

Tell Me Where to Go When We Part

A.K.A. "The Travel Book"

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Chapter One

At the Border

Funny I should meet them at the border. One would think I was just waiting for them to arrive. I've been loitering outside the bus station for hours. I've become an expert, a resident; I know the fruit lady by her maiden name. Any travelers looking lost or confused surely need my aid. I have memorized the schedule and learned the colors and stripes, make and model of all the bus companies headed to Laos.

I can see it in their eyes, that look of surprise, so sure that on this side of the world they'll be safe. "Not getting past this line," I tell them, branch in hand, "till you show me some ID."

Why am I harassing this young Mexican bride and her. . . Mexican bride, waving this lychee branch with the authority of a conductor's baton at these perplexed foreigners who would basically do anything I say because I know the buses, appear to be Asian, and have been speaking in perfect English the entire time?

"Where's the honeymoon?" I ask them casually, my jaws working like a piston at a piece of gum, my pen making nonsensical doodles on the clipboard. I smile and noisily breathe clouds of minty freshness in their direction so that it fogs their sunglasses.

"We are trying to find the bus to Luang Prabang," the biker chick with the pompadour says, trilling her R's in a Latin accent. Her sleeves are rolled back to hold a pack of smokes while revealing some freshly jabbed honeymoon ink.

"Bus four-two-zero! Luang Prabang!" I shout to no one in particular. "Right behind you." I nod over their startled heads.

"You work for the bus?" the frizz with glasses asks me.

"Only on weekends."

"It's Tuesday."

At that moment, the bus driver shows up and I hand him his clipboard and quietly avoid his gaze. The bus fills up fast. Whatever I did to her, whatever offense I committed, the lady back at the ticketing office is now sticking it right back to me with this assignment of a wheel seat. A poke in the eye with a lychee branch couldn't send a clearer signal. Am I just some driftwood to be tossed in the corner or stuffed under a seat, locked in a closet without a key? Sixteen hours over potholes and stray dogs, into the hill country of the Laotian plateaus, the possible discovery of an old landmine by bus tire. Why should she deny me leg room? What have I done for her to treat me this way?

The only solution is to steal someone's seat. I decide on some prime real estate located near the middle of the bus, equidistant from bumper to wheel, the farthest I can possibly be from the accursed shaft. Why should I suffer for the sake of economy? Sacrificial lambs randomly selected to burn for the serenity of the flock, to watch as other passengers stretch and cuddle in sleeper cabins on either side.

My shoes are already off. I've come to stretch out. There's a no-nonsense attitude to the smell of my own feet now. Just as with all the basics of daily life, I sleep on some sort of conveyance, spend the next half day/full day/all night riding towards somewhere, never stopping, never knowing why. I eat my humble meals of cookies and

fruit and appreciate every calorie, every inch my toes can reach out into space without obstruction. If only I could find someone to spoon.

I sense someone beside my bunk. I spread the curtains open and stare haughtily without removing my sleeping mask.

“Can I help you?”

“I think you’re in our seats,” the Asian guy says in perfect English.

My blood freezes. My face pales behind my mask.

“Excuse me?”

“I believe you’re in our seats. You see?”

He shows me his ticket.

“Y-your English is perfect,” I stammer, suddenly filled with dread, pretending to give my ticket a second glance. “Ah! Yes! I make mistake! So sorry! So sorry!”

I laugh nervously, wondering if they see through this charade.

He takes a look at my ticket to be helpful. He’s tall and has the type of physique polo shirts were made for. His curled forelocks remind me of an Asian Clark Kent.

“It’s towards the back,” he says cheerfully. “I think it’s there, near the wheel.”

“You sure know your way around the bus! So sorry!” I chirp ridiculously.

“No problem,” he smiles, and waits as I put my sneakers back on, deodorize the area, and slink over to my circular penance.

I feel the bus starting. I can feel every pebble in the road vibrating through my spine. I lie with my back forced into an arch like a compulsory yoga position. My knees hang suspended above my chest. I can feel the torrent of air from the open bus windows entering in and out of my spread anus without any delay or hurry. I can breathe this way like a fish breathes through gills. I am one with the road. I have become a question mark, asking the question to anyone who can understand.

Perhaps it was destiny after all that we should have met this way. Not even now do I fully comprehend the mechanics of the wheel, the way it turns and bends your body to go where it's going, unless you can keep your feet moving at such a speed as to just dance on top of it. But sooner or later, you flatten out and curve your back and spin around and around and around.

Chapter Two

Sam lam vs. Jack Sour

There are moments on the bus when you wake up with a start and see rain in the darkness, fire in the wombs, a glow in the jungle distance. It takes you a minute to remember where you are, where you're going, how you got here. A week ago, I was on the border of Tibet on rendezvous with Roi, my Israeli informant. A week before that it was Shanghai, tied up in a chair, tangoing with my old dance partner, Jack Sour.

I don't usually do sit-down interviews, but when I do, it's usually in a room without windows. Flecks of spit were spraying me as Jack barked beneath the glow of a flickering bulb, my arms and hands tied in Gordian knots. He grabbed my face and forced my lips open with one hand, popped the cap off a bottle of water, and poured it down my throat.

"Refreshing, isn't it?" Jack smiled. "That water's straight out of the Yellow River."

I gurgled and coughed, spluttering liquid from my mouth.

"You know how this goes. I ask a few questions, you put up a fight, I torture you. It's all so boring. Why don't we just skip it this time and you tell me what the hell you're doing in China so we can all go home?"

"There some kind of problem with me being in China? It's a free country, isn't it?"

"Not the last time I checked."

"Tourism sure is booming though."

"That it is. So where are you thinking of heading? Maybe I can show you some brochures."

Jack reached behind him on a table and proceeded to beat me senseless with a bundle of tour guides and slapped a *Lonely Planet* across my face to top it off.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN CHINA?" he roared.

"Research," I grinned toothlessly.

"Research?"

"For a novel."

"A novel?"

"Still working on the log-line."

"Name me three novels it's a mix of. Go!"

"It's a travel novel! Think *Eat, Pray, Love*, except from a guy's perspective. I'm calling it *Fuck, Drink, Shit*. I eat street food with hookers."

"Sounds like a real culinary adventure."

"A journey for the taste buds and the spirit."

An awkward silence.

"It's a shame, Sam. You and I have so much in common. If only there were a way for us to work together. But unlike you, I'm not looking for a way out. I'm taking destiny into my own hands."

"The path to prostitution is more like it," I forced through bloody teeth. "Why am I not surprised?"

Jack snorted.

"Do I look like a cheap whore to you, Sam? I'm talking big bucks. Or in this case, yuans. Agents for the highest bidder. Truthfully, it's kind of a turn-on to have all those warlords throwing money at you. I'm not one to disclose numbers, but let's just say it's going to be a very merry Christmas."

"So who's giving you the yuans, huh? Taiwan, those ungrateful fucks?"

"So close, and yet so far," Jack smiled indulgently, shaking his head. "Who's the king trying to get back in his castle, Sam?"

"His Holiness?" I choked in spite of myself.

"Don't tell me you're one of those Free Tibet fucks, Sam. I always knew you were gullible; I just didn't know you were so naive. Were you hoping to get blessed by the Dalai Lama? Hear that disarming chuckle of his? Newsflash, Sam! He lives in India!" Jack laughed and grabbed a fistful of my hair, pouring more of the Yellow River onto my scrunched-up face.

Resistance training against waterboarding is virtually nonexistent, even for a super-agent. There's an automatic panic button triggered by millions of years of neuro-evolution which never seems to end. A minute of this and I tapped out, jiggling my feet as a sign of surrender.

From one archnemesi to another, I almost wanted to tell him everything. I wanted to tell him things I could never tell anyone, about My True Love, about how she visited me every night in my dreams, and about this strange feeling that I'm fated to end up somewhere in the belly of the whale, but at that moment, all I could do was splutter, gurgle, and do my best imitation of Guantanamo Bay.

“You just don’t get it, do you Sam? What use are you in this world without some kind of purpose? The only reason they keep you alive is so you do the job that they don’t want to do. And of course, there are a million of those jobs, and even more millions of you, so why not let you crawl all over each other and gouge each other’s eyes out in the process?”

I tried to cough out something patriotic, like “freedom,” but all that came out of my mouth was regurgitated lung water.

“No one has the patience for water torture anymore,” Jack mused. “I mean the old kind: Chinese water torture, where you’re tied flat on a table with a spiel letting a single drop of water fall onto your forehead every couple of seconds. It literally drives you insane. Tied up. Unable to move. That pressure just building and building until finally. . .”

Jack made a “pop” with his mouth.

“Couple months later, you’re lucky if you even know your own name. Nowadays everyone wants it in a rush. No one gives a damn if you get some truth mixed in with invention. Everyone loves a good Hollywood plot, just as long as it’s enough to fill the seats. We record it, they forget it, and it all gets lost in history until it becomes reincarnated as propaganda. Men get moved around, the stocks go up and down, but the system stays in play.

“It’s all just a game, Sam. You already knew that, or else you wouldn’t be trying to escape. Everyone plays the game. There’s no way around it. But let’s be fair. I won’t kill you unless I have to. It’s nothing for me to let you run around like a fool. There’s nothing you can do to interfere. But as you and I have had a long history, I know better than to just let you wander into my path carelessly. I had to let you know I’m here. You need a little angst now and then in order to accept uncertainty.

“You know what the sad thing is, Sam? All those people out there, awoken, and yet completely numb. Pretty soon, agents like us will become worthless. We won’t have to put the mask on them anymore. They’ll do it themselves. They’ll give you the thumbs-up sign and tell you to start pouring.

“If only we didn’t need to matter, Sam. Can’t you see? No one gives a damn. But you’re different, right? Your experiences have been siphoned through a unique funnel as narrow as those slits you call your eyes. You’ve seen the world differently, because the world sees you differently, and in the end the human spirit endures. AND THE ACADEMY AWARD GOES TO. . .”

Jack paused to make a juvenile farting sound with his tongue.

“Don’t make waves, Sam. You’re a pencil-pusher, not a creator. Do your fucking job. The history books have already been written. The parts have already been taken. Take it apart and they’ll burn you at the stake. Don’t go looking for your Hollywood ending.

“You want a story? Here, read this. In it, you are you. You’re not invisible as you so often complain. Here you are. The hero speaks to you. Hi. You speak in reply. You are a good guy. You help the hero (me), who time and time again blows you away with his selfless honor and bravery. You, on the other hand, are constantly worried about losing face. . .”

Chapter Three

Jacky

We arrive at the border early the next morning. The world has changed from that city of false seasons to one that is steady and unrelenting. The summer sky, which is wet or dry according to the monsoon winds during this time of relative cool, feels like waking up in such a paradise that even the five minutes spent urinating behind a tree feels like some great Amazonian excursion. So sudden is the change to dewy jungle with sunlight radiating down from a smoggy canopy that you wake up missing layers and only a T-shirt remains, coat rolled up like a pillow.

The bus dies as soon as it reaches the border. You hear a gunshot and note the grim face of the bus driver lighting a cigarette, body language saying, “Don’t talk to me.” Was it a rebel or is it still redeemable? It came like the others with a dream from the northern lands that found old diesels in a ravine as a final resting place. There is a graveyard here at the border filled with buses that are finally left to rust after drivers slosh bowl after bowl of water on overheated tires, a revival process that can take no definite amount of time. Enter now into a fifth dimension, a law that bends the rules of physics and permeates every aspect of life. This process known as “Lao Time.”

You notice the hands on your watch become twisted and broken due to a mysterious force in the magnetic field. A strange dimension formed by a gateway of banana trees leading you into a realm of eternal summer, a haven of endless red hills. What are you waiting for? "I don't know," you reply. "I'm just. . ." And you find yourself waiting to know why. Lost in thought, all intentions gone, until suddenly, there before you, presented with an innocent smile and a sign of folded hands, is that which you have asked for. Do you still need this? "No, I. . ." you find yourself stammering. You fall in love with Lao Time.

The bus driver announces that a second bus is coming, while behind him his young trainees have now resorted to their own personal drinking water to get the job done. Plastic bottles of river water ain't gonna cut it, boys. We gotta let her go.

I think about making a break for it and running past the guards, but really there's no need. A visa office sits conveniently at the border. Plenty of time for processing!

"Here, take a seat! We'll have you in our country in no time. Go on over there and have yourself a nice little meal. Take a look at some souvenirs. Hang out, talk with the drivers, get yourself a tour guide. Everyone's a tour guide here. No need to worry," the lady at the visa office assures me. "The next bus will probably break down before it gets here. You've got time."

"Okay, I'll just be over there."

I point to somewhere in the distance and go outside. An hour passes without the sound of bus engine or dinging bell. I go off to explore the land. I walk up a hilltop and spy border security from an elevated vantage point and find it to be as porous as a sponge. I find the guards to be slack in posture, their rifles slung lazily over their shoulders, their bare feet finding sticks to be scratched with, their smiles easy like the lope of stray dogs searching for dubious morsels buried in the sand.

Finally, in a rush of giddy hopelessness, I commit fiscal suicide and convert the rest of my comrade red yuan into ambiguous purple kip, a currency worth nothing outside of this land of dreams. Where is some kip that doesn't feel somewhat moist in your hands? You can feel the sweaty palms, the desperate clutch for an amount of paper that can sustain a family of 10, the wet of rain when the rice was plenty and the wet of tears when the rains were scarce, palms and pockets, crotches and asses, and other secret places where the purplish-blue notes lay hidden near. Enter a land of ghost players who no longer play the game, yet maintain the same habits of life in death. All is fair in war and money, bombs and chips, the insanity of this child's game of life and death. Life is currency, backed not by the acquisition of rare minerals, but by the ability to harvest the energy of a person with the exactitude of a machine. There, you're all equal now. You mean nothing.

Clutching my new wad of toilet paper, I approach the shade, where most of the bus passengers have congregated to pass the hours. Groups of travelers have already magnetized like ions released in space, sticking to each other by the sheer force of language. The Chinese sit at the big table; the Laotians organize by family ties; and on the outskirts sit other assorted brown folk I can't confidently name. I buy some unfamiliar fruit, mostly for something to do, a way to be rid of this godforsaken kip.

Suddenly I see the flash of a wave.

"Hey, amigo! Over here!"

I look and see her big pompadour in the corner. She's sitting beside the frizzy hair and several new faces. I point to myself and look around in disbelief. Are they inviting me to the English-speaking table? Am I worthy?

My chest pumped full of pride, I offer piecemeal apologies to the other tables as I pass by. "Sorry, I've been dying to meet you. I just have to say hello to some friends over there. Let's catch up on the bus."

The truth is I was hoping you'd invite me over. I had to play it cool. I always feel uncertain in these situations as to whether or not I'll be accepted, desired, worthy of curiosity, even though there's so much I probably can't tell you, shouldn't tell you. But the truth is I admire you. All flying under that faded black flag, a diaspora of the privileged and insane. Aren't you the ones without direction or cause? The ones who roam the Earth over every horizon, moving like a jungle disease, ever closer towards a watering hole for pink flamingos to gather and copulate? I've slain many a crocodile. Perhaps I may be of service to you.

"Hi, I'm Sam."

"I'm Louis," the Asian guy says. "This is my girlfriend, Bee."

"I'm Maya," the girl with frizzy hair says. "This is Paprika."

Her partner waves. The two couples sit in a circle around a plastic table that leans if you lean, on the type of chairs that like to take off in a strong wind. At the end of the circle is a fifth wheel, a girl with honey-brown hair dressed like a sexy hitchhiker.

"Jacky," the Aussie girl says.

I take the empty seat beside her.

"How was your yoga?"

"You were watching me," she says, halfway between a question and an accusation, her eyebrow arching over her sunglasses, that mischievous smile on her face, appreciating the fact that I had noticed her downward dog. At dawn, we stopped in the middle of a jungle and she wandered off the bus to stretch her legs. She performed some stretches in a little clearing, the sunlight filtering through dark green trees, her hair like wild honey, catching the rising sun like a bird's nest aflame.

Was it me, or did we have a little moment, I wondered later, my will more powerful than cowardice, and let our eyes meet in the forest as I awkwardly ventured forth to pee under the propaganda of tropical birds.

"What happened?" Jacky asks me, nodding at the bandage around my right hand.

"Occupational hazard," I reply, instinctively covering my broken hand, feeling it tick like a clock.

"Where you headed, Sam?" Maya asks me.

"Thailand."

"We were in Thailand, what was it babe, three months ago?"

"Three months ago," Paprika smiles and holds Maya's hand, reminiscing of heavenly nuptials there.

"It's so hard to keep track of time. We've been traveling for the last eight months. We're on our honeymoon. We skipped the ceremony and used all of the money to travel for a year."

"That's a great idea! Maybe we should do that too," Louis says to his girlfriend Bee, who returns his smile and goes along with it, but inside she wants a big wedding.

"I can't wait to go back to Thailand," Jacky says, holding up her hair for ventilation. "I might have to marry a Thai man and get a permanent visa."

"What if he turns out to be a dick?" Maya asks glibly, perhaps thinking that all men are.

"Thai men are sweet, but they all cheat. Everyone cheats in Thailand."

"When in Bangkok, do as the ladyboys do," Louis quips, distorting the old maxim.

"Don't talk to me about transgenders. I broke up with my last boy over one," Jacky groans with a disparaging smile.

"You caught him with a trans woman?"

"He said he didn't know. Disgusting."

"Whoa, baby. All colors are beautiful."

"I meant the cheating."

"Oh yeah, that's disgusting."

"Thailand has loads of places that will do it for you. Bangkok is the trans capital of the world."

"Do what?" I ask naively.

"Turn you into a woman."

"How do they do that?"

"How do you think?"

"Surgery?"

"A complete transformation."

"They can just build you right then and there?"

"There are hormone shots post-procedure. Your body has to accept the changes."

"Jack," I whisper.

"Huh?" Jacky asks.

"No, nothing. I know someone in Thailand. I think he's trying to get it done," I find myself stammering.

"Are you all right?"

"I think we've made him sick."

"It's a little early in the morning for all the medical talk," Louis says, coming to my aid. "How about a drink? It's hot out here."

"I don't drink before 9 o'clock," Jacky says.

"It's never too early for Beer Lao!" Louis says, making his voice sound like a commercial only he knows.

"It's after 9."

"Get me one."

Jacky removes her sunglasses and I meet her unshielded eyes. I feel the shock of light fluxing through a cascading icicle. These eyes seem to reflect the trees and sky in greenish-blue irises.

"You want me to order for you?" Louis asks me.

"Sure. Two Beer Lao."

Louis calls to the lady in Lao and gives our order. She nods and goes to fetch the bottles in no great hurry.

"How is your English so good?" I ask Louis, demanding an explanation.

"I went to a prestigious international school. I can also speak French, Mandarin, Cantonese, and Thai. I'm a diplomat. It's my job," Louis says proudly to our murmurs of admiration.

"He always come home late. Smell like perfume. Tell me he out fighting crime," Bee complains.

"It's true! The job of a diplomat is serious business. I have to deal with weapons dealers and drug cartels. These aren't the kind of people who have offices. You have to hit them where they work and play."

"You really are a diplomat," Jacky says in awe.

"If you're ever in trouble, you know who to call," Louis says in mock superhero mode.

"You want to be our tour guide, mayne?" Paprika asks, half-joking.

"Sure! Just pay me in Beer Lao!" Louis chuckles.

I imagine us for a moment following this drunken Catholic school-boy turned super-bro, running around Laos, showing us plenty while explaining nothing.

Our beers arrive.

"Merry Christmas," I say, holding the cold beer in my hand. I clink bottles with Jacky, and we drink. The cold beer washes away some of my Jack-induced dread and I sense time moving like perspiration on the bottles, the water drops splashing in slow motion into the litter box

of bottle caps and cigarette butts surrounding our feet. Jacky holds her 22-ounce bottle vertically over her head, displaying an impressive dive time. She lets a belch fly, and then covers her mouth, ladylike.

"God, I miss Thailand," she says.

I see her staring beyond the table as if somewhere through the trees, Thailand is there waiting. Everyone disappears. The edges are blurred, hazy.

"Thailand misses you, too."

"You an American?" Jacky looks at me.

"Sometimes."

"What do you mean 'sometimes?'"

"I am when it's convenient."

"How long you been out here?"

"About a month."

"How long have you got?"

"Till Christmas."

"Not that long then."

"We'll get to know each other," I say defensively. "Lay of the land. Some feels. That sort of thing. What about you? How long have you been traveling?"

She gives me a look of appraisal. "Three," she finally mouths.

"Months?"

She puts her shades back on.

"Years?"

She smiles, looks the other way, and takes a sip of beer.

"Who was he?" I want to ask, but I know this is none of my business.

"Where are you guys going after Luang Prabang?" Maya interrupts. "Paprika and I are going to Vang Vieng."

Jacky suddenly hoists her bottle and shouts, "Woo! Vang Vieng, baby!"

"Are you going? Let's all go together!"

"You sure? I don't want to feel like a barnacle on your love cruise."

"No, you guys should come. You know who's going to be there, right?"

"Who?"

"Candidate Dim."

"Oh my god! What's he doing in Vang Vieng? He's not opening another one of those godawful restaurants, is he?"

"I think he just wants to go tubing," Paprika jokes.

"I don't want to see him with his shirt off. I think I'll vomit."

I hear myself laughing along with the others. Despite being clueless, I'm not about to announce the fact that I've been on restricted media privileges for the last couple of years. I make sure to smile and agree with whatever is being said.

"We're going back to Vientiane," Louis says as Bee nods apologetically. "That's our hometown. We got some family things."

"Plus, you've got to fight crime," Jacky duly notes.

"That's right," Louis agrees.

"Guess you can't be our tour guide."

"Next time."

"What about you, Sam? Do you want to join the fight against bigotry and injustice? We're going to join the protest there and let the locals know we stand with them. Power in numbers! We'll get there right in time for the Full Moon Party. That's when the cosmic energies will be at their strongest. We'll dance with our brothers and sisters in love and unity," Maya says with her brown eyes glowing. "Every journey begins with serendipity. You coming, Sam?"

"I'm in."

"One more to join the Resistance," she nods, smiling with approval.

"*Chingon!* Get your ass on the conga line!" Paprika cheers.

"There's a guesthouse where more of our brothers and sisters are waiting," Maya adds more seriously. "We're going to meet them in Luang Prabang and head down to Vang Vieng together. You guys should stay there. It's a friendly place."

"Sounds like a party," Jacky says.

"We represent everyone, and are represented by everyone," Maya continues, and then it hits me.

R.E.I.N.!

I spray the side of Jacky's face with backwash lager.

"Hey!"

"You're not supposed to say his name," I say.

Chapter Four

Mr. Yellow

Three weeks ago, I received a tip in Beijing. I was waiting in line at Mao's mausoleum to see his distinctly orange spray-tan when suddenly Mao started talking. You should always be prepared to meet an agent at any place and any time, but even this was going above and beyond the usual rules of espionage. It wasn't Mao at all, but a Chinese agent named Ping playing for both sides. As much as I distrust any agent who speaks Mandarin better than I do, Ping and I have been working together for a long time. His special skills lie in his ability to look like any Chinese national. They say the Chinese all look the same. He takes it to another level.

"Pssttt! Sam! It's me, Ping!"

"Jesus Christ!" I shouted, prompting a 7-foot super-soldier to look at me with eyes sharper than a bayonet.

"You can't say that here!" Ping whispered out of the side of his mouth, looking all Mao, stiff and orange.

"Ping, what the hell? Couldn't we just meet at a park bench in front of a lake?"

"No good. Done too many times," Ping said. "Doesn't keep them in their seats like the old days."

“That’s what they say. So what’s all this talk about R.E.I.N.? What the hell is that? The Chinese version of the Third Reich?”

“Worse. Don’t know much yet. They move in open secrecy. Got an Instagram page, but it’s just a cover. We got their leader somewhere in the south. Not sure where. He very careful. You have to ask Mr. Yellow. He’s waiting for you in Shanghai. Café Travail. You’ll see him there. Look like Vincent Van Gogh.”

“Ping, you have to get me some better cover. I look like an agent trying not to look like an agent. The secret police are becoming less and less secret. They’re starting to leave threatening little notes inside my fortune cookies. ‘Get out of town, why don’t you? Visit Leaping Tiger Gorge. Maybe fall in . . . hehehe.’”

“Chinese humor. Don’t worry about it. You find new gear inside your room when you get back. Make you look like a backpacker. You English literature major working on a travel novel.”

“You mean I’m a trust fund baby with no direction except to find my artistic voice through a random journey of the soul and spirit?”

“You got it. Your rucksack have clothes for winter and summer. You might go into the mountain. Might go into jungle. Don’t know yet. Got to be prepared. Toiletries sharpened in case you need weapons. No guns. They watching you, but don’t make them come out of hiding even you know they there. They don’t like to be embarrassed.”

“Is this that face they’re always afraid of losing?”

“That’s why you the man, Sam. You read between the lines. One last thing: The clothes we got for your disguise might have some holes in them. That’s what the kids wear these days.”

I shook my head in disgust.

“My mother would kill me if I wasn’t an orphan. Anything else?”

"Just remember. You supposed to be 25-year-old backpacker. You believe everyone should do what they want. War is bad. Obama is good. Life is not a destination. It's a journey. You know what I mean?"

"Reminds me of the good old days. Remember the 60s, Ping?"

"You look good, Sam. You never get old."

"Carrot juice and meditation. That and a few years in an underground government lab. Take care, Ping."

"See you around, Sam."

The next day I woke to a glittering metropolis filled with futuristic skyscrapers, glass towers, and imaginary numbers. A wild prince running slush funds from an opium den surrounded by his accountant/concubines. Traces of the past erased. Files shredded, buildings bombed, memories erased. I waited until nightfall to meet my man and watched as the day faded and sparkled the last of its rays on the waterfront, burning like Chinese junks in older times. The electric skyline of the future glowed across the water. Behind me the golden light of the colonial past. Blinding neon on Nanjing Road lit up the smiling faces of couples arm in arm, the mood of the scene a Chinese Christmas. I stood before my reflection and watched my face blur into the background of a Coca-Cola commercial flashing on the screen. *Kekoukele*, Santa said and clinked bottles with a polar bear. "Delicious Happiness," the screen read. The perfect marketing campaign, devised from ancient days when it still meant opium. The takeover of society by the black, sticky, and sweet. A religion controlled by merchants. Scenes of industry presented on state TV. A smiling Mao. A jolly Santa. Overlords of sweatshops working overtime to make quota.

I wandered lost in People Square, peopled by only one person, a down and out guitarist playing alone in the cold night, and sat with him while off in the background noise, the traffic of holiday shopping continued in the neon circus of commerce. Finally, I sensed

Mr. Yellow in an inn, red lanterns glowing outside, a backpacker's hostel called The Café Travail. The sort of place you come to dust off with a Tsingtao. Mostly transients refueling, trading stories. A good place to hide.

The bar was mellow, the music Radiohead. Most of the action was happening in the back of the room where a group of American students were taking shots of tequila next to an abandoned pool table. There was a plethora of cheers from the girls, indicating they would soon go into the night seeking more lively conditions. A pair of young Shanghai guys stood nearby waiting, armed with basic English and toothy smiles, ready to be used as translators and escorts into Shanghai's nightlife. I leaned by the jukebox, keeping my face hidden while listening to the rest of the room.

I spotted him beyond the pool table as a hazy light shined over his gardener's jacket, his shoulders hunched over his drink, his back shaped like a question mark. The guitar riffs to Pink Floyd's *Run Like Hell* played at that exact moment. I smiled and approached with the oncoming of the chorus:

Run, run, run. . .

"It's often the opposite, isn't it?" I said, leaning on the bar. "You think it's saying 'run,' but really it's saying 'go.'"

Mr. Yellow turned just slightly, and I gasped in shock. All the lines became blurred and swirled into chaos. In his breast pocket was a sunflower. Was Vincent Van Gogh an agent?

"Where are we going? What are we? Where do we come from?" Mr. Yellow responded to the air in front of his beer.

He lifted his pint to his ashen ginger beard and took a long draw from the well, smiling at me from the corner of his eyes as he did so.

I ordered a Tsingtao, trying my best to keep cool.

"Isn't that backwards?" I ventured to the air between us as the beer is placed in front of me. I dug in and sat one barstool away from him.

"The sun rose in the east, but it will set in the west," Mr. Yellow spoke cryptically.

His accent was untraceably European, the voice of a nomad. His head was shaved, his age a mystery. He could have been anywhere between 40 and 240 years old. A master who sought only to perfect his skills, renouncing all, like a Buddhist monk, secretly operating as a vessel of knowledge and intel to agents, often with unclear allegiances.

"Where can I see the best sunset?" I replied thus in code.

"If you want to see the sunset," Mr. Yellow said, giving me an odd look, "watch from the highest place. You must go west, to the Himalayas."

"To Ti—"

The name was sniped on my lips in an instant with a glare from Mr. Yellow. "Damn fool," I could see him thinking. Doubt and hesitation clouded his blue eyes. He returned his gaze to his half-empty pint. I suddenly became very thirsty.

"We don't say that name here," Mr. Yellow said softly, staring into the amber. "I was there a long time ago, a long time ago with a friend. We were in the mountains a week and had run out of jerky and water and were on the brink of death in the tundra. After many days, a few mud huts appeared built into the side of the rocky foothills in the distance. As we approached, hungry and exhausted, a pack of giant dogs attacked us with hellish ferocity."

"Mastiffs?" I asked, gripping the perspiring bottle. "What happened?"

"One of us lived. Ha! You see, this one carried stones in his pockets. You must carry stones in your pockets to survive in the Himalayas."

Mr. Yellow finished his drink, and then said in absolute solemnity, "Always carry stones in your pockets."

As he got up to leave, I noticed a part of his left ear was missing, possibly eaten by dogs.

"Wait. You're leaving?" I almost pleaded, suddenly wanting to tell him everything.

I'm not who you think I am. I'm not me. I'm someone else.

Mr. Yellow looked at me with consideration for a moment and said, "Here, take this."

He pulled something out of his gardener's jacket and placed it on the bar with a clear, definitive thud. It was a round white stone.

I stared at him dumbfounded.

"From the banks of the Li River, Yangshuo. You may find the sun sets there as well."

"I'm in your debt," I whispered, and closed my fingers around the stone, putting it in my pocket.

I watched as Mr. Yellow disappeared into the men's room, never to reemerge.

Chapter Five

Firewalls

Interpol has a funny way of reassigning double agents like Jack. Keeps them in the seats, as they say, to see the two go at it again. That's what the people want. This time, the stakes are a little higher. Another piece added to the puzzle that makes me Sam Iam. As long as I've known Jack, it's been strictly business. Black Ops, Psy Ops, secret coups and guerilla war games, rockets, satellites, underground laboratories. Our relationship goes deeper than a nuclear submarine. There's almost a cordiality between us at this point. Even as I throw him off another roof or into the next volcano, I bid him good evening until we meet again. I know he won't die. He never does. He simply reappears just when I think it's over.

I've never complained about the life of an agent. It's a lonely life, but then again, I was always lonely to begin with. I never minded hanging on the edge of a cliff or running into a hail of gunfire. Makes life worth living knowing you can lose it at any time. But after a while, you get tired of the blood and smoke. You start feeling old, sentimental, looking for memories that aren't there. Try to make some new ones that you can keep. Run off and sign out of the network, go off the grid, and disappear somewhere in paradise. That's when I met her: My True

Love. The girl with eyes darker than the darkest darkness. The girl with the long black hair. We searched for electric blue fish at night with a flashlight. I used to see her in my dreams every night. Not anymore.

I wonder where she is and if I'll ever see her again. I wonder if Interpol will give me back my memories. I wonder why I don't see her in my dreams like I used to. What firewall is there?

Chapter Six

Jacky

We drive through green and dappled light, passengers getting off every couple of hours at bus stops and banana trees. The bus is almost empty, careening on the edges of steep hill roads. We ride with every window open, boys pushing the bus out of a mud hole, laughing as we bound off the bus to help. Jacky's eyes glance over her shoulder as we push against the back of the bus like twin planets peeking over the lunar dust of a red moon. The bus heaves and then frees itself, only to succumb to Lao Time.

I know what it looks like, me sitting here beside the Australian surfer girl sharing earbuds on an iPod. But I have to get close, find out more about Candidate Dim, unravel the conspiracy, and find out how he ties in to R.E.I.N. We share earbuds as she introduces me to her playlist. All the while, my head swirls with a cocktail of Jack Sour, the Dalai Lama, Tibetans, Americans, the Chinese, and Candidate Dim. Somehow they're all tied together. All signs point to Vang Vieng.

Jacky's sweat has a tinge of citrus to it. She grows on me like an invasive species, blossoming little white orchids before moonlight and releasing that infused aroma of sex, adventure, and freedom. She's the poster child for the anti-doxology of R.E.I.N., which I grow more

acquainted with as the bus drones on. It seems more like evangelism than political discussion, Maya taking both of my hands with a look of unspoken sympathy. Their approach with Jacky is more amorous, flirtatious, these two newlyweds perhaps trying to up their game by inviting one more to the connubial bed. Perhaps they know we want to feel touched by the letters of understanding, the vowels that murmur through pouted lips, crossed by furrowed eyebrows as we open up to each other on this never-ending bus ride, the sunset hanging above the horizon, but never intent to fall.

By the time we get there, I have, against my better judgment, grown partial to these new companions, their sense of freedom, their sense of optimism, their hope and cheer. To them, the world is a thing to be explored, life to be experienced, a world to save, yes, but freedom above all else, the freedom to be as you are. A thing that is. A thing becoming. Beautiful in every layer. I spend way too much time smelling Jacky's hair.

Chapter Seven

Hey

Following Mr. Yellow's lead, I took a train from Shanghai to the Chinese countryside and followed the trail to a place called Yangshuo. A rented bicycle brought me to an arched stone bridge, which served as a point of deliberation at the fork of a river. Covered by the shade of rainbow umbrellas, lulled along by the gentle waves and the river-man's rafting pole, bamboo rafts went up and down the Li River with sedated ease.

It wasn't the sort of place you'd expect to find a terrorist in hiding, but they say Afghanistan also has its charms. I suddenly felt someone next to me. I snapped out of my trance and wheeled around with my hands ready to intercept a dagger only to find a gap-toothed smile and a photography book being shoved in my face. There was a sprightly little woman wearing a rice hat and a black and neon tracksuit. Her eyes told me she was old, but her chestnut skin beamed with a glow of health that seemed typical of the locals there.

I could see why she had the audacity to approach me, the lone sucker at the bridge, just soaking it all in. It was like the *100 Famous Views of Edo*, only this book bore the title *Four Seasons of Yangshuo*. Clearly a collection put together expressly for the momentarily en-

raptured, the existentially fearful, or the pinesexual, those who are sexually aroused by scenic views of mountains.

"Sorry lady; I don't jerk off to trees," I said with a wave of my hand at the view before us. She was not easily discouraged, however, nor did she have other customers to ply her trade. It became awkward rather quickly, as she continued to follow my line of sight with the book, flipping through the pages to some of the more dramatic scenes where the river is covered by a fine autumn mist. I tried to walk off, but she popped up in front of me again, this time throwing a wooden duck on the book as a deal-sealer. I shook my head. Now she threw on two ducks! Buy now and we'll throw in two wooden ducks for free! Double happiness!

Ma'am, with all due respect, I'm looking for terrorists, not souvenirs.

I started to walk away, and then I felt a Wushu grip on my sleeve, and in a voice that almost sounded as if she was from Brooklyn, she said, "Look at the damn quackers, or else you're gonna sleep at the bottom of the Li."

I turned to her in shock and saw that same gap-toothed smile as she held the photography book with the two ducks sitting on top of it.

"What did you say?" I stammered, but she knew she had me. She wouldn't repeat it again.

I took one of the wooden ducks and flipped it upside down. Written on the bottom of the first duck were the words, "Follow me." On the bottom of its eternal mate were the words, "Who are you?"

"Who are you?" I read out loud.

Duck lady smiled her gap-tooth smile and replied, "Follow me."

She mounted her moped and let the engine purr, waiting for me to grab my bicycle. Like the duck said, I followed her, knowing this would lead me to the leader of R.E.I.N. “Who are you?” asked the duck. So I followed, hoping the wooden duck would be the one to tell me.

The water was jade, the mountains were emerald, and as the sun reached the midpoint of its descent, the scene was covered in a soft white shroud. The limestone formations carved by thousands of years of rain and wind rolled like echoes across the landscape, reflecting the perfection of Taoist symmetry against the placid streams. It felt as if we had entered a time-warp, into a secret grove that could only be found by riding off the beaten path into another classical Chinese painting with raft men silhouetted in the sunset and herons flying through the mist. I almost expected to look up in the upper-right-hand corner to see Chinese characters dripping down in faded black ink.

