

1995

The color of light

Tiffany Darrough
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THE COLOR OF LIGHT

A Thesis

Presented to

**The Faculty of the Department of English
San Jose State University**

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Tiffany Darrough

December 1995

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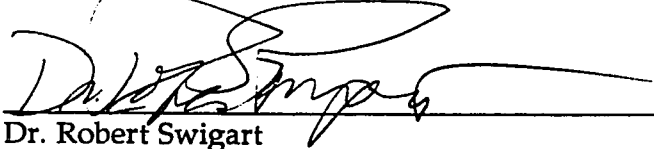
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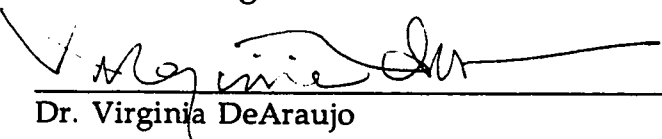
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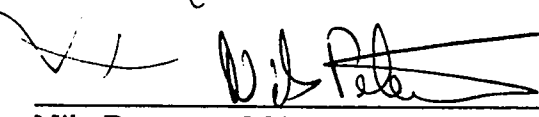
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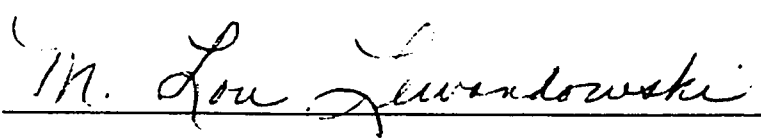


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ABSTRACT

THE COLOR OF LIGHT

by Tiffany Darrough

The Color of Light is a novel about one woman's journey of self-discovery and the people she loves along the way. The main character, Jenna Donnelly, is a twenty-eight year old San Diego lawyer, whose strength and confidence stem from a determined (and at times combative) independence, a restless intellect, and a hungry sensuality. Out of curiosity, Jenna agrees to help represent Jeff Casey, a Baba Sai Ram devotee accused of breaking his lease by turning his beach-front La Jolla home into an ashram. Although at first she fights it, ultimately Jenna can't resist the internal and external adventure Casey's world offers her, and she joins him on a pilgrimage to Southern India with his close-knit community of friends and relatives. Through her experiences of friendship and betrayal, Jenna faces her greatest adventure yet--herself--and learns how to love on many different levels.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisors, Rob Swigart, Virginia DeAraujo, and Nils Peterson, whose criticism and support has seen me through this project.

DEDICATION

The Color of Light is dedicated to four people who helped me discover the many colors of love: to my husband, Patrick, who held our world together so that I could follow my dream; and to our children Aaron, Katie, and Megan, who for two years accommodated themselves to my late nights and endless weekends of writing.

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SCHEMA
for *The Color of Light*

<u>Title</u>	<u>Definition</u>	<u>Physical Elements</u>	<u>Spiritual Essences</u>	<u>Color/ Chakra/ Kundalini</u>	<u>Symbol</u>
Part I. Maya	Ignorance	Earth	Body	Black & white	San Diego
Ch. 1 <i>Manas</i>	The mind	"	"	Black -- absence of light/ color	Law office
Ch. 2 <i>Samsara</i>	The physical world	"	"	" "	Downtown night life
Ch. 3 <i>Puras</i>	The body	"	"	" "	Jack & sex
Ch. 4 <i>Avedana</i>	Yearning	"	"	White -- presence of light/ color	White suit, clouds, fog, orchids
Part II. Ananda	Bliss, joy, oneness	Water	Heart	Spectrum-- presence of all colors	Tears/ ocean/ snow
Ch. 5 <i>Atma</i>	The soul; the spark of God within	"	"	red, orange & yellow (1st, 2nd & 3rd <i>chakra</i>)	Caseys' home & <i>kirtan</i>
Ch. 6 <i>Yaga</i>	External activity; sacrifice	"	"	green, blue, & purple (4th, 5th, & 6th <i>chakra</i>)	Bob & separation
Ch. 7 <i>Kundalini</i>	Creative divine energy	"	"	all colors (awakened <i>kundalini</i>)	Rebirthing
Ch. 8 <i>Yoga</i>	Union of individual /universal souls	"	"	white (full <i>kundalini</i> & light)	Mt. Shasta

<u>Title</u>	<u>Definition</u>	<u>Physical Elements</u>	<u>Spiritual Essences</u>	<u>Color/ Chakra/ Kundalini</u>	<u>Symbol</u>
Part III. Karma	Moral compensation	Fire	Mind	Light -- invisible color	India
Ch. 9 Bharath	India; Land of the Lord	"	"	golden light	Baba
Ch. 10 Asanthi	Absence of peace	"	"	morning light	Premarasa (Baba's ashram)
Ch. 11 Sadhaka	Ego & greed	"	"	night light	Jeff
Ch. 12 Samskara	past life tendencies	"	"	refracted light	mirror & crystal
Part IV. Moksha	balance, liberation, peace	Air	Spirit	Black & White in balance	The Sky
Ch. 13 Darshan	blessing; to breathe the same air	"	"	full chakra; balanced kundalini	Desert sky
Ch. 14 Sathya	Truth; past, present, future	"	"	full chakra; unbalanced kundalini	wedding
Ch. 15 Shanti	peace	"	"	black & white in balance	acceptance of self & others

CRITICAL PREFACE

In *The Color of Light*, Jeff Casey uses the metaphor of color and light to explain to his friend, Jenna Donnelly, the individual's relationship with the universal:

Light is light, but within it are all the variant shades of color. We are the color of light; God is the light. Don't you see? Everything is connected. Everything is one. . . . God--or universal consciousness, whatever you want to call it--lives in each of us in the form of energy. It's called *kundalini*. The energy vibrates in different colors that correspond to different aspects of ourselves, but it's all *kundalini*, just as we're all God. (114-15)

Light is a slippery property; transparent, yet containing the entire spectrum of color, light has lent itself to mystical metaphors even before modern physicists discovered that it both was, and was not, composed of waves and particles. Ralph Waldo Emerson writes in his 1836 essay titled *Nature*: "I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God" (193). In ancient Sanskrit, *yoga* is the word used to describe this union of the individual soul with the universal soul. For practitioners of yoga, there is no "this *or* that"; there is only "this *and* that." We are separate, and we are one:

Brahman, the ultimate reality, is understood as the 'soul,' or inner essence, of all things. It is infinite and beyond all concepts; it cannot be comprehended by the intellect, nor can it be

adequately described in words. . . . The manifestation of
Brahman in the human soul is called *Atman*. (Capra 77)

According to Yogic philosophy, the manifestation of *Brahman* and *Atman* in the physical is *kundalini*, a universal energy that lies dormant in the individual until it awakens and begins to vibrate with all of the colors of light.

In *The Color of Light*, after struggling to integrate the personal and mystical experiences that her internal and external journeys have led her through, Jenna Donnelly experiences an epiphany gazing into the night sky in the Arizona desert:

She breathed deeply, and in one startling moment of clarity saw herself and the world as it truly was, and she didn't feel like running anymore; she didn't need to open any new doors because they all led back to the same place; to herself. When she turned her gaze to the sky again, she didn't see a black night, but stared instead at waves of light flowing gracefully among particles of stars, some dark, some light. All bursting with color. All whole. All one. (265)

Jenna Donnelly, like most humans living at the advent of the 21st century, struggles with discovering not only herself, but her place in a world where even the physical make-up of the universe is relative, and truth has been dismissed as a quaint memory. At the beginning of the novel, her world is black and white. By the end, she learns to accept a world with "no promises" and to appreciate the vibrancy of living awake and alive to the possibility of

each moment. She integrates both the color and the light into her being; she becomes both particle and wave.

As the preceding schema illustrates, *The Color of Light* uses narrative structure and symbolic devices to create textual support for the underlying themes. The novel is structured into patterns of four. The four main Parts correspond to the four physical elements (earth, water, fire, and air) and the four spiritual essences (body, heart, mind, and spirit). The first three Parts each have four chapters; the fourth Part has only three chapters. The narrative is structured in this way to simulate the thematic and character evolution of the novel. During the first three Parts of the novel, the main character, Jenna Donnelly, has a deep-seated need to control, order, and define herself and her life. In the fourth part of the novel, Jenna lets go of this need for order and accepts that life holds "no promises." The final "missing" fourth chapter for Part IV purposely defies fitting the narrative into a neatly packaged closure; thus, it is the structural expression of Jenna's final thematic acceptance that life holds "no promises" but must be lived fully and deeply and colorfully each moment.

