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In the Land of Perfect Bliss

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by

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Book One

Chapter One

Lautoka, Fiji. November 1985

Instead of despairing over an article in the newspaper about the irreparable
damage from the flood that had just swept Fiji’s sugar belt, Shantam Dutt should’ve been
attending to the eight-legged baby on his doorstep. But at this particular moment,
despairing was a more enticing pursuit. For a few minutes, the slight, middle-aged man
sat catatonic at the flimsy plastic kitchen table, staring at the article and allowing himself
to be drawn to small, irrelevant details, like, for example, that the population of Suva, the
capital, had swelled to about 180,000. And as the banging at his door got louder and his
patience shorter, Shantam reflected on how on this particular balmy Sunday morning it
was very possible that that entire lot, or at least the more prying of that 180,000, were
formed in a sort of intestinal pattern lined up along his street, a smaller number along the
back of his house, and the luckiest, the rectum of it all, gathered right in front of his door,
all to catch a glimpse of the eight-limbed girl who had appeared on his doorstep that very
morning.

He stretched and yawned and then stretched again. The table rattled a tinny noise
in response to his movement and he made a sluggish mental note to fix it with a wad of
paper. If he were to hazard a guess at what the small carved wooden clock above the
stove behind him said, he’d say it was six a.m. Five hours earlier than he’d planned to be
awake. Sundays were sacred, the only day off from the mills. A day without the thought
of soul-crushing heat and the threat of severed limbs. It was a day worth fighting for in Shantam’s mind, and though the thick stench of molasses sat as a heady reminder of his daily fate in nearly every inch of Lautoka and its environs, he’d devised a fairly effective strategy of creating an alternate reality, a life well-lived on that one oasis, that one life-preserver day of the week. But how does one ignore the droning, the pleas and chants of hundreds at his door?

For the last three weeks, cane belt dwellers from Lautoka to Labasa had done everything they could to escape the throttling ritual of cyclone rains and watched as their homes, cars, and farms became submerged. And now the rain had finally ceased and in Shantam’s village of Namanqa the devastated came out from their homes and some even from high in the sturdy strangler figs where they sought refuge. Trees that now emitted the damp, familiar odor of ending rains and hopeful recovery. Thank God he’d taken the time to add more steel, elevate their lean-to with the indestructible coconut wood beams he’d spent nearly six months carving. He remembered what his wife Devi said as she admired his carpentry: You may let the cow’s bladder swell, but you never let it explode. That was just two days ago, as they sipped tea, satisfied, and watched the rain pelt into the accumulating pool around them.

But the worst seemed behind them now, and Shantam realized that maybe the people of Namanqa had the freak of fortune on the other side of the door to thank.

Making the effort to turn around and see that it was nearly seven, Shantam closed the paper and plunked it down on the table with all the resolve he had. The table rattled annoyingly again and this time he wadded up the stack of mini-Bibles he’d saved from
missionaries over the years and shoved it under the table leg. His neighbors had been keeping vigil outside of Shantam’s home for nearly two hours, hoping he’d soon rouse and acknowledge the auspicious gift that they were too afraid to touch. Why then, did Shantam hesitate to receive the gift that was no doubt meant for him? There was the kava hangover, yes. There was also what Devi revealed to him last night, deep under the covers when he’d returned from a night of drinking and playing carom at Hibiscus Hal’s. The few words that had struck him from their conversation still pricked him like mosquito bites. There was that.

“Please go,” Shantam grunted just loud enough to cause the sleeping hen in the corner to stir.

_Om Sri Maha Lakshmi Namah. Om Sri Maha Lakshmi Namah._

_Shanta! Shanta! There’s a baby out here Shanta! With eight legs! Wake up!_

The villagers chanting, Lulu screaming. He didn’t care what was going on. Were it not for the troublesome shaking of his brand new roof due to Lulu’s pounding, Shantam would put his head down right on the newspaper, right under the woodcut of the goddess Lakshmi above him, and go back to sleep.

“Just go and see Shanta,” Devi whispered from the bed.

Shantam stretched and stiffened his toes against the stone floor, wincing at the shock of cold under his feet as he got up from the table. With all the great Ratus and gurus in Fiji, the priests and the NGO-ers and the gap year students wanting to make change, why him?
He shuffled over to the door, wiping the sleep from his eyes and dreading the prospect of increased responsibility. The willowy cotton nightclothes hung so loose off Shantam’s gaunt frame that he looked down to make sure he was even wearing clothes at all. Imagine opening the door naked. That would shut them up. He turned the knob slowly and opened the door.

“Ok, ok everyone. You can go home now, I’m—”

Below him was a sight unlike any other he had ever seen. A tiny, slumbering body the size of a potato sack was swelling and sighing with the sounds of a sleep undisturbed by the commotion around it. A variety of colorful, silky sari scraps cocooned the baby in a protective barrier within a round banana tree planter large enough to encompass the girth of what was the most striking feature of the baby: the four arms and four legs that radiated outward from the girl’s core, tiny fronds unfurling from a palm sapling. Shantam let out an uncharacteristic gasp. He bent and gingerly picked up the little girl by her shoulders and underarms, as though he were gripping a steering wheel made of feathers. He scooped one hand up under her back and looked at her face. The girl couldn’t have been more than a week old. While he lightly squeezed her small hands and feet, the dark knots of her sleeping eyelids opened, revealing eyes of the lightest brown he’d ever seen. Two golden nuggets shining in a dormant tornado. Little tourmalines waiting to be plucked.

The planter itself was surrounded by a multicolored zigzag of sugary offerings, a child’s dream. Cassava sweetened with coconut cream, honey-colored ladoos, gold-dipped almond paste triangles and tricolored condensed milk barfis were arranged in
meaningful clusters across his porch. On the steps there were miniature lanterns and
golden figurines of Ganesh and Lakshmi flanked by bowls of rosewater and saffron kulfi
that sat in glossy, slick mounds, threatening to melt.

It was all just too much. And too early.

Lulu was the only one brave enough to come onto the porch. They’d been
neighbors for nine years and all throughout that time, Shantam had never known her to be
the superstitious type. But today was different. Today was a day to shed everything
known and emerge into this reality the way a newborn might, with a trusting, unfocused
gaze blurred with wonder.

Holding the baby close to him, Shantam looked up at the throng, head still
pounding, the dull reminder of last night’s kava making its presence known again. The
hope he read in their eyes seared through his resolve to do nothing about anything like
he’d planned from the moment he heard the chanting outside his door.

Maila, a taro farmer who wrote and performed ocean-inspired poetry on the
weekends, shouted “Hey! Every good poet needs a muse, nuh? I’ll take her!”

This prompted more calls from the crowd. The sturdy and usually silent Jone
Lalapola, little Tui’s father, piped up with a “I need more hands around the house, give
her to me,” causing everyone to titter apprehensively.

Cathy M., an Australian native who had been living in Namanqa for nearly fifteen
years after she’d come for a university anthropology project she was taking and decided
to just stay, and whose last name they could never quite remember so they simply went
by her first name and last initial as a compromise, called out to Shantam something about
how they should have her blessed by the priests at the temple with a hundred steps in Labasa.

But it was what Lulu said that really unsettled him.

“Shantam, what are you going to do? She is yours now.”

Lulu’s question made Shantam aware of his undeniable role in this equation. Somewhere deep in his being he knew that he had been chosen to receive this omen for a reason, and that each of his neighbors, friends, and family would be relying on the child for something different. He could not let them down.

Pigtailed Aishwarya Kulkarni blew kisses toward the baby, wishing for the love of the boisterous Tui Lalapola; Arpan “Plucky” Godwankar, Shantam’s best mate and fellow mill worker wanted simply to return to work; Side-eye Velma Vairiti (so-called because her curious eye placement resembled the wild goats the kids chased near the mangroves) burned incense and mouthed Doomsday prayers; and little Bindass Balbir, the smartest (and shortest) boy at Nimini Street Secondary School, hatched a plan to woo girls with the child, anyone except Aishwarya Kulkarni.

Where the clamor of the neighborhood had escalated to an ear-splitting point just moments before, now the air was still and it was only the sound of old, lazy rain dripping from the pines and palms that Shantam heard.

The child began to writhe and fret. Staccato, puttering sounds came from the tiny arcing of her mouth as he struggled to hold the slowly waking child. And just when the right words occurred to him, words that would both reassure and quiet the desperate and
the optimistic in front of him, she unleashed a trapped, adult cry that sounded like the cavernous foghorn bellowing over Lautoka Harbor.

Animated, the crowd began to talk amongst themselves about the child’s voice and what it could mean. Some claimed she was an unsatisfied Draupadi, returning to Earth to find a sixth husband, others argued that was impossible, she was too fair, and insisted that she was Lakshmi, that her limbs resembled the trunks on the elephants that anointed the four-armed goddess.

“Ok everybody. Enough!” Shantam shouted above the baby’s cries. “Someone left a gift…a child of god…like all of us. Let us keep this a secret for now as best we can until I decide what to do with her.” And with that, he closed the door, his mind racing with thoughts of what to do next.

Shantam knew the truth. The chance of this group keeping a secret was about as likely as Side-Eye Velma having relations with a Hindu. It wouldn’t be long before all of Namaqa knew about the girl and where she could be found. If God was smiling on him, he would be lucky to have a few solid hours to figure out what to do with her.

But there was a lot that Shantam didn’t know. Couldn’t have known. He hadn’t known what those tiny specks of gold had seen or where they had been mined from. Or from whom. He couldn’t know that whether this girl’s presence was a gift or a curse was suspended on a fine line, on circumstances as razor-thin as his mustache that the Universe dangled to test the faith of its inhabitants.

He couldn’t have known that in the end, it was going to be all up to him.
Shantam’s great-grandfather Yash was one of the original girmityas, the indentured servants brought to Fiji from India by the British to work on the sugar cane plantations. To entertain each other on the journey to Fiji, Yash and the other girmits told each other stories to make the interminable trip aboard *The Leonidas* bearable. One of these was about a light-eyed beauty who broke hearts during the day but at night roamed their village in the form of a jackal, destroying their crops and eating little children.

Devi had the darkest eyes Shantam could find, though after fifteen years of marriage, he’d learned that the intensity of eye hue meant little when it came to temperament. Because of what she confessed to him last night, the current situation called for a delicacy that Shantam wasn’t sure he had.

“What do we do?” he asked his wife in as tender a voice he could muster. He placed the baby on their bed, bundling her in a swathe of blankets and propping her up against the wall like a doll in a Proud’s department store window.

“There,” Devi gestured to a steaming cup of gingery tea. “Finally, you fixed the table. Already this child is bringing us luck!”

Sipping the tea, Shantam ignored her comment. “The rains have taken my work but brought me this child…but I don’t think we can afford to keep her, Devi. What to do?”

“The people have mostly left, it seems.” Devi, too, was quite skilled at ignoring. She turned back to the kitchen counter and continued making the morning khichadi. She made it in the Maharashtrian style, the way her mother, a Mumbai native, taught her. The
shiny ivory tapioca pearls, the *sabudana*, had been soaking overnight and she tossed those onto the hot oil, where some tiny red and green chilies she’d purchased from the Lautoka market that morning and potatoes had been frying. With each deft stir of the khichadi she took a deep breath, then sprinkled on some cumin, some chili powder. When the sabudana turned partially clear, she quickly spooned the khichadi into a bowl, squeezed on some lemon juice, tossed on some crushed peanuts, freshly grated coconut, cilantro, and a dollop of yogurt and served it to Shantam.

“But what do you think?” he asked in between bites. “I want to know what you think.”

Shaking a head of lightly grayed curls, she finally spoke after a minute or so of silence. “I think we should take her to the hospital and be done with her.”

“You know what they’ll do to her at the hospital. A Hindu baby. With eight legs? And besides don’t you—this—” Shantam said.

“Don’t—I don’t want to get involved. The people are desperate, Shantam. No land, no food, these rains…who knows what they’ll do to us. This feels like a test, and I don’t want to fail.” There was regret in her voice.

Devi winced as Shantam cleared his parched throat of last night’s kava and the milky tea. “Too much kava, Shantam,” she muttered.

Devouring the bowl of khichadi, he got up and walked over to the little octopus, who’d fallen asleep on the bed, the rise and fall of eight limbs trapped under the stiff shelter of blankets animating the bed like a cartoon character.

“You still haven’t touched her Devi.”
“I know. I’m busy right now,” Devi said, eating a bowl of khichadi slowly in front of the window. The glint of her gold nose ring reflected in the window. “Ah, Side-eye is still there, of course.”

“Of course,” Shantam replied.

He glanced at the planter (he’d brought it in, afraid the villagers would turn it into a shrine) and noticed a flash of white wedged between two of the loose sari scraps that had been swathed around the little baby. He walked over and picked up what appeared to be a note wrapped around a thick, rectangular something.

Shantam bent down and picked up the paper, unfolding and reading it out loud.

This paper signifies that the baby here in question is one by the name of Gulabi, no surname, with a birthdate of December fourth, nineteen-and-eighty-four. She was born in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, to a mother who died of natural and unnatural causes and has been brought to Fiji for reasons unknown by family members looking to find her a suitable home. Please find with this note five hundred Fiji dollars to aid in her care. Thank you and Gods bless.

Shantam thumbed through the stack of bills, animating Queen Elizabeth II like one of those flipping books the children loved. Devi ran over to Shantam and looked at him while he counted the money.

“This baby is from India? Why so far?

“Who knows? Could be anything. Who knows if the baby is really from India anyway, the paper could be a lie.”

“Shantam, that is a lot of money. We have to be careful that it’s not—“
“Cursed. I know, Devi,” Shantam said, smiling for winning the secret bet he made with himself. He was always amused at her tendency toward the superstitious.

“You laugh but remember that time Kaiya found the fifty-dollar bill rolled up with the drug of some tourist on it? Then the police came and took her away to Naiboro? She set herself on fire and her body burned red as pawpaw, the prisoners saw it. They gathered up her bones and ashes into large plastic bags and put them in the dumpster. One of the bags broke and left a trail that the children played with. They found them with ash on their foreheads, acting like the missionaries!” Looking at the child, she said, “The money ruined her life.”

“Five hundred, indeed.” Shanta finished counting. Thinking about Devi’s words, he picked up Gulabi and walked around the room seven times, feeling for an evil eye. Doing anything seven times was always good luck, according to his late mother Bomba and as he did, he thought about several things:

1. He was afraid that if he gave up Gulabi, the villagers would worship her as a god and make unrealistic demands of her.

2. There was a chance that religious devotees would steal her and make her perform or even preside over the annual firewalking festival, which could be dangerous.

3. They needed the money, and if he didn’t keep her, he could not in good faith keep the money because of the fear (a slight one, but one at that) that she was indeed a reincarnation of Lakshmi or some other (hopefully benevolent) goddess.
4. Last, and most important. Devi is yet again not pregnant. She confessed to him last night how her depression over this had led her to thoughts of suicide, which he of course, will not allow. Perhaps this child was sent by God as a reward for his sacrifices in fields? For that time he pulled the machete out of Jone’s hands before he killed a taunting bar patron in a drunken rage? Who is he to reject God’s gift?

“Gulabi. Our little rose,” Shantam said, eyeing Devi. She pretended not to hear, dunking a biscuit in a cup of tea as though she were conducting an orchestra.

Gulabi’s fretting returned again but with a more peaceful timbre, as though, like bendy straws, each one of her tiny limbs had imbibed Shantam’s demeanor and distributed itself throughout her body.

“She is a gift,” Shantam decided.

Devi sat up from her chair, the same Meenakari chair that her mother sat in when she found out she was pregnant with her, some thirty years ago. Something about finding this child on their doorstep had wizened them into old age, even though they were both only a few years past thirty. Silky ringlets of hair framed an unlined face, and eyes that were worried and distant before now flickered with yearning.

“Yes—our…little rose,” she said, walking with her arms outstretched to take hold of her new daughter, the girl with the golden eyes. Shantam saw how natural the effort was; the legs curled along Devi’s arms and against her stomach as though she was meant to hold her.
Just outside the Dutt home a myna bird sang an urgent tune as it swirled and settled in a large fig tree nearby dripping days of accumulated rain. All that was visible of the bird was the swift movement of yellow under its eye as it danced and hovered just above the tree with a territorial joviality. Other mynas gradually called back to this myna, until the cacophony of birds singing in a sort of serendipitous unison was remarkable enough for the few vigiling neighbors to turn around and take notice.

**Chapter Two**

*Los Angeles, 2008*

The lit end of the clove cigarette was slowly approaching Sarita’s lips, threatening to burn them as she took another crackling, saccharine drag, the nicotine surge giving her something that for the first time, in a long time, felt like elation. The sweet duplicity of this thing that tasted like candy but felt like pain thrilled her, and as it was nearing its end she relished in the rush of needing to hurry the clove’s fate. As far as she was concerned, the more she enjoyed the little brown sex-in-a-scroll, this spicy fire, the more she felt like she was fucking over her husband Paulo. And as she blew her smoke into the Los Angeles horizon from where she was sitting on her balcony, listening to the wheezy motion of a supposedly health-conscious city, she felt was fucking over the entire world too.

She couldn’t get that last argument she had with Paulo before he left out of her mind. Just thinking about it all made her reach instinctively for another Djarum.

“What the hell, Paulo? *Light-skinned naked black women? Really?***”
It started with the pornography. She was updating her website with new research about the effectiveness of Ericksonian hypnotism on smoking cessation. Thrilled that she had finally gotten a patient to quit smoking for two weeks with her highly metaphorical, highly suggestive talk therapy, she had uploaded a video of the session when the popups started. Digging into the history, she realized someone—and there was only one other someone in the house—was downloading a gamut of erotic content the moment she left for work every day.

Sure, she understood that this was normal, and sure, she thought of herself as a progressive feminist who wouldn’t be threatened by something like her husband looking at a few thousand other women naked and in provocative positions. But the apparent frequency made it seem as though it were almost a hobby of his, a second life.

“Midgets and moms! Big-titted German amputees! Thai trannies giving head! Sexy Japanese schoolgirls playing rock, paper, scissors! Light-skinned naked black women-on-women!’ Light-skinned! There’s so much to be offended by!”

He’d been sitting at his drafting table, sketching out a flyer for their next pop-up event. “Lunar-tic Nights” was the latest project his branding company One Night Stand was promoting—they only promoted one-day or one-night events. That was their thing. Sarita always rejected the urge to wonder why something so idiotic could do so well. It was LA, she always ending up saying to herself. “What are you talking about Sarita? Paulo smiled at her as though she’d just told him she’d made a poopie. As though she were mentally deficient somehow. “Calm down,” he cooed.
Sarita lit up a clove cigarette and the house filled with its headiness. “Oh c’mon Paulo. I’m not an idiot. I was working and these images started popping up. I looked at the search history and found all of this. Honestly? Midgets? Light skin? Who are you?”

Paulo’s look of concern went from flash to sizzle and again he was smiling at her, though this time, a bit more strained. He was huddled in one of those cutout blankets that everyone was obsessed with these days.

“Sarita, don’t smoke. It’s so bad for you.”

“Fuck off.”

“How about some tea? The theanines are really good for your mood.”

He got up and leapt like a predator toward the kitchen, a place that seemed to him to often have answers.

“I don’t want tea. I want to know how I’m supposed to trust you. Well, here’s the answer. I can’t.” Sarita really didn’t know what to say anymore. There had been too many lies in the past, too much second-guessing. This must be what it feels like to be in witness protection program, this kind of paranoia.

“Sarita…please. Please.”

Paulo’s imploring tone had surprised Sarita. She looked hard at him, the intensity of his Afro-Brazilian features almost pressed sharply against the glassy white noise of her anger. She marveled at the chemical pull of his presence, the geometry of nations indexed within every feature of his face. Distant Yoruba ancestors conjured some element of what she was seeing, an angle here, a curve there. She wondered: had they known he would go through the processing of colonialism, to be brought to Brazil, then finally to Los
Angeles, then to this moment in time filled with pornographic searches for ‘light-skinned naked black women,’ what would they think?

A motorcycle revved on Broadway. Standing in the middle of their loft, right in the middle, seemed to make sense. His goddamn tea. Always with the tea. For a graphic designer, Paulo was terribly dumb about computers. Like she wasn’t going to check the history. Like after everything, a porn addiction. *Light-skinned.* Why did this bother her so much?

The clove crackled and she licked the sweetness, looking down at her own body. For the first time, she felt different than him. What did he think about her skin? Though her mother was pale, she’d inherited the dark pallor of her Indo-Fijian heritage through her father. She wore it proudly. For her, it was the color of infinite suns, of the mulchy ground under a caneworker’s foot.

Wasn’t it good enough for him?

She was never sure what to say when people asked her about their relationship. *What’s it like, you know, being in an Indian-Black couple?* It was like being soldiers in a war where anyone could be the enemy. It was like endless conversations of getting it. It was just being.