At this point, duck lady killed the engine on her moped and waited a little farther back as I dismounted my bicycle and walked up to the riverbank. The bearded man floating in the river noticed me watching and slowly swam landward, rising up from the water like a Baptist. He walked right past me as if I wasn’t there and began to towel off beside a sparkling chrome motorcycle I could only assume was his. I politely stared into the blinding refractions as he got dressed in jeans, an undershirt, and dusty leather sandals. He mounted his motorcycle and shook his shoulder-length brown hair, tying it up in a topknot as his blue eyes blazed at me with an intensity I couldn’t quite read. I was expecting him to make the introduction, but instead, all he did was give me a little nod and put the key into the ignition to take off.

“Hey!” I cried in something more like a yelp than a greeting.

Much to my surprise, he freaked out, looking wild and paranoid, glancing over his shoulders and around his back before shooting

me a look of pure murder. He revved his motorcycle and came right up to me in a burst of speed that left his front wheel firmly beneath my crotch.

“Don’t say my name!” he hissed viciously, still looking as if he wanted to run me over. “Follow me. I have a safe place where we can talk.”

He sped off down the dirt road faster than we could possibly keep up with, but duck lady seemed to know the way. We rode down the back roads deeper into the woods and came to a farm situated in a valley surrounded by mountains and golden fields. Three boys, ranging from 10 to teen, lazed around playing cards, relaxing barefoot against the open frame of the old barn. They sat up upon seeing me, but relaxed as duck lady called out to them in Mandarin. The oldest one ran off to bring us tea. We sat at a picnic table in the untamed garden, the scene almost surreal with country charm. Puppies wrestled each other on the dirt, chickens pecked their seed, and a woman passed by with laundry on her head and kittens at her heels. After slaking my thirst, duck lady smiled and gestured for me to go to the back of the barn.

I walked to the back of the barn and saw the man’s motorcycle leaning on its kickstand under an apple tree. He was sitting on a bale of hay nursing a baby goat with a milk bottle, looking almost like Jesus with his little lambs.

“Hey!” I called out, forgetting the warning issued previously.

Big mistake. He shot me a look of death and leapt to his feet, throwing the nimble goat onto the ground to spring away.

“Damn you!”

“What?”

“Are you trying to get me killed? Who sent you?” he said narrowing his eyes.

"I came because of this," I said reaching into my pocket, showing him the white stone. "Your calling card, I presume?"

"A rock?"

"It's a sign. . . a rock from the banks of the Li River. . ." I spluttered in frustration. "From Mr. Yellow?"

Both of us glared at each other with suspicion, somehow on the same page, yet completely bewildered by each other's presence.

"Are you American or Chinese?" he demanded.

"Consider me a free agent," I said, offering my open palms. "I'm sure we have common goals, even if our goals are nothing alike. One hand washes the other, as they say."

He nodded his head in contemplation and turned his eyes to the open sky.

"You were sent by Providence. A paradox unto itself, since the universe is uncaring. But perhaps it loves you enough to guide you towards that understanding so that you can stop searching, and embrace your fate. You've suffered. Anyone can see that. You've struggled to understand why it is you are here. You were approached because you wanted to be found. She led you to me because you want to know who you are, and why you are here."

"Yes," I whispered against myself.

"I am Hey Guevara," he said, gripping my hand, his blue eyes aflame, "leader of R.E.I.N. (Revolution Evolution Infinite Nihilism). It means 'pure' in German. It also sounds like the English word 'rain.' Sort of like 'pure rain.' Get it?"

"Sounds fascist."

"Ha! Don't let the German fool you. We are anything but. We represent everyone, and are represented by everyone, with independent cells on five different continents, all moving towards Point Omega."

“Point Omega?” I echoed, my scrotum tightening.

“The final revolution which will bring forth our ultimate purpose, the only purpose there ever was for having existed at all.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Consider the frog,” Hey said, stopping beside a stream in the rice paddies. “He knows not from where he received his legs, but at one time he was nothing more than another fish in the ocean. There was a revolution that happened, a terrible event in the eyes of those stuck in the prison of time. He was different, outcast, ostracized, and forced to seek shelter elsewhere. He was forced to live on his own in the mud, a strange and hostile new environment where many of his mutated brethren died. A terrible tragedy, eh? But we know the happy ending.”

As if on cue, the frog hopped away.

“Man is no different. Society is no different. We evolve, only by chaos. From chaos comes order, from order comes progress, from progress comes decadence, and from decadence comes revolution.

“Since the dawn of mankind, Man has sought the answer. He has wandered from continent to continent, mainland to archipelago following the stars across deserts of wind and sea. He has followed his heart with the pure hope that beyond the point on the next horizon, some answer to his question lies, the question that lays deep in the heart of his darkest fears and wonders: ‘Why am I here?’ ‘Why am I alive?’ That is why you have come to me, is it not? To seek this truth?

“We are all just accidents,” Hey continued and turned to me with a confidently arched eyebrow. “A collection of stardust and molecules, smashed together in a super collider we call the universe. But even accidents can be used for a higher purpose.”

“What’s my purpose?” I asked as if hypnotized.

“You know as well as I do.”

“Tell me.”

Hey’s face grew dark, his eyes filled with shadow and conspiracy, starkly different from the enlightened impression that they had had a moment before. Maybe it was the angle of the sun.

“You’re here to kill me.”

There was a rooster crowing, not unlike Peter’s cock. I smiled and spread my arms, inviting him to search me.

“You’ve got me all wrong, Hey. I’m not the one you should be worried about. If you had done your homework, you’d know that Jack plays for both sides. He’s working you to get the goods on R.E.I.N. Two paychecks; double happiness. Get me?”

I saw a flash of fear in Hey’s eyes. I pressed harder.

“The Chinese are closing in on you. They’re watching you as we speak. The only reason you don’t have a bullet in your head right now is because I’m here to make you a deal. I can help you with your operation. I have skills beyond what your own people possess. I can offer my services, for the right price. If you want to take out the Dalai Lama, you’ll need more than a ragtag group of Tibetans to help you do the job. What do you say?”

“No thanks. I can’t trust a comrade who drinks Starbucks. The Chinese aren’t interested in ideology. Not anymore. The slogan used to be ‘Religion is the opiate of the masses.’ Now selling opiates is the new religion. And by that I mean the opiate of ‘wealth,’ the opiate of ‘technology,’ the opiate of ‘entertainment,’ and of course, just plain old opiates. The Age of Decadence has come upon China once again, and you know what comes after decadence. The Tibetans have already planted the seeds of revolution in anticipation of the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama. R.E.I.N. plans to speed up that process, to time it before the Chinese have a chance to produce their own puppet king.”

"The Americans invented Starbucks, not the Chinese," I point out. "All the Tibetans have is yak butter tea. Choices are limited, and so endlessly the same. That's the irony, isn't it? The communists ship a few megatons of cocaine to fight a war against the capitalists. The capitalists ship a few megatons of cocaine to fight the communists. In the end, it makes no difference. Both sides are in sore need of a good night's sleep. But there are winners and losers, Hey. You can still walk away from this thing with your life, a new identity, enough money to live on. Hell, the Chinese can give you a new face if you want. It's as good a deal as you're going to get. You just have to tell me when and where, and I'll finish the job. Check my stats. 100 percent satisfaction."

Hey looked at me with amusement, and then his countenance changed and his eyes filled with pity.

"You don't even know who you are," Hey said, shaking his head, his voice so soft and sincere a shiver ran through me. "You don't know where you came from. You don't know who made you. But Jack does, and he knows even more than that. He knows more about you than you do. You can't help me do anything except sign up for hard labor in Mongolia."

I fought the instinct to strangle him with my dental floss until he confessed all that Jack's told him about me. His words hit an old mark, hidden away beneath the layers of all the identities I've assumed in my career. That bottomless pit inside me gaped open, laughing.

You don't even know who you are.

I pretended to laugh in scorn.

"So I guess it's a bullet in your head and a botched job by the Tibetans. How many are there? They can't all be with you on this."

"It's a tightly-knit group," Hey shrugged. "But like you said, one hand washes the other, right?"

We reached the barn. The sun was setting.

“Whether or not Jack decides to betray us, it matters little. Point Omega will happen, and when it does, there’ll be no more religion, no more borders, no more reasons for war. We can finally be what we were made to be. Anything else is just a construct keeping us from absolute freedom.”

He started to go inside, then paused at the door.

“If you’d like to stay for dinner, you’re more than welcome. I’ve never been rude to a guest, even one that’s come to kill me. Stay awhile and we’ll chat. If Nixon and Mao could have dinner together, why can’t we?”

He picked up the cute little goat he had been milking earlier and handed it to me. The goat nuzzled my nose.

“What are we having?” I asked him.

Hey Guevara smiled.

“Frog legs.”

Chapter Eight

Reeducated

In the morning, I wake up at Cool Shade Hostel, a backpacker's haven serving as the headquarters of R.E.I.N. Headquarters is nothing like I imagined. The triangular roof and white stone structure of the French colonial is lost in a haze of vegetation, a lawn spreading wild with an eclectic assortment of chairs below the open veranda where the colors of rugs and the music of windchimes flutter and blaze. There are way more beanbag chairs than I would have expected given the level of conspiracy their operatives are involved in, but it doesn't take more than a couple hours before the attempt to indoctrinate me is made.

My reeducation begins with "Selective Histories," the orientation pamphlet (not written, but edited) by none other than Hey Guevara himself, who uses the pseudonym "Ernesto." I'm tempted to tell everyone that I've already met him in person, just so I can shoot up the ladder and gain their confidence, but I'm quickly educated that this, like all things, does not matter. Hey is merely a figurehead, a symbol for their cause, with an awesome image in silkscreen. But I have yet to hear his name mentioned, or anything else about the Tibetans, the Dalai Lama, or Point Omega. I listen for code words or

phrases that may be part of their operation. But unless the ascending levels of SPF secretly refer to their choice of assault weapons, none of the members seems to know a thing. Their fight seems to be directed entirely against Candidate Dim, a man I knew nothing about 24 hours ago, who is now expected to become the subject of all my soul's vitriol, the anti-human who embodies everything we've grown to hate.

The indoctrination process is an informal one. It is set on a veranda softly buzzing with other early birds fluttering around, picking up toast and jam, butter, juice, fruit, and Lao coffee. I help myself and choose a sunny spot on the bamboo mat fielded with colorful cushions. My mind is at ease in these peaceful surroundings, and I almost forget that I'm surrounded by assassins and terrorists trying to spark the onset of a nuclear holocaust.

I'm distracted by the sheer friendliness of everyone here, their gentle eyes which seek out yours in a moment that is beautiful, strange, wondrous, and kind. Within a fraction of a second, there is an understanding that we are here to coexist harmoniously, thrust into these cheap beds as equals, with no more status, no more rules, and as naked as the yoga pants and Beer Lao tank tops that we are draped in.

The smooth-faced ponytailed owner of the hostel, Pong, sits at the small front desk assisted by an ice-blond Scandinavian girl who has stayed here throughout various seasons and now seems to work here, though not officially. She represents one of the many factions who come here, find this oasis, this paradise, this state of mind, and make it a part of their lives to spread the ideas of R.E.I.N. and show that, indeed, nothing does matter.

I'm set for brainwashing after breakfast. My defenses are lowered. A gentle breeze! I end up talking to everyone. I start to believe there is no place like this on Earth. Where else can you find people with this simple desire to escape the world as it exists and create another? A

new life, a new existence, a shutting out of everything that's outside. I flutter from person to person, gathering the nectar of knowledge they have for me.

Take Claire, the English teacher from London. She's working on a universal language that will erase the problem of language. "Every word is constructed of words from other languages, thereby representing all by all. Do you want to know how to say 'Hello' in One-glish? 'Konichi-bon-ola!'"

"How do you say 'amazing?'" I gush excitedly.

"You say, 'Wow!'" she laughs. "I didn't feel like we needed to change that one. Everyone says 'Wow!' anyways."

Then there was Serena, the animal rights activist.

"I've created a circus that features Thai street elephants. They're rescue elephants, freed from a life of being beaten and abused to do tricks for tourists. So we give them a new job that pays peanuts."

"Oh my."

"We get human volunteers to act as animals in the circus! The elephants whip the humans and make them do tricks! We train them to hold a whip in their trunks. It forces people to see how brutal the circus really is, and it's also therapeutic for the elephants. And in case you're wondering, all of the human volunteers come from first-world countries. Most of them are French."

"That's fantastic."

And of course there's Ben, founder of Ben's Shoes, who just loves telling people his story:

"So there I am in Siem Reap. I'd just graduated college, and all I want to do is go see the world before I get into the rat race. I don't really know what I want to do; I just know that I want to help people and make a lot of money doing it, but I just can't think of any ideas."

A crowd of listeners, some of whom have already heard the story once this morning, sits around him as he goes on, legs folded like a guru.

“So I’m at the temple doing my meditation when it hits me! A flip-flop! Some kid must’ve thrown it at me. At first, I got angry, but then I quickly realized this was the answer! This is the thing people need!

“So I started my own flip-flop company, all made with 100 percent recycled tires, courtesy of the Siem Reap junkyards. It gives the kids an education. They learn a skill and can earn money for the rest of their lives. Plus, if you buy a flip-flop, I give a recycled tire to one homeless child in need.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to just give the kid some flip-flops?” I ask impulsively, and I feel a murmur of revolt in the audience.

Ben smiles wanly and says, “You know the old saying, ‘Give a man a fish, he eats for a day?’”

I bow my head in humility and slink to the back of the audience.

Despite the apparent disparities of employed vs. not, the members of R.E.I.N. conduct themselves as equals and remain childlike at play. The day begins shortly after the Lao coffee has gone on infinity mode, and we’ve sipped and smoked and trembled with the restless excited chatter of summer camp. The activities are scheduled by Pong and his team of assistants and organized as team-building exercises to further instill the values of R.E.I.N.

It isn’t long before the coffee gets everyone nervous and in a state of hysteria. “What should we do? What should we do?” begins to ribbit out of our mouths. Fortunately, Pong has the situation covered. I know we’re just being fed pots of coffee so he can get us all caffeinated and let us loose into the forest somewhere to wander around, scream, whoop, and pretend we’re animals in the jungle again. We’ll decide

who gets to play the role of lion, and who gets to be the zebra, and who is the despised hyena and vulture. We'll run around and scream until we get sleepy, and then we we'll drift back to the vans in a daze, hours later, returning with wooden things someone had carved into the shape of a frog.

Listen: Ribbit. Ribbit.

By afternoon, word gets out that there are two vans going to a waterfall. In one van are our original four — Paprika, Maya, Jacky, and me — and now also adding Jergen, the Norwegian diver, Claire, the English teacher, Serena, the animal activist from Holland, and Ben from Ben's Shoes.

They leave us in complete anarchy, and I find this to be the first level of R.E.I.N.'s indoctrination, to show you a world of absolute freedom with no rules, a world to now survive in together as equals. We become teammates with the simple goal of making sure no one gets hurt. Besides that, we can swim in the water, jump in the pools, and admire our bluish-green reflections all tranquil surrounded by huge black rocks, a pathway leading higher towards the skyscraper of waterfall, at the very top of the green hill, a silvery white sheet of rainbow cascading and pounding into the bottom of a flowing lagoon.

"The way up is very narrow and slippery, so I advise you to pair up," a voice says from the bushes.

"Pong!"

Pong materializes like the Predator from the green leaves. His handsome Thai face smiles as he twists the ends of his mustache teasingly.

"But where did you. . .?"

"Watch your step. It gets very slippery, especially at the top. See you there!" Pong cries, and vanishes back into the broad green leaves. We watch as Paprika spreads the leaves to reveal Pong's hiding space and witness only a flurry of white butterflies rising from the flora instead.

"Some freaky shit in the jungle, maybe!" Paprika cries.

We each pair up. Paprika and Maya lead the way. Claire teams up with Jacky and Serena with Ben; Jergen and I together. The path winds around a hill, the narrow pathway bordered by a crudely built fence tied together with fibers, and at best, merely marking the edge. We walk up treacherous stairs planted into the hillside, sliding on moss and catching sprays of mist from the waterfall. I almost slip and immediately feel Jergen's hand on my wrist; his reach like a branch extending from a gangly trunk.

"They must've sent you to watch my back," I say, thanking him.

His blue eyes flash, and I see a faint smile. He says nothing.

Our trail moves along a spiny ridge, the vegetation gnarly and wet with an ever-present mist. I look ahead at the back of Jergen's head, a blonde untamed bush of half-dreaded, half-forgotten locks amidst a chaos of curls and swirls. This agent who would so often be stopped in airport security to spread those long arms and wait for the intrusion of wand around his crotch. I let my foot slip, just to make sure. His arm shoots out with the speed of a mantis shrimp. He catches me.

"You're not wearing Ben's shoes, are you?" Jergen grins, making a crack at the tire guru.

"Standard sweatshop Nikes, I'm afraid."

"You should be more careful. The jungle is a dangerous place."

"Full of dangerous people," I say, nodding to our group moving on ahead, my eyes settling for a moment on Jacky.

"The most dangerous game," agrees Jergen. "Her skill level is 100. I doubt that's even her real name."

Skill level? Fake names? I narrow my eyes. *His vocabulary can't be coincidental. Who of us here are agents, and who of us are assassins?*

"How many are with you?"

"I'm traveling alone," says Jergen, "but I'm going to meet some of my friends in Vang Vieng."

"Expecting to see some fireworks?"

"No, just a lot of screaming and yelling. There might be some police, but it usually doesn't get anywhere near that. And that's if he comes."

"If?"

"Candidate Dim is unpredictable. It's always a lot of commotion and a big opening, and he sometimes makes a speech, but these days he barely shows up unless the media is there to put it on the news."

"Fame go to his head?"

"He wants to run for parliament. It scares the shit out of me."

"What's the big deal? Shouldn't everyone get a shot at a lifetime of kickbacks?"

Jergen stops and looks down at me, meeting me eye to eye. "You're not a Dim supporter, are you?"

"Listen now. I don't know anything about his policies," I start bumbling defensively, my hands in front of my chest. "I just know he's a horrible demagogue who's as corrupt and ruthless as they come."

"Well, you answered your own question then," Jergen says coolly, and he turns and continues up the path. "If he builds another one of his shitty restaurants in Vang Vieng, it will destroy the local culture. That's the first reason."

"The locals need culture," I agree.

"Second, it will add more traffic and development around the town."

"Too many carbon footprints," I hum.

"Third, his existence is causing nothing but rifts within society and stirring up tribalism and hatred."

"Hate the player, hate the game," I sing.

"Finally, his burgers are disgusting and will probably decimate insect populations, which sounds like a good thing, but it's really not. It's really, really not."

"You ain't no good for me, you ain't no good for me," I chant like a backup soul singer.

"Do you know what he said yesterday during a visit with the king of Thailand? He said Theravada is the only pure form of Buddhism there is. Like, does he even know what Mahayana Buddhism is?" Jergen scoffs with disbelief.

The jungle suddenly gets quiet.

"So what do you think about Jacky?"

We pick up speed and catch up with the others as they stand in front of a rushing stream. Just as Paprika attempts to brave the first rocks, we hear a voice from above.

"Careful! One of you is definitely going to get your feet wet!"

"Pong!"

He's at the top of the next hill, looking down on us, encouraging us onward. The stream must be crossed and then another hillside climbed helter-skelter through the trees and into the flowering vines. Somewhere over the rainbow is the waterfall.

"Just a little further, and then you can take a dive!" Pong cries, falling backwards, disappearing off the high precipice to somewhere beyond our sight.

"*Dios mio!*" Paprika utters in amazement.

We stand there paused, listening to the chittering of the birds and insects. Butterflies flutter past us in a smoke pattern through sparkling vapors fluttering across the frothing rocks and spray.

"You can do it, baby!" Maya calls out to Paprika, as one by one, she carefully jumps the rocks, nearly falls and recovers, and we all exhale

in unison and cheer as she celebrates by pumping air guitar with a tree branch.

The rest follow.

Maya runs without a slip and Claire leaps like a lost Bollywood star in her sari. Serena and Ben, both hiking-booted, basically walk on water. Next, Jacky plays hopscotch on graceful toes, and Jergen joins them on the other side showing an almost faux-celebration, mocking the idea of ceremony itself, but I see a satisfied grin on his lips knowing that his feet are dry.

Finally, I step up to the rocks. I've purposely chosen to go last as to not raise the bar too high. If I make it look too easy, the others might suspect my true identity. Knowing I can do this with my eyes closed, I smile at Jacky instead. I let our eyes meet and see myself crossing the entire way without breaking eye contact, leaping in slow motion like a ballerino, the pounding waterfalls of my desire churning beneath the zither and zephyr of longing, the sound almost silent.

I find myself hanging in midair, my legs split like Van Damme, that crazy look on my face like they just killed my best friend, this giant monkey with humongous pecs, snarling at me as he shakes his fist and growls. Here I am blinded, spinning in cold current, hands stretched out, being flung like a rag-doll hard enough against the rocks so that there is an audible "Ooh!" that escapes the lips of my audience.

I get up and shrug, try to laugh it off, strike a haphazard nonchalance when the next rock betrays me, throws me back in the stream, and I'm just sloshing around now, not even trying to step on the rocks, just fording my way across, knowing that even as you fall, you feel every rock on the way down.

"That's never happened before," I say to Jacky, who does a very poor job of trying to contain her laughter.

We continue up the narrow ridge through flowering vines where orchids grow out of thin air. The aroma of nectar surrounds us. This is the hummingbird's paradise, the butterfly sanctuary. At the top of the waterfall, a solitary man poses on one leg, balancing on a stone in the middle of the stream that cuts the roaring flows before they break off and spill down into a white void.

"Pong!"

He turns and faces us with his arms spread to the sky.

"Congratulations for reaching the top," he says, smiling.

We whoop and cheer and give each other high fives.

"From here, you can see all the surrounding countries. To the north, there is Myanmar, which used to be called Burma. To the west is Thailand. To the east is Vietnam. Behind us to the south is Cambodia."

He points to the mountains and plateaus and foothills shining and darkening in a dance beneath the clouds. The green hills roll on for as far as the eye can see.

"If you look hard enough, you can see a light on the horizon. That's the top of a golden temple. This land used to be full of gold. No more gold now. All gone.

"Long ago, before Westerners come, our countries always at war with each other. They fight and fight and whoever wins gets the gold. They take the gold from their enemy and put it in their temples. Back and forth, over and over again. We always fighting with each other, so when the Europeans come, it easy for them to win. We didn't realize until it too late, but they not really fighting each other. They find an easy way to conquer us.

"Two great powers, fighting each other. It makes the world at war, but it makes the world at peace. People sleep better when they know who is their enemy. They get restless and afraid when they don't know who is coming for them. But like two great powers at war, there is still a

stronger one that wins no matter what. It don't matter they help you, they kill you. They win. This is the enemy you should be most afraid of."

Pong turns and faces us, letting the seriousness of this monologue pass into the roar of endless water.

"Only one way down," he says, smiling. "If you scared, don't jump. Just go down, cuz if you scared, you gonna get hurt. You believe you can jump, then just jump. Don't think about it. You think about it, it mean you don't believe."

And with that, Pong closes his eyes with pure bliss, stretches his arms straight above his head like a pencil, leaps off the precipice and flips into space, twirling sideways and upside-down in a tight ball, gracefully finishing with a perfect dive.

10... 9.9... 9.5... 10...

"Would anyone like to walk back?" Claire jokes.

We all laugh nervously. No one moves an inch.

Who of us will be the first to follow? Which of us truly believe?

Without a word, Jacky bursts into a sprint towards the edge. "WHOOOOOO!" she whoops and hurtles into the water, screaming all the way down.

"JACKY!"

We run to the edge and look down. There she is in the aqua-colored pool, laughing, flipping back her hair and whooping with delight.

"Come on, you big baby! Let's see if you believe!" she hoots, taunting me to jump.

"All right guys, I'm going," I say to no one in particular and back up so I can get my running start.

At least that's what I saw in my head. But a minute later, I still haven't moved or said anything. Inside I'm cowardly, reminding myself that I shouldn't get my bandage wet.

Suddenly Paprika goes leaping off the edge.

"FUCK YOU MAYNE!" she screams and cannonballs it down with a big splash.

"AIYEEEEEEEE!" Maya cries, following her partner, and a minute later resurfaces, her hair no longer frizzy.

"Bloody hell," Claire murmurs to herself and looks at us. "See you in the next life, then! Ta!"

"When in Laos, yes?" Serena says and jumps in as well.

"Yes We Can!" Ben cries fiercely, runs and jumps, screaming, "OBAMA!"

It's now down to me and Jergen. We stand there looking at each other — smiling, but scared shitless. I don't dare move. I have no idea what will happen. Now that I've become my own man, they've cut me off. I'm on my own. My skills were nothing but a program, a program now erased. I see myself being broken wide open like the metal fuselage of a plane crash.

"You, uh, going to jump?" I ask him.

"If I jump or I walk down, what does it matter? Will I feel like a coward and lose a part of myself because I did not jump? Will I care if some strangers think I'm too scared? No, I won't care what they think about me. But I will know that inside I am a coward and inside I will die every day that passes from this moment to that until I am able to find another waterfall even higher than this one and perhaps risk my life in some stupid attempt to prove to myself that I am not a coward. I have only to prove this to myself so that I won't die inside," Jergen says spitefully, and then adds, "What a stupid way to die."

He closes his eyes, shakes his frazzled mane, and walks to the edge with absolute calm and conviction, and drops off as if searching for an invisible bridge.

The feeling of believing is to not even know you are going to act before you act. There is no consideration or hesitation. You simply assess the situation as it is happening, as you fall. You don't even feel your legs running or hear the water roaring as it spills over the edge. You only see the white foam, that little line drawn by the water across the green vista and all the hills rolling into the horizon, invisible behind each other and invisible to themselves. I hear the explosion in my ears as water erupts all around me. The feeling of inhaling all with one breath, falling and breaking through the surface, feeling nothing but refractions of light all around you like the dazzle of illuminated scar-tissue around the place where you were first broken. This is what you are. This is what you will be. The water is perfect and turquoise and clear. The streams meander one into another. We're all wet now and happy knowing that we are braver than we think. We leave the water and follow each other into the trees.

Later that night, we go out as fully initiated members of R.E.I.N. We work for Pong now, and will do whatever he tells us, which tonight just means going out and having a good time. It's a celebratory night, and though no one mentions the mission by name, there is something in the air that seems to suggest this may be one of the last nights we ever see each other again. An unspoken bond exists, which seems to have been formed as soon as we jumped into the water. We move as an unbreakable force, a new hope for the future, a rainbow of cultures and creeds representing freedom and equality unlike the world has ever seen. I feel myself slipping on the rocks again.

We shine our light on the illuminated streets of Luang Prabang, passing the night market aglow with the colors of silk scarves and

handmade tapestries. We quickly empty our pockets in support of the local artists who build, paint, and innovate ingenious little trinkets made from bottles, cans, and any other materials they find washed up on their shores or populating their landfills.

“Here’s our money,” we say.

This is not just a souvenir. This is a stand against corporate tyranny.

We stroll past the avenues lined with architecture from those days of make believe when dusky servants quietly lived their inner lives behind white smiles, before Marx and freedom and other dreams brought a bloody end to imperialism. We safari past older well-to-do tourists enjoying their evenings of anniversary romance inside the structures we’ve been taught to despise while begrudging to some level the purity of aesthetic value, and finally admitting that it does look rather nice inside. Perhaps we’re a little bitter that the French-style restaurants with sparkling wine glasses on the table are far beyond our range. What?! No haggling?! Damn imperialists.

Further on the edge of town, along a sleepy stretch of the Mekong, we find a strip of family-run seafood stalls with the catch of the day on big platters with big beers, all while looking out at the dark blue night upon the river.

“So, Vang Vieng? Who’s in?” Maya asks after we order and each have a Beer Lao in hand. “I need a head count. We’re going to start working on placards tonight. What do you guys think of ‘Rim the Dim?’”

Laughter and murmurs of praise bubble around the table.

“You still going?” I ask, glancing over at Jergen.

“I must meet my friends first. I’ll see you there,” he promises with solemn blue eyes.

“I don’t know what kind of operatives we might encounter,” I say quietly. “I might need backup.”

"I'll be there," Jergen nods.

"I'd love to join you guys, and as much as I hate Candidate Dim and would like nothing more than to see him roasted over a spit, I've got an important meeting in Hanoi tomorrow. A new line of Ben's Shoes made from Vietcong army helmets. Shell-toes."

"I hate to spoil the party, but I think I'll have to pass as well," Claire says, continuing to damper the mood. "It's not quite my scene. For me, the best way to fight against Candidate Dim is to educate the children. I'm going to volunteer at the orphanage, and to be honest, I'd rather guard my rose-colored view of humanity by avoiding the pits of hell."

"Serena?"

"Yeah, I am sorry, but I already booked a ticket for a boat," Serena says heartily. "I promised to help my friend. She started an equal payer coffee plantation. Going to get my hands dirty."

Aren't we all? I resist saying.

At that moment, the waiter arrives with a multitude of dishes. It seems like we ordered one of everything. We eat family style: soup from the same bowl, meat from the same plate. It lets you try a little bit of everything. Some plates are better than others, but in keeping with the values of R.E.I.N., we try to eat more of the ignored, leaving the more sumptuous dishes shocked in their snubbing. Being together is what matters. If you want to know the world, experience the spectrum, share a meal. If you want to assassinate a world leader, pass the shrimp to your comrade.

"Here, try this lemongrass chicken with greens and chopped mint leaves. Sticky rice in woven bamboo bowls."

"Here, try these noodles. This is better than Pad Thai!"

"Oh my god, these prawns! This sauce is amazing!"

"All right, everyone take a pepper. On three, we eat. But you have to chew; you can't just swallow. First person to drink their beer loses, or wins, depending on how you feel. Ready? One. . . Two . . . Three!"

We each take a pepper, these fiery little yellow-green acid grenades, which taste good at first, just that right amount of spice on your lips. . . but slowly, they start to smoke.

"Ah, Fuck!"

Glug. . . glug. . . glug. . .

"AHHHH!"

"Garçon, six more Beer Lao! Hurry!"

By the time we finish eating, we're so stuffed from chicken, prawns, noodles, fish, sticky rice, and beer, we can hardly move. I decide to get the blood flowing and walk to the bank of the river with my comrades blurred behind me under a string of Christmas lights, drinking the third round. The river seems like a sea of bluish-black ink with a speckling of lights on the distant shore.

"I can't wait to go back to Thailand," Jacky says, walking up beside me. "Laos is so boring. I feel like I'm going to fall asleep any minute. If I could, I'd fly right over the Mekong past the guards, over the highway towards Bangkok, and land right in my favorite bar on Khaosan Road. If you'd been there, you'd know."

"I have been there," I say matter-of-factly.

"I haven't heard you say a word."

"Can't remember anything."

"You're a wild one, aren't you? You must've had quite a time. Can't say I blame you. There's no place like Thailand. The food, the beaches, the parties. . ."

"I knew a girl there. That's all I remember. I was a different person back then."

“So easy to fall in love there,” Jacky says sympathetically. “Most of the time, it’s a huge mistake. As they say, live and learn — or just keep living.”

I remain tightlipped, feeling guarded now about My True Love, not wishing to defile her with small talk.

“I didn’t want to leave,” Jacky says almost to herself, confiding in my silence. “I’d already been so many places. But once you get started, you just can’t stop. The world is so big. There are so many places out there that make you feel like it’s all so endless and beautiful. You don’t think you’ll ever get old. Everything stops and disappears. You realize it’s all bullshit, the things people worry about back home — money, and jobs, and status, and things. I’ve always wanted to be free and just be happy with whatever I have. I never wanted diamonds or a fancy car. All I wanted was to be free. And I was going to give it up, all for him. It’s probably the best thing that’s ever happened to me, walking in on him with that tranny. But here I am, still talking about it like a stupid girl. Meanwhile, he probably calls me ‘that bird I met in Thailand,’ if he even mentions me at all.”

“I’m sure he still thinks about you. People don’t forget that easily.”

Jacky snorts a little, but finds comfort.

“If I ever see him again, I’ll cut his dick off. Do you think he fell in love with her?”

“I don’t know. Depends if he knew she was trans. If he didn’t, there’s a good chance they broke up.”

“Some of them are very convincing,” Jacky concedes. “But I can tell. A girl can always tell. Men can’t. Or they’re so deep in the closet they don’t want to.”

“Was she hot?”

“She was okay. A bit whorish-looking. That’s how he likes them. Sick bastard.”

"There's consolation in that."

"Have you ever done it with a transgender?" Jacky asks teasingly, then studies me as I slowly contemplate my amnesia.

"Not that I'm aware of."

"How do you know your Thai girl wasn't trans? You don't seem very good at telling the difference."

"To be honest, I'm not even sure if she's real," I find myself saying, invited by our mutual confessions to say the truth aloud. "She might just be a memory implant used to control me."

Jacky cackles and slaps my arm.

"Oh god, you're a riot! The rest of them are so serious. Let's just have fun tonight," she says, brightening up. "Are you going to be my friend out there?"

"What should I do?"

"Just watch my back," she smiles and touches the tip of my nose with her wet fingertip. She sashays her way back to the table.

"I can't believe what I'm hearing. 'True communism?' What does that even mean?" Ben is saying at the table, now cleared for after-dinner, which means ashtrays and more beers. "You don't honestly believe that humans are capable of sharing equally without some iron fist around their necks, do you? How many more millions have to die before we realize it doesn't work?"

"Wow! So says the white male who has done nothing but benefit off of the backs of brown children!" Maya retorts, a bit drunk now. "What about capitalism? Are you really going to make the argument that millions haven't died in wars waged by the military-industrial complex? Do I have to point out the American for-profit prison system? Don't be naive!"

"Look, all I'm saying is we need to find a system that works for everyone. But it's impossible for it to work perfectly across the board," Ben says soothingly, trying to keep his cool, his cheeks flushed and red.

"What did I miss?" I ask Jergen as he looks on with a mixture of curiosity and disdain.

"Same thing people have been fighting about for the last century," he comments. "Cheers."

I take a long drink and try to catch up.

"Communism breeds corruption. Competition breeds creativity and innovation. What was the last great invention to come out of a red state? Hmm? I'll wait."

Ben sits back, smug and self-satisfied. He might be right, but no one at the table likes him.

"Go to Cambodia, where I first thought of the concept of Ben's Shoes. You know what I saw there? Besides opportunity? I saw the greatest resource a country has being sold out to the highest bidder. And sadly, it doesn't take much. You can't understand how life can be so cheap. So don't talk to me about a social system that looks out for its own. That's bullshit."

"He's a complete twat, but he's right," Claire murmurs in agreement. "I spent a year there, teaching in Siem Reap. All those orphans. You see tons of them. In Cambodia, if you have white skin, prepare to be ambushed. It breaks your heart to push past these children. But that's all they know, and it doesn't help to have a heart. Then all you're doing is teaching them that begging is good for their lives. They should be reading and writing and learning arithmetic, but instead, their parents have them digging through garbage, because that's the only way they can survive. How does a civilization that rich and powerful fall apart? Civilizations are such fragile things."

“So it’s just a dog-eat-dog world, right?” Maya says sarcastically, not one to be beat. “I guess we’re all supposed to just kill each other and let the strongest survive.”

“I didn’t invent the laws of nature,” Ben retorts. “But I know the futility of trying to reinvent them.”

I glance at Jacky, who rolls her eyes and pretends to shoot herself.

“Great! The white male wants to talk about nature! Have you ever considered the possibility that you don’t really know? Maybe it’s not our nature, but the system that’s the problem! What if we try a matriarchal system for a change?”

“Please don’t start that ‘Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus’ crap. You can’t really believe a female president is going to make us all hold hands and sing Kumbaya.”

“Ohhh, I get it. You have woman problems, don’t you?” Maya says, narrowing her eyes, ready to make it personal.

“He does,” Claire confirms, and ignores Ben shooting her with lightning bolts. “Mommy problems as well.”

“They used to date,” Serena says, filling us in.

“Ohhh.”

“If it isn’t Marx, it’s Freud,” Ben sighs in exasperation. “Who do you want to pull out next? Mr. Rogers? Big Bird?”

“You disgust me!” Maya hisses, ignoring Paprika’s attempts to simmer her down. “I bet you cream in your pants whenever you hear Candidate Dim say that all a lesbian needs is a good fuck!”