Part I, titled *Maya* (ignorance, temptation, illusion), plays on the Earth physical element & body spiritual essence. This section is rooted firmly in Jenna Donnelly's physical, earthy needs and the pleasure and power she gains through the experience of her body. This first part opens in Jenna's downtown San Diego law firm, and follows her through a night of dining, drinking, and lovemaking, introducing her in her natural environment, while beginning to show her growing restlessness. At the peak of her confusion, Jenna throws herself on the ground, making snow-angels on the

wet grass, so desperate is her need to find solace within her dominant Earth element and body essence. The colors black and white symbolize Jenna's spiritual evolution in Part I, as she clearly defines her world in an either/or dichotomy and vacillates emotionally between black (absence of light and color) and white (presence of light and color). By the end of Part I, Jenna has begun to contemplate the light and yearn for more.

Part II, *Ananda* (bliss, joy, oneness), is structured around water as the physical element and the heart as the spiritual essence. In Part II, Jenna accepts an invitation to dinner and *kirtan* (a form of chanting and prayer) at the home of her client Jeff Casey. Slowly, she feels her heart opening under the kindness of Casey's sister, Anne, and the many friends who share the Caseys' home. The stirring trancelike experience of *kirtan*, combined with the warm communal female relationships, break through Jenna's defenses. Within a few weeks of this first experience, Jenna takes a leave of absence from her law firm and moves into the Caseys' ocean-front ashram. With the help of Anne, Jeff awakens Jenna's *kundalini* through a meditative experience called rebirthing. Once this is awakened, there is no returning to her old life and self, and she embarks on a spiritual journey that leads her from the oceans of San Diego to the snow-covered mountains of Mount Shasta. In Part II, the full spectrum of color vibrates through all aspects of Jenna's experiences; tears, waves, rain, and snow serve as ointment and catalyst for the ablution that occurs with this emotional opening of her heart.

Part III, *Karma* (action; law of moral compensation), takes place in India, as Jenna joins the Caseys and the other members of the ashram on a pilgrimage to Southern India and the home of their guru, Baba Sai Ram.

Mind is the spiritual essence, and fire is the physical element at work in this part, as both Jenna and Jeff face their karmic relationship and seek to burn away their own spiritual doubts. To her dismay, the trip to *Premarasa*, Baba's ashram, pulls Jenna out of the joy she found in her previous "heart" phase; instead, her experiences at Baba's ashram rekindle her mind. She loses the color and sees the light in varying shades of distortion reflected back at her. She experiences shifts in perception; of perceiving and being perceived; of seeing this new world from the other side of the looking glass. In a dramatic test of faith, Baba forces Jenna to choose to either leap into the karmic fire and burn away her doubts, or to extinguish the flames sparked by Jeff Casey. In that moment, clarity returns to Jenna and her mind helps her to see through the flames of distortion.

In Part IV, *Moksha* (liberation, balance, peace), the physical element is air; the spiritual essence is spirit. In this final Part, Jenna faces the wide open spaces of herself in the void left by the loss of everything that had defined her. In a scene that parallels the one in Part I when Jenna flings her body against the earth in search of solace, in Part IV Jenna throws her spirit out into the expansive blackness of the Arizona desert's night sky. In a startling epiphany, she doesn't see terrifying darkness; she sees the individual in the universal, the particle in the wave, the color in the light and the dark. She makes peace with the conflicting elements and essences of herself in this moment of contemplation, and she is finally able to be still and stop searching. In the final chapter of the novel, she is able to accept and give love because she has learned to love herself and to accept that life is a mystery; it cannot be ordered; there are "no promises"; there is only living to the best of our capabilities.

I have always been stirred by literature that combined strong characters with imaginative technique and philosophical possibilities. I find it terribly difficult to define which texts have influenced me as a writer because everything I read (and ever remember reading) I constantly analyze for technique and ideas that I can incorporate into my own. As a young girl, I began teaching myself how to write by reading, and that habit has now become my natural way of reading. Thus, everything I have ever read in one way or another has influenced me as a writer; either because I found something in the text that I liked and retained for future use, or because I found something in it that I disliked and learned not to repeat. I can, however, isolate four novels which have had a profound effect on me as a writer and which I continue to return to year after year in humble awe of their authors' genius. These four authors and novels are: John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*; Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*; James Joyce's *Ulysses*; and, finally, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*.

First and foremost, to John Steinbeck I am indebted for nearly every aspect of what is important to me as a writer. While still in my early teens, I began studying his techniques for pace, setting, dialog, narrative structure, and characterization. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, he gave a voice to the people that were my family, and created in Ma Joad, a fictional character that was as real to me as the mother and grandmothers and aunts and cousins that filled my home:

Tom stood looking in. Ma was heavy, but not fat; thick with child-bearing and work . . . Strong, freckled arms were bare to the elbow, and her hands were chubby and delicate, like those of a

plump little girl. She looked out into the sunshine. Her full face was not soft; it was controlled, kindly. Her hazel eyes seemed to have experienced all possible tragedy and to have mounted pain and suffering like steps in to a high calm and a superhuman understanding. She seemed to know, to accept, to welcome her position, the citadel of the family, the strong place that could not be taken. And since old Tom and the children could not know hurt or fear unless she acknowledged hurt and fear, she had practiced denying them in herself. And since, when a joyful thing happened, they looked to see whether joy was on her, it was her habit to build up laughter out of inadequate materials. But better than joy was calm. Imperturbability could be depended upon. And from her great and humble position in the family she had taken dignity and a clean calm beauty. From her position as healer, her hands had grown sure and cool and quiet; from her position as arbiter she had become as remote and faultless in judgment as a goddess. She seemed to know that if she swayed the family shook, and if she ever really deeply wavered or despaired the family would fall, the family will to function would be gone. (99)

Whether describing characters like Ma Joad, or Jim Casy, or Tom Joad, Steinbeck studies life in its natural environment; like starfish lifted gingerly out of a tide pool and then set back again, the characters are inspected and then slipped back into their experience.

Structurally, thematically, and philosophically *The Grapes of Wrath* influenced *The Color of Light*. Steinbeck created in Jim Casy--who says "maybe all men got one big soul ever'body's a part of"--a character that is "deliberately Emersonian" (Benson 233), just as Jeff Casey's quoted passage in the opening paragraph of this preface echoes Emerson's ideas on the individual's relationship to the universal God. The dominant theme of both novels is the relationship between the individual and the larger community, which is developed both by the characters and the structure. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the narrative switches from the story of the Joads to the intercalary chapters that mirror the Joads' experiences on an expanded social and political level. These intercalary chapters demonstrate the political and social need for the movement from "I" to "We"; the Joad narrative expresses the need for this on a personal level. In *The Color of Light*, I structured the four Parts to reflect Jenna's movement from duality and disconnection in Part I, *Maya*, to integration and connection in Part IV, *Moksha*.

The second novel which had a profound effect on my writing was Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, which I discovered as an undergraduate. So radical was it compared to anything I had ever experienced, I felt as if I were reading contraband. In Marquez's works, I still found the combination of complicated characters, imagination, and philosophical possibility that I had always been drawn to in other writers, but now they were set in a brand new context full of fantastic genius. For me, the most profound aspect of the novel was the theme of the relativity of time and the spiraling narrative that was both connected and disconnected to past, present, and future, all at the same time. From the very first sentence, there

is no chance to orient oneself in time: "Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendia was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice" (1). In a displaced present, the narrator predicts a future when the main character will remember a past that has not occurred yet. Marquez plays with language and relativity as he condemns generations of Buendias to struggle with Melquiades' indecipherable history of their family, until the final Aureliano, at the very moment of his death, realizes that the secret of his existence is written in Sanskrit:

It was the history of the family, written by Melquiades, down to the most trivial details, one hundred years ahead of time. He had written it in Sanskrit, which was his mother tongue. . . . Melquiades had not put events in the order of man's conventional time, but had concentrated a century of daily episodes in such a way that they coexisted in one instant. (421)

Using the narrative structure to combine the idea of the relativity of time and language, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* inspired my exploration of modern and post-modern literature, critical theory, and Eastern spiritual and philosophical texts as well (in large part because of Marquez's choice to make Sanskrit the secret language of the Buendia family's history).

