretty scared."

“Yes.”

“How do you feel now?”

“Not scared.”

“No? That’s good,” he said. “Are you mad at me?”

“No.”

“Were you?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“When you left without saying good-bye, I was afraid I wouldn’t see you again.”

Chase pulled her over toward his shoulder and wrapped his arm around her. “I won’t let you down anymore. I promise you that, okay.”

“Okay,” she said. Chase and Dakini watched the shacks along the side of the road pass by. They were built with scrap materials that looked like they were salvaged in a landfill. The structures were all connected one-to-another, and seemed as if a steady wind could topple the entire neighborhood.

At last they reached the outskirts of town. Chase looked out the back window and watched the town becoming smaller and smaller. Then he looked out the side windows to the empty fields on either side.

Is this where Shelby crashed? he thought. Chase took in the feel of the land on all sides, placing himself in that moment when Shelby struck the side of the tourist bus. He shivered.

“Are you okay?” she asked, feeling him shiver.

“I am.”

“Are you cold?”

“No.”

“Can you take me back to see Shelby before she leaves?” she asked, looking up at him.

“I will try. I will have to get permission from Father Chadwick.”

“Will you?”

“I will ask him when we get back.”

“Can we go tomorrow?”

“If he will allow it.”

“Two road trips,” she said, leaning against him.

An hour or so later, the bus came to a stop in the center of the town square. The driver opened the door, and the father led his twins off the bus. Chase and Dakini were the last to step off the bus. The square had buildings of official capacity in the center, with shops and cafés beside.

Chase pointed across the street. “Look. An open patio. Are you hungry now?”

“Yes,” Dakini said, clapping. “Can we sit at the table under the tree?”

“We shall try.”

Chase led Dakini into the front entrance of the café, and requested the table on the patio which sat under the tree. The waiter smiled broadly as he led them to their spot, telling them over and over again that he could tell they had sophisticated taste for choosing the best spot in the restaurant.

Dakini placed her book on the table, and they both set their backpacks on the ground. The waiter placed two menus before them, and Chase watched Dakini as she studied the menu in awe. Traffic moved in and out of the town square and people walked up and down the sidewalk beside their table.

“You want to order for both of us?”

“Is that okay?”

“I trust you,” he said.

Dakini looked up from the menu and looked around. “You are right. There *are* more things to look at on an outside table.”

“Do you like it?”

“I like it,” she said. Then Dakini looked up into the tree above them.

“Oh. This is a Dumar tree.”

Chase looked up into the tree. “A Dumar tree?”

“Yes. It is a holy tree.”

“How so?”

“Look at its fruit here,” Dakini said, standing up and pulling a branch closer.

“See how they look like little birds?”

“Yeah,” Chase said, smiling. “They do look like little birds.”

“The Dumar tree is worshiped for nine nights during the festival of Navratri.”

“What is Navratri?”

“It is a celebration we have four times a year.”

“What do you celebrate?”

“The Goddess Durga slaying the demon.”

“Have you been to it?” he asked her.

“Yes. I like it.”

Dakini sat back down in her seat.

“It is a beautiful tree,” Chase said.

“No human has ever seen its flower. They say that if you do, you will become a god.”

“A god. Wow. Have you ever seen its flower?”

“Not yet.”

The waiter came, and Dakini ordered for them both. Eventually, the waiter brought eight small metal bowls, all filled with different dishes. Some were thick like a stew; others were solid like a potato salad. Chase scooped a plate full of rice onto both plates, and they each ladled out small portions of the dishes onto the rice.

“How long will you stay?” Dakini asked him after they had both eaten awhile.

“Today?”

“No. Here.”

“Oh. I think I am going to stay in India a while.”

“How long?”

“I haven’t decided yet.”

“Will it be long?”

“Maybe.”

“Will you stay in Pondicherry?”

“Probably.”

“Will you stay with me?”

“Would you like that?”

Dakini nodded. "Could we go on road trips?"

"Yes. We can go on road trips. Are you having fun?"

"Yes."

"Me too," he said.

They finished the meal, tipped the waiter, and walked out to the street. Chase flagged down a taxi. A tattooed man drove up on a motorcycle with a rickshaw being pulled behind. Chase handed him a piece of paper with an address on it. The man studied the address, and nodded, and Chase and Dakini climbed into the rickshaw.

"Where are we going?" Dakini asked as they pulled out of the square.

“It’s an adventure day.”

“Okay,” she said, looking around.

They passed a temple with a grassy lawn in front of it. A group of people were in the lawn doing yoga as they passed. The buildings began to spread out the further they moved away from the town square, giving way to apartment buildings, and later to large homes.

Chase scanned the streets, trying to find the small clinic that Shelby had first been transported to, but could not find it.

The motorcycle turned off the main road and steered up and around a winding hill lined on both sides with hunched-over trees and gnarled branches. The houses were set off from the main road and most of them were protected by stone gates.

At the back of the hill, the driver turned into a private driveway, and through the opened gate. Chase said something to the driver once he had stopped.