“He said that?” I ask, appalled.

“He inferred it!” Maya cries on the trembling edge of hysterics.

“*Puto malo!*” Paprika growls and grips her dinner knife in a way that makes us all edgy.

"Okay, that's enough!" Serena bellows her way in. "My goodness, who's the enemy here? We're here to stop Candidate Dim! We have to stay united!"

"She's right. I'm sorry. I think I'm a little drunk," Ben says sheepishly. "I should probably just head back to Cool Shade."

"That's all right, man. No worries," we murmur, but no one tries to change his mind.

"Ayyyy, let's go find some music and dancing," Paprika says with a laugh.

"Thank god!" Jacky says. "Let's make a toast!"

"What should we toast to?"

"How about to Laos?" I suggest.

"To Laos!"

The night gains momentum as rounds of tequila find their way into our hands. We find a strip of Tiki bars brightly lit along the river. The torches dance to the music, and our eyes glitter in the dark. A bonfire grows on the shore, and fire-jugglers take turns whirling the wheel of fire to the delight of childlike faces. People drift in from out of nowhere, travelers and Lao guys riding in on motorbikes. Now it's a party. Bare feet on grass. Serena brings over a Lao guy holding my Nikes, worried I'll lose them. "They're yours, mate," I tell him, adopting a Strayan accent in this climate, certain I'll never return to civilization again. The Lao guy takes his sandals off, gives them to me, and we hug at the bonfire.

Midnight comes, and it's curfew. The whole city shuts down. Stores are closed, radios silenced, loiterers and pedestrians subject to harassment by authorities with black guns. There's no traffic of any kind. The only thing moving is us, flying now in a *tuk-tuk*, gripping the metal bars like a roller coaster, whooping and taunting the laws of the land, barely missing stray dogs, which rule the night.

Where the hell are we going? Did someone give this guy directions, or did we all just hop in and let him spirit us through the night? The windowless vehicle leaving you naked in the arms of the jungle, which is evidently loud, filled with laughter, and moves in a cloud of booze.

We pull up in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by the threat of too many trees. There is the sense of the jungle still surrounding us, the exit onto the highway without lanes going back to town, now standing in front of this abandoned warehouse in the middle of the woods. Without lights of any kind, we follow the techno pounding through the nightclub, or whatever this place is, some industrial smell still lingering, a mixture of paint-thinner and ethanol, beer, and jungle juice splashed all over the concrete floor.

In the dark, the Lao guys lean about all relaxed, even in the nightclub, with curious stares and hair that looks on the verge of being styled with a dab of wax that never comes. At the core of a Lao guy's sexual prowess is a shiny, freshly washed motorbike. These pull up in abundance, some with exterior neon making them fly futuristic into the sleepy jungle night. Girls pull up as well with their own motorbikes, their long hair appearing to have never felt the touch of scissors, trailing behind them like silken waterfalls, a thousand times combed and spiced with coconut oils and adorned with tropical flowers. If a girl wants a fling, she comes to the nightclub at the edge of the highway and moves the white blossom in her hair from right to left.

Inside the frenzy of digital light, we're just ions dancing around in space. Whoops! I knock over a bottle. The boys don't seem to mind and invite Jergen and I to a drink. It's a mix of whisky, tequila, and rum, plus some Red Bull. I don't know what the fuck this is. One of these guys is now yelling in my ear. I think it's English, but he might just be shouting noises. My mind is only able to hold focus on one thought at a time, this rhythmic sea of girls around us. Somewhere

in there are our friends. I forget we even have friends. These girls just dance, smiling with black lustrous hair, moving in a way that is fun, almost innocent, beautiful, exotic, pure. I'm getting dizzy.

"Holy shit, it's him!" Maya cries grabbing us with wide startled eyes. I glance up at Jergen, who uses his long neck to periscope above the crowd.

"Who?"

"Candidate Dim," Jergen confirms with a solemn nod. "He's in the V.I.P. having a very private party. It looks like one bodyguard, three girls, and a bucket of fried chicken."

"He's on a pussy run!" I gasp, and stare wide-eyed at Maya, who mirrors back at me with a mix of shock and displeasure at my phrasing.

"We have to stop him!" Maya cries, more frantic than resolute, and takes another shot at the little bar. She starts heading off to search out Serena, Claire, Jacky, and Paprika, who were last spotted somewhere on the dancefloor. We would be able to spot them easily if the club weren't packed to the point of mocking a fire code. The building is small enough empty that if Candidate Dim was on the V.I.P. couch, I could reasonably attempt to fling a record at him from the DJ booth at the other end and expect to hit his head maybe three times out of 10.

"Wait!" I shout at Maya, paused at the edge of a mass of gyrating bodies. "I'm going to do it."

"Do what?" she yells back.

Jergen lowers his neck, both of them looking me in the eyes.

"I'm going to throw a drink in his face."

"Are you crazy?!" Maya shouts, her face a jumble of fear and confusion as I make my way towards the V.I.P. lounge.

I pause and turn around, meeting her dead in the eye.

"Bitch, I might be."

I push through the innocent 1950s-era style of dancing where fellas grab your ladies and ladies grab your fellas and head on down to the middle of the floor on roller skates. I feel the music change to slow jazz, and suddenly there comes this other world where singles don't grope each other in the corner or grind their genitals to the beat. People remain mostly clothed, despite the lack of air conditioning in the tropical heat. The lights are on and everyone has a drink. The guys smile their best smiles and old friends have a few laughs. Girls dance with their girlfriends and guys sit on the side and watch the girl of their fancy. After a few shots of liquid courage, the guy sidles up beside her, smiling to himself as his friends laugh from the sidelines and cheer him on. He looks over and sees her smile, and she meets him from the corners of her eyes, shyly glancing back at her girlfriends, who all watch giddily, clutching each other's hands, telling her to go on and do it, do it, do it! His smile grows and he dances a little closer, and by the end of the night their hips graze against the mystery of each other's fabric, they have seven children, all of them seated on a motorbike cruising through a free-for-all of traffic.

The nostalgia of better times fades as I see Candidate Dim sitting in the back of the club, yukking it up with a trio of young ladies, each of them in desperate need of chicken and dough. They betray none of these feelings as they smile and clink glasses from a bottle of pink champagne, a vintage he must've brought himself for such an occasion. The muscle beside him stands erect in the black suit, seeming to never move his shaved head, an oddity in this atmosphere of strobe and disco beat.

Just as I reach the edge of the dancefloor, the music cuts off. The spotlight turns on. Bodies freeze and pause with anticipation, disappointment, confusion. A microphone crackles and squeaks, and the voice of an emcee attempts to do a big Vegas-style introduction, and

then, when the microphone fails, resorts to hoarsely shouting to get everyone's attention. The crowd begins to form under his direction into something of a circle with an empty space carved out in the middle.

Jacky whirls me around from out of nowhere, and I see her eyes glittering with a craziness I hadn't seen before. "It's a dance contest!" she cries and grabs me by the wrist so hard that it hurts and pulls me towards the circle where the emcee is announcing the prizes. The spotlight moves onto each prize as the rankings are announced. Prize #1 is a shiny, new, electric blue motorbike! (No one ever wins that prize.) Prize #2 is a brand-new electric fan, complete with oscillating head! There is a real surge of excitement over the second, more attainable, prize. Who couldn't use a new fan?

"I want that bloody fan!" Jacky screams and jumps up and down, whooping her heart out. I feel a little afraid of what will happen next.

The DJ plays the beat, and one girl is shoved into the slaughter by her girlfriends. She puts her hand over her mouth and trembles with classic girl-next-door modesty and makes a timid attempt to dance. The whole club cheers her on good-naturedly and watches as she tries another little move, something happening with her feet, a terrific disaster. She covers her face and edges back into the crowd.

Next, a ladyboy marches into the fray like "let me show these bitches how to work it!" and out of nowhere, and without invite, begins showing off the goods, strutting back and forth around the circle, not so much dancing as taking advantage of this moment to display herself on parade, snapping her fingers and moving her neck, spinning, and wiggling pixie fingers at the shy girl still recovering from her moment of public humiliation.

Finally, Jacky decides she's had enough. "I'll show these girls how to win a bloody dance contest!" she roars, and in she comes with a look of

fire, body movements of a snake. She finds contact with the camera, wherever it is, staged in this cinematic moment of white girl magic, when time freezes and the bartender overfills the drink, the DJ nods with approval and puts on the perfect beat, and the whole club comes alive with the rapture of this heat, this moment like an out-of-body experience, everyone in attendance touched by the transcendence that comes with forgetting oneself completely, in the spotlight and in front of the crowd, in love with yourself not out of vanity, but something purer, more powerful. In this moment, you are alone with an entire room and feel every eye upon you. They can't breathe and neither can you, but you float on a levitating stage, and soon all you see is hair flying and kip raining from the air, her body now above us, crawling on a glass ceiling. The monsoon clouds burst and the rivers overflow. The levees break and Maya, goddess of wind, hurricanes in with that bi-curious smile and Latin rhythm programmed into her hips, grabbing Paprika and the two of them take over, salsaing in a way these people have never seen before, or anyone for that matter, on this side of the hemisphere. Claire joins in grabbing hands with the shy girl, and Serena swings in with the ladyboy, and pretty soon the dance contest develops into the nocturnal spectacle of a lesbian conga line.

Clearly things have been turned up a notch, perhaps to a level of no return. They've seen too much; it's too much to unsee. These Westerners with their lack of shame and ample cleavage just changed the game forever. An epidemic of girls stripping for oscillating heads takes over the country, shattering that old image still hanging from the wall of the bar, the Beer Lao calendar featuring a beautiful Lao girl who looks on from an idyllic field dressed in something form-fitting, but traditional, ready to bring her man a cold one. The revolution starts suddenly before anyone can even ascertain where, how and when the change began. The contest turns the disco into a strip club, girls taking

their clothes off for electric fans, and pretty soon, political freedom. Finally, they'll call it art. Soldiers raid the place and confiscate every electric fan from here to Vientiane. The captain rides out on the shiny electric-blue motorbike.

The emcee concedes the victory to Jacky, looking like he just came in his pants. She takes her spoils with satisfaction, holding the box in her arms, and in the spirit of sisterhood, hands the fan over to the shy girl, who covers her face, bows, and comes in for the hug.

"Damn it! He gave us the slip!" I cry, coming back to my senses. "Candidate Dim's gone!"

We look back at the V.I.P. area. There's nothing there except an empty champagne bottle and a greasy bucket surrounded by napkins.

"It's all right," Maya says, putting a hand on my shoulder. "We'll get him in Vang Vieng."

"Damn right, we will. Let's party!"

For the rest of the night, we're treated like legends. Every table wants to drink with us. I seem to be running on the power of my subconscious awareness and Red Bull, a sugar-rum autopilot. But my heart tells me through the noise and the fog that it's her. I see her. My True Love, here at the club! Isn't that her in the white capris? Or is that her in the pink? That long black hair, those sensual lips, the curves of her body. Those eyes darker than the darkest darkness. We dance together for a song and a half before I place my hands on her hips, and barely notice when she gently removes them and places a little more space between our bodies.

"I'm not who you think I am," I say to her with a level of creepiness that even in my drunken state I admonish myself for.

Suddenly I feel two hands whirl me around and My True Love escapes me like a squid. It's Jacky, completely wasted, going on wildly about some spanking contest.

“None of these boys can spank me hard enough!” she cries out.
“Spank me, baby! Give me all you’ve got!”

I turn and see My True Love making for the exit with her chubby girlfriend on the other side of the dancefloor. Jacky is still bent over waiting for me to give her a big old smack on the ass. The next thing I see is My True Love’s white capris and long black hair flowing out the door. I chase her down and confess everything to her in the parking lot, her sitting on a motorbike with a pink helmet on, her chubby friend looking on from the back.

“Baby, it’s me! I didn’t know I’d find you here. I mean, here in Laos. It’s me, Sam! Remember? Blonde hair, blue eyes. You used to say my eyes looked like the sky? I know it sounds crazy, but they took my body. Jack has my real body! So does this mean you’re not with Jack?”

“I go home,” she says with fearful eyes.

“Home? Why go home? No, stay, stay,” I plead, touching her hand gently as she white-knuckles her handlebars.

“I must go,” she softly insists.

“I don’t even know that girl! She’s just a friend! Please stay with me. I love you.”

A look of pity that says, “Let’s talk about this when you’re sober or less insane.”

“Thank you,” she says and rides off with flashing lights and a small puff of exhaust into the night.

I kneel in the gravel to weep. Vomit spews out of my nostrils instead.

Chapter Nine

Chinese X-Files

They tried to kill me on the bus. Poison gas. A cocktail of fumes and freezing cold air. You could feel the vibrato on everyone's nose-hairs. Engine dead. Keys gone. The door lingering ajar. The driver must've done the job and left the gun behind, so to speak. Wasn't he wearing sunglasses and steering us all through the dark? I was on a crazy leg of travel going 48 hours nonstop, rushing to prevent an assassination in Tibet. The constant inhalation of carbon monoxide left me fatigued and my senses dulled. The overnight bus to Lijiang was ripe with foot odor and tinged with a faint humidity I found disturbing. The bus dropped us off in the middle of nowhere. I was expecting the gates of an ancient city spreading open to the dawn. Instead all I saw was a vacant lot, orange streetlights, and a blue sunrise revealing only a colored fog. Passengers stumbled sleepily into the chilly morning finding their way towards headlights. I saw their faces chortling merrily as they rode past in shotgun. As the last man got off the bus, I started to panic. Where are you going? Let me go with you! Don't leave me here!

I was in the middle of the parking lot. A shroud of mist covered the exits. Suddenly, a white van pulled up in front of me. The sliding

door flew open. Orders were barked and I felt myself being yanked into the van. The van peeled out of the parking lot. I heard the ominous door slamming shut behind me. My captors wore matching ruby-red goose down jackets from some factory that pumped them out by the billion. I was seated in the back seat of the van with an agent on either side of me. A third, the leader, addressed me in Mandarin. They were going to harvest my organs. My hands were tied! They were using an ancient snake technique using my own pressure point system against me! I soon felt the wool cap slipping over my eyes, to keep my head warm, preparing me to meet Mr. Hypodermic.

I heard the sliding door open again. I was pushed out onto the gravel. Speeding off, the van disappeared into the morning dust as I removed the wool cap from my eyes. I turned and saw the gates of Old Town glowing in the rising sun. I knew without being told that I had arrived in Lijiang.

As I walked through the gate, the sun trickled over the stone walls and illuminated the alleyways. I felt as though I had entered a dream. Everything was made of stone and wood. Streams cut along the sides of the street and glowed with goldfish and aquatic greenery. The sun rose and sparkled over a bridge which arched in a scene of fantastic ancient Chinese buildings with stone-shingle roofs. Everywhere you listened was the sound of a babbling stream. You could look and see clouds of goldfish and birds chirping and the morning market beginning to bustle with women dressed in similar azure garments.

They seemed to be elements of another time. Or were they acting? I couldn't be sure, but surely my man was here sprinkled among the falconers, a bearded man with leather chaps who appears as if he has just strolled off the mountain of time. Or perhaps he'll be one of the ex-revolutionaries smoking cigarettes and offering children pony rides. The assassin or informant, or whoever I was to meet, may also be

hidden among the women and girls in their homespun dresses and bonnets the color of sky singing traditional folk songs in the square.

From a tea house overlooking the great expanse of stone-shingled rooftops, hills, and evergreens, I saw golden flashes of late-November willows among the old streets and a great snowy-white mountain in the distance beyond the walls of Old Town. There, where the mountain sat, was the West, and beyond that, Tibet, where the signs were telling me to go. Something big was going to happen. Something frighteningly deep. An abyss ready to open. One hundred million bodies on the ground. I stumbled upon a bike shop and saw the sun descend upon a rusty black steed. The name on the bike was "Excalibur." Could there be a clearer sign?

"Pump it up," I said to the shopkeeper, who I both pitied and envied in his cheer. He had no idea of the coming storm.

I flew through endless fields of grain; the mountain was a beacon of white. There was no turning back. The time to turn back was yesterday. Would I see my own face blown off by the spiral of a sniper's bullet? Would the little fragments twirl in the bright blue sky before landing in the soft grass and spraying the earth red? Would I lie down in golden fields, searching for Eternal Spring? Voices and laughter echoed from down the road. I skidded to a stop.

My heart raced in the stillness, the twitter of a thousand opening birds senseless in the afternoon sunshine. The village was abandoned. Perhaps it was never really there. Like a nuclear holocaust years after, the forest recaptured human memory and absorbed it with her tendrils, flowers grew out of broken glass, and barbed wire made love to vine. Three boys knelt in the middle of the road shooting marbles, looking like they were from the days of revolution. The red bandanas hung from their necks like dripping blood.

"*Ni hao!*" I called in an attempt to not freak them out.

“Hello! Hello!” they called out merrily in echo, and my heart froze. My face was stunned. How did they know?

They vanished into the wind, laughing like ghosts.

“Come back here!”

I dropped the bike and ran, but they were already gone.

The trees thinned and I arrived at a clearing. I paused and took in the surroundings. There was something vaguely familiar about it. Something inordinately strange. There was no one there. Not a single resident or passerby. No builders or overseers. Just the half-constructed mass of gravel alleys and buildings being put together like a puzzle from the lumber waiting about in piles. But I’d seen this before. I’d been in this town.

Suddenly I understood. I walked up in shock to the nearest structure and scrutinized the door frames and stared open-mouthed at the empty rooms inside. The window frames were like empty jigsaws; the sitting rooms were ready for decor. All of the building materials were made to look rustic and old, perfectly deconstructed, this Disneyland still in skeletal form. I threw up water and gasped out, “Those crazy bastards! They’re building a new Old Town!”

Click.

“You wouldn’t listen, would you? You couldn’t keep your nose where it belonged,” I heard a familiar voice saying behind me.

I whipped around and saw Jack dressed up as a yak herder with a long fake beard, chewing a dried yak penis like an old cigar, a black pistol in his hand aimed right at me.

“You thought you were going to move to Old Town, didn’t you?” Jack jeered. “Disappear from the world and live like a yak herder?”

I dry-swallowed.

“Just tell me one thing, Jack. How much of this is real?”

“You’re projecting meaning onto matter, Sam! Nothing is real! Only what you believe! These buildings are nothing but wood, just as you and I are a spiral of molecules. We die now, we die a hundred years later, it makes no difference.”

“You’re starting to sound like your friend, Hey.”

“You’re not supposed to say his name,” Jack said automatically, and then caught himself with a scornful smile. “So you met the White Jesus, did you?”

“It’s over, Jack. I know everything about R.E.I.N., Point Omega, and the Tibetans. Your friend told me you were planning to get a little work done. What’s the matter, Jack? Feeling insecure? You always were one for the enhancements, but whatever upgrades they’ve got waiting for you in Thailand won’t save you this time. I’d spend my money elsewhere if I were you. A lawyer for starters, considering you’re about to be locked in a military prison for the next century.”

“Oh, Sam,” Jack simpered, shaking his head. “They pumped you full of intuition and forgot all the sense. Think, Sam! Think! Wherever you go, I go. Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

“Yeah,” I growled, steel-faced. “You suffer from separation anxiety.”

Jack groaned in frustration.

“You just don’t get it yet, do you Sam? Don’t you ever look in the mirror and wonder why you don’t recognize your own face? Doesn’t it seem strange to you that you barely remember last week, let alone your entire life? Killing you will be an act of mercy. Kind of takes the fun out of it. But don’t worry; I’ll take care of that girl they’ve got waiting for you in Thailand. Surprised, Sam? You thought I didn’t know? I know everything. We’re connected, you and I.”

“You son of a bitch, if you touch her. . .”

“The irony is that when she sees me, she’ll think I’m you. Now why would that be, Sam? Hmm? And these pills they keep giving you.

They're for what exactly? To keep you in telepathic communication with the Motherboard? Wake the hell up, Sam. I'm being your friend here. Interpol's got you so blind you can't even see the obvious. Remember, Sam? The cold metal table. Lasers burning your genitals. A face you've never seen before staring right back at you."

I tried to keep him talking, edging toward a pebble I could kick up right into the hole of his gun, making him backfire.

"For your information, I stopped taking my pills weeks ago. Flushed them back in Beijing. You think I didn't know I've got a brain implant? We're both trapped souls, Jack. Who are we kidding? Tracked no matter where we go, recording all we think and say. You'll never stop running, just so you know that, and it'll be me that gets you. No one else. Just me."

"That's funny. I seem to be the one holding destiny in my hands," Jack smirked, his eyebrow twitching. "This time I'm just going to kill you. I thought about relishing the moment, but I know you, Sam. Soft as you've become, I've learned not to romanticize the end of our special relationship. After this, I'll finally be free. Free of you, Sam. Did you think you were the only one who wanted freedom? How incredibly arrogant and self-centered of you! With you gone, I'll be one archnemesis lighter; my subsequent success in this global conspiracy will push me further into the dark world, and I'll escape the arms of international justice and even the public eye; I'll somehow go on living out my days carrying out other missions, even as my personal life crumbles into disarray and my relationships suffer because of my endless lies on top of the soul-deadening decay that comes with the compromise I have made with the devil himself. Well, that's the way it goes," Jack concluded, cocking his pistol. "Goodbye, Sam."

Before Jack could fire, a black sedan with tinted windows bowled him over, tossing him into the air like a rag doll. Jack hit the gravel

with a sickening thud and rolled down a ravine and was washed away. The black sedan crashed into a tree. I stood in shock at the smoldering wreckage only for a moment before ducking behind a bush to get a better view.

The door popped open and a morose-looking Chinese woman in an all-black skirt and blazer with smart-looking heels and black frames stepped out of the car. On the other side, a little more gingerly, a Chinese version of David Duchovny removed himself from the wreckage.

"Nice driving, Mo-dah," I heard the woman saying.

"I toh you, I cannot steer you give me blowjob!"

They seemed completely disinterested in the vehicular manslaughter they had just committed. Perhaps Moulder was coming right at that moment and missed the impact.

"What so important, Suk-Li? There no signs of paranormal behavior. Just another housing development."

Chinese Scully stood in vantage at the edge of a cliff, looking past the ramshackle expanse of stone-shingle roofing to the glimmering rows of solar paneling. Her deadpan voice fluttered, "No Mo-dah. This not just another housing development. This an American suburb in China."

Sneaking closer through a tangle of foliage, I saw what appeared to be a UFO landing in the valley. The organism remained contained, but it was ready to spread across the Chinese landscape, crawling with condominiums and flamboyantly curved streetlights, spotless sidewalks, and perfectly manicured lawns. The whole scene was ripe for anxiety pills and dog-walking. Midrange luxury sedans were sitting in driveways; the condos were painted a chic Heather gray. I covered my mouth to keep from screaming.

"The American dream live in China now."

As Suk-Li completed her analysis, a drone hovered above a dog taking a shit on the sidewalk.

“We always become like our enemies in the end,” Moulder mused.

The two suits stood in silence as I stealthily made my exit.

I sat lotus-style in a pagoda staring at the reflection of the snowy mountain on the lake, searching for that feeling of oneness, that feeling of division gone, the overwhelming sense of liberation and clarity and rebirth that is the epiphany I am still waiting for once I know for sure that Jack is dead. But Jack’s not dead. He can’t die. Wherever I go, he goes. I can feel him looking through my eyes.

The young cyclist sitting across the way laughed happily as he turned the pages of Spider-Man. He leaned back, bringing the comic up to his face and became the face of Eddie Brock, half-consumed by that insidious bluish-black slime, that alien parasite that can bestow unthinkable power. The laughter of schoolgirls echoed in the distance. A young boy and his monstrous bodyguards, two Tibetan mastiffs, looked out across the sparkling lake.

“He’s going after her,” I heard myself utter, rising in a daze. “He’s going to pretend to be me. But why would she believe him unless. . .”

The cyclist turned the page and like a mirror, I stared at Sam’s reflection with Jack’s dark eyes.

“We switched bodies,” I whispered, haunted, and stumbled off. The cyclist lowered his comic book and gave me a goodbye smile, the whole lakeside ablaze in orange and pink light. I tripped off the pagoda into the fire-burst of golden autumn and orange down the stairways to a blinding sunset where yellow leaves floated upon the mirror of water at my feet. I crossed a bridge in the middle of the lake. The trees stood like black figures on the shining horizon.

Chapter Ten

Vang Vieng

As soon as you arrive in Vang Vieng, you know you're there even without ever having been. There's no mystery about it as your van slows to a crawl and lightly honks girls in bikinis out of the way. Heaps of drunken Aussies roaming about in search of god knows what, phrases like "Get Fucked" and "I'm a Cunt" finger-painted in rainbow all over their bodies.

The protest against Candidate Dim broke down fairly quickly once it was announced he had gone on to Vientiane. A few zealots claimed they would follow him there and put up road blocks for some reason, but the mob soon dispersed and the morning got started as the first bottles of the day cracked open and plastic buckets were filled with liquid love.

"We'll protest him anyway," we cried, hoisting our buckets, convinced we had somehow won this exchange. It was a happy day for R.E.I.N. I never saw any of them again.

The sun is high; the air is warm. Jacky appears with another red plastic bucket sloshing about with four straws. We each take two and hit the bucket, sipping away like two honeybees on an overgrown blossom. The buckets are endless, a never-ending cocktail, a drinker's

mansion wrapped in plastic, leading toward your final transformation as a beast. The idea is to get smashed immediately. Soon enough, I'll be dancing around in my trunks, and there's nothing I can do about it. It's only a matter of time before the juice hits me and makes me understand this.

"Stop looking around! You've got to feel it!" Jacky cries.

"I am feeling it!" I say, and start chugging the bucket over the rim.

"If I don't have anyone to dance with, I need you to be my dancing partner!" she says over the music, never missing a beat.

"I'll do my best!" I say, and do my best impression of whatever Paprika and Maya are doing next to us, laughing happily in matching sunglasses, tangoing up on a platform.

There beside the sparkling river is the lush green and clear blue sky of a summer that never ends. Here and there I catch glimpses of that crazy vision: a place of music, sunshine, and peace welcoming all people, free from class or occupation, a communist paradise with each man to his own and all as one, here on the river Vang Vieng. Here comes the traveling man and the wandering woman, in perfect harmony, anarchy, strangers, friends, bedfellows, soulmates who arrive with no invitation needed, no reason to live, and therefore none to die for either, which to the members of R.E.I.N. means to simply live without regret, in defiance of time, ignorant of death.

None of us will ever die here. Not us. We'll grab a bucket and pour it back endlessly as if trying to make ourselves spout out the truth in a confession somewhere down a long line of bars so far you can't even remember what time it is. And finally at the height of all the endless chatter, the noise of screaming conversations, laughing and yelling and being brought to the most basic words that still contain any meaning, the aping of primitive language only to say, "Hey! Let's procreate!" The music so loud you can't even hear anything. You simply smile at the

one across from you. She's dancing and acting to your surprise sort of reserved, aware, looking for someone. She smiles to herself and shakes her head back and forth, dancing without having to try to be sexy; she just is. She puts her hands in the air and twists her hips, claps her hands, pumps her fist, and laughs as you grind up on her. Where will we be when the sun dies? They throw you in until finally you feel nothing, fly into the water, land in a tube, and float away to the next bar. . .

Soon we're adrift in the river of floating people; all of them, like me, holding their precious drinks, splashing along in tubes, gently paddling toward the ropes cast nearby, grabbing hold, and letting the bartenders pull them up. It's a strict catch and release system. You let yourself be caught, and when you're ready to move on, you release yourself. There are several ways of doing this. The preferred methods are by zipline, trapeze, or rope swing. Not all recommended for beginners, of course. You can almost tell how long a guy has been traveling based on one extraordinary dive. Most people land badly, being unskilled, drunk, and overambitious. No one seems content with a simple cannonball into the water unless they're still sober. No one is sober. Once the punch has them, they go flying in at all angles and directions, and the splash, while appearing painful, is completely drowned out by the blasting music, making it even more surreal as people dance around with drunks awkwardly flying into the water behind them.

So much color and inspiration. What would Mr. Yellow have thought of this? Girls with tanned bodies laid out in the sun with flowers painted on their thighs and stomachs. A sea of absinthe. More finger-painted messages. "Jesus was a Jew" on a freckle-faced Irishman. "Paint is Gay" on another guy's back. What are these? Zen koans? I used to have the power to discern such messages. Now they only point me to my drink. How many have I had? I notice I've lost Jacky. There

she is, shouting the happy cries of "Oh my god! What are you doing here?" Some guy she knows. Looks like an old flame. I decide to fall off the planks when I feel a hand clasp my shoulder.

"Jergen!"

I turn and see my fellow agent holding a beer, still dripping wet from the river. I almost hug him I'm so glad to see him. A group of singing Brits passes by.

"Where the hell have you been? Candidate Dim's on his way to Vientiane! We've gotta stop him!"

"Stop him? From doing what?" Jergen asks blissfully, drunk and possibly high on ecstasy.

"Damn it! You've been compromised. Don't even tell me. I already know who. Where is he?"

"Candidate Dim?"

"The agent who gave you the pill. Was it Jack? Dressed up as one of these raver kids, I bet."

"I got it from Waldo."

"Waldo?"

"Yes, there he is. Over there."

I turn and look past the volleyball court and see him, that nefarious double agent handing out blue pills to make agents forget their mission. He's dressed from top to bottom like that ubiquitous beatnik, hiding amongst the crowd of half-naked bodies, that red and white striped shirt, glasses, and beanie. In a way, he was our teacher, the one who taught us everything we knew about hiding in plain sight. I hate the idea that I now have to take him out, but I decide to wait until he's done motorboating.

"What lies inside the mind of a person who packs their luggage with a Waldo disguise?" I ask Jergen as we watch Waldo pour

shots from a bottle of vodka surrounded by Swedish swimsuit models, burying his face in their tits.

“A genius we cannot understand,” Jergen says.

“It’s too late, isn’t it?” I ask him.

“It’s still early,” Jergen replies, glancing at a wristwatch that isn’t there, replaced by a tan line.

“I meant for us. This dream. Vang Vieng.”

“It’s happening already. Look.”

I follow his long point finger towards the river where already the evidence of Candidate Dim’s presence is found: a fast food burger wrapper.

We walk over to the water and fish it out with a stick, ignoring the splashing bodies around us, the partiers dancing and trying to throw each other in.

“That’s one of his,” Jergen confirms, eyeing the specimen hanging from the end of the stick. “Tarantula Burger from the looks of it.”

“So it begins,” I say solemnly, taking a moment to soak in the as-yet unspoiled beauty of the river, the painterly reflections of splashy sunlight sparkling blue and green.

“It had already begun, long before we came here. Trust me. There’s nothing we could’ve done,” Jergen comments prophetically.

“What are you talking about? Are you saying he’s—”

“No, I’m not talking about Candidate Dim. I’m talking about us. This revolution. We never had a chance. All we had was a moment in history. To unite and stand against someone, to fight for something. A way to reassure ourselves that there was good in this world, and that we could stand there and fight for it. But what is good? Are we good because we say so? What gives us the right to say what we are and what he is? We have no foundation, no history, no mythology. We look at the

world as a narrative of uprising, a denial of gods, a protest against our forefathers. We have no ancestry. We have no link. All we have is this blank sheet of paper that says 'Utopia,' and a pencil we give ourselves to draw it.

"What do you think guides us but our highest esteems, this worship of freedom? Are we not slaves to our own desires? How can we know purpose when morality becomes an invention of our mind? We pick and choose at our own convenience. Our hunger becomes a reward. Candidate Dim and all the others like him have already won because they believe in something, as shallow and corrupt as it is, while we deny any absolutes and embrace the transient. Our truth is just a feeling. Soon we will be buying Bug Burgers and moving on to the next outrage. But when the revolution is co-opted and branded into the next commercial catchphrase, don't give credit to their overwhelming strength. Instead weep over our crippling weakness. Nihilism is dead, and we have killed it."

We stand there by the shade tree watching the scene of afternoon delight pass by carefree while at our backs lies the hot intrusive breath of apocalypse.

"I thought you were supposed to be all carefree and happy on that stuff," I say finally.

"I'm Norwegian. This is me being happy."

A little later, Jergen disappears to get another drink and doesn't return. "I need some air," I say to myself. Then I realize I'm outside.

A Lao guy hands me a rope, and without thinking, I swing. The sudden splash into the water snaps me out of my daze. I grab a stray tube and glide away in the flow of the current. I lie back and close my eyes, no longer sure what belongs to me. My soul, my body, my mind. I'm just another note in the music, written upon the radiant sheets, all these floating donuts playing melody, dotting a river of sheet music as

we pass in a stream. I suddenly want to escape, find a sense of peace, become a monk, and receive enlightenment under a Buddha tree. How can I deny my mission without a sense of regret? Fishers of men lift me out of the waters. A cloud passes over and darkens the sun.

I feel her hands suddenly spin me around, but as I'm already spinning, I dip into a windmill and almost break my neck. Jacky pulls me up onto my feet and shouts so I can hear.

"HAVING FUN?"

I feel myself nodding, floating in the air. My smile stretches so wide it feels like my cheeks are about to tear. My teeth grind against each other in a ghastly fashion.

Did Waldo spike my drink?

I turn back and see him at the bar, his bespectacled face laughing at me.

Damn it! I've been compromised!

"LET'S GET YOU SOME WATER!" Jacky says, shouting so I can hear.

"OKAY!" I hear myself say, but there's only this beat that drives the symphony, that drives the life, that drives the whole damned river!

I'm afraid to leave now, feeling as if I have found the source of all this life around us, so beautiful, so idyllic, so crazy, wild, and free.

Water's a good idea. Pretty sure I'm dying.

"I'm sorry," I say to Jacky as we sit down and I chug a bottle of water.

"Sorry for what?"

"Making you do this. You go on. Have fun. I'll see you in the morning."

"I knew I'd have to take care of you."

"It was Waldo! He's a double agent! He's working for the feds!"

She touches my forehead, almost motherly, but drunker.

"You're such a nice boy. Why doesn't anyone try to keep you?"

"Do you want to dance?"

"No, let's do something better!" Jacky cries, eyes blazing. "Let's go mud-wrestle! Come on!"

She grabs my hand and off we go to the mud pits where a few friendly matches are already in play. Lao guys stand off to the side with buckets of water ready to make more mud. I squish on the scene like a jellyfish. It feels like I have no legs. I'm not talking landmines here. I resist the urge to rub it all over my body.

Jacky skips the warmup and approaches me, hands out in a convincing pose, daring me to make the first move. What am I supposed to do? Tackle her? She has no idea what I'm capable of. I make a little mudball instead and toss it at her feet, expecting this to lead to some amorous grappling. She charges like a rhino, scoops me in a judo toss, and stands over my fallen body like Muhammad Ali.

"I dated an MMA fighter," she boasts.

I execute a takedown, which she blocks impressively, and pretty soon we're just rolling around in the mud. I feel her skin soft, cold, and wet, now growing warmer, that little space between our bodies which becomes no space, just her lying on top of me, that feeling as if the clay is baking, the fire raging in the kiln, and both of us know I'm not making a giraffe in there, but something seems to be taking form. She sits on top of me, dominating me, for what purpose, I still don't know. Are we traveling in the same direction, or have we just not found another place to go? I see her smiling less mischievously now. Her blue-green eyes capturing the sun, her dirty gold hair hanging down in my face.

Rising from the muck, we laugh as I chase her around from bar to bar and I stalk her as she weaves in and among the people, appearing like someone and then reappearing as someone else. Smiling, laughing at being caught, I almost have her cornered for a drink before she slips

away again. The last bar I see her at she's wearing a flower in her hair. A plumeria, her favorite. "Where'd you get that?" I ask her. "Someone gave it to me," she says and lets me hold her hand. Suddenly my hand is cold and wet. The moment she lets you take hold, she jumps in. You have to go with her.

I know she's impossible to capture, impossible to hold, like that flower you find on dilapidated streets that somehow seems like a glimmering door. The moment you pluck it, it's already faded. No way to return. We're separated on the river, and I find myself headed down the rushing rapids while she sails on slowly, looking back at me and shouting, "Where you going?" But I have no idea.

Jostled along some bumps downriver, I eventually find myself far from the noise, away from the bars and the people and the music. The echo of bass quickly fades into the stirring buzz of insects and babbling stream. I float on my tube down a channel surrounded by grass and canopied by jungle trees. The hidden hollow seems to send drones to spy on me. Dragonflies helicopter around me, taking photos and sending them back to headquarters. Even in a paradise formed from the imagination and desires of the heart, to defeat the lonely darkness, the bird-calls that inspire music as we make love beneath the archetypal windows, we still have this place of silence away and down the river where we belong.