While the above mentioned novels have been inspirational to me, the most practical and humbling experience I have encountered with a piece of literature came when I read James Joyce's *Ulysses*. While "practical" is probably not a word used very often to describe *Ulysses*, for me this book was very practical because the minute I found Stuart Gilbert's schema outlining

the symbols, colors, narrative technique, and other devices used for each chapter of *Ulysses*, I found a tangible device for ordering my writing in the way that my creative thought processes wanted to work. Rather than creating a schema *after* the novel was written, I decided to create one *before* and to use it to help me stay focused and juggle all of the elements that I wanted to incorporate in each Part and chapter. For the obvious artistic reasons, *Ulysses* was the most humbling experience I have ever had. I return to *Ulysses* often and just read the last two pages of the "Penelope" chapter:

the sun shines for you he said the day we were lying among the rhododendrons on Howth head in the grey tweed suit and his straw hat the day I got him to propose to me yes first I gave him the bit of seedcake out of my mouth and it was leapyear like now yes 16 years ago my God after that long kiss I near lost my breath yes he said I was a flower of the mountain yes so we are flowers all a womans body yes that was one true thing he said in his life and the sun shines for you today yes that was why I liked him because I saw he understood or felt what a woman is and I knew I could always get round him and I gave him all the pleasure I could leading him on till he asked me to say yes and I wouldn't answer first only looked out over the sea and the sky I was thinking of so many things he didnt know of . . . how he kissed me under the Moorish wall and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to

me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes. (783)

I love the sensual descriptions, the endless pulsing rhythm of the run-on sentence structure, the urgency of the repetition of the "yes." I find myself at high dramatic moments in my writing creating sentence structures joined by the repetition of conjunctions or parallel words or phrases; however, only Joyce could successfully write a whole chapter in the style of "Penelope."

The above writers influenced me on a technical level, but Kate Chopin's novel, *The Awakening*, made a startling impact on my consciousness for several reasons: first, I rediscovered languorous sensual imagery; secondly, as a wife and mother, I identified with Edna's struggle to find her voice, but was horrified by her suicide; and thirdly, Chopin opened my eyes to a feminine tradition in literature that I had somehow missed. Like prisms on the page, Chopin's use of language captures color and light with words. Describing Edna's twenty-ninth birthday dinner party, Chopin writes:

There was something extremely gorgeous about the appearance of the table, an effect of splendor conveyed by a cover of pale yellow satin under strips of lace-work. There were wax candles, in massive brass candelabra, burning softly under yellow silk shades; full, fragrant roses, yellow and red, abounded. There were silver and gold, as she had said there would be, and crystal which glittered like the gems which the women wore. (115)

Sadly, although she can paint a pretty picture on canvas or a dinner table, Edna fails as an artist. Mademoiselle Reisz, the genius spinster pianist,

predicts Edna's weakness: "Ah! an artist! You have pretensions. . . . To be an artist includes much; one must possess many gifts--absolute gifts--which have not been acquired by one's own effort. And, more-over, to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul" (84). As Edna faces the sea and chooses suicide rather than a life on the margins like Mademoiselle Reisz's, Edna thinks of her children and of her friend's advice to her:

She thought of Leonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul. How Mademoiselle Reisz would have laughed, perhaps sneered, if she knew! "And you call yourself an artist! What pretensions, Madame! The artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies." (152)

Edna did not possess that courageous soul. She did not let her husband and children *possess* her body and soul, but she still let them *define* her body and soul. Edna did not have the courage, or find the voice, to give up her gold and silver dinner parties and live the life of faded lace and wilted violets that Mademoiselle Reisz chose. Chopin has sentenced Edna in a way that Leonce Pontellier could not. In doing so, she sends the message that to be an artist, to rebel against the conventions of marriage and society, is to die a spinster or a martyr. On the subject of Edna's suicide, critic Carole Stone writes: "Edna succeeds in giving birth to a new self even though the fact that she can not live on earth as this new self is tragic" (31). This is absurd! Edna is dead! There is no "new self"! Just when she finds her voice, she gives up her struggle and is permanently silenced. Now that she is dead, Edna is no longer a threat to the convention of marriage or society. In *Sister's Choice*:

Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing, Elaine Showalter defends Chopin's ending in a more logical argument:

Chopin wished to reject both of these endings [marriage/ marginalized artist] and to escape from the literary traditions they represented; but her own literary solitude, her resistance to allying herself with a specific ideological or aesthetic position, made it impossible for her to work out something different and new. (76-77)

As mentioned earlier, without a community in which to be received, writers often saw death as the only answer.

I began to read other nineteenth century texts written by female authors and found in them a frightening pattern of punishment dealt to powerful women. Much of the re-discovered works by American women writers conclude with their strong female protagonists suffering punitive endings for finding their voices and venturing beyond their domestic sphere: In "The Story of an Hour," also by Chopin, Mrs. Mallard is secretly elated over her newly gained widowhood, but drops dead when she learns that her husband has not actually been killed; in "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the narrator finds her voice and her identity only by first being driven insane; In "The Village Singer" and "A Poetess," both by Mary Wilkins Freeman, the two heroines are aging artists who have spent their lives in spinsterhood, devoted to their art, only to discover in their old age that their work is no longer valued; in Rebecca Harding Davis's short story "Marcia," the young woman, a writer, leaves her opium addicted mother's prosperous Mississippi plantation to flee to New York and try to publish her

work, only to nearly starve to death in miserable poverty before being "saved" by her fiancé and brought back into the sphere of marriage and domesticity. There are many other examples; the list continues, but for the sake of brevity these should suffice to make my point.

As Rachel Blau DuPlessis asserts in *Writing Beyond the Ending*, "death comes for a female character when she has a jumbled, distorted, inappropriate relation to the 'social script' or plot designed to contain her legally, economically, and sexually" (15). For the artist without the support of like minded individuals, "death occurs because a female hero has no alternative community where the stain of energy . . . will go unnoticed or even be welcomed" (16). Even more horrifying than the punishment, is the positive spin that is then attached to it: "Her punishment is often treated as her triumph. Death itself becomes a symbolic protest against the production of a respectable female and the connivances of a respectable community" (16). Other critics have agreed with Carole Stone's reading that Edna finds a "new self" in her suicide, but I reject this ending as being supportive of the dangerously oppressive and violent society that engenders such punitive endings.

While DuPlessis argues that these punitive endings are no longer part of the twentieth century culture because "community and social connectedness are the end of the female quest, not death" (16), I disagree with her. In fact, I see that punitive endings still continue today, especially in the film and mainstream literature markets, and even among texts written by women about women. For example, Laura Esquivel won the Ariel Award in Mexico for the best screen play adaptation for *Like Water for Chocolate*, and

in 1993 the translated novel was on the best seller lists in America for months. In this novel, after the long-suffering main character finally gets the man she loves, he dies in her bed at the moment of climax. She, of course, dies also so that she may join him. Even more disturbing is Jane Campion's film *The Piano*, which won an academy award for best screenplay. Campion's main character starts out self-maimed; she chooses to be mute. Later she is imprisoned by her husband, barter her body in order to buy back the voice that rightfully belongs to her (the piano), and finally has her finger chopped off as punishment for her sexuality. Even the movie *Thelma and Louise*, hailed as a feminist text, continued this tradition. The unspoken message when Thelma and Louise drive their Thunderbird into the Grand Canyon is "you may find your voice if you rebel, but you'll pay for it with your life." Although I empathize with the struggles of these characters, I reject the endings as being extremely limiting, especially coming from women writing at the tail-end of the 20th century.

Some contemporary female authors have defied these punitive endings and found critical and commercial success. In the summer of 1993, Barbara Kingsolver had three books on the best sellers list: *Animal Dreams*, *The Bean Trees*, and *Pigs in Heaven*. In all three of these books the main characters are strong women who determine their own fate, find their voice, and are not punished in the end for it. Jane Smiley's 1991 novel *A Thousand Acres* won a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Critics Circle Award, for the story of woman who survives the disintegration of her family without being silenced, killed, mutilated, or driven crazy.