“Where are we?” Dakini asked.

“Wait here a second, okay?”

“Okay.”

Chase stepped out of the rickshaw and walked up the stone-lined path to the front door. The house was two stories tall and made of tan stucco with black shutters. On the second floor was an open patio with dark wooden columns and cream curtains tied back along the side.

Chase knocked on the door and looked back over his shoulder to where the rickshaw sat in the horseshoe driveway. He waved back at Dakini. The door

opened and a man dressed in white stood before him. The man was nearly a foot shorter than Chase.

“May I help you?” the servant asked, eyeing Chase suspiciously.

“I am looking for Tantra Chakraborty. Is she here?”

“Who shall I say is asking?”

“I’m Chase Komley. I’m from America. Please let her know that I have Dakini Guntherpalli with me.”

The servant looked Chase over. As he turned to walk away, a young Indian boy walked up behind him. The boy wore baggy jeans and a Jay Z t-shirt. His hair was gelled and spikey, and he wore a bright blue pair of headphones plugged into an iPad. He moved the iPad up and down, titling it occasionally, eyes pasted to the screen. The servant walked into the

house, and the boy glanced up hurriedly at Chase and then back at the screen.

Chase watched the boy, surprised by what he was seeing. Tiny fingers moved between his, clasping firmly. Chase looked down to find that Dakini had sidled up beside him. They both looked at the other hesitantly, neither certain what was to happen.

“Maybe you should wait in the taxi,” Chase said.

“Hey,” the Indian boy said, pulling his headphones off his ears and letting them hang around his neck.

“Hi,” Dakini said.

“I’m Ravi,” he said, nodding. The boy did not sound Indian. In fact, he had the slightest hint of a surfer accent. “Who are you?”

“I’m Dakini. What is that?”

Ravi turned the iPad over to show her. His game had been paused. On the screen, two elves held arrows pointed at a hairy giant about to swing a mallet at them. “You play World of Warcraft?” he asked her.

“No.”

“Too bad.” He looked up at Chase. “You?”

Chase shook his head. He felt a tense knot forming in his stomach.
This might not be a good idea.

“Do you like stories?” Dakini asked excitedly, holding her book up to Ravi, smiling.

“Stories? Like, what do you mean?”

“Stories. You know . . . stories,” she said, shaking her book for emphasis.

Ravi wrinkled his brow at her. “No,” he said sarcastically, acting like he was holding back laughter.

The servant returned. Dakini moved closer to Chase. Ravi put his headphones back on.

“She will not be able to see you at this time,” the servant said.

Chase took in a deep breath, looking at Ravi, and then at the servant. “Maybe you should go back to the taxi,” Chase told Dakini. She clenched his hand tightly, shaking her head. Her eyes were big as she looked up at him from under the bill of her baseball cap.

Chase turned to the servant. “What would be a good time for her?”

“You may wish to call and set up an appointment if you like. But she will not meet with you today.” The servant stepped away from the door, and started to close it.

“Bye,” Dakini said to Ravi as the door was closing, but Ravi did not look up.

Chapter 44

Dakini slept on Chase's shoulder on the bus ride back to Pondicherry. Night had fallen, and they had spent the day exploring the village and all that it had to offer. Chase had tried to conceal his frustration from Dakini all day long. He thought that if Tantra had been willing to help Bindy find Dakini, then perhaps there was a hidden place within her that would want to offer Dakini . . . something, anything.

Dakini asked several times during the day who lived in that house. Finally, he told her he had thought that it was where an old friend from college lived. He told her that apparently he had been mistaken. "Americans know everyone," Dakini said, at last dropping the matter.

As the bus drove down the dirt road, Chase watched Dakini sleeping in his lap. He reached down and traced his fingers around the red-string bracelet he bought her in the market that afternoon. The bracelet was too large for her delicate wrists, and had to be tied twice to keep it from falling off.

This girl will be trapped in life, he thought. How can she live a life hanging in the balance between a deranged father and an indifferent aunt? And what sort of life can she have in the orphanage?

Chase thought about Naomi. He thought about how she had abandoned all of her plans in life when she found that Seeta needed her. She was heading in one direction, but Life pulled her in another.

Just then, the bus driver cursed.

The bus slowed to a stop. Chase looked up and saw brake lights in the road up ahead. Off in the distance, on the side of the road, he could see a large fire glowing brightly against the night sky. Everyone on the bus, as if on cue, woke up and looked out the front window. The driver of the bus turned the bus off and stepped out to the road beside. The other passengers on the bus were murmuring amongst themselves in a language Chase did not know.

Chase lifted Dakini's head, and placed it gently on the place he had been sitting. He walked down the aisle of the bus and stepped out beside the driver. The driver was smoking, staring at the towering flames up ahead. The driver was mostly bald, with a dark, pockmarked face and a pronounced comb-over.

“Do you speak English?” Chase asked.

“Yes,” he said, not looking over at Chase.

“What has happened?”

“Someone hit a Brahmin bull. This road is very dangerous.”