With Paulo, she’d thought she could endure anything, that in every shard of their life together there existed the unassailable bond of shared experience, of injustice. Throughout her undergraduate years at UCLA she’d mostly dated white men. She simultaneously marveled at and was intimidated by how easily they could waltz through the world and made proclamations about things. *“Pulp Fiction is to twentieth-first*
century film what Van Gogh was to twentieth-century art.” Paulo did not do this, he did not boyfact with confidence. It was only with Paulo she’d finally seen the side of a partner who could be as insecure as she, who needed as much reassurance as she, who, ultimately, needed to feel safe.

It was the relationship she wanted the first few years, passionate and ambitious, romantic and all-encompassing. Them against the world. Until their fourth year of marriage, when Paulo first confessed to her that he had kissed his coworker Karen Ima at happy hour, just down Main Street at a place called Pete’s Cafe. A year later she’d noticed charges on their credit card statement from Paris while she’d been visiting her family. He had pretended he was in Los Angeles the entire time, making sure to keep time zones and background noise in check. His explanation: a last-minute trip to see some clients. He had an explanation for everything, and she had the faith to back it up.

“I guess the last straws are always the least offensive ones, Paulo,” Sarita said, shaking her head.

“People change…” Paulo said quietly.

“I really don’t even know what you mean by that.”

“We’re not the same as we were at UCLA…it is what it is,” he said sighing.

“Oh, I’m sorry if this is exhausting you. And you know how I hate that expression.”

“I know.”

“Then why do you always use it?”
Paulo ran a hand through his braids. It was hard to read him now, his face seemed sad, as though he’d just lost a bidding war for a lucrative client.

“Because there’s no other way to say it. And sometimes you just have to deal with things the way they are, not the way you want them to be. That’s always been your problem.”

Outside the muted hullabaloo of the street preachers trying to save souls and the shrieking of intoxicated folk on the corner continued the fugue of Sarita’s hysteria. What was there to believe in, anyway?

“My problem. Sure. You’ll stay up late nights, working on those goddamn designs until everything’s always perfect, the fonts, the kerning, the composition like something out of a Dalí painting…but our marriage…”

Paulo sighed again, dreading the trajectory of the conversation and hugging himself closer within the clingy blanket.

“Ugh! I can’t stand it…you…look like a ridiculous ghost!”

“Now, Sarita—”

His tranquility made her angrier. She walked to his designer desk and grunted at the mockups she saw. The thought of his business made her even angrier, so she leaned in and swept everything—the mockups, the laptop, the pencils, the small tumbler of rum—off the table onto the floor. It felt good.

“POP-UP THIS!” she said, flicking him off.

“FUCK, Sarita! What the hell! Get a hold of yourself.”
“Why?” She really wanted him to give her an answer, because right now, this was too much fun.

“You’re like a child, now.”

“Everyone thinks you’re the god-damn fucking Queen of England. They don’t know what I know…you’re no feminist.”

_There’s an end, just get there quietly. It is like the twenty-third mile, like the hours before breaking a fast, the last days before turning in your thesis._ But her own techniques failed her, and she blurted out nonsense.

“You’re a…suckass-ist! A suckass-ist who sleeps around on his wife!” At that moment she realized how stupid this was, and how she was complicit in it. She felt the warm trickle of recycled tears. Crying wasn’t special anymore.

“Oh, Sarita, Sarita.” Paulo shook his head, his sculpted cheekbones reflecting the machinery of his jaw, the traces of his accent lengthening the “A” into an “ah” at the end of her name. “Look, nothing in life’s permanent, right? We _have_ tried.” He stared at the ceiling and ran his hands again through his hair, crossing his long legs out in front of him.

“You know as well as I…I mean, we agreed on this before, that most humans are polyamorous creatures. There’s the dolphin, the rabbit, even the vital creature—the honeybee—all polygamous.” At this, Sarita sat in the middle of the kitchen floor, legs crossed.

“Oh, Sarita. Come here.” He beckoned her with arms outstretched from the cutout blanket. A ridiculous ghost.
More than the pornography, there were other signs of a faltering marriage, like what you see on the television shows. Late work nights, expressionless stares, the dampening of that chemical pull. Sarita knew that something was happening, a schism. As they sat there, nine flights up in their noisy Los Angeles loft amidst the steady hum of gentrification and haunting bass beats, the impending death of an accidental fall out of their large, unscreened windows just a few feet away, she knew that things were over.

And now here she was, teaching Paulo a lesson by searing her lungs like she would a pair of ahi tuna steaks. Sarita took one last suck of the cigarette and turned to see her cat, Oscar, sitting in the balcony window, undoubtedly wanting to seek refuge from the sad landscape that had become her home since Paulo left her. With the last exhale of the clove’s harsh smoke, she felt more alive, more normal. Sarita had been smoking so much that night that she was starting to lose some of the feeling at the tip of her tongue, and feared that a tiny piece of her, bit by bit, was becoming dead.

She put out the cigarette and went back inside, resolved to start cleaning up some of the mess that meant Paulo to her. An open closet caught her eye, and she stopped. A light bulb that was undoubtedly on its last hum of light casting a dim glow over the little room. The closet was tucked smartly away at the end of the foyer, under the loft’s narrow staircase and to the left. Her father, a chemist who dabbled in architecture, told her it was to it as a spear closet; it was a home’s dead space. This particular one was shaped like some uncomfortable marriage between a kite and trapezoid, and contained no spears but
rather items that marked the vagaries of a Los Angeles lifestyle: Two pairs of dirt-encrusted hiking boots; an In-N-Out visor tangled within a teal bikini top; a slew of still-stained wine glasses wrapped in brown paper; a knit woolen hat balancing precariously on the end of a nine iron; the swirling mess of winter scarves lying in wait; the two points of a Diwali paper lantern stuck in a wicker picnic basket; the angled elegance of a berimbau, an instrument played during the Brazilian martial art capoeira, resting in the corner, and a yellow beach bag spilling its interminable supply of sand from a weekend excursion to Venice Beach. A Disneyland’s simulacrum of her life with Paulo.

Sarita stood outside the closet, gripping a book she’d almost tripped on and letting a conveyor belt of memories wash over her: the wooing, first sex, the wedding day. She imagined these moments clustered deep within her hippocampus as thoughts shaped like little pulsating lychee balls, swimming in the syrup of her mourning brain. A Silversun Pickups album played on repeat in her living room. The lychee balls pulsated. Her lungs seared. Her heart dulled. Sarita wanted badly to stop the pulsating, to stop the sinewy, sticky residue of memory from forming within her mind’s production line, yet felt powerless to do anything but let it continue.

None of this was surprise, how she was dealing. A hypnotist skilled in the metaphorical tradition of Ericksonian hypnosis, Sarita allowed herself to be mesmerized by the closet or by her own thoughts. She’d talked alcoholics out of drinking and trichotillomaniacs from pulling out their hair, but she couldn’t quite talk herself out of whatever it was she was feeling now.
A nearby argument between Sarita’s neighbor Cassie and a woman yelling on the sidewalk by Dr. Ko’s Dentistry, a popular hangout for many of Broadway’s local characters, jolted Sarita out of her somnambulant state and forced her to engage with her surroundings.

“WILL YOU SHUT THE FUCK UP CRACK WHORE? JUST SHUT UP AND GO AWAY, PEOPLE LIVE UP HERE AND ARE TRYING TO SLEEP!”

“WHA-? WHERE’S THAT…WHY DON’T YOU COME DOWN HERE AND TELL ME TO MY FACE? TELL ME TO MY FACE, BITCH! I’M WAITING FOR YOU!”

“I’VE GOT THEM ON THE PHONE, BITCH. I’VE GOT THE POLICE ON THE PHONE, THEY’RE COMING FOR YA…”

Ah, downtown. The skyscrapers trapped and held the rest of the city’s Doppler Effect. Here she had her own free soundtrack: the mechanical grinding of the Metro buses, incessant street bickering, and the roaring booms of storefronts shuttering for the day all buffeted ferociously through the single-paned windows in her loft and could rouse her from any state, even nine flights up.

Sarita waited to hear a conclusion to the noisy fracas next door but heard only silence, the threat of the police perhaps momentarily forcing the distraught woman away from the corner outside of Dr. Ko’s. She heaved her five-foot-seven frame up (the Glamours and Cosmos describe her as pear-shaped but she liked to think she knew better) and dropped the well-worn copy of bell hooks’ All About Love that she had been gripping
onto the floor of the foyer, her body a vial of anger filling up with a mingling of her own
grief and feeding off of the heated exchange next door.

There was the thing that bell wrote, something she couldn’t stop thinking about.
And now it made sense.

She opened the window and leaned a little too far out, looking at the clueless
people below, the people that never look up.

As loud as she could, she screamed: “Love is a fucking VERB!”

Chapter Three

The fall wind turned brash, not the usual autumn zephyr, pushing things around
and forcing catastrophic consequences on the neighborhoods of Los Angeles. Lines
between neighborhoods seem even more blurred—rich or poor, white or nonwhite, as
trash became the great equalizer and weather other than sunshine always made the streets
of Los Angeles devoid of people, a veritable ghost town. Meteorologists on all the news
channels were finally earning their keep, excitedly reporting on a doozy of a storm about
to sweep most of the city. Though there was yet no rain, accidents abounded. Gyms and
bars were empty, even the outdoor megamalls dressed to look like Seurat’s Sunday
Afternoon painting lacked their usual verve, water fountain choreography halted,
artificial turf untrodden. Upheaval and uncertainty drifted into the city with the winds,
blew the subterranean trash into the West Elm patio furniture, the sex ads into City Hall.
It carried one-dollar Chinese food from Lynwood into upscale burger joints in Mid-City.
The throbbing gristle of freeways--the city’s Great Segregator--even were no match for what was happening. Nature herself was rejecting the city’s inclination to self-segregate.

Seventeen year-old Sally McDonald, “Red,” they called her, was walking home from school along Manchester Boulevard, sniffing the air and finding rain. The walk was irritating. Vividly painted taqueria stands, the menacing look of bail bonds, and the endless neon stream of liquor stores loomed like a messy plate of cafeteria food in front of her. Every day she walked by so many stores and restaurants she had no desire ever to walk into. Where were the candy shops, the comic book stores? Or even just a regular book store. A beauty outlet or something, come on. Something she could slip into and out of every day on her way home, spend all day looking forward to. Maybe get a trinket or two or a gift for her mom.

Was it the same everywhere? Did her blue-eyed, half-Russian, half-Korean pen pal Susie who lived in Detroit, Michigan walk on the same drab streets? From what Susie said, it seemed like things weren’t so great there, but boy would Sally love to get into some snow right about now. Anything to get out of here.

To pass the time on her walk, she would practice the Spanish she saw painted in garish colors on the outside of the Mexican, Guatemalan, and Salvadoran restaurants. “Al Pass-tore,” “Po-lo,” “La leng-wa,” “Cama-rones,” “Poop-oosas” she would repeat to herself, the vibrant pictogram next to each menu item cementing in her memory the type of food it was. With each step she took, her tightly drawn ponytail of crimson braids
bobbed up and down a little, moving in tandem with her lean, perfectly straight figure. To an outsider, it might appear the flat backpack flush against her back was simply a form of decoration, but inside it contained treasures: assignments folded up into neat squares, notes written from her best friends and boyfriends (she had several of both), hair combs, and extra extensions.

Why hurt her back by carrying heavy books? The books were safely stored in her locker at Inglewood High, away from anyone who might steal them, scratch off her name and return them as their own to avoid library fines at the end of the year. The risk of being called schoolgirl by the adverts because of a bulky backpack was enough reason for her to do homework in the middle of class anyway, so she always left her books in her locker for safekeeping.

“Adverts.” She’d made it up. Sally and her friends Shanice and Betty called the boys at her school adverts because they were teenage perverts always trying to feel up on them, always in clothing scrawled with brands and logos. Their mamas worked two jobs so they could be like walking advertisements for companies like Nike, Ecko, and Timberland. She and her friends just didn’t get it. The boys were like the billboards she passed on her walk home from school every day along Manchester. The weirdest billboard, Sally thought, was the one that reminded you to read with your kids. Not even any brands on that one. *No matter how tired you are, it just takes an hour a day,* it read. The “hour a day” part was written in large, red letters, an obvious equation for this new change you’ll make in your life. She passed by the billboard now on her way home and noticed that a tagger had already gotten to it since she last saw it, editing it to say “a
whore a day” in red spray paint. She rolled her eyes and muttered, “Always gotta be so ghetto.”

Sally never called the boys advert to their faces. She wasn’t ready to put herself out there like that, and those boys were unpredictable. They didn’t take lightly to even small offenses like made-up namecalling and there’s no telling what the repercussions might be. No way was she going to rat them out either for the stuff they’d try to do to her or her friends. Amongst hoodrats and schoolboys, emo kids and the lezzies, no matter who you were, when you lived here, you had to come correct. Sally made the mistake of trying to explain this once to her English teacher, Ms. Wilson, during a discussion in the tenth grade about the book they were reading, *Lord of the Flies*.

“Suppose you were trapped on this island. Would you have stopped Jack’s gang from killing Simon, or Roger from dropping that boulder on Piggy?” Ms. Wilson asked. She was always trying to get them to philosophize on stuff, and Sally hated it because most of her peers were too stupid to philosophize correctly.

“Hell nah. I ain’t going up against Jack,” said Trey, Sally’s number one. He made a hand gesture in the air like he was shoving something away three times. “There’s one thing I don’t mess with, and that’s crazy.” The rest of the class snickered and made noises of disgust. Someone in the back of the classroom said “cannibal” under his breath. Another yelled, “Homos!” Another screamed, “Piggy!” and snorted. The entire class laughed. They could just not get over Piggy.

“Okay,” Ms. Wilson continued, “what about like a family member? What if you found out that a family member of yours was about to commit a heinous crime, like a
murder. Perhaps you overheard them plotting to commit a crime that was going to happen in a few hours or the next day, would you turn them in?”

The class screamed, “Noooooooo,” shaking their heads as if she’d just asked them if they would ever skydive naked.

“What?” Ms. Wilson had a pained expression on her face and for a moment, Sally felt sorry for her. “You wouldn’t report a person who is about to commit murder? You’re understanding my question, right?” As she said this, pleading eyes made it seem as though Ms. Wilson herself had just had been transplanted onto an island with forty ravenous, unruly children who might spear her at any moment.

Ms. Wilson frequently spoke of her youth growing up in the city, but since she’d left to go to Yale, then to Columbia Teacher’s College, things had changed a bit. Sally didn’t think Ms. Wilson was naïve or unintelligent. In fact, she thought the opposite. She was just in denial. Like she refused to put two and two together, think in their shoes for awhile.

“We heard you Ms. Wilson, we know what you’re sayin’ and the answer is no,” Sally said firmly, hugging herself in her purple windbreaker against the stiff steel-backed chair-desk contraption.

“Yeah, what she said,” offered a short, pudgy Samoan boy named Marvin wearing a t-shirt with “I see stupid people” scrawled across it in neon. Others murmured in agreement.

“I don’t get it. Isn’t that the right thing to do?” Ms. Wilson asked.
“Hells no!” yelled Letizia. It was Thursday, and she was decked out in her green ROTC uniform, hair tied back neatly in a little bun, black combat boots planted firmly on the ground. “Nobody likes a rat Ms. Wilson. You could take any old M-4 rifle, hold it up my head, demand that I tell you who killed JFK and even if I knew I wouldn’t tell you who it was. Although if I’m gonna go down like that I’d prefer it to be an AK-47. They’re where it’s at, don’t ever let anyone tell you otherwise,” she leaned back in her chair, wagging her finger.

Sally rolled her eyes. She couldn’t stand Letizia and her weird ROTC ways. Every time there was a school assembly, and Letizia came out all serious-like, dressed in her military clothes and a stone face, Sally couldn’t help but make fun of her to her friends. Sure, it was mean. But come on, really? They’d march, raise the flag, salute it and stand like little green ninja turtles. Secretly, she realized that she probably hated that Letizia was so passionate about something and shared that with the other weirdo ROTC’ers. And while she wouldn’t trade her life for two seconds with the uniformed green geeks, she always felt a twinge of jealousy when they sat like a little happy platoon of nerds at lunch. She thought frequent and often about who would be there throw her a bachelorette party, attend her graduate school commencement, give condolences at her funeral.

“What’s the point Ms. Wilson? Jail ain’t no justice for anyone I know,” said Sally.

“I don’t agree Ms. Wilson,” piped Caesar, one of Inglewood High’s star football players. “I say call the cops and throw ‘em all in jail. Lettum getta taste of hell, ‘eh,
especially if they drop the soap, y’know what I’m sayin’. Seeing that he got laughs, he collapsed into a fit of hysterics himself.

“You stupid!” shouted Sally, frowning. This is the stuff she hated.

Walking on by the adverts, she thought about how she really did like *Lord of the Flies* more than she thought she would, but could never bring herself to tell Ms. Wilson in class. She took out her cell and clicked a single polished nail all over it, fast, and waited. A boy she recognized from a pep rally she’d been to—was it Centennial, no, it was Palmdale High—called out to her. He was tall and cute, and she was restless. But the buzz of her phone interrupted her thoughts and she took that as a sign from God to stay away.

Besides, he was the quintessential advert. A Tommy-Ecko-Nike-Timberland hot mess of an advert. No, thanks. One moment they flirted, the next they fought. She didn’t want the adverts to mess with her or her younger brother Leonard, either, who was a freshman trapped in a fifth grader’s body. Texting Adriana (her second best friend) back about how she’s not going to the swap meet this weekend with her because she hates shopping and why would she waste her time with that when she’s got precious Buffy re-runs to watch, she thought about also telling her about the adverts. Nah, why? Along with a slew of other words, she kept the currency of what advert meant to her hidden in the deep pockets of her mind, shelling them out sparingly, one at a time.
She stopped and looked at another group of boys doing the Crip Walk across the street at the Metro Rapid stop. Their movements so graceful and mesmerizing, it seemed as though their large white sneakers barely touched the ground. Their feet passed over one another carefully, showing off to her, dancing the word “CRIP” letter by letter, the floaty literature of their movements drawing a small crowd of mostly young boys and girls from the neighborhood. Two of the teenagers were more accomplished dancers, attempting to master the more complicated angularity of the heel-toe offshoot of the original Crip Walk, the non-gang affiliated Clown Walk, which was in vogue now.

One of the boys, about sixteen or so in glistening new Pumas and a smart Lakers jersey turned his head and called out to her. “Hey, Red. Get ova here. Get summa this.”

She holleried back at him, “Get summa what? I don’ see nuthin’”

“Nah, for real though. Come ova here. I gotta ask you sumthin’”

“I can’t. I gotta get home. My mama expecting me, it’s late.”

“We got a little mama’s girl over here don’t we?”

“ ‘Guess so,” came the coy response.

Briskly, she turned the corner, ponytail bobbing like a frisky cat’s tail, thinking about how trifling boys were, how predictably immature and unintelligible they were. Not like Jemaine. He was immature in a totally mature way. Like he did it on purpose. It was hard to explain. The boys at Inglewood just didn’t get it; they were stupid, all of them. She thought about what happened in history class yesterday, when Mr. Feisenburg was talking about World War Two and Keyshawn and Patrick got into it over how gay Adolf Hitler looked with his mustache, how he looked like one of those guys who lived
in Modesto smoking PCP and raping innocent girls. Patrick chided Keyshawn about what she heard *he* had been smoking lately, and the rest was disciplinary history.

Sally didn’t know what was happening to her; it felt like a sort of fatigue. Like she was starting to exist in a world outside of her own body, watching things happen. Sometimes, she’d watch herself do things that she knew were stupid too. Like in seventh grade when she got into it with Betty, the Mexican girl who tried to steal her boyfriend Trey from her. She punched Betty hard, with the strength of three or four high school boys, and Betty reeled back into the bushes surrounding Inglewood High’s gymnasium, a slow trickle of blood forming at her nose, turning Betty’s face quickly into a scarlet inkbolt. Sally remembered looking up, startled by the intensity of the crimson and in it saw shapes of monsters and teeth coming after her, the ferocity of spirits that were protecting Betty grinning sharply like the Cheshire cat in *Alice in Wonderland*, then chomping after her.

Something in Sally changed that day, and for the last five years she had resolved to make it up to Betty by becoming a better person. She worked her way up to president of Inglewood High’s student group working toward better Black-Latino relations, known as BLT. (No one could agree on what the “T” stood for but they *could* agree that it would be easy to remember and so they stuck with it and allowed everyone to come up with their own meaning.) And in the way that kids can remember to forget, and swallow their pride, and be ok with laughing at an enemy’s joke just because they can’t help it, Betty finally forgave Sally in the tenth grade, and they’ve been best friends since. Now Sally was a senior, and while more composed and calm, she was also more unsatisfied than
ever. Her rage still came in short bursts and sat squat in the middle of her thoughts sometimes, but her mind was able to rationalize this impulse and ultimately quell it. She was waiting for something better. That something had beautiful lips and a lot of money. And his name was Jemaine.