Women writing today have to resist the temptation to continue this tradition of transcendence coming through violence, madness, or death. Although the grief which surrounds these occurrences can be illuminating, to have the character's self-awareness culminate in her experience of it--as if it were somehow liberating--is an out-dated and oppressive assumption. Contrary to being inspiring feminist texts, these punitive endings continue to insist that rebellion is futile. Women have been victims long enough. It's time for women writing today to use our imaginations to envision characters surviving and speaking from this much fought for voice. In *The Color of Light*, Jenna Donnelly finds her voice, her heart, her mind, her body, her soul. She is not punished for this; rather, she is rewarded, loved, taken into her community, and accepted for who she is, with "no promises" and no compromises.

I wrote *The Color of Light* with five goals: 1.) I wanted to create a strong female character; 2.) I wanted a narrative structure that developed and furthered my thematic ideas; 3.) I wanted a story that contained imaginative and philosophical possibility; 4.) I wanted to create all of this with richly sensuous language; and, 5.) I wanted to tell the story of a woman's journey to self-discovery that did not result in a punitive ending. I am satisfied that I have met these goals. Now that the novel is finished, I can (in an odd looking-glass perspective) apply the schema's four physical elements that I used to define Jenna Donnelly to define my own creative process: my mind created and used the schema to manage my first three goals; my heart's deep love of language manifested itself in the fourth goal; and my female body and soul insisted upon the fifth goal. Like her creator, Jenna Donnelly walks away

from *The Color of Light* wiser, stronger, and better for the experience.
Together, she and I have learned to love and be loved; to be strong and
vulnerable; to be "I" and "We"; to be color and light.

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THE COLOR OF LIGHT

by

Tiffany Darrough

I. *Maya*

(ignorance, temptation, attachment)

*You must know the one truth: All that is, I am. All that is, you are.
All that we are, is one. We are The One, and it is love; it is truth.*

-- Baba Sai Ram

CHAPTER 1.***Manas*
(the mind)**

Jenna Donnelly slammed the receiver down on the telephone hook as three more lights flashed on hold in front of her. "Sophie!" she yelled out her open office door.

Sophie appeared in Jenna's doorway within seconds. "Yes, Ms. Donnelly," she said apprehensively.

The girl was young, inexperienced, and new. To top it off she was a perky bleached-blonde, a combination Jenna couldn't stand in the most ordinary circumstances. "I told you to hold all my calls," Jenna snapped. "What the hell's going on? Get rid of whoever's waiting on those three lines!"

"Um, I'm sorry. I just have them on hold until I can take a message." Sophie rolled her eyes, and attempted a half-smile, perhaps looking for sympathy. "The lines are going crazy today."

"The lines are always going crazy," Jenna shouted. "If you can't deal with it, you better look for another job. It's not as if I'm asking you to perform brain surgery."

"I'm trying," the girl said, near tears, "but the gentleman on line three says he knows you're here and he insists on waiting. What do you want me to tell him?"

Jenna exhaled. "Who is it?"

"Michael Rafferty. About the Carmichael divorce. He says your client is harassing Mr. Carmichael, and he wants a restraining order immediately."

"My client is a ninety-pound grandmother; how harassing can she be? Tell him I'm in a meeting, and I'll call him Monday."

"He won't believe me," the girl whined.

Jenna lowered her voice and spoke her words slowly. "Sophie, I've been in settlement conferences all morning. I have a twelve-inch stack of mail to respond to before I leave today, and I don't want to talk to anybody." She stood, leaned over her desk, and shouted, "What part of that don't you understand? I'm not available, O.K.? Tell him I went home. Tell him anything; just get rid of him!"

Sophie nodded and disappeared in a trail of White Shoulders perfume.

"You shouldn't yell at her like that," Robert Antonelli entered Jenna's office, shaking his head disapprovingly. Bob had been Jenna's law clerk for nearly three years while he worked his way through law school, which he had entered late in life after a decade of, as he said, "driving a cab in New York and writing bad poetry." Although it took him three tries, when he finally passed the bar in the week of his thirty-fifth birthday Jenna convinced

James Avery, her senior partner, to hire Bob as an associate attorney. She had worked so closely with Bob for so long she had grown fond of him and his thick Long Island--pronounced "Lawn Gyland"--accent. They were both expatriates who had come to San Diego to go to law school and ended up staying in the city. In the six years since Jenna had migrated south from Seattle, Bob was the first person she had met who could appreciate the annoyance of the endlessly sunny San Diego weather. Their friendship was sealed when, on his first day as her clerk, she took him to a sushi bar for lunch and he asked the chef for a "Shamu roll."

"She's a complete idiot," Jenna snapped, motioning to where Sophie had stood moments earlier. "How could Jim hire her?"

"You know how he is. She must've triggered his compassion button."

"She's lucky," Jenna snorted. "She never would've stood a chance with me."

"She's OK. She just gets flustered. You could try being nice to her. Yelling at her just makes things worse."

"I know, I know. But I've talked enough sweet talk today to last me a year." Jenna slipped her suit coat off and leaned back in her chair, hands behind her head, staring up at the ceiling. Her twenty-eight year old body was composed of straight, lean lines and the tangible, pulsing expectancy of a summer lightning storm. As she stretched, she caught Bob trying not to look at her breasts, though his eyes were continually drawn to the bits of white lace peeking through her pale silk blouse. She smiled, and he looked away quickly.

Bob walked to her credenza, poured them each a cup of steaming black coffee, and then sat down in the green straight-backed chair in front of her mahogany desk. "What's the big deal today?" he asked. "It's Friday afternoon for Christ sake."

"Da big deal is," she said, mocking his accent, "dat I settled da Billy Bailey case."

"No, not Billy boy," Bob set his cup down.

"Yep." Jenna nodded. "Guess how much I squeezed out of 'em."

"Two hundred?"

"Get real. It was only a few toes, not the whole foot."

"Fifty?"

"No. More than that!"

"One-fifty."

"Too high."

"Just tell me. I give already," Bob insisted.

"One hundred, twenty-three thousand dollars. Can you believe that? Am I good or what? One hundred twenty-three thousand dollars for a guy who's such a dolt he tries to knock a jammed two-by-four free with his own foot."

Bob shook his head. "Damn shoelaces just reeled him right into the blade. How many missing parts is that for these Bailey boys now?"

Jenna stopped to think. "Well, Davy lost a leg when he fell out of the pick-up, Willie has a metal plate in his shoulder from the motorcycle mishap, and Jerry lost two fingers in the trash compactor . . . and now Billy's short a few toes."

"That's all of 'em. I guess that means no more Bailey cases. Lightning never strikes twice, even for a Bailey," Bob said.

"You're probably right." Jenna pushed her chair away from her desk. "It's already twelve-thirty; what do you say we get some lunch and celebrate a successful settlement for the last of the Bailey boys? It's on me."

"Naw, I gotta work. I got a client coming for a depo at two o'clock."

"On a Friday afternoon? Who agreed to that?" Jenna asked.

"Jim," Bob raised his right eyebrow and rolled his eyes. "He's got a case of the bleeding heart again. He took a pro bono for some local guru who leases a house across the street from him. The owner says our guy violated the lease agreement by turning it into a commune, or ashram, or whatever they call it. Our client says he's just got lots of friends. Says they drop in and stay at his house during visits, but they don't live there."

Jenna shook her head. "Oh, the Big Guy does take some losers doesn't he?"

"Yeah, well he took another freebie and lost interest, so guess who's left holding the bag for him?"

Jenna could feel it coming. Occasionally Bob would try to get her to take these crappy jobs by convincing her they were beyond his league, flattering her expertise. She knew he was waiting for her to volunteer to help him. She ran her fingers through several honey-colored strands of hair, then secured the stragglers with a twist of her barrette. "Well, that's a shame, Bobby. I've got an urge for a big fat pastrami. I hoped you could join me. Now I guess I'll have to eat alone."

"I'll call Kong's Deli and have one sent up if you'll help me," Bob said, taking a chance that she might be feeling generous given her recent victory. "I've got a stack of discovery that I need to review before two o'clock, and you're so good at rifling through this kind of shit."

Jenna shook her head. "No way. I've got my own work. If I help you, I'll be here late catching up on mine. I mean," she paused, her green eyes flashing bright and narrow under thick brows, "what's in it for me?"

"Dinner at Croce's and all the beer you can drink?"

Jenna laughed. "We always have dinner and beers at Croce's on Friday nights. That doesn't count."