“Is that a vehicle on fire?”

“No. It is the bull.”

“The bull is on fire?”

“Yes. They must burn the bull on a burial pyre. Nobody can pass this road until the bull is burned.”

“Why?”

“To respect the sacred.”

“I see,” Chase said, nodding. “How long does a thing like this usually take?”

“Until it is finished.” The driver tossed his cigarette on the ground and smudged it out with his foot.

Both men stood for a second, listening to fire up ahead. Chase walked along the dirt road away from the driver. He passed a car with both passengers asleep, slouched down against the windows. Two guys had parked their motorcycles on the side of the road. They sat on the ground, talking. Chase moved nearer to the flames, smelling a sharp sour smell in the air. He could feel the heat of the flames on his face.

Chase watched tiny bubbles forming along the face of the bull as it lie motionless in the flames. The wood under the bull crackled, and occasionally a popping sound came from one of the hooves. Dark gray smoke rushed up from the pyre into the stars above. Chase watched the smoke drift higher and higher, vanishing at last along the edges of the full moon.

I will do this thing, he thought. There is no greater thing to do with the remainder of my life. I will no longer vacillate. The time for thinking has passed. And the time for uncertainty with it. On this night, my life shall change, and I shall throw my entire being into this child's existence.

“Yes,” he whispered. His stomach turned, and a quiet laughter sprung from somewhere, and chills formed down both arms.

Chase stood for a moment, before turning his back to the flames, and retracing his steps to the bus. He passed the driver, who was talking to the two men beside the parked motorcycles.

He stopped. There she was. Her face was pressed up against the front window of the bus. Her eyes looked sleepy. The flames from the Brahmin bull behind him were reflected in the glass on both sides of her face.

[I see you.] Dakini signed to him.

[I am here.] he signed back.

[Take me with you.]

[Where? There?] Chase asked, pointing back to the fire.

[No.]

[Where?]

[Wherever you go.] she signed.

[Tonight?]

[All the time.]

[All the time?] he signed.

Dakini nodded. Chase watched her through the window, and the reflected flames crawling all around this small girl.

[I want to.] he signed.

[I want you to.]

Dakini nodded sleepily. She folded her arms and rested her chin on her crossed arms, and pressed her forehead against the front window of the bus.

“Yes,” he whispered, as he watched her fall sleep.

Chapter 45

The bus eventually pulled into the bus depot in Pondicherry. Chase woke Dakini, who sat up, looking around.

“I did not know we were here yet,” she said.

“We’re here,” he said, pulling her hat from her head. He swept his hand across the top of her hair to fix it, before placing the hat back on her head.

As they stepped out of the depot, they could see that some sort of celebration was happening in the front gardens of the ashram. Fairy lights were strung up into the trees, and music was playing. The gardens were crowded with people, some dancing, some talking, most laughing.

“What is this?” he asked her.

“They are celebrating a baby,” Dakini said.

“How do you know?” he asked.

Dakini pointed to a table with food on it. “See the statue with the head of an elephant but the body of a baby?”

“Yes.”

“That is how I know.” The guests were loud, and dressed in brilliantly colored clothes. “Can we go?” Dakini asked.

“Are we allowed?”

“Yes. The whole community is invited to this type of celebration.”

“You want to go?”

“Yes. They have cake. See?” she said, pointing.

“I see. Okay.”

Chase took Dakini’s hand and led her through the street and into the front gates of the garden. Torches were lit along the paths, and near the center, in the open spaces below the trees, tables were spread out. Under the dim light cast down from the trees, two women and a man danced to the music, in sync, twirling at the same time, then stopping, then dancing around the others in a circle.

A couple of men sat on a bench beside the table, cackling, and behind them were a brood of old women, all talking at the same time. Dakini pointed to the table with the cake on it.

“Okay,” Chase said, leading her around the perimeter of the dancing. Chase took two plates and handed them to Dakini. She held them steady as he placed a piece of cake on each plate. Beside the table was an open bar with many people gathered around, drinking and laughing.

Chase led Dakini to a bench in front of the dancing. “Wait here,” he said. “I’m going to get a drink. What do you want?”

“I don’t care,” she said, taking a bite of the cake.

Chase turned and walked up to the bar and got in line. He looked all around the gardens. People were everywhere. The whole village must have come out. He saw a man holding up a baby to two women. He thought this must be the child for whom they had all gathered.

When it was Chase’s turn, he ordered a drink for him and a drink for Dakini from the bartender. While he waited for the drinks, something caught his eye in an alley beside the ashram. Under a streetlight, a young

officer with a thick mustache was talking to Bindy Guntherpalli. Chase's heart quickened. He recognized the officer. They had talked about cricket two nights before.

Bindy was doing all the talking. The officer only looked at Bindy every once in a while. Bindy was waving his hands about as he spoke.

"Here you go," the bartender said. Chase turned to the bartender, and reached in his pocket and pulled cash out. He handed it to the bartender, before turning back to watch Bindy. The bartender went to make change.