How many of us disappear into the forest only to walk alone? Which of us will survive in the end? What echoes of genetic bravery are left in those wanderers? Surely they find someone to love and settle or simply leave and forever become a shadow on the wall. And then they grow up. Their seed becomes a legacy of lostness, and that desire to range across mountains and float down rivers stays deep in us still. What makes us wander from the fire? From the beat of the drums? Who's here in the presence of the silence of the trees, and the infinite

days when there is no one left? The universe keeps dividing itself in half, and yet the only world I live in is this one.

To impregnate a planet, the full moon of a woman, this alien invasion sending all of a million and one ships in three bursts of blast-off. White sails gliding through the water. How can I save the natives without destroying what we have? What appendages can we make when we don't like the future? Create a monster, and make amendments to the document until it reads as insane. Into the girl's arms, into an unraveling of culture, unwrapping myself from my own preconditioning. The last waning bows of sunshine stone me quietly that shimmering orange towards the horizon. Let me be the sky that remembers all pink and nostalgic while looking at something new.

I feel the jolt of my tube hitting and scraping the sloping side of the riverbank. I sit up, turn, and look around me and see a bamboo shack by the water, the limestone hills rolling in the distance, a dirt road that leads through the grasses back to Vang Vieng. A young woman tends the kitchen as her little boys play about in the front. A dog sits curled in the dirt, gnawing some bones, getting shooed by the broom on its backside as I approach the simple wooden table. I order spicy chicken salad, sticky rice, and beer. Bob Marley sings in the background and everything is calm. Everything seems still, the sun frozen there in the middle of the sky in its lazy descent behind the palm trees.

Chapter Eleven

Into the Himalayas

The edge of the mountains was as far as my ride would go. I slipped some yuans in his hand and watched as he drove off. I began my journey into the Himalayas, planning to hitchhike to the border or as close as I could get to it, but half-a-day passed before I saw another soul.

The sun was already starting to make its wintry descent when I saw another person at a fork in the road. He was wearing an old Chicago Bulls jacket and sitting cross-legged eating sunflower seeds on the grass. He had silver hair and walnut skin, tiny cracks of light in the places he smiled. He gestured for me to join him. It felt as if we were the only two people for 100 miles.

He asked me where I was going, how I was getting there. He lit up a cigarette as I pantomimed everything that would happen if I should fail to warn the Dalai Lama or prevent his killers from carrying out their mission.

Chicago Bulls guy nodded thoughtfully and put out his cigarette.

“Come with me,” he gestured. “Put on your coat. It’s going to be cold.”

I got on back and we rode higher and higher above the world. The wind cut like steel knives. Even after being huddled down in all my gear, fur-trimmed hood over my head, a pair of gloves on each hand, and a pair of mittens on top of those, my knuckles still caught frostbite from holding onto Chicago Bulls guy’s sides. Despite the cold, I was in awe at the raw beauty around me. I could almost touch the blue sky with my eyebrows and feel the snowy peaks with my hands.

Hours later, another fork in the road called us to rest. We stood on the edge of a cliff and urinated together, watching our streams dissipate into the ethereal nothingness, never touching the valley below. Carpets of pines spiked the distant mountains as far as the eye could see. An icy stream trickled behind us as we lay there looking up at the sky above. We were at the top of the tree line, and I was filled with that certain peace that comes with knowing you’re floating above the clouds where nothing can touch you.

Finally, we decided to get to it. This was the end of the road. Chicago Bulls guy was headed downhill while I would continue higher towards the snow. It was a sad goodbye as I realized that he had probably saved me from freezing to death. I tried to give him some gas money, a symbolic gesture, but he closed his eyes and shook his head. We waited there for the next rider to come. He would make arrangements with the next person who passed by. I’d have to save my yuans to pay the new guy.

There was almost no one on the road at this elevation. When the new guy approached and lifted his face mask, I got a bad feeling. He had a scraggly mustache and shifty eyes, a short and shitty character who seemed like he kicked dogs. But the likelihood of someone else passing before nightfall was starting to fall below zero. We’d already

waited more than an hour in the freezing cold to even see this guy, and I was pretty sure Chicago Bulls guy had plans other than riding into the glaciers.

Chicago Bulls guy worked out a deal with this new ride. He turned to me and explained the situation. He wished he could take me farther. He wished he could do more. "You've done more than enough," I told him, and in a sudden outburst of emotion, embraced him as he took me in his avuncular grasp and patted me on the back. All the while, the new guy was probably wondering, "Do these guys even know each other?"

With a shout in the air, Chicago Bulls guy wished me luck, and we buzzed off in different directions.

The new guy and I climbed higher and higher in elevation, and were surrounded by a panorama of glaciers and snow-white faces scraping the silver blue sky above the clouds. At this elevation, there was only one mud-brick shack to mark any sign of human existence, and it didn't look like anyone was home. We passed stacks of prayer rocks perfectly piled along the roadside; colored flags waving tangled and tattered by the wind, hanging on; surviving.

It was hard to judge the hour, for the sun seemed about even with us in altitude. There was no clear horizon. The mountain peaks rose majestically above the clouds, and as we began to descend through the boulders toward the downside of a rocky face, we flew down a narrow road, which wound about the mountain's slippery edges. It happened in slow-motion. The whole world seemed like it was tilting. It took me a moment to understand what was happening. The mountains seemed to have lifted themselves up from the roots of the earth and were turning themselves sideways. We were no longer in communication with the earth. We were falling.

I reached out my hand to stop the earth from spinning at the last moment. That moment of finally hitting the ground, I felt nothing. My hand shot out automatically, my gloved hands ripping into the screaming gravel, the crash and downhill ice-slide which now dragged us toward the howling edge. I dug into whatever I could grab as if I could somehow stop this, clawing with all my might until there was nothing left of the gloves except my fingers, the rush of my heart, and then darkness.

Time passed.

I came back to consciousness first. We were hanging halfway off the edge of a mountain. One foot more and we would've flown over the side and smashed into little red satin stains like torn ribbons across the side of the snowy mountain, a little fire burning for some yeti to spot in the distance and howl for our souls.

I crawled out from under first. The motorbike was cumbersome to lift off of us, pinned as we were beneath it and hanging halfway off the side of a cliff. I managed to pull myself out from under and helped the new guy who was trapped beneath the wheel, his legs dangling over the snowy death-drop.

I picked up the back end of the bike and struggled to keep it standing as the new guy rolled to safety, groaning and holding his sides. I rolled the motorbike a safe distance away from the edge and collapsed. I blacked out again.

When I came to, I felt wetness. My hand was bleeding profusely through the glove, my fingers caked with gravel mixing in with bits of bone. My coat and one leg of my jeans was slightly torn. It was mostly my hand that was the problem. Thankfully it was only flesh and blood; no skeleton was revealed.

Despite the miracle of our survival, the new guy seemed focused on the broken headlight, which fair enough, was smashed to smithereens.

He groaned and cursed and rubbed his elbow in pain. I felt numb from adrenaline. I wondered how long it would be before this would start to sting.

Trained agents know how to heal themselves in any situation. I deployed a roll of gauze and moved like an Eagle Scout. It was immediately soaked, but the pressure seemed sufficient to slow the loss of precious life fluid. I'd need plenty of that to make it out alive. My adrenaline would soon start to fall, and the cold would settle in with the setting of the sun, and the road would seem impossibly long, the horizon becoming a mirage.

"Are you okay?" I ventured to ask the new guy, who was now picking up his motorbike and starting off in a definite downhill direction.

He growled and grumbled like a flea-bitten mongrel, and it suddenly became very clear that he planned on abandoning me there. After all we'd just been through, I was expecting a little camaraderie. He pointed to the road, the road that seemed to fall into eternity, down to earth from the ridiculous height where we were, a point on the horizon, that southern point of light. He'll meet me there, his torn glove said.

I watched dumbfounded as he lit a fresh cigarette, limped down the hill on his dead motorbike, and like a ghost rode away into the horizon, transforming into a small puff of smoke on the tundra.

I guess the old man was right. It's good to carry stones in your pockets.

I tried to take a shortcut through a field of mountain scrub and sage. After an hour of effort, walking over and ducking under the stiff branches, I found myself fighting through wrestling holds like a half-nelson, stretched and hanging like a scarecrow ready to get double-teamed and clobbered by sprinting cacti, holding hands to double-clothesline me to the ground. Two hours later, I was back

where I started, the sun sinking lower behind the mountains, down to earth, the white city in the distance. I could feel the wolves closing in, silently howling. I thought of lying there under the starry evening and freezing to death in the snow. I thought of not being able to write my dying thoughts to My True Love, my dreams of walking up to that island bungalow where we fell in love quickly fading. I'd always believed that despite how long it had been, she would be there, waiting for me to come home, the two of us in the water beneath the cacao trees, making love to an audience of monkeys, her cries in my ear, her hand on my wet back as I fall backwards and ride a shooting star into space. Hang onto dismal hope as you lie surrounded in snow; drift off into the light with a blissful smile as the wolves drag your frozen carcass to a secret place.

Light shined like an oasis. I saw movement on the horizon. The glint and flash and trail of exhaust bringing life to desolation. Who sent you? Sign of mercy, gift of angels and blue dust, sparkling from some distant height, watching my travails. The truck approached me like a dream, fleshing-out metallic through the hazy mirage.

I waved frantically with my good hand; the SUV slowed and stopped to pick me up. It was painted gold, and inside was a cab full of Tibetans, each of their faces brown and rosy, smoking with the windows closed, cancer ranking fairly low on their list of concerns.

I began babbling and showed the driver my bloodily-wrapped nub. He nodded and I got in. The truck was warm and smoky and thawed my bones, which at that moment, seemed as stiff as ice.

As we drove off, the sun seemed to hang in the air just above the horizon, everything painted the golden color of peach and yellow hues. I saw a white city glowing in the distance as I came in and out of consciousness. The golden SUV sped like a shout echoing into the nothingness. I saw wild horses running across the plains.

Mountains loomed high and fields of yellow winter grass stretched into eternity. I listened to the driver chanting mantras, his voice deep and gravelly like the *Om*; a deep sense of comfort washed over me, and I passed out against the window. At the end of the horizon, in a glowing beam of light, the white city lay ahead, waiting for me.

We drove toward the golden horizon and passed that guy still coasting along on his battered motorbike with the dead engine. I saw him now with motoring goggles over his eyes, beard frozen with snot crusted all over his face.

"Fuck you, buddy!" I screamed out the window as we roared past, laughing like a maniac. The Tibetans looked at me puzzled, wondering what kind of psycho they'd just picked up off the road.

"You don't understand," I explained. "I know him. We crashed together. He left me for dead."

My explanations ran a mile long and swirled like cigarette smoke around the driver's head, who closed his eyes while driving somehow and in a deep gravelly voice chanted prayers of a mystical power and energy and lulled me into a deep sleep.

Hours must have passed. Then there was only darkness. The Tibetans dropped me off in front of a dusty little building at a one street trading post. There seemed to be little else but a canteen and a clinic for miles and miles, only the loneliness of the steppes beyond. I walked inside the clinic and called out to see if anyone is home. A college student, looking like the Nepali version of Doogie Howser, came down the staircase. Without asking questions, he started carefully unwrapping the bloodied gauze, now stained a deep burgundy. I winced and gritted my teeth as he pulled out bits of gravel with the precision of a jeweler.

My hand was wrapped in fresh white bandages. I took the painkillers he offered, and without words, without sound, gestured that I felt lightheaded, feverish. "Altitude sickness," Doogie said. "You

came up too fast. Your body has no oxygen. You'll be in pain for about a week. Maybe forever. Depends. Try to drink lots of fluids. . ."

Everything went dark again.

I found myself staring at a monastery sitting at the top of a mountain. I was standing at the gates greeted by a white yak. Beyond there were two Tibetan angels. One angel held a puppy. Another held the leash to a giant dog. "Won't you take a picture, brother?" they called.

Something about the symmetry and the way they called me brother made me not refuse. I held the leash and puppy and stood there smiling. It was the last photograph before I would be reincarnated into my next form. Just a keepsake you receive later on in Nirvana when you finally become enlightened and rescued from the endless repetition of life, living and dying over and over again until finally you realize that it doesn't matter. You're greeted at the gate by two fair-looking maidens with white dogs and a white yak and told to smile in "3... 2... 1!" And the shutter clicks and you're handed an uncountable amount of Polaroids, all taken at the end of one juncture of incarnation to another. In this photo, you are Chinese. In this photo, you are an American. In this photo, you are a Jew. In this photo, you are African. In this photo, you are a monkey. In this photo, you are a frog.

I walked amongst the spirits of limbo in this beautiful border town of living and dying. Everywhere I looked there were young monks, cheerful guides into the afterlife, walking about in burgundy robes and shaved heads, rosy cheeks and brown creases in white smiles. They folded their hands and bowed their heads in greeting as I passed by. I did likewise.

At the top of the hill, I arrived at the main temple. It was a grand old structure fortified by great white walls and dusted by blowing sands from the mountains surrounding. The expanse of the blue supernal seemed endless and touched the very realm of the

infinite itself. The endless plains of desolation between this life and the next stretched in eternal emptiness where wandering spirits flew about searching for a way to the next life.

Covered by a heavy brown curtain parted just in the middle, I walked into a sanctuary full of older monks seated and chanting meditations within the incense-burning darkness. The great hall vibrated with a deep rumble of meditating monks. I held a stick of incense and stared at the golden Buddha before us, unsure of what to say or how to pray, my stick smoldering with blue wisps of smoke rising in the gold-choked darkness.

I entered a sanctuary emblazoned with the stars of brightly colored tile moving in swirls both clockwise and counterclockwise, alternating with the spin of pinwheels in an ever-changing wind.

“Stop right there,” a voice said from the darkness.

As I turned, a monk materialized from the shadows, his bald head gleaming and his eyes glittering, his robe drenched in burgundy blood.

“We’ve been waiting for you.”

“I know.”

The monk seemed stunned, but only for a moment.

“Where you going?” the monk asked me, eyeing me curiously.

“It’s not your time yet.”

“I’m just following the signs, to the highest mountain.”

The monk smiled knowingly.

“Come, I show you.”

He led me through the door to a sunny courtyard beneath the bright blue sky. Sitting lotus-position on the ground surrounded by a pep squad was a monk pouring trails of sand between his fingertips, the sand of a million colors transforming the concrete into a mandala

spinning, spinning a wheel of life and death. As sand flowed freely from his knuckle, five peaks formed on top of the clouds.

“The five peaks of Meru,” the monk said, quietly touching me on the shoulder and looking me in the eye. “Home of the gods.”

As I continued to watch, the mandala was completed. The monks cheered excitedly and observed in wonder at the detail and perfection of the artist’s hand. The sand formed a chrysanthemum of colors, twirling like a kaleidoscope, wrapping me deeper into its web.

The artist bowed his head and began murmuring a prayer to which all of the monks calmed themselves and folded their hands respectfully in prayer, and as if in answer, a wind came from the east and began scattering the colored sand in different directions.

“No!” I cried and moved to recapture the lost grains, but the monk held me firmly and shook his head.

We watched as the mandala was slowly obliterated, the sand in all directions, and the monks themselves began to part.

Chapter Twelve

What the Hell is in Those Shakes?

The next morning always hits you as a sort of surprise. You're somehow still alive. There are greenish-brown flakes all over your clothes and the bed. The room is dark. There's no view of anything from behind those curtains besides another guesthouse. I look and see Jacky's golden-brown hair fanned around a pillow wearing my t-shirt and boxers.

Flashbacks of the night before creep back into my head. I turn and see someone's half-dreaded tangle of hair in a bed across the room. The dong-joint, which we had attempted to roll out of Vietnamese currency for lack of rolling papers, lays there dead and badly singed. More weed lays crumbled around the dresser. Jergen comes out of bed in women's panties. I look under the blanket and gasp. None of us seem to be wearing proper underwear.

"Oh. My. God. Take off my knickers!" Jacky screams. "Actually, wait. Keep it on. Keep it on!"

"Can you stop yelling? My head feels like it's going to explode," Jergen mumbles.

"Where the hell are we? What country is this?" I cry.

I find myself drifting back to the Full Moon Party. Fire shows and fire dancing all around us. We decide we are weary of alcohol and agree to do mushroom shakes instead. We let Maya guide us into the trance, each of us taking a cup and downing it and noting that it tastes sort of like vanilla ice cream, only there's a grainy feeling at the end. "Get all that in; that's the psilocybin," Maya motheringly coaches. "That's where the spores are. Remember, stay positive. Align your chakras."

Everything seems to be going well. We think nothing of it, just another mysterious drink we have collectively decided to toss back like Kool-Aid at a Jonestown retreat, no big deal. Get in touch with your spiritual side, your other side, the parts that lurk in the night. The DJ senses our chemical change and plays the same reggae song over and over again. Not only do we enjoy the endless repetition; we demand it. We sing the lyrics all wrong and are struck by how these words somehow describe the moment, the feeling we have been searching for all night.

I'm going to put on my iron shirt

And fly to outer space.

The singer's voice is a raspy Jamaican. We can't be sure what he means. There's a huge circle of dancers, and everyone just goes in the middle and acts like a fool. Some dance by jumping around on one foot to the other. Others move their arms in waves and twist their hands as if casting a spell. There is openness and safety in this place. There is a pregnant moon above us. Everyone is beautiful. Everyone is perfect just the way they are. I can see their souls in their eyes. I feel the fellowship of these gentle spirits, and I wonder how anything

that has ever happened happened, and then forget, because of this overpowering feeling of love. The love is so strong I grab a stranger's hand and kiss it for no reason at all. I do this several times.

I'd been doing nothing but drinking mysterious beverages for the last 24 hours. This thought comes sweeping past me as I suddenly feel my stomach a gurgling as though replaced by a cauldron filled with a bubbling brew. There's a breakout of cold sweat, a panic, and I quickly dive into the bushes down towards the water away from the party. I pray no one is making love nearby as I lower my shorts just a second too late and then grin and bear it as the evacuation process begins. The sound of the river mutes this sickening chorus of liquid and mushrooms. Everything I have ever eaten, drank, thought about eating or drinking, has now exited the rocket ship and gone off into space. The river accepts my offering with her endless song, and I stand there alone and in the dark, feet wet, shorts around my ankles, which are from what I can guess, slightly shit-stained. There are flashes of fire in the air. Flashbacks of LSD programs in the dark. I see fire, torches, and tortured faces like melting ice cream distorted in the hellfire of war and savagery. The night lights up with chemicals trailing comet tails and falling stars, flares above the trees. There are screams in the night. A shadow agency dosing soldiers strapping skulls to movie theater seats. I watch traumatic moments of another life over and over on repeat. I am an animated deer. Hunters shoot my mother. I never even see who they are. I just feel myself running and feel her fall behind onto the earth. Her body is wet. Rice paddies light up with napalm. An orange vapor creeps into the jungle like cancer and instantly decays all that it touches, the country a forest of death. The world becomes filled with ghosts. Howling zombies invade a village, burn it to the ground, shoot fathers and brothers and sons, all blindfolded with their hands behind their backs, bullets and then a hole, the screams of mothers,

wives, and daughters as dicks harden in the open air and the procession begins. A little sister cries out. I gnash my teeth and try to save her and find the back of my head smashed by rifle butt. I feel nothing. The film replays again.

My chakras feel nauseous and sick. The feeling passes and I find the resolve to come back to camp. Like an animal moving in the darkness, I simply act. I wash my ass with water, my feet, my ankles, and give my shorts as an offering to the river goddess, which takes them and sends them floating down current into the impenetrable darkness where these evil thoughts will stay. I stare into a fire. The all-consuming dance of a flame. Why do they dance, the life of a fire, the life of a soul, dancing as they die? But only we know they're dying. Only they know how glorious it is to dance on fire and die.

"Oh my god, where have you been?! What are you wearing? Is that a. . .?" Jacky begins hooting with laughter, then suddenly stops and continues her plea. "He's here! What am I going to do?"

"With the tranny?" I ask, my voice traveling some vast distance of space, mesmerized by the flame, somehow knowing who and what we are talking about and answering via radio waves.

"No, some other bird. Oh, wake up! Snap out of it! I need you to walk with me. I can't let him see me alone. You said you would be my friend; now come on!"

Something tells me I may not be the best man for the job, but damn it, I'm all she's got. Searching for Maya, Paprika, or Jergen is out at this point. I have a terrible feeling that if I go in among the dancers, I may never return.

"What do we do?" I ask nervously, my fear growing in-sync with hers. I break my eyes away from the hypnotic flame and look at her. The wreath of flowers from a love-fest sits fresh in her hair, but it looks like she somehow managed to escape.

"We've got to get back to the guesthouse. We'll stay there and regroup. I can change and you can, well, you do whatever you want. Do you have the keys?"

"There are no keys."

"Oh, come on!"

"Which direction is it? Where are we? The mushrooms were poisoned! I can't see anything!"

We run blindly for what seems like a very long time, but mustn't have been that long because we bump straight into Jacky's old flame with his new bird, as Jacky would say, probably hoping for a bump-in just so he could display his sexual and emotional wellness to her. This Jacky piece by piece surmises for us later in the room.

"Antonio!"

He's a lot different from what I imagined. I sort of pictured him to be a strapping Sicilian with thick brown hair tied in a ponytail wearing white linen shirts to ripple over his muscles as he zips around on his Vespa. It certainly seemed that way when she had recounted her days in Rome. "Italians are lovely. Some of the most hospitable people in the world."

"You mean waiters and guys who are trying to get you into bed? Those Italians?"

"You've got to go."

He looks like he has a unibrow with a hooked nose and eyes filled with superiority. In another life, he would have been a conspiring Roman senator. All this I perceive through first impression, but the more I concentrate, the more he seems to look like an ostrich in a Versace shirt with an Ethiopian supermodel beside him.

"Hello, Jacky. Where you running off to?" the ostrich opens its beak, smiling.

"Off with my boy," Jacky says nonchalantly as I stand there and stare open-mouthed at the African girl's body wrap, which is decorated with tropical flowers in respiring bloom tendrils curling and uncurling over her boobs. She in turn, amusedly, and then disapprovingly, returns my stare.

"Hello *boy*," Antonio says condescendingly. "Doesn't speak English, does he? Must be nice to finally hear yourself talk."

"He speaks. Go on, speak!" Jacky commands, elbowing me now.

"SQUAWK!"

"Very nice, Jacky."

On a better day, he wouldn't have caught me in a Vietnamese rice-hat and oversized novelty sunglasses. Worse still is the Beer Lao shirt I am now wearing like a diaper.

"Have fun, Antonio," Jacky says coolly and leads me away slowly, and then in a mad dash to escape.

"Oh my god, that was the worst thing that could've happened!" Jacky cries as we sprint blindly through the trees. "Why didn't you say anything? Actually, no! It's better you didn't say anything! We've got to go back to the guesthouse. There's the road. Oh god, we look crazy. Am I all right?"

We stop beside the last torch, which separates us from the all-encompassing darkness and the menacing carnival of streetlights ahead. The blue-green planets of her eyes burst into flames.

"You're fine," I lie.

"I can't believe he's in Vang Vieng. He must've followed me here. What a psycho! Well, I hope he's happy. It's sad that he came all the way here. Are you even listening? No, of course you're not. You're staring at the bloody wall."

We've managed to reach the room somehow running through a delirium to the door. Pornographic visions of Gandhi and lost chil-

dren and even more lost adults and dogs. Face-paint, neon colors, savage howling, laughter echoing eerily in the alleys.

"Stay off Instagram," I reply from an ethereal distance trying my best to be helpful, but finding it difficult to concentrate as vines and tendrils and lotus flowers grow like mystical spider webs along cracks in the plaster. "Jealousy is a fruitless emotion. It never achieves anything but the sacrifice of your happiness and well-being."

"Me? Jealous? Of her? Please! If he's happy, then good for him! What do I care? How can you compare me to her?"

"Did you see her aura? She was like a neon goddess."

Jacky gives me a look, and then sighs and rolls her eyes.

"Bloody hell. Maybe I should've drank my shake after all."

"You didn't?"

She smiles guiltily.

"I barely even sipped mine."

"What? But back there. . . You were all . . ."

"I felt something before, but I'm sobered up now after seeing him. To be honest, I've never done drugs before. I don't even smoke grass. I thought I'd try the shakes once here, but I don't know. I changed my mind. I'm not really a drug person. I just wanted something that would make me feel . . ."

"Transcendent?"

"I don't know. Christ, I'm zonkers."

"Wait! Don't move! The light in your eyes! I can see your soul!"

She cocks her head, but doesn't move, standing in front of the bed where I'm now sitting, the light above her head forming that halo not unlike the one I first saw.

"You remember when we first met?"

"You mean yesterday?"

"I think it was the day before. I lied when I said I didn't see you. I saw you coming off the bus. The sun was rising. You were stretching and then you started walking off into the woods. There was this moment when the sun touched your hair, and these two white butterflies came out of nowhere and were fluttering around your head like a halo. You looked like a forest spirit or a goddess or something. I wasn't even sure if you were real."

"I'm the spirit of the road," she says and touches my face and points my eyes up at hers. The ceiling is filled with shadows, the faint recollections of a night under starry reflection, the feebleness of a canoe, knowing you are out there in vast infinite space, a tiny thing so fragile and helpless, in the arms of a beautiful, loving universe. Her eyes look into mine, black holes swirling and taking in everything of a moment, afraid to lose it, taking it and turning it into another world where imagination designs the outlines of things that once were.

"I'm going to shower up. Are you coming?"

She stands at the doorway in her mud-stained bikini, preparing to undress, looking at me.

"Yes," I agree slowly. "I suppose I should."

"Come on then."

I rise from the bed and follow her into the bathroom. The room is yellow and smells like jungle fungi and strawberry shampoo. I stand and watch as she starts the water, reaches out and touches it, letting the water pour off her hand. She turns and takes off her bikini top, then, with the same nonchalance, removes her bottoms. She is shaved.

"Did you do that for me?" I ask, not sure how, but finding I am now standing naked before her. My diaper has slipped magically away into the forest never to be seen again.

"Don't be absurd," she replies, and brings me into the water. We stand below the poorly working shower under a drizzle of naked and

wet, standing face to face like animals meeting suddenly in the forest. Not threatened, but startled, curiosity warming with attraction, the water warm and cold at once drizzling slowly down one side, half her side and mine. She pulls me against her and kisses me with lips that softly taste, then take with passion my lips and tongue. I feel the grit wash away from our bodies and smoothen the layers of dirt and savagery that we are. I feel her reach down and guide me and water drifts down my chest to my stomach and I feel suddenly enveloped in blissful warmth all over.

"I'm inside you," I gasp in bewilderment as the thing which is happening is happening.

She slaps me across the face and kisses me hard, holds her arms around my neck as I lift her like a caveman and race with madness back into the room; she sits on top of me, dripping wet, straddling me now on the bed.

She rides me with a passion fueled by longing, regret, heartache, and, fuck it, revenge.

"Do you love her?" Jacky asks breathlessly, pausing now, biting my neck.

"Fuck! Yes!"

"Do you want to be with her?" she coos, and digs her nails into my chest.

"What?" I look at her with fear.

"Do . . . you . . . miss . . . her?" she shouts, pounding the emphasis of each word with her body.

". . . Yes! . . . Fuck! . . ."

"Close your eyes. Pretend I'm her. Fuck me like your tranny girl!"

"She wasn't. . . a tranny!"

I close my eyes, grit my teeth, and slowly count to 10. . .

I can still hear the sound of the motor from the rigger bouncing us up and down against the chop, the water clear and sparkling turquoise blue, a color that would always stay with you once you had seen it, swam in it, felt its warmth against your body, swimming out to the distant buoy, resting against a blazing screen of sapphires. The lazy hot air and the cool Pacific winds. She came to tell me my friend had left the night before. I decided to stay. She had smooth, dark legs. A beach bungalow all to myself and the hot sand and palm trees and sparkling sea, its waves lulling hypnotically. She worked the bar on that tiny island.

“What was her name?” Jacky asks me as I lay on top of her now, kissing her neck as she holds my head in her hands, my face buried somewhere in her golden brown hair.

I remember how she looked in the moonlight, in the hammock, staring out at the ocean. You could hear the waves in the distance. Her silhouette in silver. She went back to her bungalow around sunrise.

“Do you want to come from behind?” Jacky asks.

“Yes, please.”

Jacky gets on the bed and arches her back, hands and knees, turning her face up to me in that moment of welcome and longing, wincing and biting her lip, crying and forming words that won't come out. Her eyes turquoise as the ocean, the bungalow, the moonlight descending through the open window, the sound of a crashing sea. I feel myself holding on tightly, so tightly it feels like I'll break. My hands, my fingers, her hair gripped between my knuckles, I grit my teeth and shout as she cries out louder, louder, and watch as snow begins falling from the skies, falling upon the sand, glittering the paradise shores with a crystal white, the moonlight turning everything silver, snowing harder, harder, harder, and harder. . .

“I’M SAM IAM! I’M SAM IAM! I’M SAM. . . I . . . AMMMM-MMMM!”

My True Love looks at me from the hammock where she lies, looking out at the open window at the sea bathed in moonlight, her face in shadow. We run through the sand glittering with crystal snow. She takes a handful of the stuff and marvels at it in awe, then with a cry of delight rubs a handful on my cheek. I feel nothing. I see nothing. I close my eyes and try to see My True Love’s face. I see darkness. I see moonlight, her naked body on the bed.

Chapter Thirteen

A Reverse Wig

I woke up with a freshly bandaged hand, wrapped in a blood-stained and somewhat torn parka. Weak sunlight filtered into a diner, empty but for one man. This of course was none other than Mr. Zen. His face was like a beaming chestnut, perfectly shaved and round, his stocky frame accented with a pink flowery apron. He's in the business of slinging short-stacks and making friends, standing in the street and calling to any foreigners who wander down Happy East Street. It just so happened I was dragged in.

“Hey! You awake now. You fall in the street. Someone pick you up and bring you to me. You a foreigner, huh? American? You looks Chinese. Here, drink this. Green tea with ginger and honey. This help you. You got altitude sickness. You look like dying! Hee hee! Drink, drink!”

I reached out with T-Rex arms that seemed to tremble from the weight of the mug, set the steaming hot cup down on the table, and sipped from the rim like a child. The steam entered my sinuses and cleared the impenetrable clouds that swirled about my dome. There was visibility on the mountain.

I looked at Mr. Zen in amazement as he giggled with glee. Something about the hot steam, the lemon zing, the sweet honey, and the sharp ginger revived me for at least a few moments of relief. I had enough energy to sit up now. I hadn't eaten for what felt like days. Mr. Zen got started on a plate of chicken fried rice, something that would go down easy. I could barely get the spoon to my mouth without losing half of it along the way, but he pretended not to notice. He made me feel at home; he let me eat and did most of the talking. He mostly talked about all his fan mail, the letters and postcards that adorn his "hall of fame." And there they were, in snapshot, in caricature and frame, the mayor of maple syrup and all of his friends.

I got about half of the plate in my stomach before the effects of the ginger tea wore thin. I felt like passing out. Mr. Zen stretched me out in the booth, threw a blanket on me, took my shoes off, and brought the portable heater closer to my feet. There was no way I could possibly thank him. My life force was completely drained as if sucked away by phantom parasites. Every cell depleted of oxygen. My entire body was gasping to breathe. But at least I could die with warm feet.

Around lunchtime, I was able to sit back up and drink a little more tea. Mr. Zen was describing the scenes on Happy East Street during the summer horse festival, his gentle way of admonishing me for coming at such a foolish time of year and in such a state. "Everybody coming from their home and meeting here! Many, many people! Many, many horses! Horses everywhere! Big horses, fast horses, good-looking horses. Good-looking girls, too!" he giggles. "All the streets filled with Tibetan horse-riders. Tibetan learn to ride horse when they are just a baby! Tibetan people love horses! They come and race and dance and sing. Many, many drinking! Everybody have a good time! My restaurant busy day and night!"

Suddenly Mr. Zen cut his narrative short and jumped up from the table with a huge grin on his face, stepped outside and yelled, "You! Hey you! Hey! Come here! Come here!" gesticulating fervently.

"Do you know him?" I asked Mr. Zen as he cackled with glee.

"No, but look! He coming! He coming!"

I bolted upright seeing the guitar case on the stranger's back and instantly envisioned the weapons within. This was one of Interpol's clean-up crew sent to take me out, to put an end to the mission, destroy all evidence, close the file and seal my casket with a tidy little bow. He looked like a traveling musician, a vagabond with a Sherpa hat on his head. His bearded smile and twinkling eyes met mine, and in that moment, I knew I was being replaced.

"Don't do it here. Not in Mr. Zen's restaurant," I said weakly.

"I heard this was the place for banana pancakes," the stranger smiled, setting down his guitar case.

"I've got a guesthouse. It's a real piece of shit," I said between wheezing breaths. "Do it there. No one will mind the mess."

"Sounds great!" the stranger grinned. "Nothing I like better than staying in a piece of shit room! My name is Roi."

"My name is Sam. There's some things I need to tell you. Things you won't believe," I said, looking white in the face. "But I'll need some help getting out of here. I feel like I'm dying."

"Say no more! I am your happy companion. But first, some pancakes? I'm starving!"

"I love this!" Mr. Zen cheered. "You come from your way and you come from your way, and you meet here and go together! You want pancake? Coming right up!"

As Mr. Zen went in the back to flip stacks, Roi and I locked eyes, each of us zoomed in, squinting, knowing, ready to show our cards. Roi took out his and I took out mine. Mine slapped the table; his

made a clear thud. He broke out into an open grin now, displaying to my astonishment pages of notes tattooed with foreign cities spanning five continents at least, inscribed and circled in helter-skelter scrawl, crossed and slashed with question marks about flying off to space to reassure himself that no real commitments were truly made until the job was finished; the daily planner was used as a diary instead. I looked at my own skitter-scatter of Post-Its and napkins, some of my notes used as actual napkins, and felt engulfed in shame. How many jobs had he done? How many missions completed? And now he was coming to replace me, a washed-up agent with no clue where to go or how to make the next move. He was an explorer of alleyways and side streets, a connoisseur of street food, a curator of handicrafts, bus depots and train stations to him being the eternal waiting rooms of love. He did the job with romance and style, a real member of the old-school. I couldn't help but feel impressed.

I watched his pancakes disappear between sentences. We were now beyond the pleasantries of introduction. He had just come from Tibet while I was headed in that direction; our paths were crisscrossing here at the border. I gradually began to relax, sensing that he was a messenger and not a replacement, as I had feared. But if he was sent to bring me intelligence, he was less than forthcoming about it. His manner was indirect, yet verbose; a matter of gleaning grain from syrup. Why was he being so evasive? Was Mr. Zen a snitch?

"No traveler should ever go in the same direction as another. As for me, I have no plans. I follow the stars guided only by my empty stomach and desire for sleep. Occasionally, there is music and love. I might end up in India again. I was in Varanasi for a month learning transcendental meditation. That's where The Beatles wrote the *White Album*. If that album was a woman, I would marry it."

"I'm more of a *Black Album* kind of guy."

Roi laughed.

"It's a shame. We could've gone to Tibet together. It was quite an experience. But I'm not going there again. I would seriously reconsider going if I were you. The situation is dark. I wouldn't recommend it."

"I can handle the cold. I'm almost starting to enjoy it."

I constantly felt numb.

"It's not the cold you should be worried about. It's the Chinese," Roi paused, glancing around the empty restaurant, continuing in a whisper. "The Chinese have soldiers on every street. You can't get in or out. I was lucky I was able to escape without too much trouble. I have an Israeli passport. But you? An American? Forget it. They're too afraid of people finding out. They want to keep it quiet."

"Keep what quiet?" I asked, my eyes growing wider.

"The rebellion," he quickly murmured into his syrup and smiled up at Mr. Zen, who came and stood next to the table.

"How do you like it?"

"Best pancakes I've had in my life!" Roi grinned.

"Everybody say that!" Mr. Zen beamed proudly. "You boys going to visit Old Town? Walking take one hour. Not much time. Come back early. No lights in Old Town. Hard to see! Hee hee! Be careful of wild dog!"

"Ah, Old Town," Roi sang. "A nostalgic stroll through the last standing vestiges of past civilizations, a mixing of oohs and aahs with remorse for the things we have lost through the modern age. A chance to romanticize the pastoral lifestyle while mourning the loss of ancient traditions. What do you recommend, Mr. Zen?"