"I'll pay for everything."

"Not good enough."

"Well, what do you want?" he asked.

"An open IOU redeemable the next time I get stuck with one of Jim's pro bonos."

"Do I still have to buy you dinner?"

"Of course!"

"O.K., you've got a deal."

She shook her head. "You give in too easily, Bob. You better get more of the fighting instinct if you ever plan on making any money for this firm. The big dogs are gonna eat you up out there."

"Yes, boss," he said teasingly.

"That's good. I miss hearing that. Don't think you get to stop calling me that just because you're not my clerk anymore. Now give me that file." After scanning Bob's notes for several minutes, she said, "This looks good,

but I think it's very important that our client comes off sincere. If he appears for a minute to be a flake, then it's over."

"I agree," Bob nodded.

"Where's he getting his money?"

"He teaches yoga classes and new agey seminars or something. It's in my notes, third page."

Jenna flipped a few pages and nodded. "Oh, yeah, I see it. Let's try to steer opposing counsel away from questions regarding the origins of his income then. Leave the focus on the fact that he's never made a late payment. Model citizen kind of stuff."

"Got it."

They worked through lunch, and by the time they had finished their sandwiches and reviewed the last piece of discovery it was ten minutes to two.

Bob pulled the file together and squeezed Jenna's arm. "You're an angel."

"Not exactly, but I can be bought. Don't forget, you owe me."

"Tonight. Pick you up at seven-thirty?"

"I'll be there."

Bob slipped out the door of her office singing, "*Every time it rains, it rains, pennies from heaven.*"

If she worked quickly, she still might be able to answer her pile of mail and leave by six o'clock. She sat dictating a letter, when James Avery, the senior partner of the firm, entered her office.

Though only thirty-eight, Avery had already earned a reputation as one of San Diego's best litigators. Few doubted that he was destined to become a judge, maybe even a congressman. He gave free legal counseling to the Downtown Battered Women's Shelter, coached the swim team at the San Diego Boys and Girls Club, and was a patron of the Museum of Modern Art. Jenna first entered the renovated Victorian that housed his office on Front Street when she was in her last year of law school, looking for an unpaid internship and hungry for the excitement of working for such a respected attorney. His office, which was several blocks north of Broadway and the bustling activity at the center of downtown, sorely disappointed her. With its large white porch, pale blue paint, and lace curtains, the Law Offices of James Avery looked more like her grandmother's house than a law firm. Inside, the receptionist and legal secretaries worked in a room that had once been the front parlor. The three bedrooms were now offices, and the kitchen and dining room had been renovated to make a library and conference room. Though tastefully decorated in mahogany antiques and framed Monet, Van Gogh, and Picasso prints, Jenna immediately hated the office's homey atmosphere and complete lack of the professional distance and intimidation she imagined a law office needed. During her interview, Jim gave her a lecture about his responsibility to do his job honestly and fairly, nothing more. Because of this, he said he liked things simple, clean, and efficient; he didn't believe in excess, personally or professionally. Jenna wondered if he weren't really trying to explain away a healthy dose of liberal guilt, but she kept her mouth shut and nodded in agreement. She grew to understand her partner more clearly when one Friday night at Croce's, several years after she

had joined the firm, Jim told her that he had once been married, while still in law school, only to come home on an April afternoon and find his wife gone without so much as a note. Three years after his wife left, he received a picture of a little blonde girl in pink overalls and red Converse tennis shoes. The letter simply said, "Her name is Alicia. I thought you should know. Please don't try to find us. She has a daddy she loves very much." The envelope was postmarked Bend, Oregon, but Jim never found them. That was fifteen years ago, and Jenna knew he never forgave himself for not being able to find his own daughter, despite all of his legal skills. She grew more comfortable in their homey offices after that and complained less about the pro bono cases that Jim took, especially after Bob arrived and she could pass them on to him.

"Have you seen Bob?" Jim asked.

"Just left." Jenna motioned out the door. "So, where's the Swami?"

"He's not here yet. I knew he'd be late." Jim adjusted his suspenders and buttoned the top button of his coat.

"I'd like to see this guy. I keep picturing some sort of bearded guru with lotus petals behind his ears."

"He's not what you think. He looks like he would be more at home handing you a cheeseburger than the meaning of life. I see him walking on the beach in the evening when I take my swim."

"Bob said he was your neighbor."

"Yeah," Jim nodded. "He has a house across the street, on the cliff side. Much better view of the bay than me. He lets me use his stairs down to the beach instead of walking all the way down the hill to the end of the street."

Jenna shook her head. "I don't understand how he can afford the rent on that place. I saw in the file that he's paying almost three thousand dollars a month. I can't even afford La Jolla real estate."

"Some how he manages to swing it. He's a good guy. I'd hate to see him lose his house." Jim laughed. "It's the damndest thing. I see him walking along, a big goofy grin on his face, and he waves, and I always feel like he's actually glad to see me. It's hard not to like him."

Jenna smiled. "I'd love to hear Bobby depose him. Mr.-New-York-Linguini-Man meets Mr.-California-Tofu-Man." She bent at the waist a little, like Bob was known to do, scrunched her eyebrows down, and threw out her left arm as if swatting flies away. "Whad di' ya say? Are ya tawking ta me? Ya got incense in ya ears, Bud? Whad are awl dees people doin' in ya house? Are ya lisnen ta me?"

Jim laughed. "That's very good, Jenna. You may get your chance to hear him. I'd like you to sit in with him. Help him out if he needs it. O.K.?"

"No way." Jenna shook her head. "It's Friday afternoon, and I just settled that awful Bailey case this morning for one hundred twenty-three grand. Plus, I've still got a pile of work to finish up before I can leave today. I'll pass. Bob can handle it."

"Really? You settled it for that much? That's great." He smiled, relaxing, and for a moment Jenna thought she might be off the hook. Then as quickly as it appeared, the smile faded. "But this is Bob's first depo since he officially joined the firm, and I don't want to sit in. I think it would make him uncomfortable. I'd appreciate it if you did this for me."

Jenna loved the way Jim's blue eyes scrunched at the corners when he asked favors of her. She pulled at her pearl earrings before answering. "Sure, I'll do it. I have no life outside of this office; I wanted to stay here all night. Honestly."

"Good. I've been trying to buzz him. Do you know where he is?" Jim pushed his glasses further up his nose, then stuck his hands deep in his pockets. It was a habit Jenna found boyishly charming and out of character with the rest of his professional demeanor.

"He just left my office. Do you want me to call him?" Jenna started toward the phone. It rang before she reached it. "Yes?" She paused, and then turned to Jim. "Your client's here. Shall I send him back?"

"Go ahead. I've got a few minutes. I'll introduce you, O.K.?"

Jenna nodded. "Send him back, Sophie," she said into the telephone. "We're ready for him."

Jim disappeared to go meet the client, while Jenna walked to the conference room. She thought about calling Sophie and asking her to bring up fresh coffee, but then decided against it, figuring the guy probably drank herbal tea anyway. She filled the decanters with cool water instead.

She stood bent over the long mahogany table, reaching for the last decanter, when Bob entered.

"My God, don't do that to me, woman."

Jenna ignored him and continued filling the decanters. "I'll sit in with you on this one, if you don't mind. My curiosity is killing me. I haven't met any holy men lately."

Bob poured himself a cup of water. "You mean Jim wants you to baby-sit me, right?"

Jenna turned and looked at him. She could have lied, but it wasn't in her to sugar-coat things. "Yes."

She took a seat at the far end of the table.

Bob nodded and pulled at the ends of his thick black mustache. "Well, I guess it's a good thing you did my work for me this afternoon, isn't it?" He slipped into his lawyer voice, as he slipped into the chair. The accent was gone. Jenna knew there would be no reaching him now.

"Bob, Jenna, I'd like you to meet our client, Jeff Casey." They both rose as Jim and Mr. Casey entered the room.

"Jeff, this is Robert Antonelli, my associate. As I explained to you in the hall, Mr. Antonelli has been handling your case for the firm. He will be representing you in your deposition today."

Bob extended his hand. "Mr. Casey, it's very nice to meet you. I think we've spoken on the phone before."

Jeff met Bob's hand and held it loosely in both of his. "I remember. That was the day we were served with the papers. I was such a mess. You were really great. Thank you for your help. Please call me Jeff, though. And can I call you Bob? I hate last names; I mean whose are they really? Not your own; especially if you're a woman." He spoke his words quickly, all at once, in one long breath like an excited child.