Bindy Guntherpalli was reaching into his pocket and pulled out a fistful of bills and handed it to the officer. The officer looked cavalier as he snatched the cash and shoved it into his pocket.

"Here you go," the bartender said, handing Chase his change. Chase took the money and looked back into the alley. The officer pulled something from out

of his other pocket and handed it casually to Bindy. Bindy did not look at it. He clinched it tightly in his fist and walked down the alley away from the young officer.

Chase watched Bindy until he was completely out of site. “Unbelievable,” he said to himself. Chase took his two drinks, and walked back to Dakini.

“What is this?” she asked, with a mouth full of cake.

“I got us both a very special drink that we have in America . . . since we are having our American road trip day.”

“What is it?”

Chase handed her a glass and clinked his to hers. “These are Shirley Temples. You’ll love it.”

Dakini and Chase sipped through the straw at the same time. Her face lit up. “I like it,” she said.

“Well, kiddo . . . you are either going to be up all night from all this sugar and caffeine . . . or you are going to crash in twenty minutes. What do you think?”

“I think I have had a perfect day.”

Chase took a bite of the cake. “Me too, kiddo.”

They both watched the dancers for a while, and listened to the music while they ate cake. Chase scanned the edges of the gardens looking for Bindy, but he was nowhere to be found.

Once she had eaten, Dakini placed her empty plate on the bench where she had been sitting and stood up and clapped to the beat of the music. The dancers

noticed this and started to clap along with her. Chase watched the look of wonderment that glowed from her face.

One of the lady dancers reached over and pulled Dakini out into the middle to dance with them. The three dancers twirled as they danced in circles around the girl. Dakini clapped her hands with the beat, looking up at them as they spun around her.

In the streets along the front of the gardens, children started to set off fireworks. Some of them shot up into the air above the ashram. The glowing fireworks sparkled and sizzled down from the sky. Another boy lit the fuse of a long strand of red firecrackers. The firecrackers popped, one after the other, louder and louder, like gunfire.

When the music had stopped, and the crowd had started to thin, Dakini crawled up into Chase's lap and placed her head on his shoulder. She was sweaty on the side of her face as he kissed her cheeks. She smelled of patchouli and sleepiness.

Chase stood with her for a second. They both watched the fireworks light up the elaborately tiled dome of the ashram.

“Hey,” he said after awhile.

“Yeah?” She kept her head on his shoulder.

“Are you sure?” he asked her.

“Yes,” she said. “I am sure.”

“It will take a while, you know. Lots of plans will have to be made.”

“That’s okay. You will stay here until they are finished?”

“Yes. I will stay here.”

“Then where will we go?” she asked.

“Where do you want to go?”

“With you.”

“Okay. I like that plan,” he said. “Are you nervous?”

Dakini did not respond for a long time. He leaned back and looked at her resting on his shoulder. She was asleep. He mouth was open and she was breathing loudly.

Chase picked Dakini up and walked her through the streets of Pondicherry, back to the orphanage. She did not wake up.

Chapter 46

Chase tucked Dakini into her small wrought iron bed, pulling the mosquito netting around all four posters of the bed, and turning her lamp off. He watched her breathing, and he watched the moon shine down along the edges of her face.

“Good night, my love,” he whispered. “Good night, moon.”

Chase left her room and closed her door gently as not to wake her. When he turned, he was startled.

Arvind Patel was standing in the hall behind him, holding a cat.

“Oh good lord,” Chase said. “You scared me.”

“I’m sorry,” Arvind said, pushing his round glasses up on his nose. “I found this.” Arvind held up a black cat with white paws.

“That looks like my cat when she was little. Where did you find her?”

“Outside by the gardens. I came to show Dakini.”

“May I hold her?” Chase asked. Arvind handed the cat to Chase. The cat looked at Chase with unfocused eyes, and opened her mouth to meow, but no sound came out. “She’s purring.”

“I know.”

“She must like you.”

“I think she does like me.”

“It’s too bad Dakini will miss this. She already fell asleep.”

“Are you going to take her?” Arvind asked.

“No,” Chase said, handing the cat back to the boy. “But you should take her to Sister Teresa to see what she thinks first.”

“No. Are you going to take Dakini?”

Chase had never considered being asked this before. He studied Arvind, and how large his eyes looked behind the glasses. “Uh . . . well,” Chase said, stopping. “That is a complicated question.”

“I love her,” he said all at once.

“You do?” Chase said. This hit him from a sideways angle.

“Yes. I love her.”

“You love her? Like a girlfriend?”

“Yes. I love her.”

“Okay . . . yeah. I can see that.” Chase considered what to say.

“I loved her when I first met her.”

“You did? How do you know?”

“Because of what I felt.”

“I understand that,” Chase said, kneeling down beside Arvind and petting the cat. “I think I know what you mean.”

“You do?”

“I think I do.”

“I don’t know what I would do if she left.”

“But what if it is her time to leave?”

“Then I would be very sad,” Arvind said, looking away from Chase.