There was New Zealand, after all. She stopped for a moment, a dulcet whiff of Randy’s Doughnuts stopping her in her tracks and causing her to pause on the gum-stained sidewalk. Sally thought for a moment about getting an apple fritter; she needed more fruit in her diet. She began to reach behind her back with one hand to pull the backpack off and grab her Hello Kitty wallet when a loud crashing sound warning of rain suddenly reverberated around her and she thought better of lingering. Looking up and seeing a razor of white cut through the horizon, Sally quickly sped home along Manchester, before the inevitable downpour.

In Los Angeles that night, the old, indifferent sky seemed to open and reveal a new, rumbling one, like a starving stomach, or the sound of a scorned lover’s anger, or an approaching commuter train that you imagine could derail any minute, like what’s been happening on the news. The parched Los Angeles landscape received a downpour it hadn’t seen in many months, new life already germinating deep within the womb of the rejuvenated city. Millions of women went to bed with a feeling, some new word for strength that momentarily eluded them, a novel percolating in their head.
Chapter Four

She was the type of woman who walked in and out of a room talking on a cell phone, and Sarita hated her. She couldn’t figure out why; Sarita certainly wasn’t the type to speak in platitudes, or gush about *The Secret*, but she liked most people, and the nature of her profession typically kept her judgments in check. The woman, Kelly Barnes, was one of Sarita’s regulars and she was just not in the mood for her today after such a rough night. Sarita found everything about Kelly to be totally inconvenient. Her hair was too long, she sat too close, an invisible halo of Parliaments and cheap perfume, probably Coty, followed her around pungently. And there were the ricochet words; she loved speaking in them. But _hate_ was such a strong word.

“Ok, so like I’m here already at Sevenfold and I can’t do this chit-chat stuff anymore. I’llcallyoulaterok? Hi-hi Sarita!” she said, emphatically pressing the “End Call” button on her phone simultaneously, as if to say, “See--I can turn my phone off in certain situations.”

“Hi, Kelly. Good to see you, come in.”

Sarita greeted her patients personally; there was no money for a proper receptionist, and she liked to catch them off guard a bit, in the way a medical doctor does when they know just when to knock on the door after you’ve changed into your paper robe. Her practice was really just a small cloister of converted office spaces in Santa Monica, an ideal location for her typical patient: upper-middle to middle-class, health-conscious, usually Caucasian or Asian, and female.
Sevenfold Path seemed like a natural name to Sarita for her practice. She opened it right after marrying Paulo two years ago, and had been so moved by the seven steps of the Hindu marriage ceremony that they took around the fire together – the Saptapadi – she felt that the ritualistic nature of this process was one that her patients could draw from to find their own inner happiness.

“Your office is beauty-beautiful.”

“Thank you, Kelly.”

“I’m always for sure thinking that I’m speaking too loudly here. It’s always soo quiet.”

“You’re fine. Follow me.”

Sarita led her down the warm blue hallways, cringing at the loud clop-clopping of Kelly’s spiked tan heels but silently reprimanding herself for doing so. Something about bringing her patients down the corridor, into their next state of consciousness felt like a rite of passage, and she didn’t want to tarnish that experience with negativity.

“So how’ve you been since we last saw each other, Kelly? Are you finding that your problem is getting better?”

“I’d like to say yes, but it’s not. I’m overwhelmed, Sarita. So overwhelmed. Every time I try to actually pay for something, I lose patience and just put it in my purse, or stuff it in my bra – don’t say it, I know it’s a no-no. Yesterday I was at Wackos and I saw this great book about the Japanese art of bondage ohmygod, it’s called Kinbaku, have you heard of it?”

Sarita nodded.
“Well, the thing is, I really couldn’t deal with the line. It was just so freaking-fucking long,” she said, closing her metallic eyelids, settling into the routine. “I just couldn’t wait. I’ve been so stressed out with work. It’s not easy being an executive assistant you know? They always want something from you and there’s so much pressure... Especially these bitches. Anyway I needed to get this book. I needed to get back to work, well, and, you know.” Kelly sighed deeply and sank with the weight of the implied admission, the leather chair under her creaking slightly.

“I see,” Sarita began, rousing herself from the fantasy she was having about finding Paulo outside of her work, in the parking lot, waiting with flowers. Even assholes needed to make efforts, was her philosophy. She shifted into the friendly, conversational tone she always had when beginning the therapy, as though she was changing the subject of her patient’s misery. “There’s this girl I read about in the The Times, did you hear about this Kelly? She won the lottery, like the biggest Mega Millions jackpot in twelve years. She tried not to tell anyone, but it came out. ‘We’ve got to prove it’s real to people’ and all that jazz from the lottery commission and such. Slowly, there were phone calls. Letters from people she forgot about or ever knew, just like your worst nightmare. She was only thirty-seven, young. Still figuring out her life and thought she had good friends, good family. Her aunt and uncle found out she had the money, two lost homes between them with the subprime stuff that’s going on now. They called her up, angry, hurt because she didn’t offer anything to them. Told her she’s not family anymore.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Kelly said, drowsily.
“The thing was, this girl knew that if she gave something to them, she’d have to
give it to everyone. And there were always more people. Family friends, friends of
friends, etc. The girl couldn’t take the pressure that came with having this money; she
didn’t have control of her life anymore. It seemed like everything was closing in on her,
fast. They all needed something, and she felt like she couldn’t give enough. Then one day
she went to work, got there, and realized that she had forgotten her cell phone. And
would ya know it? That was the best day she had had since before winning the lottery.
Turned out the cell phone was causing her stress, knowing that it could ring at any
moment, knowing on the other end there was expectation. She got rid of her phone, kept
a land line, and now she’s a millionaire somewhere in the New York City,” Sarita
chuckled a bit to herself, for emphasis.

“Fancy-schmancy millionaire,” Kelly mumbled.

“Can you believe that?”

“Just getting rid of the phone, huh?”

“That’s all it took,” Sarita said.

“It’s, whaddyacallit? A trigger,” Kelly said, sleepily.

“Yes, a trigger, like on a gun.”

“Oh what I wouldn’t give…”

“Hmm?”

“What I wouldn’t give. To forget it at home.”

“Forget what at home?”

“Phone.”
“Ah, yeah. One of those things about life, I guess,” Sarita said nonchalantly.

“Yeah, but why? Would we run around all helter-skelter without it? C’mon…”

“I doubt it.”

“Me too. And while we’re at it, bathroom scales and watches.”

“Yes, who needs them? The Egyptians built pyramids; the Druids, Stonehenge. Those mortise and tenon joints happened without Seiko and Invicta, that’s for sure.”

“Right,” Kelly said, her face twisting slightly into a brief, quizzical look. “Sarita, I wonder what’d happen if I left my phone at home for a day. I just want to try it, to see.”

“Gosh, remember those days? No phones. What’s a little Kelly memory, from those times before your first phone calls? Think back to something.”

Kelly paused a minute, closing her shimmering eyes hard and pressing out a thought. “Slip ‘n Slides. In our backyard. Every summer we’d do the Slip ‘n Slide. I’d always go too fast and crash into my sister Callie. Soo much fun.”

Sarita and Kelly went on, Kelly talking for another thirty minutes or so about her fondest childhood memories, Sarita goading her gently. Finally, she began to wrap up the session.

“Kelly, keep thinking about those Slip ‘n Slides. The slickness of the slide, the motion. The inevitable crash into your sister. The safety of knowing what happens. Go over the sliding in your mind. The beginning, the middle, the end. Beginning, middle, end. Beginning, middle, end. Beginning. Middle. End. That smile on your face after. Focus on the smile, do you see it? Feel that place, where it is. Let me know when you feel it.”
“Feelin’ it,” Kelly said sleepily.

“Good. Now, I want you to remember that feeling, see it the next time you get stressed out. When you feel like taking something that isn’t yours, find that grin and wear it. Feel it. And slowly, holding my hand, come out of your trance.”

Sarita gently held Kelly’s tanned, manicured hand, while she shifted around in her seat, her eyelids going through the motions of working themselves open, like tiny silverfish on paper. She finally emerged, bolting upright with fresh eyes.

“Wow, I feel soo relaxed. So what were you saying about that woman who won the lottery again? My brain feels so wishy-washy.”

“Oh I was saying that she got rid of her phone and her life got better. She lives in New York City now. I think she’s in fashion design school at Parsons or something.”

“Hm. Parsons. Well, I gotta get going. Thanks Sarita. For everything.” Kelly followed Sarita out down the warm blue corridor, pulling out a check and handing it to her. “So, hey, your birthday is coming up on November tenth, I remember because I love Scorpios; they’re so intense. What’s your hunkity-hunky hubby doing for you this year?”

Sarita almost crumpled at the question, realizing that it was the first birthday in over eight years she would be spending without him. She looked through Kelly, the waiting room, out past the front door and to the empty parking lot.

“Ah, nothing this year. We’re just going to stay in and relax, you know? Kelly--don’t forget. Phone stays at home tomorrow until you get home from work, ok?” Kelly flashed her a peace sign yes, clop-clopping out the door. Sarita smiled. She was hoping that Kelly’s effervescence would burst open and anoint her; she was the one who really
needed some therapy. Sarita made a move to turn back to walk down the blue corridor to get ready for her next patient, but instead hurried into the bathroom to heave out a sharp, continuous cry made up of a million stifled cries, the tiny origami of histories unfolding and whirling into every single sob.

Chapter Five

“Ma. You home?”

Silence. A recently brewed batch of coffee lingered in the air. Sally’s eyes narrowed on a plate of couscous that sat uneaten on the kitchen table, dry and sad like a smashed sandcastle.

“Maaa…YOU HOME??” Sally walked through the doorway, pausing first to wipe her wet feet on the tiny orange straw doormat that sat on their front stoop.

“Oh…hi honey!” Her mother ambled out of the bedroom, disheveled from a nap, coral-colored toenails peeking out from her favorite pair of pink Baby Phat sweatpants.

“Saw your car in the driveway. Why you home? Ain’t you supposed to be at work?” Sally asked.

“Nah, not today honey. Today was one of them administrative professionals holidays. One of the perks of working at the district,” her mother replied.

Sally rolled her eyes. “You get too many holidays,” she said.

“We’ll see if you think that way when you actually have to work,” said her mother.
Kicking off her Converse and arranging them neatly next to the doorway, Sally surveyed the house, remarking on its state in her mental ledger. The edginess she’d been feeling lately reverberated throughout her like a heavy bass beat at the sight of the living room’s chaos. Everywhere there were Big Gulp cups. There were stacks of Herbalife catalogues. There were grease-soaked rectangles with specks of hardened cheese. She drew in her breath and made sure some curse words came in with it. The alabaster Precious Moments figurines in the curio cabinet that her mother collected, the ones she used to love as a child, suddenly seemed awful.

“Dah-m. Can’t you clean? Look like Hurricane Katrina came up in here. God.”

Sally put her backpack in her room and went to the kitchen. She pulled out a garbage bag from a box under the sink that said “Joy-full” and tromped through the living room, shoving the greasy rectangles of her brother’s chili cheese fries, the Big Gulp cups, the Herbalife catalogs. The bag had other ideas, however, and after a few shoves of garbage, it split open, a brown tributary of sticky soda seeping onto the floor.

“Mom! You know the fifteen cents you save on cheap bags don’t mean anything when you have to use fifty of them,” Sally said. She threw the bag down on the floor and sat down on the couch with a frustrated sigh, watching the slow trickle of the soda as it threatened to collide with the rug under the coffee table.

“What’s up your butt today? Comin’ in here all huffing and puffing. Don’t let me hear that I have to go clean up something at the district again. You know how hard that makes things for me,” said her mom.
Half-listening, Sally knelt down to the floor and grabbed a dirty rag that was a foot away from the coffee table. There was a fresh coffee stain that had her attention and she was furiously trying to scrub it out. They had just gotten some brand new floors installed, Pergo, the carpenter called them, and she was doing her best to keep it that way—brand new. Pergo. She liked saying it; her lips would move in and out in a motion that felt both unfamiliar and special and made her giggle. This is what she did silently as she attempted to blot out the inky stain, mouthing the word, rolling it back and forth in her mouth like a gumball.

“Sorry, ma. But I didn’t get into a fight and you know it. I’m a senior now; I don’t do that shi—stuff anymore.”

“Umm..hmm…” Sally saw Nelda follow her gaze and then ignore the layer of dust lining the cabinet holding the Precious Moments figurines. Her mother had taken them all the way to Carthage, Missouri to visit the Precious Moments theme park—a weeklong trip that involved sleeping in a tent at one point, something she’ll never do again—yet couldn’t bother to dust the ones in her own home once in a while.

“It’s just that—well... Ok, well Ma it’s hard to do my homework when stuff be all around the place and Leonard leave his stuff everywhere. You spoil that boy too much—look he just lef’ that Doritos bag spilling all over the table. What’ll you do when I go off to college…Nelda?” Sally added her mom’s name hesitantly, glancing over at her to check her reaction.

Luckily, she was smiling. Nelda’s smile, her statuesque physique, and mysterious demeanor won the admiration and envy of many of the other Inglewood mothers. If
Gloria Steinem, Angela Davis, and Edward Said had produced an auburn-haired love child, Nelda would be it. While Sally adored her mother and respected her for how hard she worked, lately she’d been struggling with simultaneous feelings of shame. Long after she’d left the memory of what it was like to feel her mother’s smooth hand in hers but shortly before she’d asked her mom for homework help for the last time—it was the difference of squares, and she knew Nelda wouldn’t know but asked anyway and felt the oddest twinge of satisfaction—she’d begun to see her mother differently. It wasn’t until she started going on BLT field trips and meeting other kids of color from different high schools who’d been the daughters of casting agents, chefs, producers, even racecar drivers, before she began to feel haunted by the feeling that her mother was a stereotype, a word she’d learned in the Step To It Women’s Network workshops at her school. She didn’t want to be a single mother, a decade-long education with an associate’s degree at the outcome her only real education.

Nelda lowered her eyes and walked over to the plate of dry couscous, scraping it with a fork as though she was tending a Japanese rock garden. “College. Guess it is that time. But Leonard in that growing stage. I want him to focus on his schoolwork and not really have to worry ‘bout anything else right now. He got the rest of his life to clean up the house and stuff.”

“You mean he got the rest of his life for ME to clean up house and stuff,” Sally grumbled.
“Boy you are in a lousy mood.” Then Nelda’s tone shifted from slight irritation to mellifluous purr, “This have anything to do with New Zealand, perhaps?” Nelda asked, walking over to the couch and sitting down.

“Nah--Lina tol’ me them May-ori are cannibals anyway,” Sally said.

“You know you can talk to me,” Nelda purred again.

“Nah, I’m alright, is’all good ma.”

Sally’s church group had announced several months ago that they were organizing a mission trip to Wellington, New Zealand to help the native Maori improve their English literacy skills, learn about abstinence, and the main task at hand—teaching them about the glory of Christianity while hoping to convert a few. To earn money for the trip, Sally and her church buddies sold chocolate bars wrapped in generic, mysterious-looking white wrappers, better known by Los Angeles high school students as “fundraising candy.”

One day, out of boredom, Sally Googled the company—“The World’s Best Chocolate”— and read that they owned a cocoa farm in the Cote D’Ivoire where children arrived every day to hack cocoa plants with machetes to make chocolate for children in Los Angeles to sell.

For months Sally stood outside Vons, Albertsons, Blockbuster video and CVS, coaxing Angelinos to buy this elusive candy that one could only find at these locations. In fact, that was her main selling point—*Get your goor-mette cho-co-late riiight here. You ain’t ever tried anythin’ like this goor-mette cho-co-late!* She’d chant outside in the blazing heat, the freezing cold (that’s 60 degrees in Los Angeles) and hustle with all the
chutzpah of a professional car salesman. She’d perform new step routines and make her own versions of the cheers that Betty, who was a cheerleader, had taught her. The Wood…is Good…all the time…and so is their choc-o-late! But even this little Amway-in-the-making, after all this work, could only come up with $1,600 in profits. Not nearly enough to pay for the trip. And she wanted the trip, badly. It was the little push she needed to affirm her faith in God. She knew it was in His plan for her to go the New Zealand. He wanted her to succeed. The knowledge of this feeling engulfed her, infusing her with a desire for self-preservation in a way she couldn’t explain but knew was right. Right enough to stop her from making bad decisions. Mostly.

Walking over to where her mother was sitting on the couch, Sally picked up an Herbalife catalogue she missed while cleaning earlier and twisted it in her hands, bending and rolling it into a tight funnel and pretending to smoke it for a second before shoving it into the garbage bag.

“Darlin’, don’t worry. I got you,” Nelda said. She began rifling through the papers on the coffee table until she pulled out something from the stack. “And that’s what I’m talkin’ about!” Her neatly manicured coral-tipped fingers held up a folder with “New Zealand – 100% Pure” tattooed across the front of a gloriously verdant landscape.

“Wha—?” Sally jumped up and pulled the folder out of her mother’s hands and scanned the contents. “Ohmygod! Ma! Whatdoesthismeanwhatdoesthismean?”

“It means,” Nelda took a deep breath. “It means that you’re going to have ‘New Zealand Mission Trip 2008’ listed on your college applications, if I have anything to say about it.” Nelda spelled it out in the air with her hands, as if she could see Sally’s résumé
glowing like a neon marquee on Hollywood Boulevard. “I got myself a raise last week and pulled together enough for your trip. I was waiting to tell you after I bought your plane ticket, which is in the folder, so don’t you lose it.”

“Ma! I can’t believe this! Ohmygosohmygoshohmygosh Thankyousomuchmayou’rethebest. I gotta go tell Betty.” Sally embraced her mother and ran to her room to find her phone, hugging the slick folder to her chest.

**Chapter Six**

She was known as “La Reina,” and her body had been sliced into five meaty pieces and formed into the shape of a cross. From the shells of ladybugs she had divined the right time for drug cartel members to make their shipments, and now her own body had turned into a gruesome divination for the LAPD to decipher. 12:52 p.m. That was the time she’d given the two men who’d consulted her two weeks ago about a shipment going through Calexico, the city where Adolfo Mateo Highway turned into Imperial Avenue at the border. Perhaps it was a blip in a perfect record of divining or an irksome comment said at an unfortunate time, but for some reason La Reina evidently had fallen out of favor with whichever cartel members she was helping, and the cross of her body stood like a bloody beacon in the neighborhood as if to say that’s what happens if you cross them. A week ago, an anonymous tip led police to a home festooned with hundreds of Virgin of Guadalupe statues, a makeshift Botanica in the garage containing hundreds of dangling blood-red rosaries, candles to entice lovers, tarot cards and Santéria
essentials. There, among a pile of incense ashes and torn Bible verses, the police found La Reina’s body. The house did not actually belong to La Reina; she had taken residence in the foreclosed home, performing readings and offering to initiate those willing to pay a hefty price into the teachings of Santéria.

The murder of La Reina was just one of many unusual occurrences in the city of Inglewood of late.

A few streets away over from Sally McDonald’s house on Nectarine Street, Randy Morales, the newest member of the Inglewood City Council, was getting bombarded with questions at a town hall meeting on Manchester Boulevard. Many of the vacants were turning into crackhouses or were brimming with children living in deplorable circumstances. There had been reports of a few cases of young boys and girls being raped in the middle of the night while their parents were held at knifepoint. Some had become havens for prostitution rings, and with the most recent La Reina incident, locals feared the gangs and cartels would be moving in soon too.

Graffiti artists and taggers had also gotten to many of the abandoned homes, causing residents to fear for the destruction of their own property. A “Blame Lloyd” stencil with a caricature of the Goldman Sachs CEO Lloyd Blankfein made its debut on a series of foreclosed homes in Inglewood just a few days ago. Rumors that it was the work of Banksy served to elevate concern about the accelerating degradation of the city. The stencils would come down in a week; a year later, Blankfein would go on to make his infamous statement about how he was doing “God’s work.” Residents across Inglewood, concerned about their dropping property values and the safety of their neighborhoods,
organized themselves to attend the November City Council meeting at Inglewood City Hall.

“It’s just preposterous that these homes are sitting here, and we the taxpayers are being lied to about what’s being done,” a Latina in her mid-50s said at the microphone, leaning slightly on her umbrella for support. “You should be ashamed of yourselves.”

“Believe me Marisela, I know where you’re coming from,” said Randy, holding up his left hand outstretched, like a pledge of solidarity. “I am terrified at the thought of my children playing around these filthy establishments too. I know your pain. But these people move so quickly, by the time we find out about them, they leave.”