Bob glanced at Jenna, and she raised her left eyebrow slightly. "All right . . . Jeff . . . call me Bob," he said.

Jim motioned toward Jenna at the far end of the table, bringing Jeff's attention to her for the first time. "And this is Jenna Donnelly, my partner. She will be sitting in with you as well."

"Mr. . . ."

"Jeff."

"Right, Jeff, it's nice to meet you." His hand was small and soft in hers. It was a hand unused to being shaken, and Jenna felt like a fool for grasping it so hard.

She took her seat and doodled on her legal pad while Jeff chatted with Bob, and Jim took his leave. This guru didn't look anything like she pictured, and she was actually disappointed. Small in frame and build, he probably wasn't more than a few inches taller than herself, and she was barely five feet, four inches tall. His skin was fair and freckled and his hair poured over his ears from a center part in a wave of red-blond that made him look more like an Irish Setter than a spiritual leader. His big brown eyes and open smile cemented the image for her.

"How could people pay this guy to solve their problems?" she thought. "My God, the clothes alone scream for help." She watched as Jeff smoothed the front of his blue button-down shirt. He hadn't ironed it, and the sleeves bunched above his elbows. He wore the neck open revealing a thin gold chain which held a pendant of flower-like design. He wore simple, white cotton pants, also wrinkled. The serene picture was sharply contrasted by a new pair of running shoes, striped in pink and neon green. She expected sandals, or something more biblical-looking.

Bob asked Jeff about his most recent trip to India, which caused the man to roll his eyes and clasp his hands to his chest in a praying motion before answering. "There is nothing like it, Bob. To be there in the presence of the Holy Man, receiving his *darshan*--his blessing--your entire body filled with love; nothing on this Earth can compare; everything else is trivial. The first time I met Baba he looked at me, and I felt as if my chest were cracking open, as if he were reaching inside of me. When I tried to speak, I couldn't even breathe; my focus was entirely on his being, and it was love. Nothing but pure, unconditional love. A love so strong it hurt to breathe. But I didn't have to breathe because he was inside of me, doing it for me, and all was one. Have you ever known a feeling like that, Bob? A love so full your own life doesn't even matter anymore, because I am you, and you are me, and we are all just living in The One that is eternity?"

Jenna's mouth dropped open. She wanted to answer for Bob but she stopped, surprised that he was actually thinking about Jeff's question. Really thinking and considering.

After a moment, Bob shook his head, and answered, "No, I don't know that feeling."

"Well, if it weren't for the fact that Baba has told me to stay here to share his love with others, I wouldn't even be fighting this battle. I'd be in India sitting at his feet right now, homeless and happy. Maybe someday you'll come with me, Bob. Then you'll know what I mean."

Jenna couldn't stand it any longer. She wanted to get this guy's depo done and get out of here. She had bigger things on her mind than listening to this fool ramble on about loving his holy man. "Mr. Casey . . . Jeff, I mean, . . .

it's almost two-thirty, we only have a few minutes before opposing counsel will be arriving. We'd like to go over a few things with you to help you present your case successfully during your deposition. Bob, would you like to brief our client on the proceedings?" She stared coolly, letting him know she didn't want to screw around with any more talk of India and holy men.

Bob cleared his throat. "Why don't you prepare the witness, Ms. Donnelly. I'll just review my notes." He opened the file, leaving Jenna to deal with their client directly. Jeff folded his hands in front of him, and, smiling a toothy grin, turned in his seat to face Jenna.

She took a deep breath and began. "I will go quickly. If you have any questions, please stop me."

"O.K."

"As you know, this deposition will be taken under oath. You must answer each question truthfully as put to you."

"I always do," he said, fixing those dark, round eyes on her.

"I'm quite sure you do. It's my job to remind you of this fact. Mr. Antonelli and I feel it is imperative that you leave the opposing counsel with a feeling of sincerity and stability; therefore, we suggest that you limit your responses to answering the questions directly and refrain from adding any additional information. Mr. Antonelli will try to steer the questions to the subject at hand, which is your alleged violation of your lease, and will make objections to counsel's questions regarding subjects which are irrelevant to the immediate facts."

"You mean questions about my spirituality, don't you?" He leaned closer to Jenna, and she noticed that his brown eyes sparkled with flecks of

golden-red the same color as his hair. "Ms. Donnelly," Jenna noticed that he didn't call her by her first name and she was glad, "I have sworn my life to Baba Sai Ram and I live to share his teachings in this country. I love what I do. I'm not hurting anybody. Don't you think that is the most important aspect of my sincerity?"

Bob fielded this question before Jenna could respond. "Mr. Casey, may I be honest? Opposing counsel wants to try to make you appear . . . flaky, unstable . . . in order to support his client's claim, and have you removed. We know you haven't violated your lease agreement, but if you want to keep your home it's best if you answer the questions simply and don't expand much beyond them."

"It doesn't matter what you or I say. If Baba wants me to remain in my home, I will. These legal actions are simply a test of my faith."

The phone rang. Jenna answered it. "Yes, send them both back. And tell the court reporter she can come in now." She hung up the phone and turned to Jeff Casey. "Your landlord and his attorney are here."

"Don't look so worried," he patted Jenna on the arm. "Baba will provide."

Jenna was far from worried about whether Baba would provide or not. She was worried about how she would survive the next few hours without a drop of coffee to be found in the room. Despite her previous decision not to call Sophie, she picked up the phone.

"Sophie, bring in a carafe of coffee for us, would you? And some tea . . ."

"Water is fine," Jeff said, still smiling.

"No tea," Jenna corrected. "Just coffee. And hurry, please."

Bob studied Jenna from across the table. Although his face was calm, she could see his eyes pleading with her not to say anything. She held Bob's gaze for a moment longer, and then turned to Jeff Casey, and, smiling her most charming and professional smile, she poured their client a fresh glass of cold water.

CHAPTER 2

Samsara
(the physical world)

The bar at Croce's hummed with the usual handsome couples whispering privately over glasses of chardonnay and the excited buzz of men and women celebrating the end of the work week. A gray-haired piano player punched out a snappy jazz tune. Jenna loved Croce's; in fact, it was the thing she missed most about San Diego when she was away. Located downtown on the corner of "F" and Fifth, it was in the heart of the bustling Gaslamp District, only a few blocks from her condo on Kettner Blvd. The widow of the late singer Jim Croce owned and operated the establishment, and over the years it had gained a reputation for having exceptional food and jazz. Although the restaurant spilled out onto the sidewalk cafe-style, inside it was equally light and airy, yet intimate. The brick walls of the the bar that occupied half of the narrow building were decorated with photos and memorabilia of the musical career of its namesake. Jim had introduced Jenna to the restaurant, but Bob had become Jenna's standing Friday night dinner date. Tonight, as always, they sat at the end of the bar closest to the piano.

Bob sat unusually quiet, but Jenna was enjoying herself too much to prod him out of his sour mood. She pretended not to notice him watching her in the bronze mirror across the bar in front of them. She wore a simple dress cut short and low over full bare breasts that pushed against the sheer black fabric. A tangle of chains and pendants dangled from her neck, some hitting her mid-belly, others slipping off her shoulders as she turned her head. Her hair fell softly around her face and she wore no make-up, except for a splash of mascara.

She caught Bob's eyes in the mirror, and he looked away. "What is wrong with you," she asked. "You are about as exciting as a canker sore."

"I'm sorry," he shook his head. "I was just thinking."

"You're not still pouting because I had to sit in on your depo are you?"

"What," he glanced up. "No, I wasn't thinking about that."

"Then what?" she asked. "Because you're really starting to piss me off with this melancholy mood of yours."

"What'd you think of Jeff Casey?" he asked.

"What do you mean? Like . . . do I want to date him?" she laughed.

"No. About his life, the way he talks about India and that holy man--Baba what-ever-his-name-is. What do you think about that?"

"What's to think about?" Jenna asked.

"I don't know." They both drank draft Guinness. Bob took a long swig from his glass, half of the foamy dark liquid disappearing before he set it down again. "I keep hearing him in my head saying the same thing over and over again, *'Have you ever known a feeling like that, Bob? A love so full*

your own life doesn't even matter anymore? I've just been thinking I'd like to have that feeling. It doesn't sound so bad to me."