“Maybe you and I could make a deal.”

“What deal?” Arvind asked, looking up from the kitten.

“Maybe you and I can come to an understanding as men.”

“An understanding?”

“Maybe we should agree that I will bring Dakini to see you often. And if the timing works out, maybe we could arrange for you to see her as well?”

“Is that possible?”

“Anything is possible, Arvind.”

For quite some time, both Arvind and Chase rubbed the cat, listening to her purr.

“Maybe just don’t take her all at once?” Arvind asked, looking quickly up into Chase’s eyes, then back at the cat.

“Okay. I can do that.”

“Okay,” Arvind said. The boy slung the cat over his shoulder. He turned and walked down the hallway, and around the stairs to the floor below.

Chase looked both ways up and down the hallway. He had not considered the attachments that the children had formed. He had not understood until now that these bonds had any real depth. Everything had to be recalculated. *What is life like for these children here? What will they become? I do not believe I would know how to survive here. How do they survive? Who will come for them?*

The silence was eerie, and a shiver overcame him.

In time, Chase went down the hall as well, and down the stairs. He found his old room, and sat up in bed with his back against the headboard. The night lamp cast a specific circle of light upon the top of the desk, and upon the floor below. The windows above his bed were open, and beyond that, the full moon hung exhaustedly in the starry night.

Chase smelled his hands, and could smell the cat on them. He thought of Camper. For the first time in ten days, his mind turned to his old life, and to all of the steps he would have to take to start over anew in India.

Chase was not anxious. He feared nothing. In the course of one day he had developed a clear vision of what his life was to look like for the next year, the next five years, and maybe even the next ten years. All of the tiny pieces of his life that had so recently come undone, all at once, reorganized into a new order.

Chase went over to his lesser bag, and pulled out the notebook and pen that he had stuffed in a side pocket. Settling into the chair in front of the desk, Chase began to write:

Maggie,

As I write this, I am still in India. I am sorry that I have not had a chance to check back in on Sappho's and the rest of you guys, but things have developed rapidly since I arrived here.

India is so beautiful. There is a haunting quality to it. The beauty lies in how scary it can be sometimes. The beauty lies in the ugliness that it draws out in you. It feels like India is trying to suck the venom out of me. There are so many things I would love to tell you, but they will have to wait for another time. I wish we could have experienced this together, but, alas, I suppose I was meant to experience this part of my journey alone.

I am writing because there are a couple of things I need to say to you. First of all, I want you to know that I am sorry for how things went down between us. You were the best thing that ever happened to me, and I don't know why it just faded away. But I know it was not your fault. I

blamed you and Isabella for years. But I know that such drastic life changes don't come about by accident, and they never come about unless the life you are living is full of cracks and crumbling all around you.

I'm sorry I dragged us down the rabbit hole. We had a nice peaceful life before I decided to open Sappho's. I'm sorry that I took you away from your dream to run big. You gave up a lot to be with me, and I never made many allowances for that. I'm sorry that I was an unbearable dick after Isabella came into our lives. I'm sorry that I made the divorce so much nastier than it had to be.

But mostly I am sorry that I lost your friendship. Mostly I am sorry for that. You were always my best friend, and now that is gone. I know some things just break in life, and they can't really be fixed. But I choose to see it this way: the statue of David has fallen over and has shattered into a million pieces. That doesn't mean that we can't take those pieces and make a beautiful mosaic out of them. In this way, perhaps the things we love the most can still travel with us, if only in pieces.

I am giving you Sappho's. I am staying in India. I will be here at least six months. I will contact my attorney this week and make arrangements. I will send for my things someday. Please see that Camper remains happy and well fed, and tell her that I did not leave because of her.

I hope that you will see it in your heart to . . .

Chase stopped writing. Shots were being fired. "What the hell?" he said.

Chase froze, listening. At first he thought it was more fireworks from the gardens along the ashram.

But then another shot rang out. Then another. Someone was screaming. Now several people were screaming.

Chase turned out the lights. He climbed on his bed and looked out the window. In the front lawn, he saw a man brandishing a rifle. Sister Teresa lay motionless on the ground along the pathway, as well as two children beside her.

“Holy fuck,” he whispered.

The man in the courtyard yelled out. “Dakini! Dakini! I’m not going to hurt you. Come to Baba.”

Chase raced out of his room and down the marble corridor. He climbed the wooden stairs two and three at a time, winding up to the second floor to get to Dakini’s room.

“Get in your rooms and get under your beds,” he said to children who were opening their doors. They had sleepy and confused eyes. “Now.” His voice was calm but firm. The children did as he said, closing and locking their doors behind him. Some of the kids were already beginning to cry.

Chase came to Dakini's room and the door was already opened. "Oh no," he whispered. He charged into the room. Beside her bed, Arvind Patel was trying to wake Dakini. "Arvind," Chase said, kneeling down beside the boy and talking in a loud whisper. Dakini sat up, dazed.