“Well then what’s being done to get these houses cleaned up? Why aren’t they locked? Who’s responsible for taking care of them?” Marisela shouted into the microphone, her voice getting more aggravated with every word.

Randy breathed in deeply, affecting the tortured look he had practiced in front of the mirror so many times. Sharonda, the city’s secretary, paused from the typing of the meeting minutes and looked up at Randy, her fingers dangling over the keys to await his reply.

“Marisela, we’re still trying to figure that out. The foreclosed homes are being managed by loan servicers, and when we’ve managed to get a hold of them, they tell us that their hands are tied and can’t do anything about it. They tell us to go to the banks. And um…let’s just say that we can’t get the banks to take any responsibility either.”

“So you’re telling the people of Inglewood that these homes crawling with drugs and violence are just going to sit on our streets, and nobody’s going to do anything about
it? Dios mio I can’t believe it. What did we elect you for?” Marisela said, her voice trailing as she walked away from the microphone, pressing her umbrella into the ground like a cane.

A buzz tore through the council meeting and the thirty or so residents who had shown up in solidarity with Marisela elevated their whispers to tangible vocals. Randy took the opportunity to scratch his balls with his keys, a trick he’d perfected during countless council meetings. He cleared his throat and winked at a reporter in the audience, glancing at her bountiful cleavage, which was held in place with a single, struggling button. Randy was hoping for a wardrobe malfunction but reminded himself that someone probably had one of those stupid Flip cameras somewhere and looked up instead.

Next to Marisela stood Gayleah Sanders, the mother of a star player on Inglewood High’s girls’ basketball team. Pushing aside a veil of anger, she slowly approached the microphone, speaking evenly with the air of someone who has approached many microphones, pushed aside many veils of anger.

“Councilman Morales, Councilmen Tabor and Dunlap, the honorable Mayor Dorn, my name is Gayleah Sanders. My daughter, Althea is a forward for the Inglewood High girls’ basketball team. And as you know, it’s the number one girls’ basketball team in the country.” Murmurs of recognition swam through the crowd. A few clapped. “We had all kind of media up in here two weeks ago and for once it was for a good thing, remember?” More murmurs, another few stray claps. “My daughter about to graduate and go on to Tennessee on a full basketball scholarship and I’ve never been more proud of
her.” Gayleah paused, looking straight into Randy’s eyes. “Because you see, when she go out there, she not just representin’ the Sanders family, she representin’ Inglewood. They’re going to look at her and think: Inglewood. ‘That’s the Inglewood star forward,’ they’ll say. She will always come back here, and this will always be her home. She made this city proud to call itself that—and now it’s your turn.” A woman in the crowd yelled, “Yeah!” Gayleah continued, “My mother use to say hurry up an waitin’ leads to sinnin’, and that’s what’s going on here. Stop hurryin’ up and stop waiting!” Gayleah turned around and walked back slowly to her seat next to Marisela, her green and white Sentinels jacket glistening wet under the fluorescent lights.

More people clapped; the buzz that was a quiet hum only a few moments ago now became an energized roar.

Randy smiled at Gayleah and looked over at Mayor Dorn with a pleading look. In a toneless voice, Mayor Dorn stood up from his chair and said into his microphone, “Thank you Ms. Sanders. We really appreciate how wonderfully the team has been doing these past few years and of course Althea’s contribution to Inglewood’s success makes us all very proud.” Looking furtively at the crowd, an array of mostly black and brown faces, with a few whites sprinkled in, Mayor Dorn shuffled his papers and forced a toothy grin. I assure you, we are in talks with Deutsche Bank and other parties who are ultimately responsible for the maintenance of these properties, and by the next council meeting I feel confident we will have good news to report to you. Thank you everyone for attending, and if there are no more public issues, let’s move on to the closed session items…”
The door shut with a quiet thud. Sally opened up her backpack and took out a large glossy photo. She plopped down onto her bed, surrounded by a wall plastered with posters of The Roots, Missy Elliott, wallabies, and a large one of a New Zealand landscape that said, “New Zealand: Come Visit Us Down Underer.”

“Jemaine, I’m coming for you baby,” she said as she looked at the photo, kissing it and slipping it behind the other papers in her New Zealand folder.

Sally heard the front door slam and felt the distant presence of her brother, coming home from baseball practice, no doubt. She heard Nelda’s cooing and her offerings of nachos and coke being refused by the taciturn Leonard, who rarely spoke to anyone unless he was in a really good mood or needed money. She listened as Leonard dropped his backpack and gear on the ground, and marched heavily into the bathroom and shut the door. Sally rolled her eyes and lay down flat on the bed, holding the photo up against the white stucco of the ceiling.

She couldn’t believe it; it felt completely unreal. This was way better than winning tickets to the Lil’ Wayne show that Power 106 sponsored at the high school earlier that year. Way better than anything, really. She stared hard at the signed photo of Jemaine Clement like she’d done so many times before, gazing at this hot piece of ass that looked something like a lumberjack or an Amish person on the History Channel. Sally was pretty certain that there’d be some sort of chemistry between them, that maybe he’d be a little unsure about making out with a tall seventeen year-old black girl from Inglewood, but that once he touched her smooth, fresh skin and breathed in the Egyptian
Goddess oils Betty stole for her from the Whole Foods where she worked, something in him would snap and he’d be smitten. She thought about what it’d be like to kiss those wide pink lips; lips that with the regularity of breathing seemed to spout something new and funny and exciting, even if she didn’t always understand what was happening on her favorite show, *The Flight of the Conchords*.

She remembered the first time she saw the show, a year ago. Her boyfriend Trey had a job with the cable company and had figured out a way to get all the channels, including HBO, for free. He didn’t tell her how, exactly. They got high and watched *A Shot of Love with Tila Tequila*, which Trey thought was the best show ever because girls were always kissing each other, then when he passed out, she flipped around and saw the goofiest looking man she’d ever seen wearing plaid pants and speaking with an accent she’d never heard before. Something about the way he carried himself intrigued her and whether it was the accent or the weed, she was enraptured from that day forward. Later she’d found the entire series at the library, one of the only series that wasn’t perpetually “Lost/Checked Out” at the library. She was captivated by the weird humor and the crazy trouble that Jemaine and Bret seemed to always get into. And the accent…oh the accent. It was singlehandedly the strangest thing she’d ever heard in her life. She could listen to Jemaine talk all day. Sally knew that he was talented and when he sang, it felt like the funneled beauty of God responding to her prayers. She hummed her favorite song of his, “Part-Time Model,” which she imagined he might sing to her someday.
She knew it was no coincidence that in the show, he was singing the song to a girl named Sally. There were no coincidences, only God and faith. Faith was the biggest, sexiest love she’d had.

Outside there were soft footfalls of rain on the roof and shingles. In the edges of her consciousness Sally could hear cars driving through thick puddles, spattering the road with their ferocity like so many others had spattered it before. She was pretty sure this was the best thing that’s ever happened to her but yet she felt a twinge of fear. Sally had never left Los Angeles before. In fact, save for a few field trips, swap meets and church functions, she’d rarely even left Inglewood. Now that it was really happening and not just a faraway desire, Sally wondered if she was making the right decision—she wasn’t sure what people in New Zealand ate or if they’d have her favorite things like Subway or Hot Topic or how she’d call her family. Would she even be able to talk to Betty? Shanice? Would there be Facebook?

For a second her mind flitted to something her mother said earlier. She hadn’t heard anything about an Administrative Professionals’ day – the ugly mug of that fat bitch Ms. Marquez greeted them this morning at school like usual, reporting everyone on her walkie-talkie like she always did. Why did her mom get the day off but Ms. Marquez had to work? Even though she acted like a vice principal, she was just a district secretary and she should’ve had the day off too. She shrugged it off and called Betty to tell her the news, putting her iPod in its dock and pressing play.

“Betty. You won’t believe this. I’m going to see Jemaine…no I didn’t tell Shanice yet. So my mom…”
Nelda fingered the edge of the plastic trash bag that Sally had left on the floor next to the sofa. The soda had reached its destination and left a dark, crescent-shaped stain on the edge of the rug. “Smart aleck,” she said to herself, smiling at the rising cadences of Sally’s voice as she talked to Betty on the phone. She daintily reached for the bag of spilling Doritos off of the coffee table and looked inside inquisitively. Pulling out one chip, and then another, Nelda munched absent-mindedly, allowing the smooth salty orange sprinkle over her décolletage, her lips, the tips of her manicured fingers.

For a moment she thought about how she loved surprising her kids with things they thought they’d never receive; as though she was giving them a present wrapped in trash. The light rain and its accompanying clouds cast a premature shadow over the tiny house on Nectarine Street, leaving Nelda sitting in the late afternoon gloom. Nelda could hear the muffled sounds of the Santigold album Sally had been playing all week peak and falter with the staccato of the singer’s convictions in the chorus:

\[
I\ can\ say\ I\ hope/it\ will\ be\ worth/what\ I\ give\ up/If\ I\ could\ stand\ up\ mean/\ for\ the\ things/\ that\ I\ believe...
\]

Nelda got high off of the steady hum of giddiness coming from her daughter’s room and began to start grooving out herself. She was all undulating hips, curled ringlets of amber jubilation, a smoothness and slick grace that came from watching her parents dancing under the jacaranda trees on late fall nights in Long Beach. Back and forth she rocked, limbs lithe and fluid, her silhouette like a willow tree moving in the wind.
“Hmm…hmm…I here for lef..myhome…hmm..isall…You don’ know me…I am an interventionexcalator…” She knew she was singing the words wrong, but she didn’t care. She continued cleaning, shoving trash into the torn garbage bag, not caring if things fell out.

*Change…change…change…change…*I wanna get up outta my skin…*

Spinning, she thought about the credit card.

*Tell you what if I can shake it…*

Spinning, she thought about the expense reports she signed.

*Imma make this something worth dreamin’ of…*

Spinning, she thought about the expense reports Michael, Marilyn, and Nestor all signed too and the pact they made.

Spinning, she thought about what twenty-five thousand dollars would feel like, if she were to touch it.

**Chapter Seven**

Ingredients for Tea Masala
(makes about twenty servings for storage)

- 20 green cardamoms
- 1 tsp of shredded fresh ginger
- 1 tsp nutmeg
- 1 tsp black pepper
- 1.5 cinnamon stick
- 5 cloves
- 1 tsp dried mint
- 1 star anise
- Dried rose petals
Break up cinnamon in mortar and pestle, then add all ingredients to spice blender or coffee blender. Grind until all ingredients are earthy and grainy, like Mumbai dirt. Bring two cups of water, 1 cup of fatty milk, masala mix, Darjeeling or Assam teas, and sugar (or Stevia if you’re diabetic) to a boil. Boil 5-10 minutes. Stronger is better for Kapha dosha. Weaker for Vata. Drink no more than twice per day to avoid gas.

Sarita looked at the recipe for chai tea, written in a hasty scrawl by her friend Meera during their last Girls Gone Wilde book club meeting. “You’d think I’d have learned how to make this by now,” she grumbled.

In front of her: a tea pot, warm milk, small porcelain white bowls holding spices, a mortar and pestle. The last had been sitting in her cupboard like an artifact from the pottery and textiles wing she always skipped at museums. It was a wedding gift and Sarita couldn’t for the life of her remember why she had ever added it to their registry; it just seemed right at the time. She’d used it only once to grind marijuana and vanilla beans in an experiment that ended disastrously.

Putting the ingredients into the mortar, Sarita began grinding the spices for the tea she knew her parents, especially her father, loved. They were coming from Connecticut to visit her for her birthday and to help assuage the beating her soul had taken since Paulo left her.

She was determined to show them that she was able to function even without Paulo around. Surely the fact that she could make homemade chai would convince them of this.

A buzzing sound annoyed Sarita and she turned to look at the cause. A large, black fly had come in through the open window, followed by another. Sarita sighed and
walked over to the window and looked down the nine flights to Broadway, cautiously leaning her head against the windowpane.

Like the flies, swirling black plastic bags, the kind from convenience stores, flitted in a fickle motion, eddying with the currents formed by the passing cars. Sarita shut the window, gagging slightly at the smell of urine. The pride she once felt in being an “urban pioneer” suddenly seemed ridiculous and bourgeois.

The doorbell rang at 10 a.m., exactly. Quickly, Sarita surveyed the room. She’d let her home fall into the severest form of disarray: maxi pad wrappers were used as coasters, maxi pads were used as coasters, really, everything had been used as coasters. At least there’d been coasters. Satisfied that there were no empty booze bottles or the stubs of unfinished joints visible, she took a deep breath and rested her hand on the cool brass doorknob. *They love you. It’s ok. It’s only a week.*

She opened the door and there stood her parents Ram and Elizabeth, framed by the doorway, the stunned look that traveling and age can bring marking their countenances. Elizabeth’s coiffed hair and shimmering sari were uncharacteristically disheveled, and for a moment an unwelcome thought about her parents having sex flashed through Sarita’s mind.

“Hi beta. How are you! So happy to see you,” Ram said, the gray scrim of his hair floating lightly in the breeze as he stepped forward to wrap Sarita in a tight embrace.

“Good, dad! Come in, come in.” Sarita grabbed their luggage and set them down, catching a whiff of a faint, leathery smell from them that reminded her of Fiji.
“Sarita, are you putting on weight? Don’t drink so much,” said Elizabeth, giving Sarita a kiss on the cheek. Sarita was shocked at how cold and bony her mother’s hands felt as she took her suitcase, like iced tree branches, her touch igniting a faint shiver up Sarita’s spine.

“Um, probably mom. Sit down guys, I made you some tea,” Sarita said, feeling that she’d cut someone right now for a clove cigarette.

“Oh wonderful. The tea on the plane tasted like chloride. They make a nice tea at the McDonald’s, though. The one at Naugatuck, next to mom’s Walmart,” Ram said, setting down a large tote bag with the words Dow Chemicals emblazoned across it. He was always so proud of where he worked. Ram walked over to the kitchen and quickly washed his hands and came back and sat down at the dining table.

“Now where’s that tea?”

“I don’t shop at Walmart, Ram. It’s not mine,” Elizabeth said meekly, taking a sip of her tea and obliquely trying to wipe off the whelked burgundy stain she left on the cup with a napkin. “And Sarita why do you buy these uncomfortable plastic chairs? This looks like what we had when we were poor. Buy better chairs, you’re a grown-up now.”

“Mom, those are Eames chairs from Blu Dot. I paid like $700 for those!” Sarita said.

“You paid $700 for these chairs?” Elizabeth shook her head. “Too much, Sarita. You need to start saving your money better and buy less expensive things. I really worry about you, especially now because…”
“This is good, Sarita,” Ram interrupted. “Reminds me of the tea I had at the Taj in Mumbai,” Ram said, sucking his teeth at the memory. “They don’t make it like that anymore. So many years ago…So tell us, what is going on? Why has Paulo left, beta, does he not understand how marriage works?”

“Yes, sweetie. What did you do?” Elizabeth asked.

_They love you. It’s ok. It’s only a week. They love you. It’s ok. It’s only a week._

Looking away for a moment, Sarita focused her eyes on a photo of her and Paulo taken at the Arenal volcano in Costa Rica. She was holding a rolled map, using the foreshortening to make it look like she was smoking the sooty eruption in the distance. He was gesturing toward the camera with a mini glass of champagne. It was their first New Year’s Eve as a married couple.

“Nothing,” she murmured. “Not all creatures are meant to be monogamous, guys. There’s the dolphin…and the rabbit....”

“Arre bapre! That’s absolutely ridiculous, Sarita. Our species didn’t evolve because we were polygamous. I hope that Paulo’s not feeding you this kind of garbage,” said Ram. He put the tea cup down, winking at his wife, “What do you think about this Elizabeth? Should we maybe call his parents and see what they think? Maybe teach him a thing or two? Whaddya say…E-liz-a-beth?” Ram got up and pecked Elizabeth hard on a cheek that carried the paleness of raw silk, a lightness that was unusual for an Indo-Fijian. Elizabeth reacted with a slight smile, patting Ram on the head as if to say ok, enough, sit down.
Sarita couldn’t bring herself to tell them about Paris, the happy hours, the German amputee porn. In the way that children often underestimate their parents, she’d thought her mother too religious to hear the truth, and her father too optimistic to understand. Sarita’s grandmother had converted to Christianity and given Elizabeth a Christian name in addition to an Indian one to better fit into Fijian society and the religion stuck. A puzzling dynamic, it was. A culture that once practiced cannibalism finding its fate enmeshed with a culture that abstained from meat entirely.

“You guys are adorable…but I think I’ll be ok,” said Sarita, the end of her sentence drowning in a fire truck’s siren. She let it pass and then continued, “Enough about him, I want to talk about you guys. Did you bring the family tree stuff I asked you to? I’m dying to go through Dada’s memorabilia, piece things together, you know? I think going through Vikram baba’s stuff will help me feel better, you know?”

“You know?” Elizabeth echoed.

“Yes, yes, beta. We brought it. Here you go.” Ram pulled out two long paisley shoeboxes from his American Tourister suitcases and handed them to her.

“Sarita, be careful, who knows what’s inside those boxes. Your grandfather had terrible hygiene and picked his nose all the time. You could easily find a mongoose in there,” Elizabeth cautioned, adjusting her hair and crossing her legs.

“Mom, this isn’t Fiji. Mongooses aren’t around, just chilling,” Sarita said.

“You know what I mean, don’t be smart with your chilling language,” Elizabeth said quietly.
Ram walked over to Sarita and put his arm on her shoulder. The smell of dampened Old Spice and the remnants of a sandalwood cologne filled Sarita’s nostrils, and her shoulder felt warm and relaxed under his touch. The sight of his hair swaying lightly in the current from the brazen industrial air conditioner lulled Sarita into a state of familiar tranquility. She turned and looked at her mother, who was looking curiously at Ram, wondering about what he might say to Sarita. And then it came. The words that broke her.

“We’re here for you, Sarita.”

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A day later, Sarita managed to sneak some time in while her parents were out buying flowers at the downtown flower mart to look at the boxes they brought from her grandfather’s house. She opened one of the paisley boxes and saw a copy of her favorite childhood stories, Akbar and Birbal.

How nice it would be to be tucked into bed. Every night her mother would read her stories from her own childhood, but not without usually praising the Queen in some way. Her own name—Elizabeth—was a crowning accomplishment. It gave her authority at the childhood tea parties the neighborhood kids would have and make her the natural choice for the Queen Elizabeth book reports. Sarita could almost recite verbatim the Queen’s first and only trip to the islands, something she heard at nearly every bedtime during her primary school years.

“Beti, you haven’t seen anything like it in your life. She stepped off of the boat and it was as though all of Suva had just awakened in her presence. The most darling
laboral yellow dress. I’ve never seen anyone look good in yellow, especially not a gori,” Elizabeth would say, sighing. “You have no idea how every little six-year-old girl like me wanted to be that stupid Adi Ganilau, the luckiest girl in Fiji who was the first in Suva to receive the Queen.”

Absently, she reached for the coconut hair oil that sat on the nightstand next to Sarita’s bed, a minty green bottle that promised gorgeous brown tresses on a very pale woman that surely couldn’t be Indian. “The indigenous got everything,” she said, gently lathering the oil into Sarita’s thick, unruly hair, making her cringe. How could something supposedly so good for you make you feel so dirty?

“We always were just coolie dogs to them. Who had the businesses? Who worked the sugarcane plantations? Who brought Fiji to the highest levels of prosperity it’s ever seen? They certainly didn’t,” she said, putting the hair oil down with emphasis.

Elizabeth’s monologues always seemed to sputter into silence just before they were getting good, as though Queen Elizabeth herself had slapped her across the face with stiff roll of digestive biscuits. In this particular recollection, Sarita remembered studying the grays threaded through her mother’s long braid as she turned to get the Akbar and Birbal book Sarita loved, the one about the loyal gardener, a story that in retrospect seemed a bit Marxist for her mother’s usually conservative tastes. She remembered thinking that she’d tolerate the rich, pulpy smell of the coconut if it meant her hair would be as long and beautiful as her mother’s.

Now her mother looked frail and provincial to her, the braid an outdated hallmark of the 1970s brain drain that all Indians seemed to sport at the time. Why was it that the
glorious mystique of your parents was inevitably replaced by your disdain of them? Was it like that for everyone, or was Sarita just ungrateful? She was sure it was the latter.

Determined to be better, Sarita found a kind of soft solace in her grandfather’s belongings, the acrid waft of the memorabilia warming her soul the way homemade bread does.

Sarita pulled out a yellowing map of Fiji dated in 1986, just before the country’s first coup. She traced her finger from Lautoka, where she was born, to Labasa, where her grandparents, Elizabeth’s parents, Manilal and Seerah, were from. “Seerah,” an Indianized version of “Sarah,” was her mother’s way of giving her options in a society that seemed uncertain in its identity around that time. As a child, Sarita loved the story about how her grandparents met; it seemed like the perfect type of love to her.