"Hmm. . . " Mr. Zen rubbed his shaved head in thought. "Not much to do now. Too cold for hiking. Ground frozen, no good for horse. Maybe visit monastery and see sky burial?"

"Sky burial?" I echoed, and the bandage on my right hand began throbbing with a glowing force.

"A beautiful representation of death and a new beginning," Roi launched in. "The body of the deceased is carried to the top of a mountain and offered to the vultures. They eat the body to the bone. Then the monks will crush the bones into powder, and the vultures will consume even that. All of one's essence returning back into life through death, the never-ending cycle. Hopefully, they'll return somewhere closer to Nirvana, the end of all cycles."

"The end of all cycles," I whispered. "Of course."

"I don't like vulture. Eat dead animal. Ugly, too. Not good dharma," Mr. Zen said with a shake of his head.

"Where do we find these filthy creatures?" I asked.

"Top of mountain there is monastery. Famous monastery. Birthplace of seven Dalai Lama. Very special temple. But hard to walk. You okay?"

"One more cup of ginger tea should do it."

By late afternoon, we reached the top of the mountain and stood before the gates of the temple. The sky was a blazing blue diamond as we ascended higher up the staircase, golden like a lion's mane, the windblown dust. Roi helped me up the final tier and leaned me against a stone. We turned in breathless awe at the endless plateaus before us. I could barely move or speak, yet I felt a radiant energy.

"According to tradition, the Dalai Lama was an ancient soul who chose to recycle his soul over and over again throughout time to be reincarnated as an infant born to lead the Tibetan people. He is more than their king. He is more than their leader. As outsiders, it would be very difficult to understand the spiritual connection the Tibetan people have with him."

"Maybe that's why they want him dead. Cut off the head, the body follows."

Roi nodded grimly.

"I'm afraid of what the army will continue to do to these people if they fight back. They're fighting now, even as we speak."

Catching my breath, I hobbled over and joined Roi at the precipice. The wind whipped freely and sang.

"At the end of the day, the trail always leads to yuans. What could they possibly want from Tibet?"

"They say there are trillions in untapped mineral resources buried in the mountains," Roi mused. Then he shook his head. "But I think it's more than that."

The wind paused as a shower of light passed over the valley.

"How do the souls know to always return here, to the promised land?"

"It's not just a matter of floating around in space, I don't think. Although some Buddhist traditions do describe it that way. I think it is simply a dimension of reality we cannot understand."

"The fifth?"

"Maybe higher."

I gulped and stood on trembling legs beside Roi at the edge overlooking the infinite vista. Above us, I saw vultures circling. We climbed up the endless white stone steps to the place where the sky itself seemed to rip asunder and opened to great burgundy drapes parted in the middle, welcoming all who came wandering.

We entered and found ourselves immediately cloaked in the darkness of an empty prayer room. Incense burned softly in the distance, but the smell was tinged with something sulfurous. An evil spirit, a bad vibe. All around us, demonic deities bared the teeth of wild beasts in hell, a samsara that never ends, born into endless lifetimes until a

final descent to the very bottom, wherever that may go. Hundreds of arms waved in hypnotic circles, a menacing vibration.

We stumbled farther in hopes of a smiling monk in waiting, happy to explain the religious significance of this nightmare, but nearly collapsed in shock instead, both of us gripping each other in horror and devastation. We fell into a pit and found the desecration of an ancient forest, trees of wisdom chopped down, sawed open, logged. The many faces of Buddha were crushed, dented, broken beyond healing, by rifle butt, hammer, and god knows what else.

"With the jihadists destroying what's left of the giant Buddhas in Afghanistan, and the Chinese destroying the ones in Tibet, there'll be nowhere left for people to go," Roi spoke somberly. "To pray, I mean."

A giant bronze Buddha lay on its side before us, its fingers still curled in that symbol of eternal peace.

"Roi, didn't you say that prayers are like energy? That they can even change the shape of water?"

"Yes, absolutely."

"What if that energy can be seen in this other dimension? This world between worlds where the souls go before they return back to the cycle?"

"I suppose anything's possible in the spiritual realm."

"Don't you see? That's why the Chinese are destroying the Buddhas! They're like signal torches for the souls to follow back to their homeland! There must be some life force, some interdimensional channel that controls it! How else could the Dalai Lama have reincarnated back into the same temple seven times?"

"Are you saying the Chinese are destroying these statues because they want to keep the Dalai Lama from coming back to his homeland?"

“Or they want to find a way to control the life force for their own designs.”

“Control reincarnation?”

“World domination.”

“Everyone comes back Chinese.”

CLAP, CLAP, CLAP.

The sound of sarcastic applause echoed in the chamber.

“Congratulations gentlemen. There aren’t many who can make the journey, not at this time of the year. Even Chinese soldiers couldn’t handle the weight of these statues in the ice.”

A monk stepped forward from the darkness. His gaunt face flickered with love and peace, but there was a weariness to it.

“Sorry to startle you. Tibetan tradition. Wakes up the spirits. Come, I have much to show you.”

Roi and I looked at each other warily, yet followed the monk into the candlelit darkness.

“Sorry about the mess. Every now and then the Chinese government sends its soldiers to intimidate us. A rebellion breaks out in the streets because the Han have taken over our ancestral lands and set up their own businesses, and so they send their police with tear gas and batons and beat us like dogs. They lock us in their prisons and torture us, and even send some of us back in boxes. They’ll do anything but start an all-out war because it is a war they know they cannot win. The free nations will not support it. But in the meantime, they do whatever they can to humiliate us, break our spirit, and make us give up, so they come to places of holiness to desecrate our temples and make us lose heart.”

We paused at a dark stone stairwell and looked up toward a distant crack of light at the top.

"We live in a world where only the violent have power, and the powerful reconstruct history as they see fit," the monk echoed in the dark. "What can we do to survive in a world of such violence?"

I felt his body pause at the top of the stairs. A loud creak, and suddenly we were blinded by shockingly blue and white light. We regained visual clarity and saw the monk stepping out into an open terrace. The strata before us moved wispily in the air, conforming to the spiral of wind and jetty. We looked down and saw the wild range of mountains below. We were on top of the Himalayas in a stone tower, a satellite for the lost souls of the Dalai Lama, soaring through a place without wind.

"We give our lives," the monk concluded, and with a wave of his hand, pointed our gaze toward the opposite end of the terrace, where the statue of a meditating Buddha in the lotus position sat, pointer and thumb forming the holy *Om*.

Right before our eyes, a flock of vultures descended from the vast blue desert and picked the sculpture to dust. The Buddha crumbled in a flurry of sand, ash, and embers. The vultures squawked and pecked at each other with mangy beaks as it disappeared with a swirl into the ether.

"You! What are you doing?" the monk cried out.

"You want a body?" I said, removing my last article of clothing. I walked butt-naked onto the veranda. "You've got one!"

"Sam! Get back here! It's freezing!"

"Stop! The vultures don't—"

Their cries vanished in the wind; I spread my arms before the circling eaters of bone and offered myself on crucifix, lying on frozen brick.

"I am Jack! Jack is Sam! This is the only way to stop the cycle!"

With a flash of light, I warp into a PC room in Old Town. The arcade is filled with shaved-beaded little monks, all dressed in their robes, huddled around PC stations, cheering at the digital mayhem. Is it so ironic that this little monk just shot a pedestrian with a shotgun at close range?

A cheat code makes an armored tank drop down from the heavens. Soon they all know the code and the tables are turned. I lead the carnage speeding around in a S.W.A.T truck, but I don't know where I'm going. There's somewhere I need to go. I can't remember. . .

I feel myself flying through night, my avatar falling from an endless height. I land in darkness. I am brought back to life. I have infinite lives. Another chance for Jack to carry out his mission. Another time I must stop him. But if I stop the cycle, is it just Game Over?

Enter two coins. Press Play.

Blink. Blink. Blink.

I wake up in a candlelit room, and see that look of love and peace standing over me. I grab the monk's bald head and give a hard yank.

A reverse wig!

The false monk stands before me, grinning with wild cowboy hair blowing crazily in the suddenly wind-filled room, the candle flickering like mad, a cigarette in his mouth as he hoses himself down with ice-cold water. His laughter echoes as I am sucked into a space between two worlds flying through the darkness towards a river of constellations. I can almost reach out and touch the stars. My soul rockets at light speed. All lights fade but for one; the rest are jittery flames. One point in the distance growing brighter, warmer, larger, until it captures you in endless light beams. You see a blurry face, the blinding and terrifying dazzle of lights and cold air. The sound of an operating room.

Beep. . . Beep. . . Beep. . . BEEEEEEEEPPPPPPPPPP!!!!

Chapter Fourteen

Tell Me Where to Go When We Part

“Z onkers,” I say absentmindedly rolling the crumbs of weed on the dresser into another Vietnamese dollar, lighting it on fire, and watching it burn like old newspaper.

“Oh, here are my papers. They were in my pocket the entire time,” Jergen laughs.

The fire looks like fire again. I turn and look at Jacky’s form under the blankets as she gets dressed out of Jergen’s sight.

The room smells like weed despite our attempts to blow it out the window. It does little for our hangover, and heightens the bizarre sense that everything I have believed in is a lie, but there’s comfort in knowing that we can now go out and find fruit shakes and coffee. After we smoke, Jergen puts his hand on my shoulder and says, “I have to go back to my guesthouse. I’ll see you later.”

“See you later. We’ll be at the café.”

He gives me a wink and Jacky a nod, and fades into the sunlight. I can still see his tall loping figure disappear into the soft hum of the Vang Vieng morning, his blonde dreadlocks slowly fading into the distance, and then gone behind the passing of *tuk-tuks* and motorbikes. We never see Jergen again.

Paprika and Maya are nowhere to be found. We walk to the café, sit outside, drink Lao coffee, and wait for them until it's time to get on our bus to Vientiane. We had somehow envisioned this ending differently, perhaps with a goodbye hug at the bus stop, watching each other get on separate buses towards our own little destinations, shooting forever out there, not wondering if our paths would ever cross again, but welcoming it as much as it feels good to be welcomed.

How do any of us ever know where we're going, or when we'll get there? Who of us arrive on time? This time, Lao Time. Time to fade into the light. The bouncing afternoon journey of the long red dirt road into the city, sitting silent, for now, just another companion.

Such pretty eyes. Would I even remember them? I try to see Jacky's face, but she hides them from me, too hungover to tell me how she feels without throwing up, while I, alone, hum silently the fragments of my thoughts.

"I don't know her name," I say on the bus finally. "I don't think I ever did."

Jacky turns and looks at me, studies me for a moment with those blue-green eyes, and then touches my cheek with her fingers.

"Stay out of Thailand," she whispers and turns back towards the window to watch Vang Vieng disappear as we roll away.

Chapter Fifteen

A Night in Vientiane

We arrive in Vientiane as the sun drips pink in its long descent. Purple shadows spread over the yellow butter and creamy French architecture, and the air smells of banana crepes. *Tuk-tuks* and slow traffic fill the streets, motorbikes piled with husband, wife, and at least three kids, one baby riding on daddy's lap and holding onto the handlebars, boxes in tightly bound stacks tied to the back. We arrive at the magic hour when the streets in Vientiane begin dying with the waning of light and the streets don't wake up again until sunrise. We're marked for easy traps and accosted by pimps of vacant rooms and empty restaurants, but only *tuk-tuk* drivers seem to wait.

We decide to split up in different directions and converge in an hour with any news. The hour passes as the sun sits still, and we meet in front of the banana crepe cart, both of us shaking our heads.

"Everything's booked and the streets are still empty. That's Laos for you," Jacky gripes. "I didn't know there even was a high season."

"You know what they say: Dry season is high season."

"I'm not sleeping outside," she says. "We'd better find an internet cafe. There's got to be something—"

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to interrupt, but I couldn't help overhearing your situation."

We turn around and notice him for the first time. It's obvious he'd been lingering, eavesdropping, waiting for the opportunity to strike. An interloper, vaguely Middle Eastern, or Eastern European, his accent sounding Transylvanian, his entire attention directed at Jacky's glistening cleavage.

"Hey, eyes up here!" I snap my fingers, answering for her, not liking the smell of Dracula's mustard.

"I have a bed available in my room, if you're willing to share with me and my friends," the vampire continues, smiling a devious tea-stained grin.

"How many friends?" Jacky asks dubiously.

"Just three: Me, myself, and I," he replies, but does not laugh and gives no indication as to whether this is a joke or not.

"Should I take it?" Jacky asks, wrinkling her brow and looking at me searchingly. It's clear she sees her options as thus: fighting off cockroaches, rats, and stray dogs, or just one altruistic vampire. The impact of leaving me behind is unclear. I see her leaning toward the room.

"This guy clearly has a mental disorder," I murmur to her in conference, but loud enough for him to hear.

"You can always sleep on the streets," Dracula reminds her. "Anyway, I think your boyfriend is getting mad at me, so I will leave. . ."

We watch as he pretends to leave, but doesn't, finding a reason to search his fanny-pack instead. The moment stretches to the point of awkwardness, and just as he begins to zip back up, she agrees.

"All right, I guess I have to," Jacky says and smiles at me apologetically. "What about you, love?"

I see her throwing in that extra "love" just to soften the feeling of concrete I would soon be lying on, but I appreciate it all the same. What can I do? A girl needs a bed.

"I'll figure something out."

"Sure?"

"Go ahead. We'll have breakfast."

"Yes! Meet me at the Malaysian donut place near the travel agency tomorrow?" she suggests.

"How's eight?" I say, and we agree, both of us knowing we might never see each other again.

I walk all night, as is my custom, searching for a clue as to the whereabouts of Candidate Dim. I feel my heart heavy enough to weigh me down to the bottom of the Mekong, which I contemplate for a while staring at the lurid reflections on the dark river. In the distance are the impressions of fluorescence and candlelight behind bamboo screens and corrugated metal, shops that sell anything and nothing, whispers of *tuk-tuk* drivers who seem intent on taking me somewhere that will numb my disenchantment.

I clutch in the palm of my hand a single pill I've been holding onto for reasons which were unclear to me at the time, when I flushed my medication before the start of this journey, when I believed this was the answer to freeing my mind. I had pictured this ending differently, reverent in my faith in the mission and the gift of the signs, now stripped of the whispers which had guided me, the intuition which had always led me straight to my man.

I stare into oblivion, feeling I should join it now, end the cycle, end Sam, let it be what it was meant to be, let Jack have his way and win, keep my true body, chop off my dick. It's all the same in the end. If

My True Love is out there, or if she ever even existed. If Jack puts in two quarters for another round and I'm forced to come back again. If Candidate Dim has his way and eats all of the world's chicken, who am I to complain? There is no ending, there is no resolution, there is no love or girl to save. I reached out to touch her, but couldn't see her face; a shadow I've only seen in the falseness of my dreams.

I close my fist around the hard little capsule, close my eyes and imagine seeing her once more. If I just take the pill, I can see her again. Real, fake; illusion, feeling. My heart is heavy enough to sink me to the bottom of the Mekong. I throw the pill as far as I can into the darkness and imagine it splashing into the river. Though I can't see or hear it, I know that much is real, that it's gone now, and I'm alone, with no one to help me, and nowhere to go.

I'm wandering along the dilapidated street that lines the riverbank when I see him sitting at one of those shops that always keeps moving, selling everything and nothing, depending on who it is and where you are. He's a beardless blonde kid with his hair cut so short it almost has a silver sheen. He's college material, but not a student, tells me he's Parisian, but speaks a little of everything, and he's not lying. He's dressed in expensive street fashion, even wears some gold chains; definitely not a backpacker.

"What's up, bro?" I hear him say as I slowly pass by, which when said by one foreigner to another in a third-world country usually means "Who are you? Where are you from? Take a seat and rest. Tell me your story if you want to; I'm not going anywhere," all in one breath. And just like that, I'm coaxed away from the brink; just when I'm ready to crash, they send an agent to guide me back. Or stranger still, the idea that he was always there, waiting for me.

"Got a light?" I say, and walk up to the storefront, where he sits drinking a beer and smoking a clove under the dim lights of the shop, the river and the street dark and silent witnesses.

"Sure," he says, looking at me with those discerning eyes. "You're an American?"

"Yeah, something like that," I say, being purposely vague, unsure of his allegiances, holding the lighter in my hand.

"Need a smoke?" he offers, taking one out for himself after I gratefully pluck one from his silver case.

"I don't really smoke," I explain, lighting the clove, coughing on the fragrant embers and handing back the lighter.

"One of those nights, eh? Take a seat. I can order you something."

"Thanks," I say, and hit the chair like a sack of rice. "I'll take a beer. My name is Sam, by the way."

"Nice to meet you, Sam. You can call me Saint," he replies, and then calls to someone in the back in what sounds like fluent Lao, which is almost the strangest thing I've seen today. He returns to me and smiles. "She'll bring you a beer."

A young serving girl brings two bottles of Beer Lao followed by whom I guess to be the shop's matron. The 30-something-year-old Indian woman seems to see me with her red dot only as she sweeps the streets and nods at the serving girl to go back inside. Saint looks back at the woman and says something with a schoolboy smile in what sounds like textbook Hindi. She gives a tight grin and sweeps the streets once more before fiddling with some flowers on her way back in.

"She's in charge here," Saint says softly and pops the beer open for me with a wink. "So, what brings you to Vientiane?"

"I want to end the cycle," I say with a sigh after taking a long cold draught from the bottle.

“Aha. We call that ‘samsara,’ the endless cycle of rebirth,” Saint replies. “You came to the right place.”

“You ever think you knew somebody, but it turns out you didn’t know them at all?”

“Trust me, I know perfectly what you mean.”

We clink bottles and drink beer like water, suddenly thirsty in this quiet evening of fraternal therapy. The supersized moths of the Mekong flutter and bang against the fluorescent lights and the awning as we wonder at the mysteries of the other sex, sharing our war stories like two soldiers wounded in the field of love. We finish our beers, which Saint says he’ll pay for, but doesn’t actually pay for, instead telling his friend, scary Hindu gangster lady, that he’ll see her later on; he’s taking his new friend out for drinks.

“I call her ‘mom,’” Saint says as we walk toward some bar he knows. “She’s not my real mom. I have a lot of moms here.”

“Do you think My True Love is really just a projection of the mother figure I wish I had?”

“I hope not. Having a real mom isn’t as great as you think. Mine kicked me out when I was 18. She got sick of me, I guess.”

“How long have you been in Vientiane?”

“A couple of years. I was in Bangkok for a while working as a club promoter. Then I met this girl and we fell in love, and things were good for a while. . . but you know how it goes. Things got kind of crazy. I had to go on the run. Laos is like a Thailand for people who need to get away from Thailand. Do you know what I mean?”

“A quiet place to lay low?” I conclude.

“Exactly.”

We arrive at our destination, an unassuming building on the corner of a dead street. The pour of luminescence comes from above on the second floor, where some jazzy blue neon glows in darkened windows

that allow for a view into this dreary nothingness. I'm picturing plastic tables and floors it's okay to piss on. But as we enter I'm surprised to find the joint swanky, big enough to find a quiet corner for some hands down the pants in a leather booth; a semicircle of a black bar lined with hanging glasses and mirrors if you're just here to watch the game. There seems to be a conflict of vision and reality. Maybe an investment made on the ghost of a promise that the tides of money would make Vientiane the next Kuala Lumpur, or Bangkok even, instead of a city with a midnight curfew where nothing happens. Bottles glisten under the dimmed ambience; servers wear black shirts and black pants, and appear well-groomed. Yet despite the aim of cocktails and sparkling wine being serviced to stylish professionals, there are only bloated old men in soccer jerseys, a clientele that doesn't even see the point in wearing proper pants. Swimming trunks and flip-flops, fuck it, it's Laos — there's an underlying message beneath it all. Pints line the bar with girls in miniskirts standing beside red-jowled mandrills who are apparently territorial, taking a moment to pause from shouting profanely at the soccer game on screen to stare us down with pure hostility, particularly me, for no reason that I can immediately perceive without a moment of self-reflection. I take in their beady eyes, puffed bodies, and fleshy faces as they growl menacingly, bristled to the point of danger and ridiculousness.

I want to leave, but in order not to offend, I decide to have one beer. One more beer with this young stranger who seems like a really nice guy, but is possibly affiliated with some kind of underworld network that I'm not sure I want to know about. There he is at the bar now, getting our drinks, not paying of course. We don't have to pay anywhere, is what I'm guessing. Perfect. He talks with the bartender, a slick-haired mustached Laotian who looks exactly like the kind of guy who can slip you information without saying a word. If they exchange

paper, I'm out of here. Saint comes back with our two pints, but not before briefly engaging with some of the mandrills at the bar, perhaps explaining my presence, or making some loose commitments to get them this or that. Fuck, what am I doing here? Leave now!

"Thanks for the beer," I say, and clink pints with him, letting the amber hops massage my worrying neck.

"Is everything okay? Not your kind of scene, huh? I would take you to a disco, but we'd have to go out of town. Vientiane has this curfew. You can't be on the streets past midnight."

"That's all right. I wasn't really looking for anything special. I think I'll just have one beer and be on my way."

"Really? It's so early. Where are you staying?"

"Uhhh, not sure. I was thinking I could just sleep somewhere on the street, near the river. Under the stars, that kind of thing."

"Not a good idea," Saint says, shaking his head, his eyes concerned. "If the police find you, you might get charged with vagrancy. The laws here are pretty strict. Don't you have any friends here? You came by yourself?"

"That's the thing. See, I was with this girl. We traveled to Vang Vieng together. Then she met this guy who said he had a room. And she kind of, well, I guess she ditched me."

Saint shakes his head, tut-tutting in sympathy.

"Is that the girl who you're upset about?"

"No, not really. I mean, I might see her tomorrow. I just met her. I don't know. I'm kind of confused. I was talking about another girl before."

"The one who made you want to jump in the river?"

"Yeah."

"Well, there's lots of girls here. Take your pick. You're an American. You can have any one you want. Just don't fall in love."

"Thanks, I appreciate it. But when you said you were going to take me to meet some girls, I was thinking of something else."

"Not pretty enough?" he asks, raising his eyebrows, pegging me now for some whore connoisseur.

"No, no. They're very pretty. Very sexy, but I don't think I'm that kind of guy."

"Ohhh," Saint says, catching on, and then laughs. "They're not prostitutes. You don't have to pay them. They're here on their own. Well, some of them are prostitutes. Most of them just want to meet a rich foreign man. You don't have to go home with them. You can just buy them a drink and talk. Most of them can speak English. Some English. Enough English, I guess."

I take a long look at the albino gorillas with their hairy arms around the shoulders of two girls at once, laughing coarsely in the dark, having good nights and happy endings. A skinny little thing in miniskirt bends over to take a shot at the billiards table; her partner, or opponent, playfully rubbing the end of his cue up her ass. She seems to enjoy it, or at least doesn't let it break her concentration.

"I appreciate the sentiment, but I'm pretty sure this isn't the answer. Maybe one day when I decide to drown in an ocean of sex, I'll come back here. Until then I think I'm going to pass."

"You shouldn't be so hard on them," he says, laughing all childlike. "Or the girls. Most of them just want to take care of their family. When you marry a Lao girl or a Thai girl, you're not just marrying the girl. You have no idea how many people can be in one family."

"Brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents," I say, ticking them off like bills to pay.

"Lots of divorces in Thailand happen that way. Guys who come here and don't know what they're getting into. But you can't say it's

all money. Lots of girls just want to have sex with foreign men,” Saint pauses and almost blushes. “Maybe foreigners do it better.”

Saint laughs charmingly.

“You should meet my roommate. He’s a sex addict. He is, as you say, a bitter divorced guy. Kind of a genius, but kind of an asshole as well. I think his dick doesn’t work anymore. He makes me get stuff for him. He wants to die of a heart attack while fucking. This is what he tells me.”

“I bet he paints virgins like Raphael. I feel sorry for the girl who gets traumatized under that carcass. Anyway, it’s been good talking with you, Saint. I think I’m going to hit the road. I have to find a place to sleep tonight.”

“Why don’t you stay at my mom’s house? She lives in one of those mansions from the old days, before the revolution. It’s pretty nice actually. She’s trying to make it into a hotel, but it kind of ended up as a museum. There’s always an extra room.”

“You think she’ll be okay with that?”

“Yes, of course! She’ll be happy to meet you. She likes handsome guys. She’s kind of an alcoholic.”

“This isn’t some kind of brothel, is it?”

“No way. My roommate has girls come over, but they don’t stay. Mom hates that. They fight about it a lot.”

“Sounds cozy. Well then, shall we get going?”

“Sure! There’s just one place I need to stop by before we go home. It’ll just take a minute.”

“O-kay,” I hear my voice croak, now picturing Saint handing me two bricks of that Golden Triangle wrapped in brown paper, asking me to hold them in my backpack. I envision my execution by firing squad.

Saint disappears to settle our bill, which he won't pay for, and basically leaves me wondering if I should run out the door as fast as I can. Despite his reassurances, I can't help but assume my lodgings will be in some kind of pseudo-museum/hotel/whorehouse with a crazed old man running around inside ranting about the government, greeting me at the door with an angry stiffy, spraying spittle in my face as he demands to know who I am and who I'm working for. I lay my gaze upon the view from the rooftop, revealing dimly lit orange streets below and a dark blue night, occasionally a stray dog running down the street doing nothing to avoid getting hit by the scatter of passing motorbikes. I listen to the sound of a *tuk-tuk* passing and then back to the ruckus of the bar, the last calls being taken, one for the road as different men leave with different girls, off to the rodeo.

Saint returns, and we meander from the riverside road toward downtown, where we see the white government buildings and international hotels. The avenue is wider here, the architecture impressive in its illuminated silence. Here and there, and kind of everywhere, we see beggars and panhandlers, street musicians — some of them just kids — missing arms, missing legs, missing body parts.

"Did I tell you I was training to become a Buddhist monk?" Saint says, dropping some money in a legless guitarist's hat. We pause and listen to the guy strum chords by Bob Marley in his wheelchair. "That's why I came here to Laos. I did a temple stay in the mountains so I could get off drugs, after my ex called the cops on me and I went on the run."

"She called the cops?" I utter in shock. "What happened? She catch you at the Ping-Pong show?"

"She thought I was cheating on her," Saint shrugs nonchalantly, all of this old news. "She was helping me sell drugs. Like I said, I was a promoter. She was a bar girl. We just got caught up. All of the

backpackers who come to party in Thailand take ecstasy, smoke weed, smoke meth, whatever you want. I could get anything. I became that guy. Eventually I got addicted. I couldn't get out of the cycle. When she called the cops on me, I felt so betrayed. I felt so angry and lost. But now, when I think about it, all she did was force me to get my life together. I escaped to a Buddhist temple and almost became a monk."

"What happened?"

Saint sighs and flicks his clove regretfully.

"I was able to quit coke, pills, weed, meth. I even quit sex! I don't even think about girls anymore. The only thing I couldn't quit are these stupid cigarettes."

"They wouldn't kick you out of a monastery for that, would they?"

"Maybe I just wasn't ready. Still, I think it saved my life. I don't know where I'd be now if that didn't happen. Probably dead."

Our friend, the guitarist, finishes *Redemption Song*. The two of us clap for him, and he smiles the brightest smile you could imagine a guy with no legs smiling.

"I still plan on becoming a monk later on," Saint says faintly, and puts more money in the guitarist's hat. They fold hands and exchange *khob chai's*. "I just want to help people."

We walk through a warren of alleys until we finally stop in front of what seems to be a KTV silently glowing. I follow Saint down a dark rabbit hole and enter an underground that twists and turns until suddenly we come to a heavy wooden door. Saint knocks three times, no special pattern, but loud because of the jazz that muffles from a deeper source. A panel in the door slides open and two black eyes check us out. The door clicks and we enter a dimly lit, heavily gilded, rather gaudy antechamber filled with an eclectic array of colonial-era oil paintings, Buddha statues, and tantric carvings of naked goddesses

being seduced by demons. A man who looks like something between a maître d' and a gangster greets us with a smooth formality that makes it questionable whether he and Saint have ever met before. No words are exchanged and no questions are asked as he ushers us to the other side of the antechamber, opens the golden door, and bows, despite the obvious fact that we are both wildly underdressed. One of us looks particularly unbathed and has those wild what-the-fuck-is-going-on eyes just staring at the wonderland on the other side of the wall. Before us extending through the blue dark, I see a posh lounge with a beautiful singer on the far stage sparkling in her black cocktail dress singing *How Insensitive*, the bluesy band behind her playing soft keys, rhythm guitar, and stand-up bass, each band member dressed in velvet while servers patrol the darkened perimeters, responding quickly to any candle being raised, a signal from the spread of circular tables, where gangster politicians from various nations around the world sit with their mistresses, mouthing drink orders and requesting ice amid clouds of cigarette smoke and music-drowned laughter.

"Welcome to the ASEAN," Saint murmurs for my ears only, as I continue gawking at the scene. There's a dancefloor in front of the stage, the room divided into four sections, each section containing lounge seating with about half of the tables empty. We choose a table with a safe view of the old tycoons, mob bosses, and moguls dancing slowly to the bossa nova with their dates for the evening. These guys were even older, and the girls even more beautiful than the skanks we'd seen back at the mandrill bar. Each girl wears a glamorous evening gown that she definitely doesn't own, and it almost seems like each one somehow fell off the stage from a Miss Universe pageant, or perhaps this is one of the hoops you have to jump through to get in. They've clearly mastered the discipline. Their eyes are heavy-lidded in eyeshadow, and their cheeks touched with rouge, their statuesque

faces emotionless as they slowly step and turn in the arms of the old moguls whose wrinkly old faces glow with ecstasy.

“Should I even ask how much a drink is here? What is that, kip? That’s nothing!”

“That’s not kip; that’s dollars.”

“Shit-za!”

Before the song ends, Saint goes off to take care of some business, and I am now nursing an overpriced beer, which I shouldn’t have ordered, but did anyway, needing something to hold onto which would give me strength. I had to once I saw him, spotted him, nearly dropping my water glass in the process. That rich old codger, dancing as if he’s on top of the moon, like this is the only dream that still brings his pickled soul any happiness. Just when you think it’s a night out, there he is, Candidate Dim, tonight sporting an ambitious and slightly delusional toupee. So that’s why he’s in Vientiane. Of course! There’s no finer hair in the world than a Laotian’s. He’s here for a new wig!

I still owe the old man a drink. The old splash in the face. Security is tight. The dancefloor reserved just for them, the patriarch gangsters of the East, their bodyguards, soldiers, lawyers, and righthand men all sitting in the dark beside their own escorts, enjoying themselves, but keeping their libations respectfully subdued. I sip my \$20 beer slowly, thinking about how I can skip the bill, rip that toupee off his head without getting captured, and disappear conveniently into the mist before getting shot in the leg. If I was still an agent, I’d blow the horn on all these crooked candidates, breaking bed together, watching each other commit unfaithful acts, secretly filming each other in their hotel rooms, bonded together by blackmail, blood money and lawsuits. Tonight I’ll let them wine and dine and then sign away pieces of their hell-driven souls for another slice of the world. I’m only here for Candidate Dim. The eyes of the girl being

turned counterclockwise in his arms meets my eyes by chance across the darkness, asking me in that brief moment, "When is this going to end?"

"Where are you, Louis?" I whisper in the near-dark.

"Right here."

"Louis!"

I drop my beer in shock and watch mouth-opened as Louis, dressed in a server's uniform, catches the bottle before it hits the floor. He puts the bottle back on the table gently and leans forward, pretending to adjust the napkins on the table.

"It's never too late for a Beer Lao," he says quietly, echoing the commercial none of us knew, but different this time, his voice low and serious.

"You work here?" I ask obliviously.

"Only for tonight," he says, keeping his voice low. "Better drink up. The bar's about to close."

"Are you—"

He cuts me off, nodding, his eyes communicating more than words.

"Do you see that door next to the statue? When I leave your table, I need you to get back there and wait for my signal. As soon I signal, the guard will leave his post. The door will be open. I need you to open it and help whoever is in there get outside the club to safety. Can you do that?"

"My friend, I mean, this guy I came here with—"

"He's waiting outside. Don't worry. Just get to that door and open it after my signal."

"What's the signal?"

"A lot of fucking noise."

As soon as Louis leaves, I begin chugging what's left of my beer, holding it in case I need a weapon. I watch as he makes his way toward the center of the room, where a bunch of suited gangsters sit with their girls. Rising slowly, I inch my way along the perimeter edgewise toward the secret door where Candidate Dim's muscle stands guard. I see that thick shaved skull turn and spot me and approach like the Terminator as I clownishly duck behind a statue of Mara, the goddess of death.

Suddenly there's an explosion in the room. I feel myself being thrown in midair, instantly thrust into Lao Time, my eardrums popped, all hell breaking loose. Fragments of glass spiral in slow-motion, sparkling shards in the midst of short-lived gunfire and the twisting of the first thug's arm. I watch in amazement as Louis spins him into an arm lock and then uses the momentum to do a flying roundhouse kick in the face of another goon. The gangsters all rise up from their seats in Lao Time with looks of rage twisting their faces as they scramble to grab Louis or their weapons while their girls scream and flee from the shattering glass and flipping furniture. The band abandons the stage in a panic, knocking the mic stands over as the look on Candidate Dim's face goes from shock to fury and he pulls out a tiny pistol and holds it against his date's ribs as she flails and tries to escape. Candidate Dim's muscle forgets me and goes bounding toward the melee. Louis is now doing Jackie Chan moves with the chairs, confusing and flip-kicking the gangsters as they struggle to get ahold of him. Some conveniently placed chandeliers provide enough dazzle to daze them as Louis swings around comically, kicking every one of them in the face. I sprint toward the curtains, where Candidate Dim is attempting an escape. Just as he spots me and points his derringer in my direction, I throw the beer bottle and watch it explode in midair. I come through the burst of broken glass with my fist cocked and punch

the old man right in the face. His false teeth fly out of his mouth and spin in slow-motion until they hit a rim shot on the cymbals. I grab his toupee (which is glued on surprisingly tight) and hold back a karate chop, threatening to crush his windpipe.

"I was only planning to throw water in your face. I didn't know it was going to be a hostage situation," I say, smiling at Candidate Dim, enjoying seeing his panic-stricken mug convulse in search of words.

"Ah-American! Let me go! They get me, it's over! No more Candidate Dim!"

"That's the idea," I say, grinning all shitty.

"What talking about, you idiot?" Candidate Dim sputters angrily. "Who side you are on? I'm Uncle Sam, stupid! I'm your side!"

"What the hell you talking about, Dim? And make it fast. This Lao Time ain't gonna last forever!"

"I puppet leader for transition phase. Jack bring me to open door for American business! Understand? White House gonna be furious! Bomb everyone! Campaign over! Junta win! Communist win! What you? CIA? Looks too dumb for spy."

"Where's Jack?" I growl and clamp my hand over his mouth, inside knowing that I had peed earlier without washing my hands.

"I don't see, Jack!" Candidate Dim splutters desperately after I unclamp his mouth. "He only send sexy young lady! Long leg, short hair. Very sexy, but little cold in bed!"

"Thanks for the useless information," I mutter and slowly loosen my grip on Candidate Dim's toupee. I smooth it out for him, and then yank it off completely. He lets out a horrible womanly shriek.

"I'm going to let you go, Dim. But just remember one thing. You work for us, you're working for the greatest nation on the planet. A new world, a democracy, a creed, and a dream. This isn't some beauty pageant you're representing here. A little dignity! Please!"

Candidate Dim cowers away, and then runs as fast as his fat little legs can take him into the darkness, covering his naked pate in shame.

I turn around and notice his former hostage, a beautiful girl in a golden gown with a matching yellow orchid in her hair still standing where I left her, perhaps waiting for permission.

“Go on, miss. You’re free to go.”

She babbles wildly, gesturing and pointing toward the door. The door! Together we run back into the lounge, where bullet holes make a tight trail right behind us. We open the door and there’s a large dressing room filled with Miss Universe hopefuls all huddled in fear, crying out, but perhaps a little used to this sort of thing. Here are the handpicked flowers of the valley, raised and cured to perfection, cut at the stem just before blossom to be thrown together in a bouquet and arrayed upon couches for the choosing. They’re the most beautiful prisoners I’ve ever seen, waiting in a golden chamber filled with borrowed gowns and vanity mirrors, their only window to freedom a small TV, living vicariously through actresses on dramas, who in a way seem to suffer so much like themselves, but do so in a way of their own choosing, and so are envied by these young girls, too powerless to consider a true destiny. The door is open. The girl with the flower in her hair cries out something in Lao like, “What the hell are you waiting for?” The girls all come running in tow, and we barrel through the antechamber spinning the maître d’ on his ass, his head getting trampled by 20 pairs of stilettos, and I kick the door open and we burst upstairs into the warm night filled with red and blue lights.