Jenna's mouthed dropped open, and then she laughed. "You can't believe for a minute that guy is sincere?"

He drained his glass. Several drops of white foam clung to the tips of his mustache. "I don't want to talk about it anymore. I shouldn't have even brought it up."

He looked at Jenna, forcing a grin, but in his eyes there was a loneliness she had never seen before.

"Bob, I don't know what to say."

"It's no big deal. Forget it," he said.

She pulled the empty glass from his hand and moved her face in front of his. "Hey, Bobby, it's me. Talk to me. I think that Howdy Doody Hare Krishna has gotten to you. It's all a sham with these guys. It's all about money. Nothing else. Give me a break. Jeff Casey's living high on the hog in a La Jolla beach house. Don't tell me this whole guru thing isn't about money, 'cause I don't believe it for a second."

He pushed her out of his face. "Don't you ever wonder what the hell we're doing? You and me."

"We're making money, just like Casey. Except when we screw people, they see it coming."

Bob shook his head. "God, you're so cynical."

"No, I'm realistic. I have a damn good thing going here. I've got my condo on the harbor, partnership in the James Avery Law Firm, a BMW, good friends, independence . . . what's wrong with that?"

Bob ran his short fingers through his hair and paused, his hand resting on the back of his neck. "There's nothing wrong with it. I just think there's got to be more than that."

Jenna's eyes narrowed, and her voice rose. "You see, that's what really pisses me off about people like Jeff Casey. They feed you a few lines that stick inside your head, and pretty soon you're full of doubts. They get you so confused you'll do anything just to find some peace again."

Bob sat silently.

"Don't let him screw with your head, Bobby. It's not worth it."

"Maybe he did get to me, but the guy's probably gonna lose his house, and he don't care. He's Mr. Happy. He's got something else. I just wish I knew what the hell it was."

"He's got all of his little groupies' money, that's what he's got. What the hell does he care if he loses his house? They'll just get him a new place somewhere else to *om* and chant. He'll be fine." She paused. "But what about you?"

Bob ran his thumb and forefingers over his mustache, smoothing the ends but missing the foam that still dangled on the tips. Jenna grabbed a napkin and dabbed at his lips. "Foam. You're such a slob. There," she said, "that's better."

He sighed. "You look beautiful tonight. You always do."

"Thanks, Bobby." She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "Why don't I take a rain check? Go home and watch the rest of the basketball game. Fall asleep on the couch in your socks and underwear, or whatever it is you do at home on the weekend."

"That sounds like a good idea. But you're all dressed up. What are you gonna do?"

Jenna flagged the bartender down and ordered him to close out their tab. "I don't know. Maybe I'll go track down Jack. He's playing tonight at a club on Fourth, in Hillcrest."

Bob rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Oh, why do you do this? That guy is . . ."

"Don't preach at me. I'm a grown woman. I know what I'm doing."

"But what're you doin' slummin' with a guy like that?"

"He's exciting . . . reckless . . . terribly bad for me . . .," she smiled. "I like that."

Bob threw a twenty in the brown plastic dish left by the bartender and helped Jenna pull on her long, black cloak.

"Everytime you wear this you remind me of Meryl Streep, in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Did you ever see that movie?" Bob asked.

"I think I fell asleep once watching it," Jenna said. "Is it good?"

Bob nodded. "Very romantic. Very sad."

"No wonder I fell asleep."

Bob opened the door for her, and they stood for a moment in the well-lit street outside the restaurant. He removed a pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket and offered her one.

"No thanks. I thought you quit," she said.

"I did. A hundred times," he inhaled deeply and blew the smoke away from Jenna, into the street. "Let me at least give you a ride. Don't go out alone."

"You'll take me to meet my lover?"

Bob winced. "No, I'll take you home."

"No, thanks. I'll walk. I'm not ready to go home yet. I'll see you Monday, OK?"

He nodded, but didn't answer. When they parted, she could feel his eyes following her as she crossed the intersection, and she knew he would continue watching until she disappeared in the groups of people touring the clubs, bars, and restaurants of the Gaslamp District.

Walking south down Fifth Avenue toward the harbor, she soaked up the loud music escaping from the bright doorways and jostled among the tourists, college kids, and panhandlers. Her gait became firmer, her stride longer, as she walked past the Marines and sailors loitering outside the strip joints and adult book stores. The air smelled of cold salt water and warm urine blended with the spices of Mexican, Italian, and Chinese food. She realized she hadn't eaten yet, and her head began to hurt from the beers she drank on an empty stomach. Up ahead, on the waterfront, she saw an orange and blue sign proclaiming the opening of a new Indian Restaurant, "*Eastern Moon: Home of San Diego's Best Curried Chicken.*" She quickened her pace to reach it.

The Eastern Moon was small and nearly empty so she sat alone in a booth and ordered her meal. The food arrived quickly, prepared perfectly: the rice warm and bland, the curry so hot it burned her lips and tongue. Her belly grew full and warm, and she thought of Jack as she licked the spicy sauce with the tip of her tongue. It was nearly ten o'clock. He would be finishing his first set soon, dragging his lanky body through the crowd to search the

room for her. She decided she would ignore him tonight. She would sit in a corner where he couldn't see her and watch him beat his drums with the violence of a spoiled boy. She took a few more bites then pushed the plate to the side and motioned to her waitress, a young girl in a colorful green *sari*. As Jenna's hand went up to wave across the room, a shock of red-gold hair moved between her and the girl, catching her gesture in a pair of round, brown eyes and a devotional smile. Before she could say anything he was walking towards her, bowing that half-bow with his hands folded in prayer in front of his chest and his eyes half-closed.

"Just my fucking luck," Jenna cursed under her breath. When he reached her, she extended her right hand to him, smiled, and said, "Mr. Casey . . . Jeff . . . what a coincidence."

"Coincidences are just God's way of letting you know he's still in control." Jeff took her hand in both of his. "Baba is so great. I was just talking about you. We're finishing our tea. Please come sit with us."

"Thank you, but I was just leaving. I'm meeting a friend."

"Oh, no."

His eyes grew large, and she actually felt his disappointment as he spoke the words. It was like kicking a dog. She sighed. "Well, I guess I have a minute. Thank you."

"Oh, this is wonderful." He led her to a table where an elderly man with dark hair and olive skin was engaged in a heated debate with a slender blonde woman. She looked older than Jeff, but not by much.

"I'm telling you, you'll never get American women to buy into the need to separate men and women during *kirtan*." The blonde shook her

head, "Women here just don't accept being viewed as impure. Many of my friends have come to the center and told me they felt like second class citizens. They want in with the men."

The older man rattled his tea cup on the saucer as he spoke. "You don't understand. Baba says that the time of devotion must be free of distraction. This is necessary. This is how it must be done." His eyes were a shade of olive slightly darker than his skin, and though he was probably in his 60's, his spine was straight, and he held his head firm and strong.

"Now he looks like a guru," Jenna thought.

Jeff interrupted the two. "Rami, Anne, this is Jenna Donnelly, my attorney. She's the one I was telling you about. Isn't this amazing that she should appear here?"

The two nodded, and the woman gestured toward an empty seat at the table between her and Jeff. "Please sit down and have a cup of tea." She poured Jenna a cup. The smell of clove and ginger exploded in the steam. "I'm Anne Casey, Jeff's sister, and this is Rami, our dear friend. Jeff told us how well you and Mr. Antonelli represented him in his deposition today. We're very grateful."

Jenna couldn't help noticing the striking differences between the brother and sister. They looked nothing alike. Anne was tall and athletic, with a calm steeliness in her blue eyes. She wore a white silk blouse that accentuated her well-tanned skin. Although not pretty in the conventional sense, she had a familiar androgynous quality that was attractive and soothing. Jenna immediately sensed intelligence and wit behind Anne's steady gaze.

"We felt your brother had a strong case, and the facts were in his favor," Jenna said. "I think the judge will see it our way."

The older man looked away from Jenna as she spoke. He seemed to be indifferent to her, or studying her closely; she couldn't tell which. She was curious and wanted to make him speak. Looking at him directly, Jenna asked, "I overheard you talking. What is *kirtan*?"

"It is a form of prayer," he answered. "Devotional singing and chanting with music. It lightens your spirits and allows Baba to enter your soul in peace and joy." His voice was cool, suspicious.