Manilal was a sugarcane worker at the Labasa sugar mill, where he began as a field worker, digging drain ditches and driving the cane to the mill to be refined and bleached in the afternoon. One day after a particularly stormy day, the ground was so wet that a shoeless Manilal slipped and cut his own hand off at the wrist with his machete. Rather than risk getting kicked off the line, he instead bandaged his hand and kept cutting. While smoking a bidi after work that day, a young pretty girl wearing a bright persimmon kerchief in her hair and braids approached him, arms outstretched, holding a billycan. Perplexed, Manilal wasn’t sure if this girl was Indian or Fijian, so he said, “Bula” just to be on the safe side and not risk the repercussions of offending a taukei. But this was no native. She responded, “Kya re? What’s wrong with you? Your arm is bandaged. I brought you some tea and rotis because by the looks of you, you haven’t
eaten in weeks.” Shortly after that, they were married. Manilal was not a fool; there was a three to one ratio of Indo-Fijian men to women and he knew that if a woman was willing to even just look at him, he’d have to snatch her up.

The girl, Seerah, turned out to be the sirdar’s, or overseer’s daughter, and so was able to find a job for Manilal inside the sugar mill bleaching sugar, away from the perils of machetes and cane beetles. Together Seerah and Manilal lived a fairly happy and quiet life in Labasa, later opening up a jaggery and sweets shop called Manilal’s Many Mithais, later changed to Manilal’s Mithais and then just Mani’s Mithais and most recently just Mani’s. They gave birth to Elizabeth (Nandini), Victor (Vikram), Diana (Deepa), and Erin (Aishwarya) who all moved to Suva during their adulthood with the exception of Victor, who stayed behind to help with the family business.

Victor worked at Mani’s as a truck driver delivering sugar back and forth between the mill until 1977, when he died in an unfortunate sugar cane accident. The tiny road to the Labasa mill was swollen with dozens of overburdened trucks carrying sugar to various stores and restaurants. One day he was standing outside his truck checking the inventory when another driver drove right into Victor’s, turning it over and unleashing thirty tons of sugar, burying Victor like a polar bear in a landscape of melting snow.

Sarita pulled out a photo from the box. It was of Manilal, her grandfather, smoking a cigarette with three other cane cutters. Manilal had the same unlined milky skin that her mother had, a gift of good genes according to Elizabeth, that eluded the rich, sun-drenched skin that most of the other cane cutters had. The freshly cut stalks of cane were in a row behind them, bundled and stiff like the asparagus Paulo liked her to buy
because they made his pee smell funny. Flipping through the photos, she found one of her other grandfather, Ram’s father Vikram. It was stuck with flimsy yellowing tape to an envelope. She pulled the photo off and opened the envelope and inside found a letter and another photo. The envelope was addressed to her grandfather Vikram from a man named V.B. Goregoankar.

14 December 1984

_Vikram Baba, it’s time._

---*Ach-ha, V.B. Goregoankar*

Confused, she looked at the other photo. It was her father standing in front of one of the chemical plants where he was commissioned to work in India, this one had a sign that said Union Carbide, Bhopal. He was sandwiched in between a very tall, attractive Indian woman with eyes the color of light wood wearing a bright pink salwar kameez and a man she recognized as her father’s old colleague from work, Govind, arms around the shoulders of both. Her father looked handsome in a blue pinstripe suit and his meticulously combed hair, a thicker and blacker version of what it was now. The photo had a stamp on the back that indicated it had been taken on March 5, 1984.

She looked carefully at the photo of her father and the woman standing next to him. The tips of her father’s fingers were ever-so-slightly touching the woman’s hair in a way that nagged at Sarita, as though they were reaching to plunge further into the woman, once out of camera sight.
Trying to shake off her concern, she put the photo back in the box and pushed it away from her. Her parents would come home, arms full of her mom’s favorite Queen Elizabeth roses from the flower market and complaints about the myriad homeless on the urine-drenched streets and she’d ask them and there’d be an explanation.

There was no way the only man she’d loved longer than Paulo was involved in some sort of illicit love affair seven thousand miles away in Bhopal while she remained blissfully ignorant with her family in Fiji. That would just be too much to take.

**Chapter 8**

*Lautoka, Fiji, March 1999*

Tui leaned against the jeep, trying to blink the hangover away, staring at the girl. There was a dull ache in his fingers where he’d hit the wooden pieces in the carom game he’d been playing all night at the pool center. The ache momentarily distracted him from the ballooning throb in his head, the inevitable conclusion to a nightlong series of matches against the cane workers at the Hibiscus Hal’s where he drank… was it eight or twelve? He couldn’t remember how many Fiji Bitters he’d downed last night, but after releasing a fragrant belch of goat curry along with a little of the sharp bile of last night’s beer, he’d decided he could use another one right about now.

He grinned smugly for a second at last night’s accomplishment; beating the Indians at their own game felt good. A lifetime of rugby and a sturdy cassava diet had made him a formidable presence among many of the small-framed Indians, yet these cane
cutters weren’t easily fazed. Some of them had even cut cane with their bare hands, no machetes, no nothing.

Tui had heard stories of all-night grogging and cane-cutting sessions that had resulted in the mysterious disappearances of some men in the villages just outside of Lautoka. Intrigued by these rumors, he’d asked the coolies for months to play him (some might question his version of “asking”) at the tabletop billiard-style board game, and when they finally relented to play him a few weeks ago, he’d suffered a loss nearly every time.

But not last night.

Haletava (Hal) had kept his bar at the Hibiscus Wine and Dine open several extra hours after the tourists left upon his insistence and he’d finally pocketed the queen, that saucy red beauty that reminded him of the pink lips of a woman’s sweet place—hitting her into the net for five consecutive games and winning against the Lautoka mill workers who played every Tuesday at Hibiscus Hal’s.

It was a sweet, sweet victory. One he needed. Lately, it seemed like he couldn’t catch a break anywhere.

Now he was watching the girl. She had an uncanny way of walking about her, like a puppeteer was pulling her strings to the right, making her steps more pronounced on that side. But those were some legs. Tui was doing his best to get a good, long stare at her; she was wearing pale blue shorts and that amount of visible skin on a woman was an uncommon sight in Fiji.
He followed the length of her leg up from the perfect toes nesting around the single T of her thong sandals all the way up to the meatiest part of her mid-thigh, the blue shorts spreading like an ocean over the perfect brown shore of her legs. The sun glinted off them as she walked, partially the result of a daily routine of coconut oil rubs and just the natural luminescence that youth brings. His eyes traced the faint scar back down the side of her right leg that went almost to her ankle, as though you could fold her along a dotted line and make two of her.

The thought of two of her got him a little excited.

Tui adjusted his uniform and gripped his rifle tightly, covering the nozzle with his palm and digging it deep into the dirt by the Jeep, making a sharp indentation in the ground. Leaning against the side of the curry stall where he’d just eaten, he cleared his throat and called out to the girl.


Gulabi looked over at Tui across the street as she wiped off a table at Highlands, the wine and dine where she worked afterschool.

“I really wish I’d never taught you any Hindi. Such a beautiful language loses its meaning on such hateful lips,” Gulabi said, walking back into the front bar and wiping off the counter. “And what the hell are you doing with a rifle? What is this, America?”

“Watch your language. We’re allowed rifles during times of urgency, ma’am,” Tui said, tipping his gray beret slightly in her direction. “Well, certain ones of us who have demonstrated proficiency in certain police training activities. I am one of those.”
“I didn’t realize paying off the matanqali was considered a police training activity. That’s good to know. Someday, I’m sure I’ll write a paper about it. In uni. You think you’ll ever go to uni, Tui?”

Gulabi poked her head through the area above the bar and smiled. Her face was framed garishly by a bar decorated in purple and pink conch shells and tiny brass elephants that were emblazoned in the wall, making her golden eyes even more pronounced. A small statue of the elephant-headed god Ganesh and another one of Lakshmi rested on the bar on either side of her.

“And really, you can just say hello. Namaskar is a little formal,” Gulabi shouted to him across the street.

“I’m trying, though, right?” Tui shouted back to her.

She frowned. “Yeah, guess so.”

“Hrumph. When did you try and speak Fijian? And I don’t mean just bula vinaka. And that’s guess so—sir. To you.”

Gulabi laughed a hearty laugh at that, the unspoiled laugh of youth leaving a lasting smirk across an immaculate adolescent face. That smile was the reason why Tui took a break from patrolling his area, the reason why he took a break every Tuesday and Friday while checking land leases in Lautoka. Not that he particularly needed a reason, it was a tedious job and he was usually pretty bored of it after half an hour.

He couldn’t explain it, but he was drawn to her in a way he’d never been drawn to anyone before, and in his twenty-two years he’d seen just about every woman on the island. He wanted her more than he’d even wanted Aishwarya the Slut, who he’d dated
for a few scant moments back when he was a boy running around the same cane fields in
the village outside Lautoka where Gulabi grew up. He’d only been with other Fijians
since Aish, which was just as well, really. But the sight of Gulabi, even with her skewed
body and saucy attitude filled him with pleasure and thoughts of her at night made his
lonely, soldiered member throb in the barracks.

It was one of those things and he knew it. You want what you can’t have.

“Why don’t you get a real job, Tui? Like all the other men here?” She motioned
to the smokestack in the horizon, a saccharine reminder of the once-burgeoning industry
that was floundering due to stiff competition and lower quality sugar. “You’re afraid to
use a machete for something useful, aren’t you? You’d rather cut off someone else’s
livelihood, right?”

Tui typically allowed Gulabi to say whatever she wanted when they bickered, and
she did. They’d been fighting since the sixth standard. For years after Gulabi’s surgery,
she’d had an extra growth on her leg, the remnants of skin they couldn’t yet slough off
until it had matured. The kids called her octopus girl and crab legs, constantly threatening
to wrap her in banana leaves and roast her lovo-style.

Because of this, he didn’t usually let her pitiful jousts at his self-esteem irk him
and instead focused on the seductive motions of her mouth, which only seemed to be this
active when she was berating him. Otherwise she seemed to spend most days quiet,
reading or dutifully working at her parents’ restaurant serving drinks to the rowdy
kaivalagi, mostly Australian and New Zealand tourists. But today he was particularly on
edge. Whether it was the hangover from drinking so many Fiji Bitters or the instructions
he’d received from his captain to begin checking every Indian’s land leases and forcing out the families with expired ones—he’d been assigned at least fifteen and had grown tired of watching them cry and beg to stay—he was just not going to deal with it today.

He took his new role in George Speight’s army very seriously—Speight was clear, there would be no progress for the country unless indigenous Fijians took back what was theirs. Fiji was for Fijians, and there was no place for Indians, especially not in leadership. Tui was determined to do what was necessary to restore the country back to the Fiji that their legends told of, a place where the taukei reigned and held the destiny of Fiji within the palms of their hands, where only they could wield the power of their land in the ways they felt were best. The insignia the soldiers wore around their biceps said it all—two grass-skirt clad warriors on either side of a red two-legged stool, a corruption of the three-legged stool metaphor that for years everyone used to describe the equal contributions of Europeans, Indians, and indigenous Fijians to the prosperity of the country. But that didn’t mean he couldn’t appreciate the beauty of a fine girl on her way to becoming a woman. And appreciate he did. Even if he had to teach her a lesson every now and then.

He pulled his rifle up by the nozzle, releasing it from its nestled position in the ground, ran up to Gulabi and pointed it straight at her through the bar. An Australian couple seated nearby, faces flushed pink from kava they’d no doubt had at a tour to a nearby village, turned around and looked questioningly, as if deciphering whether or not what was happening in their midst was, indeed, real.
“Listen, Gulabi. I remember when you were an eight-legged freak, OK?” Tui focused his eye through the scope of the rifle and lined the crosshairs with her right eye, the specks of gold within it dancing with fear. “I remember when it was my Christian brothers and sisters who convinced your cow-worshipping lot not to burn you alive as an offering to Kali,” Tui readjusted his grip on the rifle, aiming it at that gorgeous coral-colored O of a mouth. “Remember that? Gulabi put her hands up and looked down. “Yeah, I thought so.”

“Ok, ok…it’s just a joke Tui,” Gulabi said, looking straight into the glittering hazel eyes that rested above the sturdy table of his jaw. Her eyes were wide, like a startled mongoose. And he liked it.

Something about his expression made her slip out of fear and into anger and a few seconds later, Gulabi threw her hands down on the bar and said, “You know what? Fuck it. If you’re going to shoot, shoot. I meant what I said,” challenging him with her glare.

The Australian woman sitting nearby with a hammy face and pink visor jumped at Gulabi’s cursing and seemed to sober up for a moment. She motioned to the busboy, a Fijian boy named Ralph who looked about eleven, and whispered something to him. He disappeared into the kitchen and a minute later out came the restaurant owner, a lanky drunk that Tui hated, a man named Shantam.

Furious, Shantam grabbed a four-foot long machete, which was in a bamboo case next to the register, and stuck it in Tui’s face.

“Take your rifle back to Speight. Tell him to take it and trade it for a machete, a sharp one that cuts sugar cane. Because no matter how little sugar Fiji’s selling these
days, it’s still going to bring you a better future than that,” he motioned toward the rifle, his face contorted with disgust.

“Whatever,” Tui said, spitting on his hand and smoothing his curly, close-cropped hair, just like he’d seen the American actor James Dean do.

Putting his rifle down, he straightened out his uniform, his muscled body filling out every inch.

Tui turned around and walked back to his jeep. The Australian couple went back to picking at the fiery broiled fish curry and roti they were trying to eat. Gulabi and Shantam laughed nervously, watching as streams of tears ran down the Australians’ faces.

“Good-for-nothing coolies,” Tui muttered, walking back to the Jeep.

Tui got into the police car and turned on the ignition, throwing his rifle into the backseat. Checking his roster, he’d seen that he still had seven more Indians to visit and by the way the orange daggers in the horizon hung so close to Mt. Koroyanitu, he reckoned it must be around three-thirty. He lit up a Benson & Hedges, drowning out the fragrant waft of the frangipani tree hanging over him with smoke, looking at his watch. Yes, three-thirty. Tui looked up and saw his buddy Tabua Iseisei, another soldier in Speight’s army. They called him Tabua, whale tooth, because after a brawl three years ago, one large, slightly hooked tooth stood proudly in his mouth alone like a bowling pin and when he spoke, it was nearly impossible not to take one’s eyes off it. Tabua was absolutely fearless—he stood taller than Tui at six feet five inches and enough collisions with other rugby players had seemed to erode that part of his brain that governed
decision-making. Tabua got drunk nearly every night and started brawls in bars from Lautoka to the Coral Coast, specifically attacking tourists. Tui understood his feelings, but wasn’t stupid enough to fight unless it was absolutely necessary.

It looked like Tabua was getting ready for the evening strike shift—at approximately 7pm every day, they chose several Indian homes and businesses off Queens Road, pelting them with rocks. Tabua and the others tried to convince Tui to join, but Tui wouldn’t; he didn’t agree at all with what they were doing but lacked the nerve to tell Tabua that. He’d rather get called a mama’s boy and tell them he’d promised his mother that he would learn the Fijian massage she gave to clients in the evenings than admit he would rather die than ruin the homes that people he’d grown up with had worked so hard on building. He saw that Tabua had several large burlap bags in the back of his jeep that carried the bulky form of rocks—large ones, by the way it was making dents in the bag.

“Massage again tonight?” Tabua shouted over to him, laughing.

“Yes, I’m learning a really complicated technique now. I’ll have to show it to you sometime,” Tui said, laughing.

Tabua waved his right hand in the air. “No, that’s ok. Save that for Priscilla night at the sugar festival,” Tabua said.

Tabua was stopping by the same curry stall to get what everyone in Lautoka thought was the best goat curry on the island—the cook marinated goat legs for forty-eight hours in eleven different spices and added jaggery, giving it a slightly sweet taste, like everything in Lautoka had. The thought of goat curry made Tui burp again, this time
releasing some pressure in his head and making him feel a little less hungover. Throwing his cigarette out of the window and pressing his foot on the gas, Tui hurriedly drove off, not wanting to give Tabua a chance to keep talking to him or to see the rifle he probably shouldn’t have been brandishing just a few moments ago.

Chapter 9

The stack of receipts sat in front of Shantam, unwilling to move from his sight no matter how hard he wished them away, his exhaustion getting the better of him and rendering him unable to perform the final step of a restaurateur’s task, tallying the numbers. Next to the receipts sat a glass of dark brown rum from which is took a large swig. The radio was playing a song by the Jamaican singer Shaggy. It had swept the islands some two months ago and could be heard nonstop on nearly all of Fiji’s radio stations, including the one they blasted at the Highlands wine and dine. Shantam sat with his head in his hands, half-listening to the radio and half-dreading the numbers. Tourism had suffered significantly since the 1997 coup, and he was barely breaking even.

“It wasn’t me,” he muttered.

“It wasn’t me,” he muttered again.

Shantam jerked out of his chair, remembering that he had promised Devi he’d stop by the grocery at some point today and buy some pumpkin for tomorrow’s dinner. A wintry May wind blew through the open restaurant and a slight chill coming through the open bar woke him up just a bit, or at least enough to get him moving.
Grabbing the receipts and the calculator, he started counting quickly, his lithe fingers dancing on the keypad like a ballerina on stage. His hands were smooth from years of cutting sugar cane; the tips of his fingers bereft of the hypnotic markings of a fingerprint. He poured himself more Bounty Rum and looked at his watch. It was eleven o’clock, an hour after closing time. No grocery store would be open now; he’d have better luck sneaking into his neighbor Lulu’s farm and helping himself to her pumpkins instead. For a few minutes, his rum-addled mind worked on convincing himself that this was the best plan to avoid Devi’s disappointment.

There was nothing worse than disappointing her. It left a hollow sensation in his stomach and a fear that he just couldn’t take; he’d walk on fire for her if she asked. Luckily, they’d lived through over thirty firewalking festivals and she still had yet to do so.

If he could just find a way to squeeze through Lulu’s gate and grab something sharp enough to cut off a pumpkin without startling her dogs, he should be fine. He knew he probably just should’ve asked Gulabi to pick them up on her way home but she was rattled from what happened with Tui earlier and he just wanted her to leave and calm down. The joy of raising a fifteen year-old girl never ceased to amaze him.

Just as he entered the last number into the register, a rock came flying through the window. Then another, and another.

Rocks were suddenly coming through the bar and through each window in the restaurant, their trajectories criss-crossing the way shafts of light stream through a church.
Shantam quickly crawled under the desk, grabbing the receipts, the rum, and a stack of cash from the register tray sitting on the table.

There was shattered glass everywhere and a few stray shards landed right in front of him. Shantam sat for a moment, the rum having slowed his thought process to a crawl, the exhaustion taking over. He curled up into a ball and moved his body as far back under the desk he could, shoving the cash and receipts into his pants and taking another large swig of the Bounty Rum.

“He isn’t here, take everything,” he heard a man say.

The cash register above him rattled. Someone cursed. The thundering of about three pairs of heavily-clod feet echoed in the restaurant, the sound of crunching glass masking Shantam’s breathing, which was getting labored by the minute.

A few minutes later, they were gone.

Shantam listened for about forty minutes, and when he was convinced they had left, he got up and checked for his machete, which, not surprisingly, was gone. He breathed in deeply and left the restaurant for home, but not without locking up the door and turning off the lights properly, like he did every night. He didn’t care that the restaurant was gutted like a Spanish mackerel.

Shantam was a block away from his home, the purring trill of the cane toads in the village an irritating serenade after the recent events. Shaking, he opened the front door of his home.
“Where is Gulabi? Where is Gulabi?” Shantam whispered loud enough for his wife Devi to hear.

“She’s sleeping, Shanta. What’s wrong? Why are you so late?”

“Things are getting worse. They destroyed the restaurant, Devi. Everything…it’s shattered. The windows, all the bottles of liquor, plates, it’s all ruined. At least I have the money, thanks Ganesha.” He nodded over to a brass figurine of the god of wisdom, Ganesh, that was sitting on the kitchen counter.

“No…what? What do you mean, Shanta?”

“The soldiers, if you can even call them that. The lemmings that follow George Speight. The iTaukei that want us out, Devi. That’s who I think did it. I couldn’t see them because I hid underneath the desk. They didn’t bother to look in the corner, their lot isn’t too bright.”

“Beta, are you okay?” Devi cradled Shantam’s gray head against her chest, her sari falling off her shoulder with the weight. “Arré, how much rum did you have? I could smell you from across the room. Don’t worry, we’ll fix up the restaurant. Gulabi’s done with her drama rehearsals and can come help after school like she’s been doing. These gandus won’t ruin us.”