Outside the club, there’s a swarm of police vehicles and soldiers in green and black, rushing in just as we bust out from the karaoke. The Miss Universe contestants run into the arms of various policemen and agents. The girl with the flower in her hair grabs my hand and pulls me

along the shadows, not wanting to be seen. We duck down the alley and run until we are just out of reach of the lights and the crackling of megaphone.

Down by the river, she stops and removes her stilettos, now a head shorter than me. She looks up and touches my arm, stands on tip-py-toe and kisses me on the cheek. I look into her eyes and see all that her makeup hides; she's just a kid. She turns and spirits away into the black night. I let her go. She knows where she's going. I hope.

"And now the movie ends," I say to myself aloud, and stand there for a moment, expecting credits to roll across the inky blue night above the Mekong as I go walking off into the darkness alone. Then I remember Saint.

"Saint!"

I run back to the scene and arrive just in time to see him being placed in the back of a police car, handcuffed, looking through the backseat window with his sad blue eyes. I'm stopped by a baby-faced guard, who intercepts me and speaks rapidly, shaking his head.

"Whoa, slow down there," Louis says, stepping in from out of nowhere.

"What the hell is going on? He's innocent, I tell ya! We went there by mistake!" I start to explain.

"Hold on. Take it easy. Come here for a second," Louis says, taking me and guiding me a little ways off the scene before I end up in the back of a squad car.

"Louis, you have to get my friend out of there. I'm staying at his mom's house."

"Your friend is a well-known dealer in these parts. He won't be charged with anything tonight, but we'll have to ask him some questions, just for formality's sake. I'll make sure he gets home safe," Louis says.

"Dealer? What do you mean 'dealer?'" I scoff, acting dumb.

"Where'd you two meet?" Louis asks, turning the tables on me.

"I hardly know the guy, I tell ya! I don't even know his real name!"

"But you're staying at his mom's house?"

"It's a brothel or something," I stammer. "Just trying to get my rocks off in Vientiane!"

"So he was pimping," Louis concludes casually.

"No! It wasn't like that at all. He just lives in a brothel. He's a Buddhist. You gotta give him some credit for that!"

"Your friend is a merchant of the infamous rhino horn. Pure extract. Used as an aphrodisiac. It's likely he was here to sell some to the nefarious parties gathered. So they could," Louis clears his throat, briefly uncomfortable, "do boom-boom all night long."

"Does that stuff really work?" I ask curiously.

"Whether it does or doesn't, the sale of rhino horn is illegal. We'll probably have to deport him back to his home country."

"But you won't. . . ." I trail off, silently pantomiming a firing squad.

"No, definitely not. After questioning, we'll send him home."

"Well, that's probably better for him," I concur. "He needs to call his mom. She doesn't even know where he is."

"There's no crime for being a bad son," Louis agrees. "But there should be."

"Can I just talk to him for a minute? I should tell his Lao-mom what happened, or his roommate, or someone. They might be worried."

"Plus, you need that spare bed," Louis points out all too wisely.

"If they offer it."

"Go ahead."

I walk up to the police car now, the guard being given the nod by Louis to give me a minute to have a final word with Saint.

"Are you okay?" Saint asks me as I lean into the window.

"I'm not the one in handcuffs. You gonna be all right?"

Saint smiles.

"See? Laos isn't as boring as everyone thinks. You just have to know where to look."

"They're going to ask you some questions, and probably send you home. Back to Paris, I think."

"Yeah, maybe it's that time," Saint says without remorse. "It's my dharma."

"Dharma knows best."

"Can you just tell my mom what happened? I don't want her to worry," he says, and slips me the business card of some place called Sabaidee House. "This is where she lives."

"Not what I was expecting," I murmur, examining the card.

"It was nice meeting you. Good luck on the rest of your journey."

"You too. Thanks for everything," I tell him, unsure which part of the night I should be thanking him for. "But just one thing."

"Yeah?"

"When you get home, make sure you call your mother. She misses you."

Saint smiles, looks down, and nods. When he looks up, I'm pretty sure I see a twinkle.

"I will," he promises.

I walk away and get approached once again by Louis.

"Another day in the life, huh?" I quip.

"Yeah, that's right. Tomorrow, it will be someone else's turn. But there will always be more. Can I give you a lift?"

"Sure. You know where this is?" I ask and show him the card.

"Oh yes. Famous place."

"You mean, 'infamous?'"

"Not like that. Old mansion. Historical building. Very nice."

"Sweet."

"Hop on," Louis says, and bends down to a squat.

"What do you mean?"

"Get on my back. We're going to fly there," Louis says.

"You can FLY?"

"Yeah, but don't tell anybody," he replies as I climb aboard.

We lift off and shoot like a rocket into the night sky above the dark, sleepy city below into the stars.

"And by the way," he shouts as we zoom at blinding speed through the air. "Don't call me 'Louis!'"

"What should I call you?" I shout back, my face peeling back from the speed.

"Call me . . . The Diplomat!"

We fly over the downtown esplanades and land minutes later on a dark street filled with stray dogs and clouds of huge insects having a nocturnal fiesta by the dismal street lights. Before we part ways, Louis gives me a little background on the house where I'm staying, an establishment run by a noble family punished by the regime for their prosperity under French rule, that once upon a time of land and servants, French tutors and English governesses, before the revolution woke up the coolies and they burned it all to the ground.

"I hear she drinks quite heavily. Who can blame her? The poor at least got some rice out of the bargain. People like her lost everything; generations of wealth gone with the stroke of a pen. She's still from a respected family. No one forgets that. But she's a widow. Be nice to her."

"Don't worry. Old ladies love me. I know how to talk to them."

"There it is. See the house with the veranda?" Louis says, pointing to a French colonial mansion, rain-beaten with moss and vines grow-

ing wildly around the white stone. "I have to get going. My girlfriend, you know how it is."

"Yeah," I chuckle along knowing I do not.

"Remember," Louis says, rising from the ground floating upside down. "It's never too late for a Beer Lao!"

And with that he takes off in a streak of lightning. I stand there for a moment, unsure of what to do. I was kind of hoping he'd make the introductions, knock on the door and say something like, "Ma'am, is this your son?"

It's after curfew. Should I just ring the doorbell? It feels way past visiting hours, but I have no choice. Soldiers roam the streets in search of cigarettes or bribes. Packs of stray dogs tear each other apart in the dark. I whisper my lines and walk through the rusty gate hanging halfway ajar, trying to configure the half-truths I'm about to tell.

The door is answered by a brawny kick boxer in a crew cut with a steely glint in his eyes. He wears soccer shorts and sports a rippling six pack and the kind of scowl that tells me I'm interrupting the game.

"No vacancy," he says, and begins to close the door.

"I'm a friend of Saint's! He sent me here to tell you something!" I call.

At the mention of Saint's name, I hear Ms. Alana, the lady of the house, order me to come in. Her son Ken (I find out later) scowls and lets me in. The foyer opens majestically with a massive sitting bronze Buddha growing green with tarnish, but this is quickly overlooked due to the meditation pond that trickles below. The walls are lined with oils, ancestral portraits of men in the evolution of dinnerwear from princely white and gold to French royal blues, circular gold rims on patriarchal faces, each man sporting the kind of facial hair that once commanded armies.

There is a wooden screen with intricate carvings of lotus flowers and patterns metaphorically infinite in their repetition. Behind this screen sits the lady of the house, Ms. Alana, with her empty dinner plates and half-bottle of vodka, the other half hidden somewhere in her bloodstream. She has a sultry beauty, smoky-voiced, seductive, alcoholic, and old enough to be my mother if I was in fact 25. She wears the traditional Lao *sinh*, a tube skirt in silky peacock blue that displays her voluptuous figure and her tipsy sauntering walk, caused both by the tightness of the dress and the half-bottle of vodka.

"Welcome to Sabaidee House. Please sit down. It's not every day we have such a handsome young man come to visit us," Ms. Alana smiles with hungry eyes. "I've just finished dinner, but I can have a few dishes put together. Shall I prepare something for you?"

"I'm fine. Thank you," I stammer, feeling more at home than when I thought it was a whorehouse. I sit up straight and keep my hands folded on my lap, suddenly unsure of my posture. "Saint said he was staying here. He wanted me to tell you some bad news, as you might be wondering why he's not coming home."

"First, we have a drink," Ms. Alana insists. "Then you tell me everything."

Without a change in her expression, her honey voice transforms into the barking command of a dictator. Two young serving girls bring out glasses and a fresh pitcher of water.

The girls obediently place the pitcher and glasses on the table, and I watch as Ms. Alana holds them in her arms in a drunken matron's sudden outpouring of tenderness, then transforming again and shooing them away like flies. She pours me a glass of vodka. It tastes like nothing. Not like water, but like nothing. There is only a slight burn at the end.

"Saint's been arrested," I tell Ms. Alana, who reacts with a drama so immediate and complete it could only be Russian. I measure out the details as she wails and laments, not mentioning the wheres or whats exactly, wondering how to steer the conversation towards the topic of an empty room.

"I have too many children, too many little birds. They fly away and I am happy, but then I wait for them to come back," Ms. Alana sighs afterwards. "My little girls in the kitchen, they come from the countryside, from poor, poor families. I take them in. Can I pay them? No, I have no money to pay them. All we have is the food on our table and the drink in our glasses. I was once from a wealthy family. My grandfather was a great scholar. He was part of the king's council, a doctor. There were no doctors in those days. And my father, a great man in the royal army, a brave and respected leader. We had the most beautiful garden when I was a little girl. Now look. It grows wild with snakes. In America, people have big house, yes? But they work in their own garden. This I cannot understand."

"It's a beautiful home," I venture to say, faced with this open lament. Ms. Alana gives me a withering look and snorts, throws back her drink, and pours us both another triple shot from the bottle.

"Come. I show you my beautiful home," she says, mocking me, and laughs, either at me or herself, or both. We walk into the adjoining room and stand before the family shrine, a photographic history mixed with colored prints and black and whites, framed and arranged neatly from generation to generation in a timeline. Towards the center is the portrait of a beautiful young woman with soft intelligent eyes and ringlets of hair in a classical Western style, pearls in her ears and around her neck. There are others of her in traditional costume, heavily caked with makeup, and a wide shot of the whole clan standing for a wedding portrait, and others which I look at, but receive no explanation for,

since technically visiting hours are over. I try not to ask too many questions, but let her tell it the way she wants, between jolting shouts and hard disparaging laughter, riddled with sudden tangents. She's quite drunk.

"I grew up in Moscow because of my father. He sheltered me there when the war tore our world apart. There is my husband. He is dead now. He was my father's favorite captain. Both of them served in the royal army."

"Is that him with Ho Chi Minh?" I ask, spotting a black and white photo of important men who simply seem to be enjoying a cup of tea rather than negotiating the terms of defeat.

"That dog-faced coward! I keep on the wall only for historical purposes, for my museum. I spit on his picture every night!"

"Oh, sorry."

"When I come back to Laos, the war was over. The communists take everything. They hated my family because we were wealthy. They call us all their foolish names. Aristocrat. Bourgeoisie. They steal everything from us like thieves. To them this was justice, to give everything we had to strangers so that we could feed them like dogs. Now look at my land. We had fields of rice, bananas, spices, coffee. Now you see what it is. Nothing but snakes and weeds."

She takes a pause and seems emotionally distraught. I almost put my hand on her shoulder before she laughs bitterly and takes a drink. She turns her attention to brighter times, better times, further back in the family history.

"In Russia, I had a sable coat. My husband buy me for wedding present. I miss wearing that coat. I wish I never sold it. I felt like a czarina. You cannot wear a sable here. The rain ruins the fur."

I nod sympathetically, observing now that she is starting to spend more time staring into her empty glass than at the pictures on the wall. I decide this is as good a time as any to interject.

"So I guess Saint might need his personal belongings? I don't think he's coming back. Maybe you'd like to have them sent?"

"Yes. That is a wonderful idea. My poor boy. He was a good boy. Sweet child. But young, and foolish. He trust everybody. I knew one day he would be caught," Ms. Alana says sadly. Then just as suddenly, her voice sharpens as she barks orders at her son, who groans and responds with something to the effect of "But the game's still on," to which she grows furious, prompting him to get off the couch to get Saint's things.

"You go with Ken. Bring down his things. We bring them to the police station tomorrow."

"Sure, I can do that," I reply, glancing at Ken, who does not look one bit pleased that I am making him miss the game. I hope he won't smash my nose with his knees when we get upstairs.

Ken motions me through a beaded curtain, and we walk up a servant's stairwell to the upstairs hall, dimly lit and decorated with more relics. Welcoming us at the top of the stairs on a low wooden table is a reclining Buddha, the slimmer and more meditative kind, as opposed to the fat, cheerful baldy. On either side of him are those French-style fainting couches which aren't really meant for sitting unless you're desperately tired during the tour and are willing to sit on anything. The paintings that line the upstairs hall are Laotian landscapes with princes in white uniform riding elephants leading colorful bands of emissaries and courtesans. A million elephants under a white parasol. A monk in saffron walking beneath a red sun. A gong that looks ancient and battered. The decor almost all Lao while architecturally European. The ceilings are high and the floors are made of stone tile,

keeping the place relatively cool. If I wasn't avoiding Interpol, I might write an anonymous recommendation on a travel site noting Sabaidee House as a place of cultural interest, full of history and all the vodka you could drink. But I'd probably keep it down to four stars; not going to pretend I didn't spot a few roaches here and there, or notice a mildewed smell that must come with seasons of rain that never end, slowly rotting away the mansion somewhere deep in its core, and later finding out, that of course, the plumbing doesn't work so well either.

Down the hall, rows of shutters on the side look out over the unkempt yard, and old French doors, some open, most closed with lodgers, occupying the spaces inside. As we pass by, Ken calls out to the guests he's on friendly terms with, not bothering to introduce me of course, but receiving his "heys" and "hellos" in different European accents.

We come to the far end of the hall, where we pause in front of a closed door and Ken gives me this look like an inside joke I don't know yet before knocking on the door twice.

"Pat-ty, it's Ken. Are you busy or lonely?" Ken calls in a teasing manner. "We need to come inside."

"Fuck off!" is the reply which comes muffled from inside, but a few moments later, the doorknob turns and an elephantine Englishman with a remarkable sunburn covering the whole of his face and what's exposed of his body beneath a poorly-tied bathrobe answers the door. He has squinty eyes, which indicates that he's not wearing his glasses, but the way he peers at me isn't from poor vision. He's not the type of man to welcome visitors, unless of course, they're there to give him a blowjob.

"Where the fuck is that little dodger with my ivory? I've been trying to stand straight for nearly an hour now and nothing's coming. I've had to send two girls home tonight because of that tardy little twat."

"Saint gone. He get in trouble with police," Ken says simply, and looks to me to fill in the details for this monstrous lobster in a bathrobe.

"Hi. I'm a friend of Saint's. My name is—"

"I don't give a fuck what yer name is. Where is Saint? Speak up now. Don't stand there like a daft cunt."

"For Saint, it was just another night in Vientiane. For Sam, it was the adventure of a lifetime—"

"Just get to it!"

"Okay! I know a guy, a government official, I suppose you could say, who tells me Saint is fine and in good hands. He'll make sure Saint gets home safely."

"Who the fuck are ye? Ye just show up, Saint gets nicked, and ye just expect me to stand here and believe ye ain't had nothing to do with it? Boy, this fella's got some bollocks, he has. Look at the apples on this one, Kenny. I ain't never seen an agent show up at the door to give news unless he wanted more information."

Pat stands there dead-eyeing me with a look of pure malice.

"Easy, Pat-ty. We just get Saint's things and go, yes?" Ken intervenes, prompting Pat, as I am later told to call him, to step aside and let us into his room.

"I don't just let anyone in me pad, Kenny. Ye know how I am."

"Only they has ass and teets," Ken jokes, and motions for me to come inside. I follow Ken through the doorway.

It's a bit repulsive entering the lair of a rumored sex addict, but it's the master suite and I'm curious to see what the accommodations are like. The room isn't as big as I expected, but the decor is surprisingly tasteful, executed with understanding and displaying an appreciation for the minimalist aspects of Asian design. On the other hand, the

general clutter of papers and books occupying every free inch of space show the mark of a writer who has not been practicing Zen.

The mounted samurai sword and Ukiyo-e prints on the wall tell me he was fascinated with samurai as a young lad, while the various Buddha statues suggest he graduated to more sophisticated inquiry with an Eastern philosophy course in university, perhaps with serious thoughts of becoming a monk (as everyone has) while simultaneously falling in love with a Japanese girl in his class. The chopsticks and lacquerware set on the small table confess a young and inspired love-drunk decision to pursue the girl.

The large Japanese folding screen painted with plum trees in flower tells me he's tragic. The wall-to-wall bookshelves overflowing with volumes tell me his greatest dreams. The piles of neatly stacked sheets of paper tell me he's obsessive. Arranged in mysterious formations, making sense only to their creator, like steps ascending higher and higher into nowhere, the never-ending drafts of a novel, a magnum opus which would eventually read as syphilitic madness.

"Inspired by the Japanese existentialists," I begin monologuing aloud, "he attempted the life of a struggling novelist, teaching English to businessmen for another year, and then finally returned to the UK to settle into traditional life. He spent his honeymoon in Bali (note the dark wood and white canopy), had kids and divorced, and after a lifetime of setting his literary aspirations aside to work at a well-paying job he despised, he came back to the Far East. Washed up and embittered by nonstop betrayals as his life went down the toilet, he searched for the life he had never lived, writing his novels on a Pacific island with women in endless carousel."

Pat and Ken stand looking at me in wonder.

"Back there, in the sick room," Pat finally says to Ken with a heavy nod toward a modified veranda where Saint meditated deeply enough to ignore the grunts of exertion.

Pat wields huge lobster claws that block me from going in or out, his eyes full of interrogation. He wants to know who I am, who I work for, just like the premonition I had had before.

"Fess up now. Who ye working for? Yer police, ain't ye? Out of nowhere ye show up and Saint's in the can, ay? I never heard of ye. Saint ain't never mentioned ye before. I think ye had him set up, mate."

"Saint was a good friend to me. I only met him for a night, but he saved me from drowning. I would never do anything to harm Saint. There are some things that happened that I can't explain, but I'm not who you think I am. This isn't even my real body."

"Boy's a bit screwy, ain't he?" Pat remarks to Ken, who reappears with a small duffel bag filled with Saint's meager possessions. "I call bollocks. He's no James Bond, that's for sure."

Ken shrugs indifferently, rather in a hurry to catch the rest of the game.

"I'm going to keep him for a minute, Kenny. Go on and bring that down to the lady. Me and him are going to stay for a little chat."

This is decided without my consent of course, but Ken nods in the affirmative and leaves me standing there awkwardly, wondering if Pat's planning to tighten up that bathrobe anytime soon.

The door closes. Pat remains standing where he was, blocking the door, lobster claws out, ever-expanding, his body filling up with some kind of gas.

"All right, let's have it. What ye here for, mate? Just come clean. I won't keep ye all night. Ye've been looking for me, and now ye've got me. It's my fault. I should have never taken on a roommate. But something about him moved me to help. I don't know why I did. I

can't stand people usually. I'd rather help dogs in the street. Them I can understand. But then again, Saint was a bit of a stray dog, wasn't he? I didn't know he was going to be my end."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I tell him. "Saint had nothing but good things to say about you. Okay, that's not true. But he's not going to give you up, no matter what you did. So you don't need to worry about that."

"So yer not an agent?" Pat says narrowing his eyes, but seeming to relax a little.

"Not the kind you're thinking of. Anyway I left the business. I'm a free man."

"Ye are, are ye?"

Pat shakes his head and laughs like he has a bunch of phlegm in his throat, probably from the onset of a heart attack. It would've happened with or without the sex. Too bad.

"This is why I can't have no one over," he mutters to himself. "I sit in here all day writing confessions on paper and start babbling my brains out to anyone who talks to me. I've finally gone round the bend. I have, I have."

"Should I leave?" I ask as he gingerly lowers himself into a leather chair that grumbles.

"Please, stay a minute. I think I, I thought, I almost felt that one," he laughs, looking a bit pale in the face now. "Go on and fetch us some water. There in the pitcher."

I look toward where he's pointing by a bonsai tree and fetch this man some water. His hand trembles as he takes a drink.

"What you done, mister?" I ask softly, looking at him now without judgment, but curiosity.

"I-I," he laughs and looks at me, shaking his head like I'm too young to understand what a lifetime can make you do. "I've done terrible

things. Saint knows. I've told him everything. Him and this fucking book."

He nods over to the stacks of paper laying all around the room.

"Memoir?" I ask.

"Confessions of philosophy, I suppose you could say."

I gaze around the room, wondering where it starts.

"I'm not just some bloated old wanker. . . if that's what ye think I am," Pat says now, the panting stage of his breathing beginning to pass. "But I do love my girls, and I do love that ivory. The doctor told me it was going to be the end of me. I told him that was the end I was waiting for. HA! Go on, yer supposed to laugh."

I shrug and say nothing, wondering how much time is okay before you leave someone who nearly had a heart attack that you were responsible for delivering. Ten minutes? Ten seems okay.

"So, ye've left the agency, ay? What ye gon' do with your newfound freedom?" Pat says semi-derisively, but perhaps too tired to really give it all of its effect. He almost sounds sincere.

"I used to have a plan. I was supposed to save the Dalai Lama. I thought finding Candidate Dim would lead me to Jack, but now I don't have a reason. It's not like I need Jack to die. I just thought if I defeated him, I could meet My True Love and be with her again. Now I realize I didn't even know her. The pills made me believe she was real. Interpol wanted me to believe in her so that I would keep chasing Jack and help them complete their mission."

Pat nods slowly, his look of malice faded, now replaced by the look of someone analyzing, probing, connecting the dots for you, trying to help.

"Ever read Dostoyevsky?" Pat says after a moment of contemplation. "He wrote that book over there, *The Brothers Karamazov*. It's a long book, but every sentence in that novel is absolutely brilliant. In

the interest of time — how long's the lady got you for down there? Half a bottle, ye say? Ye've got time — I'll give ye the short version. There are three brothers born by a randy old patriarch who fathers them all with different women. They have completely different up-bringsings. None of them close with dear old dad. Dmitri is the first, a hedonist, driven by lust and passion. He ends up killing dear old dad at the end of the first act.”

“Because he was drunk?” I ask.

“No, because dear old dad was shagging the lovely Grushenka, the same girl he's in for. Plus he needs drink money.”

“Classy.”

“His brothers Ivan and Alyosha come to town while all this is going on. Ivan is an intellectual, an atheist and a nihilist, and a bit of a communist as well. Alyosha is a priest whose spiritual father, the head priest Zoshima, has just died. Gives up an awful stink, his body does. Gets so bad it makes Alyosha question his faith, as the Russian Orthodox believe that the smell from the body of the dead showed ye how sinful the deceased are.”

“Could just be the herring and onions,” I say, offering an opinion. “So what happens?”

“What happens don't mean a thing. What's important is who the brothers are and what they represent. Dimitri is driven by passion. Ivan driven by intellect. Alyosha driven by spiritual faith and heart. All of us are driven by something. Which one of the brothers are ye? That's the question the book asks in the end.”

“You like this book?”

“The best therapist I've ever had.”

“It's helped you?”

“It's helped me massively.”

"From what I hear, you're still stuck on Dimitri," I say, glibly snubbing him. For a moment, he's stunned. He sits there and finally tightens his robe a little out of modesty, or perhaps a sudden flesh wound.

"Ye think you know me, eh? Ye think I'm the white man here in another third-world country just having my shits and giggles?"

"That's exactly what I think."

"Like ye said, laddie. Ye don't really know someone, do you? Ye didn't know that girl yer on about. Ye didn't know she was just a one-night, an illusion, gone before ye can even blink. Ye think true love is out there just waiting for ye. Ye think it's always going to be true in the end. Ye don't know the heart of a woman, the way she can make ye suffer in pain. She can't love ye without making ye suffer. So what yer really looking for is a reason to suffer, aren't ye? Because ye have nowhere else to go. Ye don't know what else to do with yerself, so ye suffer."

"You can't live without love. People like you just think your way out of it without calling it cowardice."

"So ye think ye know love? Ye've never even had it. Ye think love is going around the world and chasing some dream girl to lay with her in bed and whisper all yer sweet nothings, do ye? PAH! Yer just a kid. Ye don't even know that love is sacrifice, love is giving up all that ye want and dream! Ye don't ask for nothing, no tenderness or appreciation. Why? Because it's a losing game! That's what love is! And when the love's run out and yer left with nothing, all ye can do is go somewhere so ye can just die quietly. That's what love is!"

"So you're saying I dodged a bullet?" I ask.

"Ye think I don't take care of these girls? I'm not some animal," Pat goes on, lightening the weight of his conscience. "Of course I feels bad for 'em, as much as I feels bad for me-self! But better me than someone

else, and believe me laddie, there's always someone else, someone not as gentle as I am. What am I guilty of doing anyway, besides feeding the family their husbands, or lack thereof, can't provide? And I'm giving them something else they've been looking for, believe me laddie. I don't mean to be a boastful cunt, but I've got an elephant trunk. We've all got our vices, laddie. Sometimes it's just fuel for the fire. It's what keeps us going, isn't it? Our obsessions become our gods until they destroy us, or ye renounce the world and live in a monastery. It's a lonely existence, but there's yer love. There's yer truth. Just let me vindicate my life with one last sentence before I die. That's all I ask."

"Maybe you don't want the story to end," I suggest ironically, nodding at the endless wasteland of words.

"Don't kid yourself, laddie. We're all racing towards the end. If we're lucky and it's not all a gobsmacking lie, we'll have new bodies and a new Earth when the angels come and take us home. Home is where we can worship and finally rest in a world without death. It's only us that can't seem to live in harmony with the rest of it, isn't it? The fish knows how to swim, the bird knows how to fly, and the flower knows how to point its face to the sun. Only we don't know what the bloody hell we're here for. All we know is how to cry out in pain. It's the very first thing we do in this life, and it's the last thing we do in the end. The rest of it is just moments between the choruses. If I wasn't raised a Catholic, I'd have already shot me-self in the head. As it is, I'm afraid to die. But I've nothing left to hang on for in this life, laddie. If I ever get to that last sentence, I'm ending it with a bullet in me head."

"Yikes," I say.

"And so here we are, riding on chariots of death into battle," Pat almost sing-songs. "Facing the enemies far off, and the ones ye have to kill are the ones ye love. What does Lord Krishna say to Arjuna, eh? There ain't no sin in this world except to deny yer destiny. Ye know yer

destiny if ye know yer heart. When yer meant to do something, every fiber in yer body tells ye it's right. Ye've got to listen to what's inside ye. Whether that leads ye to the path ye've wanted or expected is beside the point, but ye walk that path, no matter the consequences, and ye let the gods of the universe sort it all out. Ye give up the notion that ye know what's right and what's wrong. Ye follow the path."

"So does your heart rest easy with the way that you live?" I ask Pat, challenging his thesis. "Because a minute ago, it looked like it almost flopped. You can't just let the world be a mess and fuck the time away. You think you can intellectualize the world's suffering, waiting until the last gasp when some epiphany is going to bring you redemption, but it doesn't work like that. You can't make yourself your own moral authority. That's called corruption. It's rampant in these destitute lands, and we can forget about their problems and say they did it to themselves, but are we going to forget the days we declared war on evil and killed millions of innocents on our own conquest for gold, to dominate and rule and shape the world in our own image? Lo and behold, the nations crumble, and the women become prostitutes, and the people cry out and overthrow their king because he's fallen, the gods have left them, and the only thing left is to start from scratch."

"We give birth to our own gods, laddie. Or they're above us and all we are is a mirror. Look at our streets, our cities. Go to Angkor Wat! We build temples to the things we worship. In a time when most people couldn't even go to the bloody dentist, they erected temples so massive they can be seen from space, perfectly symmetrical in every way so that even the streets, the brickwork, the statues, all of it, represent their philosophical conception of the universe as taken from the constellations themselves. And they did it with their bare hands! Look at our streets now. What do we worship? We worship money, beauty, power — we worship ourselves! Walk the streets of London;

look at the skyscrapers in Manhattan. The streets of Moscow and Pyongyang are so wide ye can have an entire army goose-stepping with their Armageddon on wheels trailing behind. We are what we worship, we become it, and we ain't got the choice to quit that without giving the whole thing away. It's slavery! That's what it is! It's the nature we can't accept because we have free will."

"What's the point of all this?" I ask him, surprised to find myself sitting down in front of him now in a mutual search for answers.

"I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage, like the despicable fabrication of the important and infinitely small Euclidean mind of man, that in the world's finale, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, for all the blood that they've shed, that it will make it not only possible to forgive, but to justify all that has happened."

"Did you memorize that?" I ask in shock.

"It's written on the wall," Pat replies.

I turn and there it is, written on a piece of paper in a spidery scrawl taped to the wall.

"Who said that?"

"Ivan Karamazov."

"I thought he was an atheist."

Pat smiles, sliding the bishop in for checkmate.

"Now why would Dostoyevsky do that?" he asks aloud, mocking me.

I stand up and ponder a moment, staring at the long sprawling quote.

"A friend of mine told me to stop using my eyes to see the world. He tried to teach me how to see with my mind, but all I saw were horrible things. Lies and deception, programming from Interpol, tricks from Jack. I lost my senses and started drowning it all in alcohol, just wandering from one place to the next. And now those people are gone, but I know it wasn't a mistake to meet them. They led me to where I am, to where I stand now, talking about the deepest parts of my being with someone I hardly know. How does the person I detest become the same person to show me who I am? Or the words of truth, the words of hope, and ultimately, the words of faith, come from a person who claims to believe in nothing?"

"And so ye become Alyosha. Go and minister unto the world."

Pat makes the sign of the cross over me in a sanctimonious manner, yet still I receive his blessing.

"Go to Angkor Wat. Ye'll find what yer looking for there."

I nod solemnly and promise, and leave him sitting in his armchair to consider the remains of his life as I drift down the hall.

The lights are off, but I find the stairs and float downward in a haze towards a dim light at the bottom, which seems impossibly far.

I see Ms. Alana through the beaded curtain sitting alone at the table while her children sleep on floor mats in the other room. I hear her telling one of them to go back to bed, but when I reach the bottom of the stairs, she's already pouring me a drink.

"So you met the fat man?" she says with unveiled derision. "He is a disgusting pig, a permanent resident, a thing I must live with. I don't go upstairs anymore. I hate his stink."

"Pigs are kind of smart, in a weird way. They're smarter than dogs. They have the same flesh density as humans. If you want to test a gun on a body, you shoot a pig."

Ms. Alana's face is illuminated by low candlelight as we take a drink in the semi-darkness. Her face looks both beautiful and decrepit at the same time.

"This is a place of the dead," Ms. Alana says thick-tongued, too drunk to have any emotion or bitterness, a hollowness which seems to thud. "You never imagine the future when you are old and have lost everything. I live with guests in my house and have become their servant, fulfilling their needs and desires and endless requests. We used to own land. We had servants. . ."

The candle light dances in reflection off the glass frames of portraits and photographs spanning the ages like fire in the cave.

"Drink!" Ms. Alana barks, and in one jerking movement, I take the vodka I don't really want to drink anymore and absorb it into my bloodstream. I should have thrown it over my shoulder. She wouldn't have noticed if I threw it past her head.

"I was once a beautiful young woman, with a proud husband, a loving son. You don't imagine the future. You don't think you will be the one with no one to help you. We live in a museum. Look at the photographs. Look how they smile. They don't know what will happen to them. And now here we are looking at them. Are we not the same?"

"They say time moves in a spiral."

"History is full of mistakes," Ms. Alana sighs and pours herself another drink. I see her face both young and old in the candle. I see her traveling as that young, stunning beauty with a diary wrapped in rosaries and going from the misty jungle mountains of Laos to the wintry empire of the U.S.S.R. She's a good student who keeps a low profile, but still has enough adventure to keep her skin glowing rosy in the Moscow nights. She wants to live in snow forever so her skin will become white. She speaks fluent Russian, Chinese, and English,

among her studies of classics and mathematics. She is arranged to marry her father's favorite captain, back then so dashing and brave, and then broken by the war. He died of whisky.

"Life was beautiful back then," Ms. Alana trails distantly.

Suddenly I feel something tickling my thigh. For a moment I freeze, thinking it's some kind of tarantula that comes out to hunt birds at night. But the thing seems to move about clumsily, fumbling for my zipper.

What? It can't be!

But it is.

I look up to see Ms. Alana, eyes half-shaded, ready to show me some photos she doesn't keep on the wall, glamour shots on bedcovers in a one-piece teddy that hides her belly and stretch marks. She smiles and breathes so noisily I'm afraid she'll wake up her kickboxing son, snoring audibly from a near distance. Is this what happens? Right after that romantic story about her childhood in Russia? Can someone make these beads a little thicker? Or perhaps, soundproof?

I'm pretty sure I squeak at that moment, accepting a final drink to lubricate the moment. We are both drenched in lubricant. Slogged, really. I take the shot as a means of courage, a foolhardy decision. The vodka sits stagnant in my stomach since the last shot, burning away my organs like battery acid. I feel an earthquake.

I run into the spiraling maze-like darkness and search in panic and pure instinct, using what little moonlight there is available to locate an acceptable place to puke.

"Think about it. If 20 percent of Americans get their passport, that means that less than 20 percent of Americans are traveling the world. They don't even know what they want control of," a French-Canadian girl was saying to me in a bar back in Shanghai.

I empty out my guts in a dark room and pray to the god of bed and breakfasts that it's the bathroom. I wouldn't want them giving me a poor rating and writing disapproving notes on my behavior. "Guest left a MESS in the prayer room. Did NOT clean, but instead fled the scene. DO NOT RECOMMEND!"

"Hey! I gave you a 4.5-star rating!"

I come out of the bathroom and feel Ms. Alana looming behind me. I feel her grab me and nibble on my ear whispering, "I want to eat you," in a Russian accent, running her tongue over my earlobe, tasting me. She pats me on the ass and disappears in the darkness, and still all I feel is her tongue in my ear, that hot breath that feels more like the kiss of a lioness. I wake up with my head in the bidet.

Chapter Sixteen

Sorry, Roi

I opened my eyes to the sounds of a softly strumming guitar.

“You’re awake,” Roi said, turning to me with a gentle smile. “I thought I lost you.”

“Is this. . . another dimension?” I asked, gazing about in wonder.

“Different room. We had some complaints at the other place. Looks quite similar though.”

“They complained?”

“I’m sure it was nothing. They seemed like assholes,” Roi reassured me.

I sat up against the wall now so that I could face him. Six beds filled the room. The room was bare and empty. I felt strangely rested.

“I felt like I was flying through space. I thought I had died.”

“That’s the altitude sickness,” Roi confirmed. “You have to go a few days at a time to let your body acclimate. Best thing for you to do now is get to a lower elevation. You should come with me to Japan. Don’t go to Tibet.”

My bandaged hand throbbed like a metronome.

“Roi, I have to tell you something.”

"Don't worry," Roi said. "I think I know what you're going to tell me. And trust me, Tibet isn't the answer."

I stared at him openmouthed.

"How did you know?"

"It's not really that hard to tell," Roi shrugged, his face screwing up in friendly apology. "You talk a lot in your sleep, you know."

"Where am I supposed to go?"

"Not Tibet, that's for sure. The Dalai Lama lives in Dharamshala, which is in India. He was exiled from Tibet, which was annexed by China during the war. He can't go back until Tibet is liberated, which will probably not happen unless the Americans and the U.N. intervene, which they won't. China is too powerful."

"Yeah, but we're talking about the United States of America here," I puffed up. "Ever hear of the Constitution?"

"What happens on American soil is one thing. What happens in the rest of the world is another. I know the Americans like to think of themselves as the torch bearers of freedom, but they're also the largest consumers of basically everything. They only police the roads that carry the goods. It's not that different from the Mongols protecting the Silk Road."

"But the Dalai Lama's life is in danger."

"His life is always in danger," Roi reasoned. "The Chinese want him dead. That's no secret."

"We have to tell them," I insisted and stared hard into Roi eyes.

Roi's eyes softened and he gave in. He reached into his bag and took out a camera. With the press of a button, he released a flash drive and held it out to me.

"I almost got caught at the border with this. Do you know what would've happened to me if the Chinese looked inside? The things I

saw were. . .” Roi stammered, and I watched as a tear made its way down from the corner of his eye.