"Arvind, I need you to quietly but quickly go down the hall and sneak into Father Chadwick's chamber. Tell him there is an extreme emergency and he needs to get on the phone and call the police. Do you understand?" Arvind's eyes were large through his round glasses. He just nodded his head. "I know you can do this. You are the best person for this task. Be safe. But go now. Go quickly."

Arvind ran out of the room. Chase grabbed Dakini up into his arms. He moved over to her window and looked out to the front courtyard, but Bindy was no longer there.

"What is happening?" she asked.

“Shhh,” he said. “Don’t speak. It’s going to be okay. Just be very quiet.”

At that point, two more shots rang out. Dakini jumped. Chase could hear more children starting to cry.

Dakini had her hands over her ears, and her eyes were large. She looked at the door.

“I’m going to get us out of this,” he assured her.

Chase peeked out the door to Dakini’s room and looked both ways. The corridor was dark and empty. He took measured steps across the marble floor, thankful that it was marble and not made of wood. He looked back and forth as he moved, listening, until he came to the winding wooden stairs which led to the first floor.

“Shit,” he whispered.

Chase took one cautious step down the first step and stopped. To his delight it did not make a sound. He stood still for some time, listening. Somewhere below, he could hear a door rattling. Chase took a second cautious step.

Then the sound of a door being kicked open startled them both. Neither could see the door nor the man from where they stood on the steps, but they knew it was coming from the floor below.

“Dakini!” Bindy shouted. “I am not going to hurt you! I want us to leave this place. I won’t have to hurt anyone else if you just come to me. Dakini! I know you can hear me.” The voice stopped. A shot rang out. A thud. “I know you hear me, Dakini!”

Chase could hear the rifle being cocked, and the sound of a metal casing bouncing onto the marble floor.

Chase's heart was so loud in his ears that he was certain it was audible. Dakini still had her hands over her ears. Chase took the third, fourth, and later, the fifth steps all at once, trying to remain as quiet as possible. Then came the sound of another door kicked in. Chase knew this was his chance.

The remaining stairs all squeaked as he carried Dakini down to the first floor. He took them quickly. He hoped that the sounds of kicked-in doors would drown out the sounds of squeaking stairs.

At the bottom of the stairs, Chase got his first clear look at the man with the rifle. Bindy was standing outside one of the rooms. He did not see Chase and Dakini at this end of the hallway, but he was, however, blocking the passage to the front door. On instinct, Chase turned and ran in the opposite direction.

I will take her out the back passage in the courtyard, he thought. I will find the exit by the garden, or I will climb the wall with her. That is what I will do. That is all I can do. But I will save this girl. That I will surely do.

“Stop!” Bindy screamed. “Bring me the girl!”

Chase did not stop. He had never run as hard as he did now.

“Dakini!” Bindy shouted, and began yelling something at her, in Hindi. Chase did not know what he was saying. He only ran.

A bullet moved quickly through the air between them. Chase pushed the double doors open and rushed into the courtyard. Another shot rang out. Chase slowed from a run to a sudden walk as he carried her through the courtyard. His breathing started to become almost impossible. He felt weak. He tried to take another step, but his leg felt unbearably heavy, and he fell to one knee.

The man was in the courtyard now, far behind them. He was still screaming in Hindi. Chase collapsed a few feet from the center fountain. He tried desperately to hold her closely, but Dakini fell with him, and struck her head into a stone beside the fountain.

Chapter 47

“It’s going to be okay,” he whispered to Dakini, over and over again like a mantra. “Don’t be afraid.” She lay motionless on her back atop the stone floor of the courtyard, inches from the fountain. The bright silver moon cast uncertain shadows from the trees along the edges, and caused the water to shimmer as it splashed into the pool below. Her small face shone in the moonlight.

How peaceful, he thought, studying her closed eyes and expressionless face. *It’s almost like she’s sleeping,* he thought. “I’ll get us out of this,” he whispered.

Chase Komley slumped over the girl, trying to prop himself up with his elbow. His lungs ached, and the air he sucked in felt thin and useless. His other hand was pressed to the ground, a little shaky. The stones to the courtyard felt cool below his palm. *How nice,* he thought. A sudden breeze rustled the leaves above the courtyard, pushing the shadows this way, and then that. Chase peered back over his shoulder, and could see the orphanage lit in the moonlight, and how the shadows swayed along the cracked and

mossy walls. From within the darkness, Bindy Guntherpalli stood poised like a beautiful serpent. Sometimes, when the shadows tilted, Chase could make out something of the man's face.

Bindy was screaming in a language that Chase could not comprehend. Chase turned once more to Dakini.

Is a life well-lived measured by the countless minor decisions that we make each day? he asked himself. Or is it measured by the lone major decision that we throw our entire being behind when time and fate collide? He pondered this, listening to the footsteps shuffling toward them from the dark boundaries of the garden.

Life is easy to read backwards, he thought. I won't know if this was my truly big decision until tomorrow, maybe the next. I'll know then, he thought. Then I'll know.