“I’m ok, just…so…angry!” Shantam breathed in heavily and shook off the rum-soaked thoughts that were budding in his mind, thoughts that involved strangulation and poisoning. “But you’re right, those gandus won’t win. Everything will work out the way it’s meant to.” He focused his bloodshot eyes and a toothy, honest smile at Devi.
Convinced he’d be alright, Devi poured him some hot tea and went back to bed, leaving Shantam sitting by himself at the dining table.

Shantam turned to their makeshift altar in the kitchen, something in nearly every Indian home. Dozens of gods and goddesses small and large, brass or even gold were arranged with copper pots holding yellow and red kumkum, a holy powder made of turmeric, placed on the foreheads of people and gods.

He stared at a woodcut of the one goddess in particular, one born from lotus blossoms and spilling a river of gold coins from her hands.

“It’s time, Lakshmi. You owe us one.”

Chapter Ten

“So, you’re a man?”

“Yeah, I’m a man.”

“How do you know?”

“I’m almost eighteen, ain’t I?”

“So? Age is just a number.”

“I just am, OK? I think about manly things.”

“Like what?”

“Like…about car notes and building muscle mass, and what will happen when I die.”
“Uh-huh.”

“And women. Men always think about women.”

“Right.”

“Look, I have a job ok? More than I can say ‘bout you.”

“You don’t have to get defensive. I’m just askin’ a question. You’re the one who said he’s ‘‘a man with a plan.’”

“Well I just know, OK. Men know when they’re men and not kids and I am a man.”

“Fair enough.”

Sally and her boyfriend Trey were on their senior class field trip to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and she was in a question-asking mood. Something about looking at modern art, probably.

“Well it’s good that you think you’re a man,” Sally said.

Trey rolled his eyes and grabbed Sally’s hand, dragging her to the entrance of a photo exhibit called Vanity Fair Portraits: Photographs from 1913-2008.

“Look, look. It’s ScarJo and that skinny skeleton-looking bitch from Pirates of the Caribbean.”

“Huh?”

“Hey—there’s Louis Armstrong. And… I really don’t know who anyone else is,” Trey said, swiveling around on one sneaker a full three-hundred sixty degrees until he faced Sally again.
Sally looked around, puzzled. She saw several of her classmates in the next room laughing at a photo of Chris Rock and others standing in the corner playing with their cell phones. It was a museum curated with a serious case of senioritis. Dominique, Sally’s best friend before Betty, a girl she’d managed to successfully avoid at Inglewood High for three years, caught her eye and glared at her for a second; and though Sally was inclined not to care—she was caring less and less about anything high school these days—the look bothered her more than she wanted it to and she couldn’t shake her guilt all day. School field trips were always an exercise in karmic payback—you’d see old boyfriends and best friends, teachers you’d disrespected and classmates you’d teased and forgotten about, all gathered together for one day of awkwardness that became more about who you’d sit with on the bus or eat lunch with than about the lessons you were supposed to learn from World War Two, modern art, or how the justice system worked. Sally loved the word “karma” and used it obsessively when she first heard it from her English teacher Ms. Wilson during their world religions unit, but now that she could name this feeling she wasn’t liking it too much.

Sally turned away from Dominique’s gaze, looking at Trey. “Why we going to the art museum in history class anyway? Man, they really give up on us seniors, don’t they? Why not take us somewhere useful, like City Hall or something?”

Trey shrugged. “Nah, girl. It’s all about how you look at it. See the way the light falls halfway on this…Julianne Moore? It’s kind of mysterious, like the photographer’s only telling you half the story. It’s dope,” Trey said.
“You just like it because she’s naked,” Sally said, crossing her arms. Just because she was in love with Jemaine Clement didn’t mean she was cool with Trey drooling over women in front of her and rubbing it in her face.

“Like I said girl, it’s all about how you see it. This how the photographer sees it,” Trey said, putting his arm around Sally and steering her into another room filled with dozens more portraits of celebrities neither of them could name.

“You stupid Trey,” she said. She couldn’t help but laugh.

“Stupid but happy, Sally. Stupid but happy.”

“Getting high in the parking lot at age seventeen happy.”

“Hey, whatever it takes, right?”

Sally would have just as rather spent the day preparing for her trip than wasting it at LACMA with her stoned boyfriend and looking at a bunch of photos of people she could’ve just seen at home, flipping through a magazine. She had tons of shopping still to do to get ready for the trip. Auckland was a week away and she still needed to get her passport, her very first one. She was eager to try some of the makeup Betty stole for her from Whole Foods and give herself a whole new look for the passport photo she was going to take at the Rite Aid later. She was starting to get excited.

“Sally, how you gonna go all the way to New Zealand but you can’t even look at what’s right in front of you? That’s what I want to know,” Trey said, uncharacteristically irritated.
His words stung Sally for a second; she’d considered herself one of the most open-minded people she knew. She’s the one who introduced cous cous to her mom.

Then something occurred to her.

“Aww…is someone going to miss me?” Sally asked with a smirk, squeezing his hand playfully and turning to look at him. Trey had a baby face and wore tight cornrows, towering above her at six feet. She liked his face, it was kind and sweet. She also liked the fact that she could look up to him, since she was tall at five-foot-nine. She only liked tall men.

Trey looked at her and grinned, smacking her ass. “Yes, Sally, someone is.”

Sally stared out of the bus window. She wasn’t in the mood to talk; a day at the museum had fried her brain and she was ready to go home. The bus whizzed past a sign that said Miracle Mile only to stop at a traffic light. Everywhere she saw men with thick beards in long black jackets and curly tendrils of hair that were either sideburns or extensions like those of several Dominican boys in her neighborhood.

The men walked together in groups, and she wondered where they were going. Following behind them there were also little boys smartly dressed in white shirts and black pants, wearing the tiny contact-lens shaped hat, the yarmulke, that Mr. Feisenberg told them about when they were studying World War Two. They must be Jewish.

Most of the kids on the bus were staring at them too. Had this been a seventh grade field trip, they surely would have been shouting and laughing at them, bodies
hanging halfway out of the window like fools, but as seniors there was a quiet dignity about how they stared, like now they were ready to understand.

The bus started again and as they headed down La Cienega (“La see-en-eh-ga,” Betty always corrected her) Boulevard, Sally saw signs in languages she couldn’t name, lots of whites and Asian and Mexicans and more of those Jewish people she had just seen and sushi restaurants where she’d heard people ate raw fish (yuck) and boutiques with women who looked like supermodels walking out of them and going in, their arms bracelet with pretty pink and yellow shopping bags.

There were taller buildings here, ones that reached higher than any she’d seen in Inglewood and in between Trey poking at her and trying to talk some nonsense about moving in together next year she caught glimpses of the people and how different they all seemed from where she lived. She closed her eyes and tried to lean her head against the rollicking bus window, but succeeded in only giving herself a near concussion as her head collided hard against it. Why can’t anything just be easy?

“Red, you can put your head here. Just sayin’” Trey said.

There he goes again, always sticky and shit. Ugh. She didn’t know what else to do, so she gave in, leaning her head on Trey’s shoulder. She drifted off to the smell of Old Spice and Gain, to the slow hum of conversation dipping in its highs and lows, the occasional bump of the ride jerking her head in some odd motion off of Trey’s shoulder, a natural inclination bringing it back. Ten minutes later—though it felt like an eternity to a girl who’d just entered the whirling weightlessness of dreamsleep—they were back at school.
Sally and Trey stumbled off the bus with heavy steps in a groggy haze. Even though she had just been a few miles away in another part of Los Angeles, Sally was grateful to be back. Back to LA. There wasn’t a feeling like it in the world. Sally looked up and saw Betty and her boy Anthony waiting for them.

“Hey sexy mama,” Betty said in her characteristic easy drawl, in a voice like that stray drop of soda that trickles its way to your homework somehow. Betty’s tomboyish style made her look straight up out of the movie *Colors*, the movie every gym teacher seemed to show them in junior high when it was too rainy to run around the track.

She was wearing a loose, red plaid shirt over a white tank top and a pair of skintight Sevens. Betty was self-conscious about her breasts so she’d wear these confusing-ass outfits that made it hard to judge her like everyone wanted to; was she slutty or was she hard? It was tough to tell. Boys always liked her because despite her rough exterior she was sweet; lezzies liked her because they thought she swung both ways.

Just to brag to Sally that she had, Betty made out with a girl in the stairwell once, a girl named Maritza. Maritza was really experienced in the ways of seduction and everyone knew it so this was nothing special. Sally would rather not imagine her best friend hanging all over a girl, lipstick smashed against lipstick like two bursting jelly doughnuts, though it was still more pleasant than the thought of her kissing her chunti boyfriend Anthony, who she couldn’t stand.

And there they were. Just the way he stood irritated Sally; the way he hovered over Betty like a helicopter made her all vomity. Betty started dating Anthony three years
ago because he was the lead dancer in Inglewood’s Folklorico troupe; he was by far the most ignorant boy Sally had ever met, and she’d met many. He was tall for a Mexican, but as she frequently forgot, Anthony was actually from El Salvador.

Sally never bothered to learn because he wasn’t worth two seconds of her time, even though she was the president of BLT and even if her best friend talked her ear off about how she couldn’t wait to open up a coffee shop with him in Inglewood after they graduate, one with poetry readings and live music and modern dance classes on weeknights. She doubted Anthony was the coffee shop type; she was pretty sure he was caught up in some illegal shit and she’d trained herself to just look at Betty when he was around, even when she was put into a situation where she’d have to talk to him. It was better if Sally didn’t have to see his face. But now he was trying to get some attention.

“How was your little ‘field trip’? Did you have fun with all them gay-ass white people?” Anthony asked, his lanky body folding with laughter.

So trifling. Sally felt the familiarity of her aggression rising, that warm burn in her stomach that swirls and tightens, her skin sinking into itself as if it succumbs, a slight trembling rattling her body in waves along the fault lines that separated her organs. She breathed in deeply and said, “I’d tell you, but your fuck-lorico ass ain’t graduating and I don’t want you to feel bad.”

“Hey! I’m not graduating either, punkass,” said Betty. Though Betty was one of the smartest girls and best poets she knew, she was failing two classes and most likely wouldn’t be graduating this year. A sheer act of benevolence on the part of Mr.
Rodriguez, the BLT sponsor, even kept her active as vice president when she should’ve been kicked off the leadership committee.

“Well maybe you shoulda stopped hanging around this fool,” said Sally, nodding in Anthony’s direction.

“I take offense to how you said ‘folklorico,’” Anthony said, stepping toward Sally.

“Ok, ok, enough fools,” Trey said, separating Anthony and Sally with the palms of his hands. “So what you all up to while we were at the museum? The world get saved?”

“Nah,” Betty said. “Had a BLT meeting at lunch, Sally. Everyone wants to know when we going to do elections for offices since you and I both leaving in June.”

“Shit, I don’t know. I’m leaving the country in a week so when I come back?”

“Alright, I’ll start working on the posters. So you ready to go get your photo done? I got you a bunch of shit. We gotta go before Rite Aid closes.”

Sally looked over at Trey. She could tell by the look on his face he was hoping to get some today. And she’d been feeling a little horny herself, despite the fact she was irritable, and he was often the cause. The other day he finally went down and her and damn that felt good. It was one thing to grind herself against her fingers, but when he was doing his thing, there was a weightlessness and relief she’d never felt before. Thinking for a second about ditching the photo session and doing it tomorrow, she looked back at Betty’s earnest face and decided against it.
“Yeah, let’s go. See ya Trey,” she said, kissing him and flicking a sliver of tongue into his mouth.

“Mmm. I’ll see you later Sally. Call me later tonight if you get…bored,” said Trey, smiling.

“Look at the lovebirds, they go like this muah muah muah,” Anthony scrunched his fingertips on his right and left hands together as though they were a mouth, making a tiny kissing motion with them.

Sally gave Anthony the look of death, one that she practiced in front of the mirror sometimes before walking to school or back home, the same one her mother gave her.

“That fool never learn,” said Trey, shaking his head.

“Alright, let’s go,” Betty said. She put her arm in the crook of Sally’s and veered her away to her little red Nissan Maxima. They got in and drove to the Rite Aid leaving the two boys standing, watching.

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A fuzzy version of Phil Collins’ “Sussudio” greeted them when they walked into the Rite Aid. As they made their way down the shampoo aisle toward the back of the drug store, Sally substituted her own chorus, singing “Yu-yu-yu-gi-oh,” lightly under her breath, looking around for the photo developing area.

“Never understood this song,” Sally said, pulling out the bag of cosmetics Betty had stolen for her. “This Burt’s Bees stuff is weak,” she said, grinding a yellow stick of something hard into her lips. “I mean, I gotta apply it like five times!” Sally was looking at her lips in a tiny, rectangular mirror hanging above the blood pressure machine at the
Rite Aid. Sally looked over at Betty who was in the nearby aisle, checking out the prices on the Clearasil, comparing it to the zit cream she gets at the Whole Foods with her very generous employee discount.

“Well then apply it five times, shit. It’s free, ain’t it?” Betty said, incredulous.

Sally looked up at Betty with a surprised expression, a “Hemp Earth” mascara wand dangling from her between her fingers. “You’re right. Thanks, girl, for getting me this stuff. My mom hates it when I wear makeup for some reason, even though she don’t care when I’m at the house alone with Trey,” Sally said. “She’s strange that way.”

“I’d be strange if you and Leonard were my kids too,” said Betty. “Y’all ain’t normal, I’m telling you. Leonard don’t talk and you talk too much.”

“What is normal?” Sally said, taking one last look at herself and walking over to a counter with a sign that read “Passport photos and prints.” Betty followed her, holding two bottles of Vitamin C tablets and the Clearasil.

“You know, your mom don’t mind because it’s Trey. He’s a good guy Sally,” Betty said.

“So? He’s an Inglewood boy and I’m about to graduate. You’re not going to be with Tony forever are you?” Sally said.

Betty shrugged. Sally thought Betty was way too good for Tony, but she figured Betty would tire of him after they graduated. She couldn’t imagine that she’d stay with the same guy when there’s a world of men to be had out there. A world of strange accents and strange senses of humor. A world with strange men named Jemaine.
“Sally…what happens if Jemaine Clement doesn’t like you? I mean, he’s a celebrity and shit…don’t you think that maybe he’s into other celebrities?” Betty said.

“Huh?” Sally turned to look at Betty, trying to discern what her tone meant.

“Nothing, it’s just that I bet Jemaine probably has a grip of girls trying to get with him, don’t you think? Not because he’s hot—let me make clear—but because he’s sort of… famous.”

Sally shook her head, smudging a bit of mineral blush onto her cheeks with the tips of her fingers as her head moved. “I’m not even worried about all that,” She turned to Betty. “This missionary trip was no accident, Betty. The Lord helps those who help themselves. I was meant to go see him. I don’t know what’s going to happen, but I gotta follow through with this. That’s all there is to it,” Sally said, turning back to the mirror.

“Well, I just hope you’re ready for whatever happens. I don’t want to see you get hurt, I honestly don’t even know what you see in that Jemaine guy. I’d take Trey over that goofy motherfucker any day.”

Betty walked over to Sally, holding up the two vitamin bottles. “You should take this stuff. My mother says it’s the bomb for wrinkles and we are getting older.” Betty stepped close to Sally, peering at her face, “Although you have the best skin I’ve ever seen. What’s your secret?”

Swatting Betty away from her she said, “Lots of sex,” Sally laughed. “And he’s not a goofy motherfucker. You just don’t get it, that’s all. That’s ok, I understand. You’re just not ready. Like you’re not ready for sex.”

“I do too understand…and I’m just waiting till I’m twenty-one,” Betty said.
“I don’t know why—you might as well get some practice in with Tony fucklorico.”


“Yeah that shit messed up. Y’all not normal with your voodoo and shit,” Sally said, checking her reflection one last time in a locked glass counter holding condoms.

“It’s not voodoo. It’s called Santería. La Reina was amazing, Sally. She could’ve told you if Jemaine was going to fall for you—she was that good. So sad.” Betty sighed, looking up at the sky. “I don’t know what’s happening to our world,” Betty said.

Sally pulled Betty’s hand toward the counter, where a brown man with chestnut-colored hair and a nametag on a pale blue Dickies shirt that said Roj, Photo Technician was standing. “Well, I’m about to find out,” Sally grinned and turned to the photo technician. “How do I look, Roj?”

“Like a young girl about to become a woman,” said Roj with a mysterious smile.

Betty whispered into Sally’s ear, “Per---vee…”

Sally ignored her and smiled at Roj. “You got that right. Now let’s get me a passport.”
Chapter Eleven

There were days and there were *days*, and this one was shaping up to be the latter. Nelda looked over at Eleanor, the district secretary with a dainty name unfitting of her bulldog-like exterior. Eleanor was the general barometer for the mood throughout the office, and since on her desk there existed no framed evidence of love but only a lone sign with a badly photocopied image of a cheeseburger and the words “This is NOT Burger King, you can NOT have it your way,” the mood of the office was generally a disgruntled one.

Nelda wondered what Eleanor’s teeth looked like. She was counting the days until Eleanor would come in one morning, her hunched body a little more erect, the etched scowl massaged out of her face to reveal the slim, slight splash of yellow that would be the closest thing Eleanor had probably gotten to a smile since her husband last gave her a good one some forty years ago. The smile would be Nelda’s reward after seven years of inhuman amounts of patience to hear these words from Eleanor’s mouth—“I’m retiring.” Once Eleanor finally retired, Nelda would move up from her position as Executive Administrative Assistant to the District Secretary to simply District Secretary and would be in charge of virtually every aspect of what happens within these impenetrable gray walls. She’d also finally have the backing of anyone who was important on the school board, ensuring that her son Leonard’s remaining years at Inglewood High would be smooth ones. It would be any day now; she could feel it. Eleanor was going to retire and there would be balloons and a tres leches cake and later on margaritas and faked words of kindness and nostalgia and the job would be Nelda’s.
Right now she just had to get through today, however. It was ten o’clock and already there were slammed doors and curse words. The district superintendent, Frank Beverly, walked past Nelda’s desk three or four times muttering “Fuck” under his breath repeatedly, very uncharacteristic for a usually soft-spoken, gentle man. Nelda adjusted the collar of her purple, perfectly ironed blazer. She slipped her feet back into her Jessica Simpson heels and crossed her ankles, sitting up straighter instinctively at the possibility of Frank walking by again. She took out her clutch from the desk drawer, pulling out a purple lipstick and a small compact mirror, lacquering on a fresh coat quickly, ducking into her cubicle to make sure no one saw. It was important that at any given time, if someone looked over at her, they always saw her working. She liked to keep her work life tidy and unemotional, unlike her home life.

Nelda allowed herself to go to the restroom twice a day, once at 10:30 a.m. and once again at 2:30 p.m. Every day she went like clockwork, whether she had to piss or shit or not. She timed her bathroom breaks with the schedules of Eleanor and Frank, knowing that they had daily catchups then, so they wouldn’t miss her when she went. For lunch she left for twenty minutes to make a tuna and cottage cheese salad from the cafeteria and chat briefly with her friend Marilyn, the Laotian woman in accounting who she’d befriended a few months ago. Marilyn was just like her—smart, ambitious, and didn’t get into all that catty nonsense that many of the other district employees like Maria Romero and Toyanda Barber were into. It was nice to have an associate; she couldn’t yet call Marilyn a friend. It was a long time since she’d called anyone a friend.
“Nelda, do you know what’s going on around here?” someone whispered behind her.

She turned around and saw Nestor Alvarez, the head of accounting. He was a handsome, fifty-something Mexican man. Nelda didn’t usually find Latinos very attractive—in fact, it’s only because of Sally and her BLT that she stopped saying out loud her feelings for the majority of them—but there was something about Nestor that was, well, sexy. It was a feeling she’d never expected.

“Huh-unh,” Nelda said, a twinge of nervous energy rattling her. “No idea, Nestor.”

Nelda could tell he was on edge—and frankly, so was she. But she wasn’t about to let Nestor know that.

“Why don’t you come and help me carry the new Sparkletts in…I can’t find Teresa to help with that,” Nestor said.

Nelda gave Nestor a look. “Wha—I can’t be trifling with water right now Nestor—” Teresa was the receptionist; it was her job to make sure the water was refilled; Nelda didn’t have time for this. Wasn’t he a man? She looked at Nestor for a second, about to tell him that she doesn’t break for another seventeen minutes, but saw the pleading look in his eye and said yes.

They walked down the gray hallways, past the endless metal file cabinets and the people click-clicking at their computers and through the front doors until they were outside. The rain had finally ceased in the last few days, leaving a clarity to the air when
coupled with the crisp, faint breeze that was happening now made Los Angeles positively swoon-worthy with possibility. It felt like a good day, even if it was a bad one.