“I probably shouldn’t give this to you, but I’m stuck here for another week until my visa for Japan arrives. I’m just a messenger,” he added guiltily, and placed the flash drive in my hand.

“You’re doing the right thing. We might just save a few lives.”

Roi nodded.

“I saw monks set themselves on fire in the street. They’re crying out for freedom, and the world isn’t even listening. The Chinese pretend it’s not happening, and the rest of the world ignores all of the death and misery there because we’re addicted to buying happy meal toys.”

“I’ll make sure this gets to the right people,” I promised him.

“What if you get searched at the airport?” Roi asked me.

“Then I’ll flirt with the guards,” I said and winked. “Do you know how to say ‘I love you’ in Mandarin?”

“*Wo a ni*,” Roi breathed in astonishment, and watched as I took out a thread and needle from my rucksack and began sewing the flash drive into a secret pocket hidden in my underwear.

“I doubt it’ll get to that point, but if it does, I can always just affect an indignant British accent,” I joked.

“What about your hand?” Roi asked. “I was a medic in the army. You need to make sure to change your bandages. If I had some gauze, I would change it for you.”

“It’s all right. Just tell me how to make it stop throbbing,” I said, squeezing my wrist and wincing.

“There’s a city not far from here called Kunming. It’s known as the City of Eternal Spring. It’s high in elevation, but near the equator. It’ll be warm there. You should be able to find a clinic. From there, you can go in any direction.”

“I don’t know how to repay you, Roi.”

“For what?”

“Being a friend,” I said, and held out my good hand.

He grasped it and held it gently. We let the moment pass and leaned back, wondering at the chances of our meeting here, at the border of Tibet on the cusp of winter, both of us wandering souls traveling this world alone. He strummed a few chords of what I recognized as *Yellow Submarine*.

“You ever feel like you’ve lost your whole sense of direction, Roi?” I asked after the last twangs faded.

“All the time. Being lost is the best way to find out where you’re going.”

“I always thought that one of these days, the road would lead me back to her. I used to hear this voice in my head telling me where to go, but now I can’t hear it. Maybe the Chinese set up a new kind of firewall or something. I keep searching for an arrow to point me in the right direction, but I can’t see it. Not the way I used to.”

“A sign can tell you where to go, Sam, but it can’t tell you how to get there. Now you’ve hit a wall and you don’t know what to do, right? All you have to do is walk around the wall.”

“How do I do that?”

“The world as you see it is just an illusion, but you don’t know what the illusion is, or what it means, or why it’s there. You just know it’s the very thing stopping you from breaking through to the other side. How do you get rid of an illusion? You learn to see it. You see it with your heart and mind.”

“Can you teach me?”

“Come to the edge of the bed and take my hands. Sit up straight and close your eyes. Repeat after me. . .”

I sat up and inhaled deep.

“I am Sam,” Roi intoned, eyes closed.

"I am Sam," I repeated.

"There is no one else. I am Sam Iam," he said.

"There is no one else. I am Sam Iam," I repeated.

"Now breathe."

I exhaled.

"Go past the noise, and search for the silence in your mind. Don't try to do it forcefully. Just let it happen. Let your mind be as light as the air itself. Picture a lake. Look at the light reflecting off the water, but don't try to hold onto the image. Just let it move further and further towards a point in the distance, a lonely mountain. . ."

Eyes closed, I went past an endless chorus of shouting voices, debates from the left and the right filling the space with empty noise, whispers of chocolate and sex and moans of pain and pleasure, sighs of indifference and roars of rage. Further down the hall, I heard a torrent of voices, threats, and warnings left for me by Interpol, built up from the moment I disconnected. Piles of frantic, fear-inspiring messages. Lies.

SAM! GET OUT OF THERE! ROI IS A DOUBLE AGENT!

*REPORT TO INTERPOL NOW OR WE WILL BE FORCED
TO TERMINATE YOU!*

*MR. ZEN HAS ALERTED THE CHINESE! THEY'RE COM-
ING FOR YOU NOW!*

I looked at Roi in amazement.

"They're all lies," I said in wonder. "They're terrified."

Roi smiled.

"Keep listening. Don't stop until the voices disappear. Let them fade away. . ."

I shut my eyes tightly and kept listening. I went deeper and deeper in. There was a crackle of static. Incoming transmission:

Jack here. Everything is going just as planned, sir. What's that? No, he doesn't suspect a thing. The package is strapped and ready to blow. Once he shakes that old fool's hand, it'll send him back a few reincarnations. I used enough explosive to make sure of that. . . Me? I've got a hot body waiting for me in Thailand. A little fun in the sun, if you know what I mean . . .

"NOOOOOO!" I screamed and jumped up from the bed. "He has her, Roi! I have to go! I have to go now!"

"Go where?" Roi cried. "It's the middle of the night! You'll freeze!"

"I don't care! Every minute I sit around waiting here is another minute he has her in his arms!"

"It's a lie, Sam! Don't listen to the voices! Listen to the silence!"

"Enough of your hokey-pokey tricks! Don't you see? I've been acting like a pawn this whole time! Jack faked his own death in Lijiang! He made me believe I'm on a mission to save the Dalai Lama, but in reality, I'm being sent to kill him! Don't you see, Roi? I'm the killer! Jack's been planning it all along! Why else would he tell me his plan? It's because I was always meant to be the one to pull the trigger! I'm being sent to kill the Dalai Lama, not to save him! And once I'm out of the picture, Jack can have My True Love all to himself! He's trying to take my life and become me! Forever this time!"

"Sam!"

I stood before the open door and let the cold hallway air blow in.

"I'm sorry, Roi. I'm forever grateful for everything you've done. Not only for helping me climb the mountain and carrying me through the street, but for being a friend. You've done more for me than you can know. But there's something I need to do. We have to fulfill our dharma, don't we? No matter where it takes us. I've probably been on this road a thousand times before wondering how many times I have to win before I get to kiss the girl. But maybe I've never won. Maybe

that's why I keep coming back. I have to let those vultures eat me over and over until the cycle ends. Goodbye, Roi. Tell Mr. Zen I'm sorry I couldn't sign his guestbook."

Chapter Seventeen

Another Road

It's almost 10 by the time I get to the donut shop. Jacky is nowhere in sight. "Have you seen a girl with blue-green eyes, golden brown hair, and big—" I cup my hands over my chest to illustrate.

"She here this morning," the guy behind the counter says. "Eight o'clock exactly."

"How do you know it was 8 o'clock exactly?"

"Because she say, 'Look at the clock! It 8 o'clock exactly!' She very angry! Hee hee! Whoever she waiting for, he crazy man! Hee hee!"

"Not crazy. Just stupid," I sigh and slump over the counter.

I refuse to move until the guy behind the counter slips me more information, but all he gives me is Lao coffee. I sip the coffee, sitting at a table now, and try to work out some sort of strategy to get to Cambodia with the 50-odd dollars I have left. After Pat's whole spiel about following the path, it feels like I have no choice. For a moment I think about Christmas. The return ticket back to America leaves in three days. I can only get there from Beijing. No matter. I'll just spend the rest of my days in Cambodia, wandering as a crime-fighting monk. But first, I'll need to steal one of those robes. . .

My mind wanders in search of Jacky, wondering what she's doing now, wondering if perhaps she is and has been My True Love all along. I see her getting on a bus to Thailand, her visa happily renewed for another three years of beaches, cocktails, dancing, men, and all of their ladyboys. I want to say goodbye. Maybe I can find her Facebook. Damn it! What was her last name?

Time to go. What I need to do is figure out some transportation. Maybe I can pay a guy to take me to Cambodia. All right, let's look at the monument. Might as well, since we're here. Patuxai Stone Arch. Tourists everywhere. A group of girls. None of them Jacky.

"I've got to get out of here," I think to myself, and then it hits me. I'll rent a motorbike! I get the idea after a motorbike almost hits me. There are motorbike rentals everywhere. All I have to do is leave some bogus collateral and then take that bad boy all the way to Cambodia! Is that stealing? Hell yes, it's stealing!

(I was really hungover. I was kind of depressed. I wasn't thinking straight. I'm sorry, your honor. No, I do not think that will hold up in court. I'm just giving you context here.)

Just as I hop into the first motorbike rental I see, there of all places.

..

"Jacky!"

She turns around. Her mouth drops as if she was just on the phone, calling me. Neither of us have cellphones.

"Where have you been? I've been looking all over for you!"

I react like a cyborg and scan her statement for bullshit. It's clean. She squeezes me tightly. She looks amazing, freshly showered and changed. I can't help but ask.

"Did they try to gangbang you?"

"Who?"

"Him and his 'friends.'"

"No, you ass!" Jacky laughs and pinches my shoulder. "I told him not to do anything funny or I'd stick him with a knife."

"You're so Australian," I whisper admiringly.

"Did you end up bunking with some lucky Lao girl?" Jacky says, batting her eyelashes. "You didn't meet another ladyboy, I hope."

Events from the previous night flow hyperspeed like I'm being plugged back into the matrix.

"I think I'm still shrooming."

"That bad, eh?"

"I was just about to rent a bike. Did you pick one already?"

"Sure did. Where ya headed, cowboy?" Jacky takes out a cowgirl hat and dons it teasingly for a moment before picking out a helmet.

"Siem Reap."

"That's perfect! I'm going to Sihanoukville. Who's in Siem Reap? Come with me to the beach! We can rent a bungalow and sip cocktails by the water. I'm going to do a cleanse there before I go back to Thailand. Just sit at the bottom of the world for a few weeks and watch the sun go down. Oh wait! You only have a few days left, haven't you?"

I nod my head stoically, trying to avoid a throat lump.

"We can still ride down together, can't we? But how are you going to return the bike?"

"I haven't figured out that part yet."

"Why don't you just ride with me? I'm riding all the way, baby! I'm not coming back. As long as you don't mind riding bitch—"

"What? Are you nuts? I can't ride on the back!"

"Why not? There's nothing wrong with a boy riding bitch. It's actually quite daring. You can show the world you're not afraid of what they think."

"Please stop calling it 'riding bitch.' That's not helping."

"Fine, we can take turns. You ride half and I'll ride half. Deal?"

"What about once we get there? How are you planning to return your motorbike?"

"I'm not," she says, and winks at me. "I just bought it."

As if on cue, one of the grease monkeys from the shop comes wheeling a brand-new motorbike up to the front. It's a fast little number, cherry red. I wouldn't have expected anything less. He wipes it down one last time and gives Jacky the key.

I stand there with my mouth agape.

"You do know how to use the clutch, I'm assuming," Jacky says as I straddle the driver's seat.

"I'm a fast learner," I chirrup.

"Oh god. Please don't tell me . . ."

"Come on! Teach me! Give me 10 minutes, and I'll have her at full speed!"

"You really are something; you know that?"

We go to the side street and start up the bike. Jacky flies up and down the street like a pro, making sure it's ready to burn. I can see she's going to be expecting me to have it pushing red line the whole time. I've never even ridden a Vespa. When she hands me the motorbike, I struggle to steady it, my arms quivering like two strands of wet spaghetti.

"It's heavy," I note dumbly, and nearly tip it over.

"Hey! Get a scratch on my new bike and you're paying for it!"

Jacky runs through the tutorial without pause, and something in her voice tells me I better get this right or I'll never see her tan lines again. Fear vanishes the moment you let absolute concentration of the moment take over and become an unbreakable particle, a transcendent wave. There's a brief moment when I enter the superconductor and all of my infinite parts and pieces seem to deconstruct and just hang there

for a moment in the air. There's a sudden shudder and the sound of grinding gears. Jacky is on the sidewalk, yelling. She's not happy.

For the next few hours, I sit on the back of the cherry red motorbike and try to avoid the stares of nearly every single person we see — children and dogs included — as I daringly ride bitch — Jacky's words, not mine — defying 5,000 years of learned culture. Perhaps the seat position fits the name. I do a lot of complaining, and continue to mutter under my breath because I'm stuck in the house and she can't seem to listen to me while she's at work. I don't like the way my helmet has a lily painted on it. Jacky tells me it looks fine, but I don't believe her. She's probably just saying that to make me feel better. "Maybe it does look good," I think to myself as I move my head back and forth in the side mirrors. I'll need to have a proper look at the next rest stop, play with the angles and my hair.

We weave in and out of traffic until we reach the outskirts of the city where the walls along the highway slowly crumble into fringes of concrete, which then diminish to pebbles, and then finally rubble and the grassy nothingness of the road stretching into the trees. The plan is to ride until we reach the border without making too many stops, a trip that would normally take half a day, but with the way Jacky rides and expects me to ride, we should get there in no time.

My bandaged hand is the one with the accelerator. A sort of numb vibrating pain comes from the hyper-pulse of the engine, electricity shooting down my arms and into my fingertips. Jacky's arms hold me tight. She moves her hands down to her sides when my speed slackens up, and holds on tight when I burn. I set that motorbike on fire; I'm nothing but smoke and rubber, asphalt and grit, tires and fire, and that feeling of numbing electricity shooting through me, tears trembling in the corners of my lids.

Jacky lets out a cry of delight as we go full-speed into an open light, a perfect summer day, wind in our hair, sun in our face, the blue in the sky and the trees surrounding us disappearing into rays of blurry light. We fly into the realms of zero gravity, and I feel her pressing my back with the side of her face. I almost see myself screaming into a bright white light before the explosion following right behind us, disintegrating the world. There's only the silence of deafening roar, the sound of pure consciousness, the perfect awareness of this moment, speeding through the countryside toward the green hills with the trees standing perfectly still until you pass them and they break down into their simplest forms. Seeing the road in complete focus until it becomes a rainbow of flying light.

If I walked into a bar and you saw me, would you buy me drink? Would you listen to how I've been and tell me there were times when you wondered how I was, however far you were, in a strange moment unrelated to anything, but somehow coming back to that time, no longer your life now, but wondering how you are? The sun dips over the Mekong, painting the sky quicksilver with pink and vermilion stains sparkling on the water, drinking cold beers, watching the silhouettes of fishing boats float in the distance.

"I wish our last meal was a bit more memorable," I say, using chopsticks to pick at a plate of fragrant greens, sticky rice, and lukewarm tripe.

"Trust me. I'll remember this every time I even think about touching animal parts again. I'm going back to being a vegetarian. How can anyone eat this stuff?"

"Starvation usually helps."

"I wouldn't give this to my dog," Jacky says, wrinkling her nose. "But here we are, and I'm eating tripe."

We stare out at the water in silence, listening to the songs of crickets in the air, the last glittering notes of sunshine. What do people usually say at these times?

"I love you?" I ask, and then add, "I think."

Jacky looks at me and bursts out laughing.

"What am I going to do when you're gone? It'll be so boring. I'll have no one to drink alone with. It's more fun drinking alone when you're there."

"I know. You tell me every time you finish drinking alone and I'm there."

"Are you going to be okay?" Jacky asks, touching my hand. "Am I going to need to rescue you again?"

"It can't hurt."

We order more beers. The sun fades into a spectacle of beauty and light, impossibly distant, distorted by dreams.

"We're not going to exchange emails and promise to keep in touch, are we?" I ask.

"No, of course not. That would be horrible."

"Dreadful."

I swallow a shot of beer.

"The bus leaves at 6 in the morning, so no dallying," Jacky reminds me governess-like. "It's not an actual bus, of course; they just call it that. It's more like a pickup. You'll see the farmers waiting around for it. That'll take you to Stung Treng. From there, you can get a bus that'll take you straight to Siem Reap."

"I was really sad this morning," I interject now in sudden confession. "When I didn't see you at the donut shop, I was hoping. . . you might still be around."

"I knew you were a stalker."

"I could've been a killer on the road. You should be more careful next time."

"I've got good instincts."

"Plus a really big knife."

"Yeah," she grins, knowing that she really does.

Our faces smile together at the river in the last waning reflections of rosy glass.

"What if there was something you lost," I ask aloud, "and you didn't know where it was, or how to get it back? How far would you go to find it?"

"I reckon I'd give a look."

"What if you couldn't find it?"

"I reckon I'd keep looking," she says softly, more serious this time.

"Should I become a hermit?"

"And move from shell to shell?"

"Not that kind of hermit. I mean the kind who live in little huts on the mountaintop, eat berries, and occasionally come down to the nearest village to play some music with mice dancing behind them in the street. Will you come listen to me?"

"I'll do you one better and bring my piggy bank."

We laugh and let our voices dissipate into an ellipse of crickets and sun fall, my hand around her waist, her head against my shoulder, cradled now in the feeling of no return.

"Is this what it means to be happy?"

"You mean where we are right now?"

"Dreaming about where we're going to be."

"Maybe, but you can't live in dreams forever."

"But I could live in a cave."

"You'd have to marry your left hand."

"How'd you know I was a lefty?"

"There was a moment that night."

"I see."

"So you planning on caving it for a while then?"

"Thinking about it. Just sitting there, meditating, becoming enlightened, understanding that we don't need anything except what's inside."

"And then some stupid girl crosses your path in the middle of nowhere and you look into her eyes, and you see all that you've been missing is still out there, because believe me, she doesn't want to live in a cave."

"But what does it mean when we meet in the desert, or sit beside each other on an empty highway waiting for a bus that never comes?"

"You'll never forget her, even if you only met for an instant. You'll walk away feeling as if you've known her your entire life."

"Nothing will ever be the same again. The peace and solitude I once had will be ruined. I spend the rest of my life searching for her like a phantom, because without her, the world is just empty scenery."

"Will you really look for her?"

"I will."

"What'll you do if you find her?"

"I don't know, but I know what to say when I see her."

"What'll you say?"

"I'll ask her to watch the sunset with me."

Jacky sits on my lap and kisses me. I close my eyes and see stars fill the twilight skies. She looks at me, and for one last moment, I see the blue-green of her eyes, like a world spinning alone in the galaxy, coming in line with the sun and the moon one last time.

"Do you think we could ever be something? Out there in the real world?"

"It never works," Jacky says, shaking her head. "We'd just end up hating each other. I'd never cook anything, and you'd always forget to pay the bills on time."

"In the next life, I will return as an accountant," I declare.

Jacky puts her arms around my neck and gives me a long kiss good-bye.

"Come find me," she says, "if you decide to change your mind."

She puts her hand on my cheek and mounts the bike. She disappears in less than eight seconds, but it feels longer, like watching a giant wave roll across the sea, growing and growing, until finally it crashes on the horizon on some distant moonlit beach.

Chapter Eighteen

Sir, Are You Carrying a Bomb?

I headed straight for the airport in Kunming: City of Eternal Spring. Nonstop night buses and pickup trucks, concrete mattresses and bamboo skewers became a blur. I raced with zero regard for the codes of espionage. I was going to Thailand to rescue My True Love, and any agent that got in my way would be greeted with neck-snaps and karate chops to the throat.

I listened for more transmissions on the way to the airport, but without Roi's guidance, everything seemed garbled into noises that were impossible to figure out. Jack must have caught onto the leak and started using a different channel. For the time being, I was left with an echoing wire-tap, looping over and over in the basement of my mind, cigarettes burning all night, analyzing sound waves. It could just be another one of Jack's games, but the thought of her in his arms was too much. I decided to buy a one-way ticket to Bangkok. Unless I succeeded, and unless my instincts were correct, I'd be found guilty of abandoning my mission, and would never be able to step foot on

American soil again. I'd be branded a traitor, charged with treason, conspiracy to assassinate a world leader, and my files would be opened to investigation, a fine-tooth comb run over my every thought and communication.

It was possible that this was all part of his trap to frame me, make me the fall guy, my demise tied up in a neat little package to cover his trail. But what if he did have her? My True Love kidnapped — a new level in his sick game. I decided it was time to kick Jack from some high elevation overlooking the ocean. I could already see him falling and making a distant splash — My True Love and I looking down wondering if he was really dead this time — an underwater explosion confirming the kill in a blast of ocean spray. With Jack terminated, the Dalai Lama would be safe, and I would follow up on the final clues I received from Jack in one of his sudden confessions where he tells me just enough to make me realize it's deeper than either of us can imagine. I'd send my report along with Roi's flash drive dutifully to Interpol, thereby regaining my status as agent, my name cleared; the experiment they've done on me forgiven, but not forgotten. And in the final scene, on a paradise island together with My True Love, a kiss.

I stood before the ticketing counter, looked at the departure sign, and saw two incoming flights ready to be announced side by side: New Delhi and Bangkok. Both slots were blinking at the same time. I felt the entire airport watching me, the video being streamed right into the highest offices of Interpol as well as the Chinese Ministry of Defense, the coffee steam rising quietly in the tension of the moment as we all realize the gravity of this decision. I held the money in my hand and wondered what would happen if I was wrong. It could be the other way around. Jack could just be luring me away from the Dalai Lama so that I won't be there to save him. That would make more

sense, now that I think about it. There was only one way to decide. Whichever came first, that was the sign.

India.

FUCK!

WHY? WHY CAN I NOT BE WITH MY TRUE LOVE?

WHY ME?

I calmed down and regrouped in KFC. By the time I had polished off a two-piece, I realized a third possibility: that I've been weaponized from the very beginning. Didn't Jack say something about the package being strapped and ready to blow? Was I the package? Of course! Even if I were to try to warn the Dalai Lama face to face, my brain is so wired with triggers that I'll react in an instant without even being aware of it. There won't be a gun. It'll only be me, implanted with this chip and armed with these skills for a final design. All it needs is a switch, a trigger, which Jack can turn on any time.

I quickly accessed the internet and found His Holiness' mailing address and the consulate that represents him. I bought a postcard that said, "Kunming: City of Eternal Spring," and wrote this message:

Oh Most Benevolent One,

Hello. I do not wish to alarm you, but what I am about to write may sound shocking. You may get death threats all the time — I don't know. However, I feel a moral obligation to let you know that your life may be in danger. There is a plot to assassinate you for reasons which are too complex to explain here. However, it is important that you know there is a conspiracy that threatens Your Holiness' safety. Do not trust anyone who says his name is Jack, but is actually Sam, or says his name is Sam, but is actually Jack.

In addition, it is possible that I have been brainwashed to assassinate you myself, so I am making an effort to stay as far away from you as possible. I am heading to Thailand to find My True Love,

so please stay away from Thailand for at least a couple of months. I will update you with my travel plans if necessary. Let's not meet or I may do something regretful.

Yours,

Sam

Satisfied with the message and my penmanship, I rolled like Jonah toward the ticket counter and left Nineveh behind. I made my decision. I was ignoring a direct order from Interpol, a clear sign. But I had to do this my way. Besides, who knew how many agents at Interpol were compromised? If the conspiracy against the Dalai Lama was as big as I feared, it meant all trust was out the window. I had just enough cash in my wad for a one-way ticket. About a hundred dollars and a handful of mottled coins remained. I took my ticket and ran towards customs, hoping they wouldn't find the flash drive stashed in the secret pocket of my underwear.

I stood before a desk with three officials seated behind it. There was no TSA in China. It was more like a tribunal. Any foreigners were deemed suspicious and sent to a different line. A moment ago they had been laughing it up, waving passengers through without a care. Now they'd become rigid and full of scrutiny. Or was it just me?

My heart was beating like it was on fire. The strategy was never about preparation, but a ballsy rush to the front, a foolhardy charge! A super-soldier of excessive size and nutriment peered at me hard from under the black brim of his hat. He spoke curtly as I stood before him like an invalid with a dimwitted smile. He said it again, this time in a tone that sounded like he could sharpen a bayonet with his teeth.

"Wo ai ni?"

He shoved a piece of paper in my face. Written on the paper, in three different languages, were instructions to present paperwork, visa, and passport. I had forgotten the Red State demanded paperwork

for arrival *and* departure. I considered for a moment pretending to understand none of these languages. But the look on Yao Ming's face suggested I begin searching.

Another officer stepped forward to see what the holdup was, and the three of us began turning my rucksack inside-out, flipping it upside down while they used flashlights to help scour a pile of dirty laundry for what seemed to be a very evasive little document.

"No, that's not it. . . wait, here's something. . . no, that's just my wallet . . hold on . . . I think I got something. . . wait, nope, just my wallet again . ."

I felt them preparing to beat me like a gong. I reached into my back pocket where I'd prepared 100 yuan and slipped it casually into the pages of my passport. Easy does it.

The super-soldiers continued squinting at my passport, holding the money in the air, looking at it as if it was this strange object they had never seen before. An item of much interest.

"Whoops. How did that get in there?"

Together they shined their lights in my face. Everything went white. Incredibly, instead of beating me with sticks like a pile of wet laundry, I saw their arms stretching out from heaven to lead me towards the metal detectors. I was on my way, as free as a rogue agent could be, to spread my wings like an eagle ready to fly.

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

"Sir, please empty your pocket. And take off your belt—"

RUN!

I bolted for the door, pushed an old man out of the way and jumped over children. I knocked over airport security and flipped over a baggage cart, and vanished between the sliding doors, the forfeited ticket flying loose from my bandaged palm.

What the hell just happened? What went wrong? It was as if the Dalai Lama himself were watching and saw my treachery. He pressed the buzzer. *EEEEHHH! WRONG!*

I crouched behind a dumpster and wept with shame.

After a few moments of sobbing at my own treachery, the backdoor of a seafood restaurant opened and a chef dumped a load of rotting fish. I covered my face with my hands to shield my nose from the smell, and then it hit me. I lowered my hands from my eyes and stared in horror and amazement at my mummy-wrapped hand. My bandaged hand. The surgery. The ticking and throbbing. A time-bomb. The doctor back at the border of Tibet was one of Jack's agents all along! I knew he was too young to be a real doctor! Wrapped it up all nice and pretty and told me not to get it wet. Damn you, Doogie! Damn you to hell!

Chapter Nineteen

The Diplomat

Getting into Cambodia proved more difficult than I imagined. I had fantasized a Hollywood reception waving my navy blue passport and flashing my pearly whites as supplicants usher me in, whispering excitedly and picking up the coins I leave behind like a trail of slime, fawned upon like the heroine at the start of a sleazy romance or the captain at the end of an adventure in the South Seas, smiling in victory lap, however obscenely.

"Please! Come in! Welcome! Welcome! If there's anything you need, anything at all, please let me know. All I have to do is call my friend. . ."

There's always a friend, isn't there? It's places like these that run on the buddy-buddy system. Soon, I'm chuckling with the guard, lighting his cigarette, and slipping a couple more into his shirt pocket as we laugh and carry on, almost flirtatiously, and he spouts the dirt in exchange for a few petty compliments.

"Boy, you sure do have good teeth," I tell him admiringly.

He looks down, beaming, feeling pleased with himself.

"You know where I can get me a square deal on a ride into town?"

The guard, still showing off his white enamel, points me to three guys hanging out in the shade beside their shiny motorbikes.

The guys eye me and smile, exchanging looks through hair hanging in eyes, smoke rising from their open mouths, looking suddenly like wolves. I look back at the guard, who's still smiling, encouraging me to go on and talk to them. Something doesn't feel right. I pull out more cigarettes, ready to ask the price and walk away, saying something like, "Well, nothing to see in Cambodia anyway. Thanks anyway, fellas." Counting to three as they call after me, begging me to name my own price.

"FIFTY DOLLAR?"

There's no question of talking them down. They all have their own cigarettes.

It looks like I'm out of moves. They know I'm desperate. What's he going to do? Walk to the next town? HAHAAHAHAHAHA!

"Now hold on just one minute. Let me get this straight, gentlemen," I say, walking before the jury of wide-eyed children, puppies, and chicks. "Let me make sure I'm hearing you clearly. You mean to tell me the ride to the visa office is double the amount of the visa itself? Preposterous! Ludicrous! Absurd!"

I enunciate every syllable like a flamboyant court lawyer in the face of each driver, all who blandly watch me with smoke rising lazily from their lips.

"And you," I say, now addressing Mr. Aviators. "It seems rather curious that you all just happen to be in the same place at the same time. Bringing people to the wrong gates and then SKYROCKET-ING THE PRICE!"

"Gentlemen," I say, leaning in now, "I'll tell you what I'll do. I'LL TELL YOU WHAT I'LL DO!"

(Rolling up my sleeves to show the children, puppies, and chicks a disappearing act.)

"I'm going to forget the insult of the initial asking price. I'll pay you," I say snapping old Ulysses into shape before their eyes, "fifteen dollars. That's FIFTEEN, mind you. Drop the oh and make it a five and shave four off for me, sir!"

The three glance at each other in secret conference with their eyes.

"And I'll buy that visa," I say, nodding at the border patrol guard, who looks up gnawing from his tattered pant leg and growls, "even though I know it'd be much easier and more convenient for all of us if I just vanished on you, but it's Christmas, fellas. I just want us to go home happy to our wives? Have we got a deal?"

I get on the back of Mr. Aviator's flashy little doowop-mobile, and we go riding into the daylight. The scene feels almost heroic, like the rising smoke at the end of a war film. There's just one part we need to edit out. We really have to get rid of that sign:

WELCOME TO CAMBODIA! IF YOU SEE ANY SIGNS OF SEX TRAFFICKING, CHILD ABUSE, OR HAVE REASON TO SUSPECT A FOREIGNER, PLEASE CALL 1-05...

I miss the important part where I remember the number to call.

Mr. Aviators drives as far as a small street market in what I'm guessing to be some sort of town. He gives me a nod like top gun and lights up a cigarette while siphoning ethanol into his tank. The market sells bootleg clothing and a plastic array of riches and wonders you would likely find in a dollar store near the pits of hell. I'm so hungry I actually consider some barbecue in this ghost town, and watch a man cooking with dried leaves and stones just to have something to burn. There is no meat, only these sticks, which raise up a nice ambience for the warm beer and generic soda floating in coolers filled with dead flies and water.

There's a guesthouse near the city square, if you can call it that. There's an open entrance, and you can almost feel the silhouettes of soldiers in pieces of uniform marching through the town in victory, the celebration pouring out into the streets, people waving flags from the windows and pledging their lives and all that they own. Year Zero is when the great herds would be taken from the city to work and die in the killing fields. The plot to restart time from the beginning, to make a new world from scratch, to shape destiny, to be free and live as one! Brothers, sisters, you are slaves no more! Come with us, into paradise! There's sunlight filtering in from the dusty street. Some dog-eared books. The whole country eaten by dogs.

The guesthouse is a piece of shit. As far as pieces of shit go — and I've seen several by now — this room is definitely the creepiest. You ever feel like you can just feel the ghost of a dead prostitute on the bed? You don't want to. The bed is a dingy creaky box of springs with speckled-white sheets, a (slightly cracked) mirror on the headboard so you can watch yourself have sex with invisible hookers — what the fuck are those rusty-brown stains? — oh god, telltale signs of blood coagulation — the remnants of someone's head getting blown off while watching themselves have sex with invisible hookers. Hmm! Thoughtful! Thank you!

Before I wander back towards the street market for some distraction, I decide to sit at a wooden table in the shittier guesthouse next to mine just to feel like I'm doing something. The entire facade is missing, broken, eroded by time into a nice view of the river and the street. Around sunset, it's actually kind of pleasant, despite the squalor. Men smoke and play their games. Children run freely in the streets. A motorbike passes slowly without aim. A dog licks the earth and passes on.

A menu is placed in front of you, and you remember that you originally came for something to eat. You don't want to eat anymore. You just want to sit and watch the people drift by in the quiet rhythm of their lives, and all they seem to be is scenery. Time keeps going. You originally came for something to eat. You said that already. Now you're not hungry. For some reason, you order roasted spiders. Great, now you have to leave.

As I wait for my roasted arachnids to arrive, I let my eye catch that sign again, a smaller version on a message board this time, of a little girl in gritty black and white with tears in her eyes, the grim announcement to beware of any signs of children being raped, abused, molested, starved, beaten, sold, or destroyed for sex. Here in this flat basin where one river runs from a desperate paradise with nothing left to offer the world but your back or a child — your back — or your child — your back for a child — a child you give and never get back. Here are the ones found in garbage dumps who never had a chance. So low are the stakes, so stingy the prizes. To live and believe your destiny to be a tissue to be thrown away. A Kleenex if she cries, if she can even still cry. Or does she sit still, joined with the others who sit silent and slack-jawed in endless shock of a universe torn, to live this moment after moment after moment in a memory her brain lives to erase, left with the violation that becomes her birthright and fate? She does not continue on; he does not remain still; he watches them, slack-jawed and silent, the cartoons, in the room taking pictures of himself as a child. The room grows darker and incense lights the room. An old woman prays to Buddha and the bodhisattvas for protection, for her family, the offering of a few flowers and some smoke.

I glance at a table on the other side of the room and see four middle-aged white men sitting by themselves, waiting for their food. I had seen them earlier when I first sat down, but hardly

paid attention. Now I see through their facade. Something inside me sounds the alarm. It's the pancakes that convince me. After they receive their food, I watch carefully, now holding up the "No Sex Trafficking" poster off the wall and moving silently towards them, watching as the bald one with glasses methodically slices and chews, drizzling the syrup in slow, perfect lines like a commercial, his knife pressing against the soft dough in perfect symmetrical triangles. Most pedophiles are neat-freaks. OCD, abusive childhood, beaten for being messy as children. They hate filth; they hate it! Love giving children baths, the sick fucks.

I watch him eating his pancakes slowly, chewing robotically, his eyes focused on the flavor of the maple syrup, the sick bastard. The rest of them carry on casually, thinking nothing of the abhorrent crimes they've committed and will soon commit again. Coming to this land specifically because of its corrupt system, its destitution, and the beauty of its children. Watching him eat pancakes, hoeing and humming, I feel so enraged that I want to scream. I want to feel him choke on his pancakes as I press slowly with my sandal upon his windpipe! I feel my superpowers rising! I have to do something!

I AM — THE DEPUTY!

Unable to stand another minute, I walk up to the table, ready to sweep the cutlery off the table. I imagine smashing the plates and feeding them the shards. I find myself in no time standing before their table, breathing heavily, my eyes glistening with a dark sense of justice, an eruption of righteous violence soon to come.

"Enjoying your dinner, gents? What kind of a grown man orders a meal like that at this time of the evening? You'd better get with your pal here with the fish sticks, although that's still cutting it kind of close. You guys are just giving yourselves away, shouting for some violation to be done to you in prison. But you reap what you sow, as they say."

I say all this while rounding the table, fingering their plates; dipping my fingers in the syrup, tasting it crudely in their faces.

"How are you guys enjoying your stay, hmm? Everything to your liking? These shitty bedrooms holding up for you?"

I deliberately land my palm onto the man's pancakes allowing the syrup to make a sick squelching noise, making their blood freeze with horror.

"Watch yourself touch any little boys or little girls in that mirror today? Not before dinner, hmm? How nice," I growl, my voice hitting a Batman-like register, my hands taking fistfuls of collar off their shoulders.

"I'll give you guys a five-second head start before I take your child-touching, evil little fingers, and shove them-"

Before I can finish my righteous ultimatum, four middle-aged women enter the guesthouse and look at me quizzically, probably thinking I'm just a handsy waiter.

Man down! Man down! The Deputy has been shot! I repeat, the Deputy has been shot!

"I recommend the soup! It's excellent!"

I vanish before my food arrives.

I can already hear the nightly news on Channel 5:

Vigilante crime-fighter turned diner and dasher? Looks like it's hard times for Cambodia's self-proclaimed superhero. Find out more on the news at 10.

Chapter Twenty

Cambodia

The next morning, I wait for the bus to Siem Reap and watch the morning scene by the river. A father stands knee-deep in the blue river, sloshing buckets of water onto his shiny blue motorbike. A mother washes her two boys as they laugh and dance naked under the torrents. The morning light creeps into cracks and crevices, illuminating the edges of blurry buildings. The mist quickly fades as 80s rock comes bursting forth and a dream machine rolls in from the heavens. This tangerine dream hums with no need for introduction. This is the one. Hop on. The fuzzy beast holds me in great arms of comfort. Now this is more like it!

“They didn’t skip out on us this time, did they boys?” I whoop for joy and elbow the thin elderly man seated beside me. He smiles with a thousand little crinkles like cracks in a building at sunrise. I point at his scarf, giving him a thumbs-up. A blue-checkered pattern, the cross between bandana and a turban.

“Krama,” the old man says, and pulls out its red-checkered twin, rolls it up in a way that I will never repeat, and places it upon my head.