How odd, he thought. In just ten days, so many seemingly random decisions led to this moment, so far across the planet. Ten days. But where did it start? Which one choice shifted the momentum?

Was it to go to the zoo? He asked. Surely not. Surely it was not the decision to go to the zoo. Damn rundown zoo. But that is where the message came. For that matter, maybe it started at the Indigo. Maybe.

Chase heaved in belabored breaths. *It does not matter now, he thought. I am here now. And I have found this child. And I have done all that I can.*

“I promised you,” he whispered in her ear. He began to cough. The taste of iron coated the back of his tongue. “Promises . . .”

In the corner of his eye, Bindy towered over them both, wild-eyed and spitting out cold black curses which shot into his back. He tried to look up into his face. The full moon sat perfectly over his shoulder. Chase’s

ears began to ring. For a moment, he thought the ringing was emanating from the moon.

From the bell tower above them, the old monk cried out, “Stop that man!” Seconds later, the wooden door to the garden was kicked off its iron hinges, and men with rifles swarmed into the courtyard and surrounded the fountain.

Chase could see that pools of blood were forming around his elbow, and around the shoulder of his beloved Dakini. *How peaceful*, he thought to himself, looking at the image of the moon reflected in the pool of blood.

“Who shaves the fucking barber?” he muttered.

Chapter 48

Opening his eyes felt impossible. He could hear sounds. But nothing sounded familiar. Out of the void, someone called his name. He tried to open his eyes. Again he tried. A slit of light formed before him. His name was called again. The voice sounded close. He knew the voice. Chase tried harder to open his eyes. Eventually he did.

Shelby Starling was sitting very close to him beside his bed. He wanted to look around, but could not move his head. “Thirsty,” he whispered.

“Okay! Yeah. Okay,” she said. “Good. I can fix that. I’ll be back.”

Shelby ran out of the room and Chase blinked his eyes over and over, searching the room. A window was beside the bed. The shades were pulled near to the bottom. There was an I.V. stand. Everything was fuzzy.

“Here,” she said, rushing back into the room with a Styrofoam cup filled with tiny ice shavings. Dr. Pathcotti came into the room behind her. Shelby took the spoon from the cup and scooped some of the ice to his lips. Chase took them into his mouth, and he was certain he had never tasted anything more satisfying in his life.

“Mr. Komley,” Dr. Pathcotti said in her usual commanding voice. “Did you know that if you come to this hospital one more time, you get a prize?”

“More,” he whispered. A dull, persistent pain pressed into his back, a constant feeling that he was laying on top of a baseball. Hot nausea worked over him. He felt clammy.

Shelby scooped more ice to his lips.

“You were in a very bad accident, Mr. Komley. Do you remember this?” His eyes were the only thing that moved. He stared blankly at Dr. Pathcotti. “But I want you to know that you are in good hands and we are going to do everything

possible to get you up and around. Okay? Do you understand what I am saying to you?"

Two men and old woman entered the room, all dressed in scrubs. They spoke quietly to Dr. Pathcotti in Hindi. She nodded to them, and the two men left the room.

Chase swallowed hard. He tried to speak. His throat felt glued together. He tried to clear his throat, making little coughing sounds. "Did I save her?" he whispered, almost inaudible.

"Do not worry about the details of the accident at this time, Mr. Komley. What we want for you right now is to get as much rest as possible. Okay? I'm going to listen to your heart right now, but you just lay there."

Chase's eyes moved over to Shelby's but his head did not move. She was wiping a tear from her eye. She sniffled. Once she saw his eyes were on her, she put a smile on, "You look really great."

He blinked. Dr. Pathcotti stood. “I am going to get more pain medication for you. It will make you drowsy. Okay?” Dr. Pathcotti turned to the old woman in scrubs at the foot of Chase’s bed and said something to the lady. A discussion ensued. The lady left the room.

Chase moved his eyes toward Dr. Pathcotti and blinked. A few moments later, Dr. Pathcotti turned and walked out of the room as well.

“More,” he whispered.

Shelby scooped more ice to his lips. “Here we go,” she said, almost like speaking to a baby. “I asked you to go back to Pondicherry and you got shot.” At first she laughed as she said this, but then she burst out into tears.

Chase’s head was fixed straight ahead, but his eyes were still on her.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to get you into all this. I never meant for any of this to happen.”

Chase’s head moved ever so slightly up and then down.

Shelby leaned in close to him. “Chase . . . please hang on. Please. Please just be strong. I know you’ll be alright. Just please hang on. Just do it for me.” Shelby scooped out more ice for him. Chase blinked unhurriedly, his eyes still fixed on her. “I want you to know something that I should have told you a long, long time ago . . . you know the night at the party?”

Dr. Pathcotti walked into the room, followed by the two men and the old woman. “Okay,” she said. “I am going to inject this into your IV now, and it will help you feel better.”

Chase’s eyes remained on Shelby. The needle went into the IV tubing and Dr. Pathcotti squeezed the medicine into the tube with great ease.