Nelda followed Nestor into the underground parking lot, then to his car, then crawled into the passenger side of his Lexus. He pulled out a pack of Marlboro reds and cracked the window, lighting one and leaning his chair back slightly. Nelda edged further away from him, holding up her head of curls with one hand away from the pervading smoke.

It was 10:23 according to the clock in Nestor’s car. Nelda had twelve minutes to get back to her desk before anyone suspected that she was doing something other than maybe taking an early restroom break.

“You know what this is about, don’t you?” Nestor said. “You know why they’re slamming doors and why Beverly’s got his panties in a bunch?”

Nelda winced at the visual and replied quietly, “No.”

“C’mon Nelda. We need to talk about this. We need to talk about what’s going to happen now,” Nestor said.

“Ok…talk,” Nelda said, coughing at the cigarette smoke, her gold bracelet clanging against her watch as she put her hand back down. She wanted to hear his perspective before she acknowledged anything; reruns of Murder She Wrote taught her that it was always best to say as little as possible in these situations.

“Sorry…” Nestor tossed the cigarette out of the window, opening the door slightly to stick out his foot and stamp it out. “Look, there’s a chance they might’ve figured it out, but it’s small. I did my best to divert funds into a variety of different
accounts…even set up a goddamn ghost charity for victims of cartel violence in Juarez…I don’t think it’ll be an issue—”

Nelda sat up abruptly. “What do you mean ‘don’t think’?” Nelda yelled. She stared at Nestor for a second, taking in his dark eyes, his slightly graying temples that framed gorgeous, raven-black hair. She wanted to run her fingers through it and feel its thickness, thinking about how the sharp, black darts of his bangs would feel leaning into her curls. She wanted to ease into his manliness and feel her body give into his bulk; for a moment she saw them laughing together at a park holding hands, the silent give of her will a memory existing in the future. She closed her eyes and told herself to get it together—there will be no silent giving of wills, no future. Not with Nestor.

Taking a deep breath, she said between clenched teeth, “You’re the fucking Chief Business Officer of an entire school district. If anyone’s gonna know anything, it would be you, right? How the hell would they have figured it out, Nestor?” She gave him the look she gave Sally when she felt like interrogating her without using words; it was the only thing Sally was scared of these days.

“I’m just saying…nothing is guaranteed in life, Nelda,” Nestor said.

“Don’t tell me that. I don’t want to hear that.” She got out of the car and slammed the door, looking around to make sure no one was in the parking lot.

Nestor yelled after her, “Hey! What about the Sparkletts?”

“Fuck the Sparkletts!” Nelda answered.

Nelda looked at her watch. It was 10:31. She had exactly four minutes to get back to her desk, and, as luck would have it, she actually needed to use the restroom. Nelda
walked briskly through the front door and headed straight for the ladies’ room, sniffed her hair for signs of cigarette smoke and after finding there weren’t any, rushed back to her cubicle to get to her seat a minute late at 10:36.

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The bronzy hue of a sunset spiked with plumes of pink and orange and lasers of white through an impeccably blue sky was important enough for Nelda to stop for a second and take notice. Not that she had time for it. She stood and stared, reminding herself that she needed to go and pick up some toiletries for Sally’s trip at the Big Lots, but she just couldn’t help herself. Even though it was already a little after six, she felt compelled to honor this sight, incredibly blessed to bear witness to it, standing on the district steps. She felt a welling within her, a seasickness of sorts made up of the little thrills and hesitations of letting her daughter go so far away. The sky represented all of this right now, to her. In it she saw possibility and transition; the existence of the sunset at all a glorious beacon but the colors, they went in all directions, infinitely. Her mind went blank and she gazed at the orange first, her favorite color, until her eyes burned to blink and she did. It was so clear—everything—the sky, her life, what her kids meant to her, what was right. This sight comforted her; Sally would soon be looking up at the same one, in another country. A few tears surprised her which she promptly wiped away. Nelda looked around, took a deep breath, and walked to her puke green Prius.

She knew that nothing was going to get in the way of what she needed to do. She was a mother. If Nestor couldn’t guarantee things for her, keep this vision of this sky and
what it promised to her preserved, then she’d do what it takes to make sure it happened. She knew about chain of command, and now it was time to escalate. Nelda had prayed to God every night and covered every base—even visited the neighborhood psychic, something her religious beliefs completely forbade her to do. But she heard this woman had forecasted the appearance of the “Blame Lloyd” stencils that had appeared on foreclosed homes across town when she told everyone that “soon the ghosts of lives ruined would bleed with the image of a man whose head was shaped like a smashed fist,” and she had to find out for herself. The woman was Catholic, and that was still a type of Christian as far as she was concerned. Nelda went to the psychic every other Tuesday after work, paying her $15 each time to get advice on each stage of the process, the process that resulted in her ability to send Sally to New Zealand, pay for Leonard’s saxophone, and buy her the puke green Prius. Just two days before La Reina died—was murdered—she’d confessed to Nelda that she’d seen her death coming in five acts, five different ways, and that even though it was probably going to be at the hands of someone she’d been helping, there was a person who stood to benefit more if she died—a person who didn’t want anyone to know about his affairs or his favors, a person who was the subject of dozens of the low-eyed confessions and pregnancy questions from girls and women that happened in her garage, who came in once himself to drop a visit and a veiled threat. She confessed this to Nelda because Nelda had a stone face and soft curls, because she was the type who knew and didn’t know, and the last time she saw her she gave Nelda a security box stuffed with papers and photos.
Crossing herself like a Catholic at La Reina’s memory, Nelda looked up at the sky for a last time and got into her car and took out her cell phone, staring at the phone number for a good friend of hers from her college days in the Business Admin program at Long Beach City College. It was the number of Inglewood City Councilman, Randy Morales.

Chapter 12

Sarita could smell the flowers as soon as her parents walked into the door. They had finally returned from a day at the downtown Flower Mart, arms full of newspaper-bundled bouquets and carping mouths full of theories hatched along the way about the purpose of Sarita’s existence, just like she had predicted. Her father hung his beige North Face windbreaker up and made a beeline for the restroom.

“I couldn’t find any Queen Elizabeth roses but marigolds are in season, Sarita. Good to know for when you get married again. Which reminds me, are you on Shaadi.com yet? Three months is enough time to brood over Paulo and you’re thirty-seven you know…” Sarita’s mother said.

Ignoring her, Sarita got up from the place where she was sitting on the floor, surrounded by photos and letters, the contents of the boxes her parents gave her scattered like buckshot all over. She took the newspaper-swathed bundles from her mother and began unwrapping and stuffing them into glass vases that she’d grabbed off the top of her refrigerator.
“Not like that, Sarita,” her mother said, putting her icy hand on top of Sarita’s.

“Sarita, you have to cut the ends off first, at an angle, so that the water adequately is absorbed…didn’t Paulo ever buy you flowers?”

The last time Paulo had bought her flowers, Sarita had the unspoiled eyes of her early twenties and lacked gray hair in unholy places.

“I buy my own flowers, mom…and besides, I was going to take care of it later,” Sarita said. “I just want you to sit down and relax. You’ve had a pretty full day already; downtown’s quite a bear if you’re not used to it,” Sarita said.

“And the smell, Sarita—pee-you. I don’t know how you live here. So many black people, baap re!” Elizabeth set her purse down on the floor and walked over to the plush green sofa, Sarita and Paulo’s first purchase together as a married couple from their favorite furniture store H.D. Buttercup, or what they’d refer to together childishly as B.M. Butterface. His face invaded her thoughts for a second and she felt an ache, just for a second. Then her mind shifted to deciding on how to deal with her mother’s racism this time.

“Mom, Paulo was black,” Sarita said.

“No, he was Brazilian.”

Whatever the significance behind her father standing so close to that pretty woman in the photo, Sarita understood it well at this particular moment. She decided against letting her mother’s racist comments rankle her; she had important questions that needed answering right now.
“Hey, mom…I’ll make us some tea in a little if you want to go lie down. Stacked the pillows on the bed vertically and horizontally, just the way you like it,” Sarita said. Elizabeth insisted she could only sleep if the pillows were positioned in alternating directions, “like a trellis for your head,” her mother would say.

“Ok, ok, you don’t want me around, I get it. Nobody wants the old lady around. Well, you’re in luck—I’m exhausted anyway. Tell baba I’m lying down,” Elizabeth said, walking up the stairs, her gold-flecked sari hiked up in her right hand while she navigated the handrail with her left. Sarita listened as she heard the guest room door close with a quiet thud.

_How many days left again?_

Sarita moved toward the kitchen to finish arranging the flowers as her father emerged from the bathroom. “Brahmins always wash when they come from the outside, remember that Sarita,” he said. His gaze rested on the paisley box and its contents and back over at Sarita. Sarita thought she caught a flicker of concern in her father’s eyes but she wasn’t sure. “Ah, I see you’ve finally had a chance to get some work done on that family tree. How’s it going, my dear?”

The words tumbled out of her the way they did her patients after she’d hypnotized them.

“Dad, did you know Fiji was both colonized and liberated on October 10? Weird, right…I never realized that. And that baba collected sand? Sand! So many news clippings in there…baba saved everything, didn’t he? What a hoarder. I’ll bet you don’t even know the half of what’s in there. Like this…see? Sarita walked over to her father, holding up
the photo to his face, a slight odor of cloves from a recently-smoked cigarette wafting from her fingers. So…who is this woman in the photo?”

“Beta, what are you—” He looked at the photo, the gray scrim of his hair lightly flickering again in the air conditioner’s forceful current. Sarita surveyed his face; standing this close his eyes looked sunken, the leaden finger of age penned thick, clown-like circles under them. What she once saw as her father’s boyish yet distinguished stance now seemed slouchy and pathetic. She was suddenly scared of what she had done, of the newfound brazenness that had gripped her since losing Paulo. This wasn’t an argument with a Republican or a random guy who told her she spoke English really well or a woman who nearly sideswiped her mother because she was barreling down the sale aisles at Walmart. With that question, Sarita shifted the weight she’d been feeling since Paulo left to her father for a few seconds. She’d changed everything.

Ram scanned the room. “Where is your mother?” he said in a solemn tone.

“Upstairs, sleeping. Trust me she can’t hear us. Paulo conducted entire affairs without me knowing up there,” Sarita said. The bitter edged at the top of her words like cream on fresh milk.

Sighing, Ram shook his head, his eyes momentarily catching the photo of Sarita and Paulo at Mt. Arenal that was still on a shelf in the living room. His body crumpled into the same spot on the sofa where Sarita’s mother had just been sitting a moment before. He rubbed his hands on the sofa back and forth by his sides to feel the warmth she left. The gesture angered Sarita.
“Anything I tell you isn’t going to be good enough, Sarita, but I’m going to try. That day in December…you can’t imagine what it was like for the poor people of Bhopal. We were so…ill-equipped. I’d been there seven months, Union Carbide couldn’t find enough engineers in India who would work at the plant. Can you imagine, not finding enough engineers in India?” Ram chuckled for a second, then cleared his throat.

“Anyway, the company reached out to other former British colonies where there were Indians, advertised a yearlong contract and decent wages, it sounded like heaven. Except for the part where I had to be away from your mom and of course, you and Fareed. But I couldn’t stay in Fiji anymore, beta, the infrastructure was shaky and the government wasn’t interested in building, they were interested in ruling. I didn’t know what was going to happen to us. With some international experience under my belt, I knew that would open doors for us to leave and go elsewhere if we needed to.

But when I got to India, started at the plant, I realized things were going to be more difficult than I’d ever imagined. The plant was managed by country-bumpkins who couldn’t spell methyl isocyanate let alone contain it in high pressure, radioactive thermal tanks—even some Dalits they hired. That’s why they brought me in as the plant superintendent. But what they didn’t tell me was that they were going to reduce the staff and work them eighteen hours a day! For months, Sarita, we would see the sunrise, God, I’ll never forget that sun. I would spend half of my time trying to find the plant workers—two or three I’d find swigging whiskey outside, another I’d find in the breakroom singing along with Indian Idol on a portable TV, once I even found them all playing a game of rummy in the containment room, right next to the chemicals! Smoking
bidis! This is what I had to deal with, for seven months. There was only one other person who seemed to have any sense there, beta. It was the other plant manager, one who was part of the same Fijian workers’ contract program that I was. A woman named Mata.”

Sarita shifted in her seat and tensed; she’d never heard her father say another woman’s name so comfortably before.

Ram continued. “Matanjali was her full name. We both argued with the plant’s executives, begging them to increase the amount of shift workers, telling them about how for hours there was no one regulating the gas tanks. I said, we need to change the temperature gauges and they wouldn’t. I said, we need to fix the cooling systems so the tanks won’t overheat, but they wouldn’t. There weren’t even any locks on the tanks, for godsakes. These Dalits, you know, they aren’t educated—any idiot could just do what they wanted. And they were angry that the contract workers like us were making more than they were. They were a spiteful lot, Sarita, going together in unions and that nonsense. The looks they would give me and Mata when we’d tell them to do something…I was afraid to sleep at night, sometimes.

What I mean to say, Sarita, and what I need you to understand, is that I was worried about my mental health. I was starting to have hallucinations, beta, strange dreams. It was everything I could do not to break down on the weekly phone calls with your mother.”

Sarita cringed at the thought of her mother on the other line, alone in Fiji with two kids in tow and a husband wielding his errant sex seven thousand miles away. She restrained the urge to roll her eyes.
“So the night that…that gas happened I was supposed to be managing and didn’t check the water gauges…” Ram’s face fell for a moment. He stopped and looked up at the staircase, grabbing a gold throw pillow and cradling it. “Mata was going through the same thing, didn’t have children but was sending money back home to her family in Suva. She was from Suva. At first she was a like a sister, Sarita, but…oh you don’t know how it was there. So lonely…the workers had each other and I had no one, Sarita. It only happened twice, I’m saying. Just twice…” He pressed the tips of his fingers on his eyes, forcing the tears out and away.

“What happened twice?” Sarita said in the calmest voice she could summon. She could feel the years of hypnosis training dwindling and anger tornadoing in a familiar way. She’d sat in this same room with Paulo only a few months before, catatonic like she was now.

Ram’s head sank even lower and he spoke to the ground. “You’re an adult now, Sarita…you know,” he said.

That blue is too royal for you, Sarita couldn’t help thinking after staring at him in silence for at least a full minute.

“I want you to say it, Dad. I want to hear what you did in your own words.”

Ram cleared his throat, a pathetic expression of contrition twisting his face into a kind of agony. Outside the helicopter droning of a jackhammer was busy assaulting the street. “Ok, I had an affair with Mata in Bhopal while you, Fareed, and your mother were in Fiji…I slept with her. There, I said it. What more do you want?”
Ignoring the rising frustration in her father’s voice, she continued calmly. “And instead of doing your job, you were with this…woman. From Suva. And while you were with her, the water gauges, unchecked, led to…water in the tank…which killed thousands of people, wow.”

“Yes.”

“And you didn’t say anything to anybody? About the water in the tank, about the fact that you were supposed to be watching?”

“We told them…we told them that a disgruntled worker did it, poured water into the tank.” Ram lifted his head up, tears streaming down his face.

Sarita got up and fumbled for the pack of Djarums in her kitchen drawer. She took one out and lit it, savoring the crackling and the harsh cloves, the plummy taste of a pathetic rebellion first against Paulo, now against her father. She leaned against the refrigerator, watching the whorls of smoke dissipate in the distance, imagining the amount of smoke there must have been that night in December. She closed her eyes.

“I’m going to need some time…I can’t…process this all now. Not without saying something I’m going to regret. Well, possibly regret.”

Ram nodded his head several times. The jackhammer continued its assault on the street. A door slammed on the floor above and the sound of clicking heels on the ceiling continued until it was imperceptible. Sarita opened her eyes and watched the ballet of a black fly across the room. A few moments later, he spoke again. “Sarita, there’s more.”
Something about that statement didn’t surprise her, although it should have. How much more could there be than an affair and complicity in the world’s largest industrial disaster? But all she could muster was, “Okay?”

“About Mata…well, there’s…uh…there was a baby. Our baby. I’m so sorry Sarita…The gases got to her…Sarita. They got to her…we had to give her away. Oh god,” the tears started, angering Sarita more.

“What? You had a WHAT?” She did her best to restrain her voice. A feeling that she couldn’t put her finger on gripped her; it sallied past anger and existed in some uncharted territory of her psyche.

“A baby Sarita…a little baby girl…she was…hurt…the gasses.” Ram began to speak faster, as if the flow of words would work as a stopper to Sarita’s anger. “I had already gone back to Fiji when I heard they took the girl away, pried her out of Mata’s unresponsive body. The baby survived the gases and probably ended up at a survivors’ camp, I don’t know. They buried Mata in a funeral plot with the others who didn’t survive.” Sarita imagined what the girl would look like. Images she’d seen of Agent Orange victims flashed through her mind. How had her father remained silent about this all these years? What kind of person gives up a suffering child? She’d wanted to ask him so many questions, to shake him until he turned into a pile of ash that she could just blow away and out of her life.

“Shh…stop crying,” Sarita snapped. “You’ll wake up mom, I don’t want her to hear this…like this.”
Ram pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket with a maddening flourish, a grey one with faint red checks that was fluted like a candle and tucked in just right.

“Sarita, she already knows. Everything.”

***

Two months had passed since Sarita had last seen Kelly and she hardly recognized her. She sported a new close-cropped, Katie-Couric-y type of haircut and—thankfully—wore flats today. When she walked down the hallway this time with Sarita, she was quiet, a new pensive quality seemed to have overtaken Kelly’s usually effervescent, charming-yet-off-putting naiveté. If it was possible for a person to age ten years emotionally in two months, it would seem that Kelly had done just that. The lack of ebullience seemed to have distilled her vocabulary too, combing over her speech and leaving only the words that mattered. No more chitter-chatter. No more ricochet words.

“Sarita, I’ve been seeing someone else,” Kelly said after sitting down.

“Sorry?” Sarita said.

“It’s just that…you were a little distracted last time. Your energy felt unfocused. I had to see another hypnotist for awhile. I’m sorry…I just had to tell you…but I’m back now,” Kelly said.

“That’s ok, Kelly…you have full agency to see who you want, but thanks for telling me. I appreciate it.”

Kelly settled into the seat and closed her eyes. While she was working with Kelly, she realized that she hadn’t seen several of her regular patients over the last few months.
She tried not to dwell on the fact, not wanting to seem distracted as Kelly mentioned earlier. She reminded herself of the importance of being in the moment. From her Buddhist days she remembered the concept of anicca, impermanence. This too shall pass and all that. Something she had a tough time reckoning with in most aspects of her life.

They finished an hour later. “I’m so impressed with how far you’ve come. The fact that you’ve stopped shoplifting, haven’t fought with an editor for over a month, even your eating habits—wow. You’re on your way to recovery. If I could only get you to stop chain-smoking,” Sarita said, doing her best at a chuckle. If she could only get herself to stop chain-smoking.

Kelly threw down the cigarette she’d been smoking with a sheepish grin and put it out with her heel. “What can I say, Sarita? You’re like a little Svengali. Well you and Bob, the other hypno I’ve been talking to.”

Sarita sighed and said, “Well, I’m glad I could help, Kelly. Come back whenever you need to, ok?”

“Yeah lady, of course.” Kelly cocked her head to one side, the sharp tendrils of her chestnut hair catching the sun in sections and framing her face in an electric way. Her eyes had a cognizance Sarita had never recognized in her before. “And hey—go get yours too, know what I mean? Your eyes are way too sad for your spirit.” Kelly tucked her hair behind her ear with an awkward gesture and shook her finger in Sarita’s face. “I don’t know what’s going on, but I know something is and I hope it gets better,” she said.

Sarita gulped and smiled, shaking her head. “Yeah, I will, I will Kelly. Again, so glad things are going so well for you.” Feeling compelled to hug her for some odd reason,
Sarita did, much to Kelly’s surprise by the expression on her face. Perhaps she knew Kelly had reached the threshold of Sarita’s abilities to help her. Perhaps she knew she’d never see Kelly again after today.

After Kelly drove off, inevitably to the Promenade to do some shopping Sarita was sure, she went back inside and sat down at her computer. She looked out her window and saw a row of palm trees darkening against the Santa Monica mountains.

Kelly was evidence that transformation sometimes came at a risk, like ditching one hypnotist for another, and in Sarita’s case the risk would be greater if she didn’t do something about how low she was feeling. She poured herself a drink and looked back at the mountains. It had been two months since Sarita learned her father’s horror stories and since then she’d done nothing but piddle away her days like a Hunter S. Thompson character. She only felt normal in the stupor of intoxication these days, and Xanax and Percocet were too easy to get, even as a hypnotist.