Orange dirt road, fields of tall grass swaying endlessly into the flat horizon beyond. Basin life. We pass a home set back in the fields and

pick up this young guy standing at the wooden gate with a huge grin on his face and his whole family behind him, seeing him off as he takes that first step into the world. One day he will return, and they will see a change in his eyes, a gaze like two mirrors reflecting distant suns on top of that old familiar smile, that look of innocence explaining the misadventures of his journey, the mysteries which lay beyond the river, over the mountains, and deep in a glassy neon wilderness, if only he could find the words to make them understand how beautiful, terrible, and strange. But today, he only begins his journey. Who knows when he'll come back again? Will he remember this moment as he should? As she will, growing up without her big brother around? Will he still be the same? Will he talk about things no one understands and feel alien until he finally runs back into that glass-refracted oasis where she knew he should never have gone in the first place? Rain-filled windows writing to baby sister that he's okay. The naked babies watch from the shade as the tangerine dream disperses the dust, and suddenly he is not there. There is a stillness from the birds and insects observing his passing, and then vibrations remain.

The young man finds his seat and tries to contain his excitement, not wanting to make it so obvious that he's nothing more than a country bumpkin who's hardly left his village. But that all changes now. He'll make mistakes in the beginning, show his wonder too easily before his eyes harden into steel and he becomes wary and suspicious of everything. He'll know how to order a cocktail and keep himself from getting cut in line. He'll bring air-conditioning into their world as he feels it here in this electric fabric, the whole caboodle vibrating as if in ascension, never climaxing, just staying there. The theater-like seats keep everyone in deep immersion, dark and fancy lighting along the aisles, a Thai-pop karaoke video playing softly, but

loud enough so that you can't tune it out without your own personal immersion equipment, of which I have none.

The song is a ballad, a specialization in sudden bursts of reckless emotion, spiced with English tropes of "I love you," "I need you," and "Baby come back to me" on top of Thai lyrics. Singing from his white piano in the middle of a windswept field, our hero, dressed in a long purple coat that flies in the wind, bangs away at the keys and sees a gallery of images starting from the moment he first laid eyes on her, one night in the library as he studied an old leather-bound edition of *Romeo and Juliet*, dressed in a silken pirate shirt, when suddenly there she was, her pretty face visible through a space between the shelves, pure as the driven snow, red lips softly reading, completely unaware that he is staring at her intensely from what seems like mere inches away.

Her books fall to the ground and they both reach down to pick them up. Their hands touch. They look up. He doesn't even have the decency to apologize for "bumping into her" before placing two fingers gently beneath her chin, lifting her head up as they both rise now in duet, abandoning the books altogether, because really, who gives a shit? He caresses her cheek and they mysteriously transition into scenes of autumn, walking hand in hand beneath the yellow, red, and orange leaves. The scene of autumn bliss is short-lived. Now in an all-white suit topped with a sable coat, he's playing an ice-piano in his snow-mansion of loneliness, and I begin to understand that all he wants is to feel cold. I see them walking in autumn, leaves like stars drifting around their smiling faces, little puffs of breath indicating the low temperature, and understand the deepest dreams of dreamers in the jungle.

Tarantulas stacked everywhere. Giant crickets, too. I don't know how these people manage to catch these critters, but certainly their

abominable size has something to do with it. There they are, staring at you from their massive girth and their 50 or so unblinking, dead black eyes. Some lackey is given the job of wiping all of the sweet and sour sauce from their peepers. Helps sales when you can see your mirror-reflected image 50 times right before you polish off the head in one last bite — Burp! — comb your hair and leave.

As I stand there flabbergasted, wondering if this is someone's idea of a sick joke, I hear someone say in American English, "Crazy, dog. These bugs are going to be the next thing, dog. I'm telling you."

I turn my head and meet Victor, a mildly excitable 30-something-year-old with a conspiracy theory and a dream, born in Phnom Penh, his accent Cambodia Town, Long Beach, returning now to his homeland, for good, it seems.

We share noodles at a rest stop in the middle of somewhere dusty and bushy and green. Shacks and concrete buildings, sparse and sporadic, on the way to the capital. Victor tells me how, despite being somewhat successful (well, not really) in America, he gave it all up to chase the eight-legged dream of spider meat.

"This world ain't gonna last forever, dog. We need to get on top of this shit. You know how many forests we cut down to let cows feed? How are we even going to breathe? How are we going to live? And all just to put a steak on your plate and a burger between two shitty pieces of bread. That ain't right."

"Yeah man, I don't know," I agree noncommittally.

"Man, soon people are going to wake up. They're gonna like, be all healthy and open-minded. Shit, we've been eating bugs for centuries. It's not impossible to like it. Did you try one yet?"

Gulp.

I feel my stomach drop in response. I wonder if they could take it out of the shell or something, smother it with mayonnaise. An

arachnid aioli on top of some fried chicken, lots of iceberg lettuce to create a nice buffer between my tongue and the spider meat. Isn't that Candidate Dim's recipe? The cartoon spider grinning and holding up a grotesque eight "thumbs up" at the drive-thru. Serenaded by a giant cricket playing a fiddle as you receive your food. "Thanks for eating open-minded! Please come back soon!"

Here you are standing before your spider selection as this fool you no longer wish to call a friend stands there expecting you to be open-minded. "Seriously, *dog*," I want to say, throwing his Californian all back in his face, "why do you have to put me in this position?" But I know he'll just get defensive, this being his stupid dream, not mine. You go ahead and eat spiders all you want. I won't judge you for it. Just don't make me have to stand here and be a part of it. I'll just think secret thoughts in my head. You do whatever the hell you want. Just keep that leg out of my — *Abb! Abb! It's on my lips! It's on my fucking lips! Oh god! Fuck! Help! — Hey! — Okay... Alright... I see what you're doing there. . . Just went in with that special sauce? . . . I get it. . . Cause otherwise it'd be unpalatable. . . I see where you're going with this. . .*

I eat 10 of them. I'm stuffed with spider legs. One of them might have been fresh off the ground. Before we part ways, Victor tells me about Angkor Wat, which he makes a pilgrimage to once a year.

"Just pick any room, dog. And don't just look at the buildings. Look at the carvings. They didn't just make this shit for their kings. They made this for their *gods*."

It's late afternoon and I'm on the bus for another long series of hours: beautiful, sleepy, mesmerizing. Every bus ride is different. Every day

is different on the road. Riding through fields of grass and pink skies screaming across the sky until it becomes a vision of eternal stillness, the shallow waters that glow with lily pads, purple-blue lotuses standing in the breeze, trembling in a place where so many have died. These aren't the foothills of Laos, covered with twisting mountain roads and elevated vistas and dense vegetation. The army chose to bomb that country into oblivion — the price of neutrality in a war where no one gets to choose what side they're on. They're given a weapon and a choice to fight or run. To run is to get shot in the back. To fight is to feel the bayonet. Choose one. We're on a flat basin where there is nowhere left to hide; the Mekong floods for months at a time. You live with pant legs high and feet open to leeches always trying, trying, trying. The flat expanse of earth is without division or variation in slope or altitude. You are at the bottom of the world. You were looking for it; this is it. There is nowhere deeper to go. Only green stretches of indica and sativa and memories of rice trapped in sky beneath the distance of holiness and a raindrop, which becomes a bud, the buds, which become pearls, a steaming bamboo bowl and a face giving grace before his or her god. Beyond the palms leaning on the horizon, like thin blue poles, the sunlight besets upon our bus a silhouette, with the luminescence of a grapefruit and the soft blue formation of shadows where one may hallucinate hills among the silhouettes of mirages, of mountains in the distance, whereupon sit temples that aren't there, a city that no longer is, but in the echo-chamber infinite, burning stars.

Chapter Twenty-One

Nemesis

The old man was in bed. The sun was just starting to come down, and the room was getting colder. I got in bed too, despite the hour, stared at a book, and watched the words wiggle and dance around on the pages while I reviewed tape. Chinese characters floated in the rain. A Chinatown that never ends. None of the cheap plastic is talking, and even if they were, they're shape-shifters, amorphous, capable of any design, any lie. The whole city's a lie. On the edge of a jungle in constant springtime, high up on a mountain, a silvery shot down towards the river to the border of Indochina, the opium highways dotted with cheap neon and cheaper noodles for both jittery and numbed of brain. I'm capable of wandering forever, like I was born wherever I am, like I don't know where I'm going, but keep going, guided by some glimmering light.

Trapped in a labyrinth of streets mapped on principles of commerce and repetition, a faith in outcome, a numbers game that gets tighter and tighter the more people are at play. What do they plan to

do with all of us? Life as sewing machines, sex dolls, and seed beds for future slaves. The chances looking up or down, calling it luck, do whatever you can to win. The machine moves forward. There's nothing stopping it now. The distant rumble breaks the center of the Earth, smelting pools forming and congealing into every imaginable form. A new beginning, a history erased. Faded to memories of a lost tradition, an ancient poem, a lost and faded sea of silk lining the steps in a pyramid of spirit stones raising onward to the peak of magnificence drawing the final line. The earthquake's jaws open the land and its fiery mouth, the dragon now emerging covered by the burning rot of the city, the polluted rivers of slime dripping over reptilian eyes, toxic spools of chemical smoke rising from the nostrils of a gargantuan demon unleashed upon the Earth. Deeper in the Earth lies the headless idol of Shiva, as many arms as the sins of men, in corporation to rule and destroy, this wheel of fire burning in sun and rain.

City lights and flashing colors light up ubiquitous screens. World markets crash, yuans rain from the sky. The lights explode and riding past, a little girl sits on her father's lap and drives a motorbike for the first time. Pop! Pop! Pop! Fireworks burst somewhere on the mountains. A couple gets married. The cries of a baby. A schoolgirl sits and cries. I'm sitting in a McDonald's when I feel it. I've been here before. Not just a McDonald's, but this same exact one, and this same exact song, playing softly above us from the greasy atmosphere. *Imagine there's no heaven, It's easy if you try, No hell below us, Above us only sky.* . . The same girls decorating the same Christmas tree the same way, laughing as they place stars as if for the first time, at the same time it starts to snow.

I woke up; the room was dark. The old man sat alone by the bed getting drunk. What would I do if he offered me a sip with those sad, bleary eyes? In came Nemesis, turning on all the lights and fiddling

around noisily, zipping his zippers back and forth, scratching like a DJ, searching his pockets for something he never finds, an object worthy of muttered profanities, which I noticed come out in English, but still I refused to connect. All of this exertion apparently made him thirsty. He squeezed his water bottle with a crunching sound of plastic, wringing it over his tongue like he was in the middle of the desert. This inspired him to take out his laptop and bang away at the keys like a monkey, running at the pace of a speed-typing contest, stopping only now and then to sniff his bananas, making sure they didn't ripen on him without his permission. Any minute now, he would peel them. I merely had to wait. He picked up the whole bunch, stuck it to his face, and inhaled like some potassium junkie. "I should bust him right now for vagrancy," I thought. "Right, old man?" The old man looked at me with his bleary eyes and smiled.

The next morning, my sunglasses vanished. "I can't let them see my eyes," I thought. "Where could I have left them?" Suddenly it hit me. Nemesis! That banana-sniffing coyote stole my frames, set me up, and sprinkled glass on the crime scene. I could see it all perfectly. While I was in the bathroom, he pawed my Ray-bans to place at the site of a future double-suicide. How Machiavellian of you, Jack.

I came into the room roaring his name: "NEMESIS!" but found the old man sitting alone, drunk again before noon. "Where is he, old man? Talk!"

I gave the room a good thrashing.

"WHERE ARE THEY?"

I sniffed the sheets like a bloodhound searching for the scent of citrus to lead me on the trail. Whirling around now, breathing heavily, I pulled out my dental floss and advanced on the old man. He jabbered something in Mandarin and held up his hands as if to show me he

was innocent. Finally I gave in to his drunken smile and took a shot of *baiju*. Now he had me.

Hours later, emerging from the dorm, a woman at the desk stopped me. "Someone left this for you," she spoke in monotone. "From your room. Leave yesterday."

"Nemesis left those for me? Are you sure? Did he have a bunch of bananas with him?"

She nodded in the affirmative.

"Well, I'll be."

I pocketed my sunglasses and walked down the street into the setting sun. I see a tree forever trapped in autumn. I see windows on night buses and water drops of rain. Far in the distance, in dreams where you see green, a fire.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Angkor What?

I meet this driver named Mac. Tells me he'll do the job cheap as long as I don't blab to any of the drivers. We shake hands on it, and there we go flying through Old Market. By this time I'm so enlightened that even a pile of dog shit, of which there are many, seems like a beautiful gesture of sacrifice. I'm already talking foolishly about coming back and adopting a bunch of kids. Every time you say "aww," they multiply. Everywhere you look, there's so much color, so much poverty, all in the same places together like they can never be apart. The street vendors and their carts, saffron-robed monks walking the street burning sticks of incense, boys and men holding their bowls for alms, blessing the little shops with a prayer each time they receive their daily rice. Rabid dogs follow traffic at random, barking all frothy and snapping at the tires, which spit back clouds of dust, sitting stunned, gnawing their tails and spinning around as little children stare all liquid-eyed from behind their mothers' wrapped skirts; the motherless sauntering freely, afraid least of all of the epic of motorbike traffic, the deadliest game there is. But here they are, urchins in their play kitchen, the streets, their secret world. Somewhere beyond the morning rush of burning cloves and motor oil, swallowed by the jungle, a kingdom

of peace and serenity, a place once forgotten by the loving eyes of man and woman, somehow, but everyone knows how easy it is to get distracted, forget about one of the greatest things man has ever built, until a Frenchman in khakis comes around taking pictures, exploring the woods with hoots of excitement, while lackeys stand around giving each other glances like "I don't see how this old temple is going to give us more rice." You get caught up in the fields, the rice patties. Staring at your phone and getting bad service. Like, "Hello? We have the most beautiful temple in the world! Get your ass over here now!" Perhaps they were simply waiting for the moment to capitalize on a market upswing. "Angkor What? Oh, Angkor Wat. Yeah, we've had it for a while. Need to buy a ticket and rent a *tuk-tuk*. How much? FIFTY DOLLAR!" But until then, the city falls into a long, gloomy silence. Or perhaps not so gloomy at all. Laid to rest, in peace. Trees sprouting through walls and flowers growing wild in the courtyards. The carved stone statues become roosts for birds and perches for monkeys. Saffron-robed monks sweep between the gnarled roots of the banyan tree, which spreads its fingers through the soil around the crumbling city, eating away at what remains of a primordial energy, a granule of dust at a time. The jungle eats us, as well as our gods and places of worship; the city itself is a metaphor of life and death. The flag of an empire and its descent into ruin. The rest of the world carries on, searching for progress, identity, industry. But when all else fails, run to the jungle. Forget the world. Sweep the leaves.

Now I'm here in the back of a *tuk-tuk*, officially declaring myself renegade to Interpol, flaunting the risk of being locked inside a military prison for the rest of my life without media privileges. I have a stamp on my hand and a couple of dollars in my pocket. What other direction is there left but forward? Is this what they mean by faith, Alyosha? Why does it have to always come so close to the edge? Perhaps

this is the trigger-point that's needed before I unleash some mystical superpower, have lights shine out of my eyes and fire shoot out of my ass while great clouds of heaven and hell darken and illuminate the skies. Why else would you have taken me here if not to give me an ending? I thought you were giving me true love, but I can see now that you've given me lawn duties instead. Let's say that I come with nothing then. Let's say that I join you. I just want you to know that I give you my heart. I can't trust anything now. I don't trust my eyes; I can't think my way out; I've lost all of my skills. What more do you want? Where's my special moment? The one where I find a tree growing from a stone wall and hear the sound of birds and gentle streams and finally shut up and just listen. . . I'm almost in it, this moment before death when I see the thing that I was finally meant to see right before I die, fall face-first into a lotus pond. Hey Diane! You know what? It is one of those things you should see before you die! *Hey Diane! We're goin' inside the temple. What?! Diane screeches. I wanna see them whatchamacallits before I die!*

There's a bridge that stretches over a moat, which forms a flowing blue square around the temple. In front of me is an outer wall where behind and beyond rise a quincunx of towers reflected in the waters as a procession of monks in robes the color of kumquats make their way before a king. I stand in a place where long ago even the beggar boy got a view of the royal sedan chair, and water buffaloes stood idly on the banks, staring at the green-choked lily padded waters filled with lotus flowers. Angkor Wat, that great temple rising like Mount Meru, home of the gods, from a lost city swallowed by the jungle with stone walls gone limey, mossy, and moist, like dew or evaporated rain, an atmosphere that pervades everything and continues like the memory of a monsoon even in the dry season. There's an odd silence now that I've entered the inner chambers. The air is

cool, and the people who share the hallways seem to be nothing more than faint echoes as they drift by. I trace a finger around the intricate carvings, the endless symmetry impossible to believe. An empty space, a pond forever rippled. From peace and prosperity, the evil demons battle Krishna on every wall, the walls seeming to never end, every inch of surface carved with countless soldiers, elephants, horses, chariots, demons, slaves, courtesans, drummers, horn-players, flag-wavers, and in the center of it all, at the spearpoint of battle rides Prince Arjuna with Lord Krishna peacefully lounging at his side. Ride into the faceless night and capture as many demons within yourself as you can, enough to battle for the rest of your life. Here in the battleground are not just soldiers, but every man and woman from the lowliest slave to god-king, riding out and meeting danger and evil at the head, engaging all their endless force in battle, because the darkness will destroy you and consume all that has been created out of nothingness and the void unless we meet it with the face of war. "Too far!" cry the archers, who feel their arms breaking. "Too high!" trumpet the elephants, whose stampeding feet have already begun to bleed. But the cries of the front echo all the way to the back, so we move forward with the certainty at this unperceivable distance that someone has sounded the cry; we march closer and closer towards a black hole, forgotten forever as we fly with swords drawn into the wind with bodies as numerous as blades of grass, wispy and curved and altogether shapeless, yet individually as sharp as a glowing knife.

"And that's when I decided to pledge my life to preserving this place, for as long as I can, in what little capacity I have. When you give your heart and soul to something, it makes it all worth it to know that you're helping people come and feel what you felt, what I continue to feel each and every day."

"You been here only three hour," the woman with the sun hat says with a playful scowl. The other caretakers laugh as we rest beneath the shade of a tree, Angkor Wat standing majestically behind in the distance.

"Isn't it amazing how we all ended up here?" I sigh blissfully.

"You go see sunset?" Mac the driver asks.

"Is that a thing here?" I yawn and stretch. "Where's the best place to see it?"

"Sunset Temple," they all reply in unison.

"That makes sense."

We fly past the head with four faces at Bayon and take a shortcut past the Terrace of Elephants. We speed through Ta Prohm, where a giant tree sprouts from a doorway and the four elemental pools where people bathed clockwise to cure their infirmities. We find ourselves at the end of a procession so large it seems as if the whole world has come to see the sunset. People must have waited hours ahead of time, some even camped out at the very top of the temple from 4 o'clock onwards in the scorching heat with their smug sunburnt faces, ignoring the jeers by the masses as they cozy in for the sunset of their fucking lives. And why not? It's not every day you get to see our closest star descend upon one of the very temples built for her, inspired by her, needing her touch, her grace, her beauty to make it real and take shape.

We feel the *tuk-tuk* being rocked as if we're in the middle of a riot as the sun threatens to dip down another centigrade closer to the horizon. There is a panic in the mob, and the scene becomes tinged with danger.

"Get out of here, Mac! I'll go ahead on foot! Go home to your wife and family!"

Mac nods grimly and peels out of there, soon trapped and swallowed by more people. Meanwhile, I have my own problems.

I'm currently caught in a massive collective of Chinese tourists in matching t-shirts gathered at least 100 strong. It's like being trapped in a purple amoeba spreading across the world. There's an elephant charioting a pair of Japanese newlyweds, the bride barely keeping it together as they lurch to and fro, the groom trying to hold onto his top hat, the elephant driver cursing and kicking his elephant's ears with a decided vigor. And from every direction, masses of people from across the nations pour in to sit on top of the temple-mountain.

You only realize at the top that the people who had seemed to quit on the stairs were secretly laughing at you inside. They did their tour around the tiers of the wedding cake temple only to find no place to sit. Everywhere you look, people sit happily on steps, on statutes, on peaks and ledges. No one willing to move so much as an ass-cheek to let you think of squeezing in on their slab of stone. But who can blame them? I walk around with my eyes pointed upwards and am mind-blown by the electric awe as I stare beyond and see forest blurring line into night, temple silhouettes in the sunset like fires reaping the darkness, the spires pointed against the paling bluish-gold gradation of the sky. The sun begins to pour down over like a hot, glowing liquid, gently seeping in with a glow, warming the expanse of jungle and distant temples. As I run about, convinced this is my moment, searching for the perfect place to secure its passing, a little raincloud drifts by. Everybody gets all excited and starts firing off their cameras. One guy pre-ejaculates and lets out a moan that quickly dies in the resumed quiet. Now the sun begins to align with the cloud, feeling our respect, sending out rays at an angle that electrifies the strata like a blowing curtain in the window, the sky beginning to glow red. She keeps going and going, and soon glows with the resonance of ecstasy and shame. Everyone takes out their cameras and tries to capture that which is most fleeting, the orgasm of time.

There's nowhere to sit, nowhere to find this final moment meant to marry me to this journey and its happy ending, when I see my name written among the tree branches as a sign, to know that somehow I was meant to be here. The gift of knowing that the journey was not all meaningless. But was—

“Care to sit down?”

No way! It can't be. . .

“Your Holiness!”

The Dalai Lama sits on a ledge with a smile, shifting over to make room for me on a lower, less-populated tier of the temple with the sunset in a humbler view.

“Please, don't bow to me like that. No one knows I'm here,” the Dalai Lama says, looking over his shoulder, waving his hand for me to stop kowtowing.

“What are you doing here?” I gasp.

“I'm here to see the sunset. Are you going to sit or not?”

I move to sit, and then freeze.

“Just don't shake my hand,” I say, showing him my bandaged hand.

“No problem. Looks like it hasn't been washed in a while,” the Dalai Lama retorts, and gives me one of his famous chuckles.

“Did you get my letter?” I ask him, sitting beside him now.

“Ah, so you're Sam?” the Dalai Lama says. “Yes, I remember that letter very well. It was quite recently, as I recall. To answer your question: No, I don't get death threats every day, which made your particular death threat very memorable.”

The Dalai Lama gives me a Cheshire Cat grin, his eyes glinting with amusement beneath his gold frames.

“So you're not mad, right?”

“Why should I be angry? You clearly have shown me a kindness which I am only too happy to repay in what little capacity that I have,” he says and winks at me, repeating my own words back to me in their exact phrasing.

Back there, in the courtyard in Angkor Wat, hanging out with the caretakers. Was that him? The woman beneath the sun hat? Was he wearing a wig?

“Wait a second, did you follow me here?” I ask shocked and open-mouthed, staring at him agape now.

“Pretty weird, isn’t it?” the Dalai Lama says and chuckles.

“You were spying on me? How did you find me? Wait a second, that means—”

“Just because I am a monk who walks around in a robe all day,” the Dalai Lama lectures sternly, “does not mean I do not have spies of my own. My secret service was able to intercept this letter just days ago in Dharamshala.”

From his robe, he withdraws a postcard that says “Kunming: City of Eternal Spring.”

“As fate would have it, I was already here, in Cambodia, on my yearly pilgrimage to this very temple where we now sit. Is this a coincidence? Tell me, Sam? What have you learned from your experience?”

“I’m going to become a caretaker for Angkor Wat?”

“No, you dummy!” the Dalai Lama snaps, and resists hitting me on the head with the postcard. He clears his throat and says more gently, “No, Sam. That is not why you were brought here. Tell me why you were brought here.”

I walk in the dying light to the other side with the sunset behind me, and at a distance. The sun disappears over the jungle’s smoldering horizon and glimmers over the temple ruins. A monk sits on the ledge

in his robe, brightly colored against the onset of blue night. I want to take a picture of him without knowing why, staring at the sunset, the green mountains all blue and shadowy in the background. But I have no camera.

At night, there's a blackout. I find myself walking through the streets far away from Old Market, following the river into the night and the darkness, just to see where it takes me. There's no light from the moon. There are no stars or heavenly bodies as I feel my way blindly through dense, wet darkness, guided by the sounds of laughter and voices, kids shrieking happily, playing hide and seek in the forest. That evening at the chicken-rice spot, two little boys came to my table and asked me if I could buy them something to eat. It was the older one who asked me with that street kid rasp in his voice. It was my last two dollars, but I couldn't say no. As they sat down, I told the chicken-rice lady to put on two more chicken-rice plates and two more cokes. They couldn't hide their excitement at the cokes. It was a real treat for them. Another boy came also, but I didn't have any more money. The two little boys shared with the scrawniest third, who looked like he didn't even have a home. The plates were cleaned. The food vanished in an instant. The cokes were sipped slowly, cherished in the setting of the sun. Finally, the oldest asked me to buy formula milk in the pharmacy for his baby brother. "We have no money. Please buy milk for our brother. My brother only a baby," he said with his little dark eyes looking fiercely into mine.

"I'm sorry," I told him sadly.

Where do we go from here? Walking in the dark, the pitch-black darkness, darker than the darkness was the color of her eyes. I found my way through the forest and found a road. There were flashes from motorbikes speeding past, disappearing into the night just as fast, as crickets reigned supreme over silence, the bewitching of frog-scum,

the shadow-boxer nodding at me from the dancing flames of an oil drum, in dreams where you see fire and green.

"There's so much good in the world. How can we not see it?" I ask, remembering the eyes of the father as he held his little girl in his lap, the two of them just sitting there on the side of the road on a motorbike, smiling and shaking my head no when he offered me a ride.

"And yet, there's so much corruption. How do we fight it? How do we fight all this darkness?"

"You become light. . . You go where darkness is and watch as it runs away. . . Even one little bit of light can do that," the Dalai Lama says in his halting, thoughtful manner, nodding his head. "Imagine what can happen when many lights come together. . . and glow at the same time."

"Tell me where to go, Doc. I'll meet you there."

"You must go home, Sam. Go back and tell the others in your village, your city, your hometown. Tell about the wonders and the horrors you have seen."

"What if no one believes me? What if they say I'm crazy?"

"Whether they do or don't does not change your mission. You have a responsibility."

"But I can't leave," I tell the Dalai Lama, hanging my head in defeat. "I have this plane ticket that takes off from Beijing tomorrow, but I don't have any money left."

"Plane ticket, eh? That must cost about — let's see, from here to D.C. —" the Dalai Lama does some quick calculations in his head. "\$800, by my estimation."

The Dalai Lama pulls out a huge wad of cash clasped together with a golden money clip.

"Well, it is Christmas," I say falteringly. "Tickets tend to be more expensive."

“\$1,000 should do it,” the Dalai Lama concludes, deftly licking his fingertips and counting out 10 crisp \$100 bills.

“Your Holiness, really. . . I can’t accept this,” I say as he holds the money out for me to take.

“Please, Sam. Consider it my pleasure, and also, my duty. Just as you have your duty, I have mine: to freely share what is freely given,” the Dalai Lama says and winks. “People give me money all the time. I’m . . . loaded!”

He throws his head back and laughs into the shadows of fading pink light.

Chapter Twenty-Three

My True Love

“And in that moment, I realized that finding My True Love, finding my true body, none of this even matters. I may never see my true body again, but I can still find a new love in this one.”

“It doesn’t matter what you look like,” Chris agrees, chalking up for the finishing stroke. “It’s how you feel inside.”

“Don’t matter what you look like,” Don affirms, nodding his head. “What matter is you happy inside.”

The cue ball clacks an eight-ball into the corner pocket. “That’s game,” says Chris the Brit, smiling in victory. “That’s 14-15 now. We’re almost tied.”

Don, the happily stoned waiter, takes his defeat with a smile, folds his hands in grace.

We’re hanging out in a guesthouse called Green Gardens. There’s a bar and lounge with a billiards table. The windows are open and it’s early afternoon. The sounds of a volleyball game echo from

outside, and a kung-fu movie plays silently on a screen. Don goes off to take care of something in the kitchen. "Have a game?" Chris asks.

"Feels so weird knowing that I'm leaving," I say, taking a cue and chalking up.

"Back to America, eh? You'll have plenty to tell them when you get back."

"They might keep me locked up for a while."

Chris laughs amiably.

"I know what you mean. I'm headed back to the UK in a few weeks. Going back to uni. It's going to be strange to wake up soon and be back in my mum's house and feeling like it was all a dream," Chris says, bugging his eyes, laughing. "I mean, how do you explain this?"

"We become ambassadors and tell them to see for themselves."

"Right," he grins, and sets up the eight ball for a quick takedown. "Maybe next time they'll give us better accommodations."

We play in silence. The cue ball kisses the eight ball for the win.

"That's game, mate," Chris says, smiling and shaking my hand. "I've got to be off. If I don't see you, have a safe trip back."

We shake hands and Chris disappears downstairs. Don comes out of the kitchen, wiping his hands on a towel. "Go home?"

"Not yet," I hear myself say.

Suddenly, there's a blast of theme music, some strip club hip-hop comes booming from unknown speakers, fog appearing from out of nowhere. Two girls in black, one petite wearing a black one-piece, the taller one with short hair wearing a suit jacket and miniskirt, come walking into the room. The way they set their bags down and get Don to rush over with their drinks makes it clear that this is their bar.

I avert my eyes and busy myself with racking up the table. I take a cue and break.

“Looks like you’re solids. Mind if I play?” the girl with the short hair says, picking up a cue. She has features of a doll-like symmetry, but there’s something soft and eerily emotionless about her — a toxic smile.

“Sure, why not?” I say and chalk up my stick.

She gives me a smirk of contempt and racks the balls with the movements of a black widow. The balls go scattering around the table and she lands two stripes in. I watch as she moves around the table with a decisive smoothness, enjoying the thought of humiliating me, showing me the rise of her miniskirt as she sits on the table or leans over to shoot, which I oblige by noticing. But there’s something about her that’s so diabolical I feel nothing but a cold disquiet being next to her. I try to finish the game without much fuss, her shots timed with that look of sweet venom on her lips, biting and shooting it in. There’s something in her voice that almost feels familiar.

Finally, she misses. I knuckle down on the felt and run the table. I start setting up for the eight when the sound of a ringtone breaks my concentration. I look back and see Don setting down a steaming plate and utensils on the table and see the long-haired girl speaking in accented English. “Hello baby! . . . What? Today? No, I can’t today. I’m busy. . . Yes, I know. . . You want me love you long time? You know I love you long time, baby. . .”

The tall girl with short hair rounds the table, brushing against my side as she passes, bending over her miniskirt in front of me and jabbing her stick in my stomach. “What’s wrong?” she asks, looking over her shoulder, smirking at me in that soft emotionless voice. “You look like someone broke your heart.”

I look at the old kung-fu movie and hear the sounds of the volleyball game outside, the children in the street, echoes of traffic in the distance, the thunder starting to roll in over the ancient city ruins.

"She was never real," I say, and watch as the tall girl arches her back before coming down on the cue with her fangs raised, finishing me off with a bite to the head.

"I win," she says, and smirks wickedly.

"You sure did. Good game," I say, ready to hang it up.

"You need to buy me a drink," she says.

"Those weren't the stakes, sweetheart," I reply, doing my best Humphrey Bogart.

"You lost," she says, blocking my way with her hip. "Buy me a drink."

"Sorry, I have a flight to catch."

"What's the matter?" she asks as I walk past her. "Never found your Hollywood ending?"

"My what?" I say laughing, my body suddenly turning to ice. "Wait a second! It can't be!"

"Surprised?" she smiles icily now, flipping back her hair and posing like a model.

"Jack!"

A violent shiver runs through my body.

"You son of a bitch! I looked at your ass!"

"Hey now, watch the gender pronouns," Jack says coolly as she circles around me like a shark about to tear into its prey. "Guess you're wondering where I got this smoking hot body?"

"I don't want the details," I say, shaking my head, looking pale.

"So how about that drink?"

What can I do? If I say no, I'll be blackballed and marked for life. I can already see Don breaking down under interrogation, his support for me crumbling in the opening of his testimony.

"What are you having?" Jack says, leaning against the bar all smug.

"Old-fashioned," I tell Don, now manning the bar.

"Make mine a Jack and Coke," she says, and smiles at me with the obvious punchline. "I'm Jack, and he's Coke."

I want to punch her in the face, but now in public, I don't know. . .

"So, this is you now?" I say, receiving my drink, but not drinking it.

"A little gift from the Chinese," Jack says, stirring the little plastic straw. "After that car plowed into me back in Lijiang, my body was destroyed, paralyzed. The Chinese government made me an offer I couldn't refuse."

"A new life as a post-op transsexual double agent?"

"It'd be a metaphor if it wasn't so ironic."

"Well, I guess it doesn't really matter what gender or sexual orientation you are as long as you get the job done. But wait — what'd you do with your — our — my body?"

"Oh, that old thing?" Jack smirks. "I donated it to science. By the way, your dick is floating in a jar of formaldehyde in a cavern deep in Vietnam. Secret laboratory. Getting pickled like a cucumber."

"Can't say I care," I say, shrugging. "I've found inner peace. I don't need a dick anymore."

"Oh, Sam. How many times do we have to go through this? It's meant to be. The next adventure somewhere in the underground of Vietnam, digging up government cover-ups from the 60s, all while trying to recover your true body and reattach your lost penis? Come

on! Get with the program, Sam! If that doesn't fill the seats, I don't know what will."

"Who's the Barbie doll? Does she know?" I say, nodding towards the one with long hair, still on her phone.

"Of course not. She's just a working girl. You'd be shocked how easy it is for an escort to gain government clearance."

"Not really. I'm pretty jaded."

"Not to mention paranoid. Very clever the way you shook our trail this whole time. I have to give it to you, Sam. You're smarter than you look, or luckier, or protected from above. Either way, I think it's nice that we're here now and can have this last drink. You can die knowing that you've led me straight to the Dalai Lama, who is soon to be reincarnated into a dummy we have waiting in the wings."

"So it's 'we' now, is it?" I say with disgust. "What happened to taking destiny into your own hands?"

"Destiny's in my hands," Jack replies coolly, pulling a gun from inside her suit jacket. "See you later, alligator."

Without thinking, I splash my drink in her face before she can fire.

The effect is instantaneous. Jack, in her new form, turns out to be nothing more than a femme-bot. She falls to the floor and begins convulsing, spazzing in an epileptic fit. A bright light shoots out of her eyes and silently screaming mouth, and electric waves fry her now badly singed outfit. Finally, she lies still.

Agent Sour: Terminated.

"Guess no one's ever turned her down for a drink before," I say aloud, voicing the pun no one asked for.

"Oh my god! What happen?" the short girl with long hair cries, bouncing over in her stilettos, now joined by Don, all of us staring at

Jack's short-circuited femme-bot form. Smoke continues to rise while sparks of electricity crackle at random.

"We have to get out of here. There's no telling what form Jack's consciousness might embody next," I say grimly.

"Still alive?!" they cry in unison.

"I'm not sure. It's possible Jack was nothing but a program all along. Which means," I say gravely looking into their eyes, tapping the side of my head, "I'm the final chip."

"What we do with her?" Don says in a manner almost casual, nudging Jack's stiletto with his foot.

"Find Candidate Dim and dump the body in his hotel room. That'll send the boys in Washington the message. We'll have to scour Interpol to find any more agents working for the Chinese. Leave the rest to me."

"What about me?" the short girl with long hair says fearfully. "You kill me?"

"No. You have a different mission. Come with me!"

I grab her hand, and we run into the busy market streets until we rest beside a French colonial bridge and catch our breath. I take her shoulders into my hands and face her towards me.

"Your mission, if you choose to accept it—"

"Who are you? Why she try kill you?"

I take a dramatic pause, eyes smoldering.

"Because. . . of this."

Without breaking eye contact, I reach down in my underwear and wrestle around, and finally with the sound of tearing cloth, resurface with a flash drive in the tips of my fingers.

"What that?" she asks, squinting at the microchip.

"This is the full undisclosed report. If anything should happen to me, I need you to get this into the hands of someone at Interpol.

Just hold onto this until the time comes. Someone will come to get it from you. You won't know who, and you won't know when. But keep this hidden in your bra until then. This is very important! You have to keep it hidden in your bra so that when finally you are approached at that unknown moment, hopefully it'll be raining, and hopefully, it'll be very sexy."

"I don't understand. Why they want your vacation photo? Why it need to be sexy? Who are you?"

"Remember, hidden in your bra," I say, placing the flash drive in her hands. "If I should die or be captured, they'll know what to do."

"The government?" she asks.

"No, the internet."

I take her dramatically into my arms and hold her in an embrace that almost feels like love. Water flows tranquilly beside us, leaves falling onto the water's surface, the lily pads and the soft pink lotus flowers stirring gently in the reverberating circles of the fall. We stand in green shade, the flashing colors of motorbikes passing by on the dusty street beyond. A crisp breeze swirls around our silhouetted bodies as autumn leaves begin to fall.