Dr. Pathcotti turned and started speaking to the other three in scrubs. She had her back to Chase and Shelby. Chase could feel the medication taking over. The two men nodded as Dr. Pathcotti spoke. Then the old woman started talking, and all of them left the room.

“Stay,” he struggled to whisper to Shelby.

“I would have run off with you,” she blurted out, watching his eyes begin to droop. They were alone in the room now at last. “I wanted you to ask me to run away. I would have started a new life with you.” She could see that he was fighting to keep his eyes open, but was losing the fight. She spoke loudly and quickly. “Please be okay, Chase. Please. Please.”

Chapter 49

Dakini and Shelby had taken a long walk on the beach the night before. Neither one of them spoke. They both knew they were thinking the precise same thing. When they had walked as far as they could in one direction, they walked back, listening to the waves, to the gulls, to nothing in particular. They eventually came to Gandhi's park, and they sat in the sand beside the Sea of Bengal. They lay on their backs and stared at the full moon.

When Shelby awoke, she was surprised to see that the sun was rising over the Sea of Bengal, and that Dakini was asleep on her chest. Dakini sat up, rubbing her eyes. Shelby leaned up on her elbows.

"Good morning," she said.

"Good morning," Dakini replied.

“How do you feel this morning?” Dakini shrugged, watching the sun rise.

They both watched the sun, its bright orange crown peeking just above the water. Two gulls rode the streams of wind which blew in from the ocean, cawing back and forth to the other.

“How is the knot on your head?”

Dakini reached back and rubbed her hair. “I think it made me dream.”

“It did? What did it make you dream?”

“I had a dream that I had figured out a way to fly.”

“A way to fly?”

“Yeah . . . and it was actually quite simple,” Dakini said.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“How?”

Dakini thought about this for a second. “What you had to do was start running as fast as you could, and then when you could go no faster, you had to make long jumping strides. Do you know how they do in the Olympics with the long jump?”

“Yeah. The bouncy jumps.”

“That’s right. You make these bouncy jumps while you are running as fast as you can, and when they became long enough . . . when the bouncy

jumps get long enough . . . all you had to do was start peddling your feet like you are riding a bicycle.”

“Just peddle?”

“That’s all. Then as long as you peddle, and you never stop, you never have to come back down.”

“Did it make you fly high?”

“No, just above the ground. But it was high enough. But the trick is you could never stop peddling. Never.”

“That’s how you fly?” Shelby asked.

“Yes. It is easy. That is how you fly.”

“Were you good at it?”

“Not good enough.”

“Why?”

“I always got tired of peddling.”

“Then what would happen?”

“I would just land back down and be a regular person again.”

“Maybe we should try that sometime?”

“I think I will someday. I bet it works.”

“I think I will try it too,” Shelby said.

“I bet it works,” Dakini repeated. A bird landed near them, eyeing them cautiously, moving closer in sideways motions. “Do you want to know something?” Dakini asked.

“Yes.”

“It is a secret.”

“Okay.”

“I’m afraid it’s a terrible secret.”

“You can tell me.”

“I’m glad he’s dead.”

“Who? Your father?”

“He was not Baba,” Dakini said. “I’m glad they killed him.”

“That’s not a bad secret, honey,” Shelby said, reaching over and pulling her closer. As Dakini rested her head on Shelby’s shoulder, the curious bird flew away.

They both stared at the sun, now completely birthed, and separate from the ocean, sitting by itself, hovering above the water, at the very beginning of its journey across the sky. “You’re safe now. You know that?”

Dakini nodded. “Maybe.”

“Are you hungry?” Shelby asked.

“Yes, but I want to see Chase first. Do you think that would be best?”

“I do.”

“Let’s do that then.”

Shelby took Dakini’s hand and led her back up along the sand, away from the rising sun, and back to the hospital. Something felt different about the hospital. The feeling was bottomless and impenetrable, and thick as guilt.

When they reached Chase’s room, his bed was empty. The bed was made, perfectly pulled back, exposing the white sheets below. The white sheets were

seamlessly tucked under the edges of the mattress. Shelby stepped back and looked at the room number once more and then back to the bed.

Her mouth opened, but nothing came out. She took a few steps into the room, but felt weak, and started to fall to the floor like an elephant that has been tranquilized from behind. Shelby was on all fours now, trying not to hyperventilate.

Dakini could not enter the room, but stayed in the threshold, unable to move. She did not cry that day. In fact, she did not feel anything at all. At the time, she thought that perhaps her tear ducts had been ruined, or that maybe someone had stolen the place inside of her that contained the sum total of all that she could ever feel.

Later, years later, when she was an old woman, and when she thought back to this day, she reasoned to herself that perhaps she had already spent her life's allowance of tears, wasted and gone, and at such an early age.

Dakini turned and walked away from the room. She walked unhurriedly and without purpose down the vacant hallways and out of the hospital. She retraced her steps to the place on the beach where they had slept the night before.

*I think I will see if that trick for flying work today's, she thought to herself.
Yes. That is what I'll do today.*

the end