At first it was just a drink here and a pill there, a whetting of her hypnotist’s resolve that felt fun to challenge. She gave herself willingly each day to these little distractions but slowly the distractions became the thing at hand and she knew it was time to stop. Her father had finally given up on his incessant phone calls to her, convinced that her mother would do a better job as she was still a welcome presence in Sarita’s life, though only because Sarita couldn’t bear to know any more about how her mother was involved.

With the woozy temerity of the whisky she’d been sipping since Kelly had left, Sarita pulled out her cell phone and began dialing the first few digits of Paulo’s phone
number. Why should she do the right thing? What is pride, anyway? Pride is for people who are scared to be human. Pride is for suckers. She convinced herself that her quest for a certain kind of morality to combat years of Paulo’s lack of included her acknowledgment that she wanted to sob to him, the man who knew her better than anyone on the planet. She found leniency and comfort in the fact of seven years and seven steps around a fire.

The amber glow of the Laguvulin through the glass cast a warm, smoky halo across the papers on her desk, the color of Paulo’s eyes. She stuck her fingers in and out of the rimmed shadow, marveling at how clear his face was to her, even after all these months of not seeing each other. Who better to talk to about this subject? Would this be beyond the scope of his even his faulty imagination, or in some twisted way would they reconnect because of an empathy he would have for her father? Oh, the irony should he not believe her. Sarita fantasized and then realized that maybe talking to him wasn’t the best idea. Paulo felt like the perfect person to confide in, but then—was he? Sarita put down her phone and allowed the whiskey hampered emotions to release and she let herself cry. She cried for the end of turning to Paulo with her problems, cried for her mother, and cried for the little girl, her half-sister out there somewhere who was the product of too many tragedies, and when she was done crying, she knew exactly what she had to do.
Chapter 13

May 2009, In the Air

Sally flipped through her copy of *Martha Stewart Living* and tried not to roll her eyes. The flight attendant was about to plug up the aisle right next to her seat with that big ass cart just as she was planning to use the restroom. *Great, now what do I do?*

It was her first time flying and she didn’t know what the protocol was—should she get up and stand behind the attendant on her way back from the restroom or should she wait? She decided to wait. They were only two hours into the fourteen-hour trip to Auckland and already she was getting restless. It was a nervous restlessness, one filled with an urgency and expectation she’d never felt before. Sound bytes from the media and people from her past drifted through her mind and said things about how black people don’t fly, how the terrorists are waiting to strike again, how the veins in your legs can clog up like a paper-stuffed toilet and you can die if you don’t walk around enough.

Turning up the volume on her iPod, she sunk into the stiff seat and listened to the Sarah Vaughn album her grandmother Estelle had given her three years ago, just before she died. “Lullaby of Birdland” made her think about Trey for a cool second. Was he missing her yet?

A few moments later, the woman seated next to her nudged her and pointed. Sally looked up to see the flight attendant trying to say something to her.

“Huh?” she said, lowering the volume on the gadget with one crimson-painted nail and setting her magazine down on the tray table.

“Ma’am, may I get you a beverage?”
The flight attendant, a woman who seemed just a few years past forty, had the spastic hair and tired eyes of her eighth grade English teacher, a British woman named Ms. Braithwaite. Ms. Braithwaite was the first teacher to give her an A for a book report she’d written on *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun*, something she’d done just to irk the teacher because the book had lesbians. She’d never expected she’d actually do well on the paper, but after that, she’d began getting As on everything. Swap the uniform for a three-quarter-length shirt and pleated pants and you’d have her, that Ms. Braithwaite.

At that moment, she felt a sudden twang of longing for her mother. Working as a flight attendant couldn’t be an easy job, especially for a woman her age.

“Yeah, you got Fanta?” She added, “Please.”

“No, I’m sorry.” The woman rested her forehead on her arm and looked at the offerings, as though for the first time. “We have Coke, Diet Coke, Sprite, Sierra Mist, Canada Dry, Minute Maid Orange Juice, Minute Maid Lemonade, Dr. Pepper, cranberry—”

“Ok, ok, I’ll have an orange juice then, please. It’s free, right?”

The attendant—Martha, according to the silver hibiscus pin on her lapel—nodded her head, “Yes, of course” and handed her the drink. Sally immediately realized this was the wrong decision after gulping it in two swallows; now she really needed to take a piss.

The woman who nudged her (which she didn’t appreciate), an Indian or a Mexican of some sort, ordered a tomato juice with a splash of something unpronounceable Sally couldn’t recall even two seconds later.

“So…you like that?” Sally heard herself asking the woman.
“Excuse me?”

“That…tomato juice.” She could feel her face twist into a stank expression she couldn’t control. “You like that? That guy over there, and the woman in front of us ordered it too. And then you did. I’ve never really seen anyone voluntarily drink that before. Just curious.”

The woman laughed and took out her ear buds, unscrewing the tiny clear bottle of gin sitting next to her glass and dumping it into the tomato juice.

“Well, yeah…it’s good for you.” The woman took a sip of her drink. The citrusy drift of tomato and alcohol had a saltiness that reminded Sally of Venice Beach. “And it’s not so bad with Worcestershire sauce, really.”

“Gotcha,” Sally said, still unconvinced.

“I didn’t like tomato juice at your age either, I get where you’re coming from,” the woman said, smiling. A few moments passed. The flight attendant’s cart disappeared down the quiet aisle, her voice and the reliability of the beverage conversation in the distance almost lulling Sally to sleep. As if in cahoots with her environment, the iPod moved on to coo “Black Coffee” seductively into her ear and Sally’s resolve to stay awake dissolved like brown sugar. Thankfully, her need to use the restroom disappeared too and she finally was able to lumber into the beginnings of a peaceful sleep.

A few minutes later, she heard the woman next to her ask, “Are you from LA?”

Jolting out of a half-sleep, Sally twisted around in her seat and murmured, “Yeah. ‘Bout you?”
“Born in Fiji, raised in Connecticut, heartbroken in Los Angeles.” She laughed and took another sip of the ruddy drink.

“Uh-oh. That don’t sound good,” she muttered. Sally could feel a long conversation coming on, and while she didn’t want to be rude, she was certainly not in the mood to be chatting for the next twelve hours with someone she hardly knew. She’d seen *Locked Up Abroad*. These things always started so innocently but before she knew it she’d be coerced into swallowing cocaine capsules and shitting them out somewhere in a dark alley. No thanks.

“Eh, it’s alright. Divorce. These things happen.”

Sally was surprised at the mention of divorce. She’d been certain the woman was a lezzie because of her magenta-streaked, close-cropped hair and her military-inspired thrift store chic. Yet another of her mother’s sturdy philosophies drifted through her mind: *Thrift stores are for people who have never been poor*. Something she’d said right before the Great Barney’s Splurge of 2007.

“Man, sorry to hear that. How long you married?”

“Seven years. They were great at first…then…well, people change I guess.” The woman reached out a hand that smelled faintly of cloves, something Sally’s mom ruined sweet potatoes with every year at Thanksgiving. “I’m Sarita, also known as 17B. Nice to meet you.”

Looking down at the side of her seat, she reached out her hand in response.

“Sally, uh, 17C. Nice meetin’ you too.” A few moments of awkward silence passed
between them as Sally’s restless leg conducted its frenzied symphony, a habit she just couldn’t break.

“What brings you to Fiji? Seems like an unusual choice for spring break. I thought most LA kids just got plastered and hung out at Disneyland.”

Sally coughed into a laugh. “Uh…no, not exactly. We usually just hang at different people’s cribs during spring break. Sometimes there’s a beach house involved.”

Betty’s older sister Marcela was a saleswoman for Pfizer and had a dope pad at Newport Beach she sometimes let them use. Well, once anyway. “Oh…not going to Fiji. On my way to Auckland for a church mission trip. For two weeks.”

“Ah, so you’re doing some converting then,” said the woman, smiling.

“No! We ain’t going to convert. We’re going to help build water ditches and run food drives for child hunger—a big problem in the May-ori community—while sharing with them the relief that the Lord’s word can bring. It’s a win-win.” Sally’s pastor had prepared them well for questions from unbelievers, like the woman undoubtedly was.

“Job 5:15-16 says it best,” Sally continued, “It says: He saves the needy from the sword in their mouth; he saves them from the clutches of the powerful. So the poor have hope, and injustice shuts its mouth. That’s pretty much what I believe.” Of course, that wasn’t the only thing she believed. She believed in a tall, heart-lipped, funny man with a funny accent. And true love.

“Wow…good for you! You know, I don’t really know a whole lot about New Zealand. I left Fiji when I was ten and barely remember that, much less a country a few
hours away. I know that Lord of the Rings was shot there...that and those Flight of the
Conchords guys.”

She knew about the Conchords! Sally was sure her heart skipped a few beats at
the mention.

“Sadly, I think those are the only two things I know about New Zealand.” Sarita
twisted the top off another gin bottle delicately and poured, the thin strains of tomato
juice on the sides of the glass adding a red tinge to her drink that reminded Sally of her
monthly period. She fought the urge to gag when Sarita took a sip and said, “Oh, and that
it is really, really green.”

Finally! Someone who actually knew about her show; the kids at Inglewood were
so uneducated—their idea of a good show usually involved a.) someone drunk b.) drama
c.) someone drunk causing drama d.) Las Vegas. “You like that show? Flight of the
Conchords, I mean?” Sally asked, tapping her fingers nervously on the tray table and
watching her leg. What would this woman think about what she was doing, she
wondered.

“Yeah, it’s hilarious. At least they don’t pretend to be something they’re not.
They’re unapologetic about how they’ve got the emotional maturity of a high school boy-
-no offense--and don’t need to be in a relationship to feel complete.” Sarita took a dainty
sip of her drink and continued. “They’ve managed to sustain meaningful friendships
throughout their late twenties or whatever, which is nearly impossible—I mean god I
never see any of my friends anymore because they’re all married or mothers and when
we do it’s like this desperate hour or two at the most and before we know it, we’ve talked
ourselves into “time-to-go” without actually doing anything of substance.” She sighed and leaned back into her seat, as if reliving those two desperate hours even in conversation was too much to handle. “Hey did you know that Jemaine Clement is half-Maori? Learned that from that one episode…had no idea.”

*Did Sally know he was half May-ori?* Ha! Did Leonard eat chili cheese fries every morning on his way to school without telling mom? Did Shawn Johnson and Jesus Garza fight each other every year “for their people” on Cinco de Mayo and then again all throughout Black History Month? She knew just about everything there was to know about Jemaine Clement, well everything the internet could tell her anyway: he was raised by his mother (like her!), didn’t own a TV (not like her) and was married to a Greek actress (bitch!). Wanting to share all of her well-researched knowledge but realizing it might be too far-fetched for even this crazy lady with obvious issues, all she could muster was, “*New Zealand Town.*”

“Excuse me?”

“The episode. It’s called *New Zealand Town*. The one where the Prime Minister of New Zealand visits and that ginger fool Murray makes them whaddya call…re-enact, with May-ori and wants Jemaine to do it.” She laughs quietly at the thought of Murray’s goofy but serious presence and Jemaine’s stoic refusal. “But he says no. So they get another May-ori.”

Sarita’s eyes widened with curiosity as she leaned to the side of her seat and turned to get a better look at Sally. “Wow, you really like this show. I’ve gotta admit,
that’s pretty interesting for someone your age. Most people I know that watch it are old
enough to be your parents.”

There went Sally’s leg again. The claustrophobia she felt when she first boarded
the plane returned with a vengeance, so she picked up her Martha Stewart Living and
flipped to distract herself from it. “Yeah, well, guess I’m different that way,” she said
into an article about how to Feng Shui your kitchen using only this season’s hot Pantone
color, Oil Spill Umber.

Different. Where did that word come from? She’d never described herself that
way to anyone until now. She wasn’t sure if she liked it.

“Well, that Bret McKenzie is yummy, I have to say. Why not, I’d do him.”

“Nah, man. Bret’s a little follower-ass punk. Not to mention that scraggly,
unkempt hair and those kindergarten teacher sweaters. Dude look homeless half the time.
It’s all about Jemaine.”

“Jemaine? Ew. He reminds me of those 70s porn stars, like he should’ve been on
Boogie Nights or something.”

“What’s that?”

Sarita sighed. “Uh, never mind…ok he looks like he’d be an actor on one of those
incomprehensible British comedy-dramas, like Fawlty Towers or Are You Being Served?
Fancying this or that and tripping over things in the way that the British always do. I
think it’s the whole turtleneck-leather jacket combo.”

“Huh?”
“Ok.” Sarita turned to face Sally head-on, not an easy feat in an airline seat. The woman’s nose ring glinted in the dim light of the plane and a light waft of alcohol drifted as she spoke. “Romance novels. He looks like one of those guys on the cover of romance novels, towering over an impassioned blonde with fluffy hair who is hopelessly clutching him like a body pillow.”

Sally frowned. “Do I look like I read romance novels?”

“Look, I don’t know what possible reference I could make in this conversation to explain to you how I feel about Jemaine Clement,” Sarita began, with a slight slur. “About what he looks like. Though I may be out of touch with the youth of today I can tell you for sure that in a battle of beauty between Mr. Clement and Mr. McKenzie, the latter would win by a New Zealand…uh, landslide.” With a deflated look, she turned back into her seat and stared blankly at the tiny television in front of her.

Clearly the gin was going to this lady’s head. Talking to drunk people was a trifling experience; every Christmas Sally’s mother’s brother Carson would be sloppy drunk by midnight and throwing up in the tub, the sink, the yard by morning. She and Leonard would take turns cleaning up the mess while her mother would feed Uncle Carson water out of Sally’s old sippy cup that she reserved for the purpose. It was quite a sight. She wished people would just stick to weed—it was less messy.

“Um…how about just that he’s Jemaine Clement? We both get that, you know?”

For a moment, a look of irritation spread across Sarita’s face as she turned to give Sally a half-glare, then it vanished into a smile and probing, sober eyes. “Hm. Wow. Ok, I get it. I see it now.”
“What? You get what?” It occurred to her for a split second that this lady might be on more than bloody marys and she looked around to see if Martha was nearby, just in case she needed some backup. A kid sitting behind her began kicking Sally’s seat, yelling “BAM! Take that Grovyle. Take it! Take it! Take it!” Sally turned around and gave the Pokemon-playing boy a sharp look and he quieted instantly.

“This trip…is this the first time you’ve ever been away from home?” Sarita asked her.

“Yeah, why?”

“No reason, just realized how exciting and scary it must all be for you.”

Sally reached for the tiny blanket under her seat and sat huddled in it. “Scary, nah! Shoot, I step over cracked-out addicts and dodge dealers slanging every day on my way to and from school. This…this is just a church trip that happens to be in New Zealand. They don’t even have guns.”

Sarita smiled and pointed at Sally’s magazine. “That woman taught me all about the wonders of vinegar. Amazing.”

“That shit is like God’s Windex, I’m telling you! Floors, coffeemakers, pet stains. Don’t even get me started on the apple cider shit.”

“So you like to clean and you watch hipster television shows.” Sarita shook her head and laughed. “You give me hope for the youth of today. You know, I remember a time—I was probably about fourteen or so—I had tried out for the school play. It was, if I remember correctly, yes, *The Crucible*…you know that play? About the Salem witch trials?
Sally shook her head. “Nah...maybe.”

“Well anyway, I had taken drama classes all throughout junior high school and high school and had been told that I was a great actress, so I auditioned for the roles of Abigail Williams, Elizabeth Proctor, and Mary Warren, the three women accused of witchcraft. Didn’t get any of them and I couldn’t figure out for the life of me why. I knew I was a better actress than Stacey Noble, the girl who eventually got the role of Abigail. I was so bummed about it for a week until my drama teacher came up to me and said he had a great role for me and I thought—yes, Stacey got mono and now I get to be Abigail.” Sarita shook her head here and continued, “Turns out he wanted me to be Tituba, the Barbadian slave. Said that that was a more believable role for me, that the audiences would love it. Believable. For a few days I racked my head to understand what that meant. I went to school in a small Connecticut town where I was one out of three Indians in a class of 400—I realized eventually exactly what “believable” meant. I realized that no matter how well I acted, I couldn’t act away the brown all over my body.”

“Did you do it? Take the role?” Sally asked, trying to picture what going to a school with all white kids would be like. She had only been to school with all blacks and Latinos.

“Yeah, I took it. I’ll admit I didn’t want to, but I did. I wanted to play a major part, not some secondary character…then I realized after I saw the video a few days after that I had. Tituba was the ultimate scapegoat…and I did a damn fine job of getting the audience to understand what she was going through. Playing her I understood how
dangerous it can be to live in an environment where everyone looks and thinks the same. It was then that I decided I was going to leave Connecticut and never come back. And that’s what I did.”

Sally thought about this for a second. “But…I mean…that’s home, ain’t it? Like your parents and friends and stuff are all still there, right?”

“Yeah, my parents are there but they come visit and my brother Fareed’s going to this crazy liberal arts school in Ohio…so he’s not really back there much either. And friends? Believe me, you’ll get new friends. Er…what I mean to say is—once you leave a place, one always finds new friends.”

“I’m going to New Zealand to meet Jemaine Clement,” Sally blurted, tilting her head back into the springy seat and staring up at the tiny icon of a woman next to the call button for the flight attendant.

The woman paused a few seconds before speaking. “Really? I thought you were going for a church trip?”

“Well I am, but only because of the chance that I might get to meet Jemaine.” She took a deep breath and turned to Sarita. “Sounds crazy, I know. But I’m pretty convinced that even if he doesn’t fall in love with me instantly, we could still be good friends. He’s just someone that I know I want to know. ‘Sides, how could he resist all this?’ She said, pointing at herself and laughing. It felt weird to tell a total stranger about this, but kind of liberating too.

“He can’t!” Sarita pounded her fist on the tray table, making the guy sitting in front of her jump. “He won’t! I am sure you’ll find him and woo him off his feet, and
when you do, make sure he’s the guy you really want, ok? Because he may not be as…cool or whatever as he seems on the show.” Sarita frowned. “Wait—you’re at least eighteen, right? Any younger and that could be iffy. Child molestation laws and such.”

“Turned eighteen in January. I’m an Aquarius.”

“Great sign. You’re a traveler at heart.”

Feeling a newfound rush of excitement at the thought of getting off the plane in Auckland, Sally’s heart swelled and her mind boomeranged with possibility. “I never want to work for anybody. I want to be just like this,” she pointed at the magazine. “My name written big, in print, on TV, in a magazine, in a book…wherever. I want to be everywhere and I want to make dope shit out of anything that hundreds of motherfuckers will pay premium for on the daily.” Turning to Sarita and grinning, she said, “Know what I mean?”

Sarita grinned back. “I know exactly what you mean.”

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_The woman’s face was a smooth, cerulean stone at first, but as it came into focus, the eyes blinked some human into her expression and her cheeks began to twitch. She was suspended above a pillar of smoke that whistled through the sky, spreading its silent music up into the trees. The woman’s long black hair was roped around her body like candy cane stripes, leaving her skin exposed in wide brown shafts that seemed to glow. As she floated higher and higher along the crests of the smoke, her hair unraveled and spread out into a fan, the thick ebony strands curling into question marks above her. Her nakedness was ordinary except for the circular scar that marked the diameter of her_
stomach. The scar thickened as it rounded just under the belly and it extended into a dark triangle that engulfed the woman’s sex. The pillar of smoke sifted in and out of the woman, threading itself through her privates and through the seams of the scar around her stomach.

The woman was singing a song Sarita recognized but couldn’t name. As the woman floated higher into the air and the smoke undulated throughout her, her stomach and her sex slowly turned into gold. The woman’s body broke off in sections around the strange gold shape and the song got louder and more frenetic as the gold orb-triangle fell and spiked into the ground.

Her father, Ram, kneeled next to the gold orb and hummed the song, a powder white doll with dull blue eyes wearing a dress made of peacock feathers in his hands. The orb was nestled in the ground amongst what looked like rocks, pieces of glass and burnt wood. Sarita watched as Ram stopped humming and dug a small hole next to it, carefully placing the doll inside and lovingly covering it with dirt.

Then with a sudden, violent motion, Ram plunged the orb deep into the ground, his face twisted in agony.

To Sarita’s horror, the golden sphere flashed into a hollow face for a few seconds as it screamed from a frozen mouth. Sarita attempted a yell, but it emerged soundless and her father continued walking until he met with the cerulean woman who appeared again, this time clothed in a violet bridal lengha glittering with sequins. They held hands and walked toward a forest, Sarita running behind them, trying to catch up. She screamed her father’s name until he turned around and finally spoke to her.
“Sarita, my darling. Sometimes I eat pumpkins for breakfast, sometimes gourds.
Sometimes a hollowed-out squash, whatever is provided by our lord. You'll see.”

Smiling, he winked at Sarita and disappeared into the forest with the woman,
leaving Sarita to sob and scratch at the ground, searching for any trace of the haunting orb.