"And you separate the men and women when you do this, when you pray?"

Jeff jumped in and answered, "We do, but it's not a bad thing. It's a wonderful feeling to be in a room surrounded by your brothers or sisters, without distractions. The separation is necessary to really let go and feel complete devotion."

"But what distractions do you mean?" Jenna asked.

"You know . . . ," Jeff paused, " . . . sexual distractions."

Jenna wanted to laugh, but she remembered the old man. Out of respect for him, she held her tongue.

"Oh, I see. Well, I've never considered that. My family was Catholic. We all sat in church together, men and women, and nobody seemed to be distracted." Jenna knew that was a lie before the words were out of her mouth. The only reason she had ever gone to church was to meet boys.

The old man held her in his gaze. "You probably were not experiencing true devotion then. The Catholic church is no different from

us. They have always separated their true devotees, the monks and nuns, so that they may focus solely on God."

"I see your point, but I still don't agree." Jenna swallowed the hot tea and wondered if she had spent sufficient time to leave gracefully.

"Actually," Anne chipped in, "it is an amazingly liberating feeling to be in a room and not consider one's sexuality, to be completely free from thoughts of your body. I actually prefer it, but I argue with Rami because I don't agree that it is *necessary*."

Jenna turned to Jeff, "And what do you think?"

Jeff took her hand in his and fixed his eyes on her own. She saw a new light in them, one that felt old and clean and sweet. "I think you would feel a love like you've never known. One without a face or body. I think that Baba is full of mystery, and I rejoice in finding you here tonight."

Jenna shuddered and drew her hand away. "It was a pleasure," she said, standing, "but I really have to go." Nodding to Anne and Rami, she slung her cloak over her shoulders.

Jeff walked her to the door. He placed his hand on her elbow, stopping her from leaving. "Jenna, I'd like to repay you for taking my case."

"You don't have to. Jim took your case on a pro bono basis, so our services are free."

Jeff laughed. "I don't mean that I want to pay you money."

Jenna smiled, "No, of course not."

"I'd like to offer you something better. Anne and I have friends over every Tuesday for *kirtan* and dinner. I'd really love it if you and Bob would join us. I think you'd enjoy it. No, I know it. I feel it."

Jenna lost her patience. She didn't want to eat with him; she didn't want to sing and pray with him; she didn't want him to feel or know anything about her. "Thank you for the invitation," she said, "but I don't think I'll be able to."

Again, the kicked-dog look appeared in his eyes, but she wasn't buying it this time.

"Well, please pass it on to Bob, won't you?" he asked.

"Sure, thanks for the tea."

She waved at Anne and Rami and pushed her way through the stained glass door, out onto the dark street. A blast of cold salt air stung her nose. She flagged down a taxi and melted into the dirty seat.

"The Blue Rose," she ordered.

The driver nodded.

"How dare he try to tell me what I need," she thought. "Goddamned missionary," she said out loud.

"You talkin' to me, lady?" the driver asked.

"No, I'm sorry." She wished the greasy head shaking silently in front of her was Bob, driving her home. She should have taken his offer. It was too late now; the evening was already in motion.

The cab stopped at The Blue Rose, and she heard the thump of a bass and the scream of cymbals as she opened the door. Jack's break had finished. She gave the driver an extra large tip and nodded at the doorman. He waved her in.

"No cover charge?" she asked.

"Not for you."

Jenna studied him, puzzled, but she didn't argue. She pushed her way through the jostling bodies and leaned through a space between two couples.

"Can I have a vodka tonic," she screamed to the balding bartender whose rim of gray hair was pulled back in a thin ponytail.

He nodded, then returned with the drink. She tried to pay, but he shook his head. "It's free for you."

"Why? How come nobody will let me pay for anything?" she asked.

"Cause you're with the band. Jack told me."

"I'm not with anybody," she screamed over the music. "Take the goddamned money." She threw a five dollar bill on the bar and walked away before he could protest.

Her lips still burned from the curry, but they cooled quickly as she drained her glass in three drinks and set the empty on a nearby table. After several deep breaths, she began to relax. The air dripped with a stale heat, and the dance floor heaved with bobbing bodies. She hung her cloak on a rack beside the door and then made her way along the wall in search of an empty booth. The music stopped, and the lights went out. The dancers applauded as a blue light hit the stage, illuminating a tacky mirrored rose behind Jack's drum set. Jenna caught her breath as she saw him in the blue light, his arms crossed over his chest, showing off his well-defined muscles from shoulder to wrist. He pulled his lips down in a practiced rock-star scowl. A collective wail escaped from the women in the room. Jenna laughed. He was damned good looking. There was just no denying it. He began to play again and Jenna recognized the song. She didn't know the name, but it was one she loved. Jack had a big solo at the beginning, but that wasn't why she loved it. She

knew that this song was the first in a set of steamy, bluesy tunes that sent her to a dreamy, shadowy place, pulling at her from somewhere deep in her belly, making her hips roll and beg to press against something firm. She longed to lose herself in music and drink. A red velvet booth emptied in the corner, and she slunk into its soft folds, hiding from the light and the stares of men.

A buxom cocktail waitress with a mole painted on her cheek set another vodka tonic in front of Jenna.

"I didn't order this," Jenna said.

The woman pointed to the bartender. He held up Jenna's five dollar bill, tore it in half, and threw it on the floor. "Johnnie says they're on the house. He says your money's no good here 'cause you're Jack's girl." She leaned closer to Jenna. "Are you really?"

Jenna shook her head, disgusted. "No. And he's not my boy, either."

The woman looked confused. "Well, anyway," she said, shrugging, "Johnnie says your drinks are free."

"I give up," Jenna said, accepting the drink. She licked the rim of her glass, trained her eyes on the wet T-shirt stuck to Jack's chest, and in the corners of her memory traced her tongue along his shoulders and neck.

CHAPTER 3

Pura

(The physical body)

Last call. Jack pounded out a solo that left his piano and bass men tapping their feet mutely, unable to keep up. He heard the beat somewhere between his head and heart and closed his eyes, banging fiercely, in a swirl of sweat and spit that flew from him in spirals. He knew she was out there somewhere, watching him, and this one was for her. This one said, *You're mine. Don't try to hide from me.* He played on for three more minutes, the music pulsing from him like the color red, the curve of her lips, the shade of her sex, pure heat, hard love. He knew his music talked to her in a voice not his own, so he called, demanding she show herself. A thrusting surge of energy, one last thumping plea, and he slammed his sticks on the snare in a final burst, then collapsed in a heap over his drums.

The crowd stood, applauding, pressing the stage, shaking his hand. He met their outstretched arms and drug himself away, zeroing in on the bar and a long, tall cold one. He let a short brunette buy him a beer and sat next to her

on a stool, not listening to her as she spoke, watching her lips move. They were small, tight lips, penciled in more fully with orange lipstick that clung to the mouth of the dark bottle she held. Jack wanted the bottle to talk with the shape of the woman's orange lips. He watched her raise the bottle to her mouth and wondered if it was as warm in there as it was inside Jenna. When she lowered the bottle, he noticed that the skin under her chin was soft, her neck short. He thanked her for the beer and moved through the crowd, searching for a neck he could love, a longer, paler neck that smelled of honeysuckle and tasted like musk.

His legs and arms still shook, pumped from playing. He wanted to run, to break free. He wanted her now. He didn't want to wait; he didn't want to play games. He stood in the center of the empty dance floor and scanned the room. She was here, he could feel her. The brunette at the bar bought a drink for the lead guitar player. *Closing time. Last chance to get lucky.* Bouncers broke up couples parked at dark tables, moving them toward the door. He searched the booths, looking for her in the velvet corners, but he couldn't find her. The bar was almost empty now. He sat on the edge of the stage, his long thumbs hooked in the loops of his jeans, and waited. She would come to him.

She's here somewhere. He crinkled his nose and lifted it in the air. *I can smell her.* He reached his left hand behind his head and removed the rubber band holding his long, dark hair back and away from his face. His full brows creased over a nose that was a little too sharp, a little too severe for the pouty lips that formed beneath it. *She likes to watch you, Jack.* He leapt to his feet, heavy boots falling from legs that paced the stage in a jerky walk, long

arms swinging at his sides, hair spilling over his shoulders and down his back. *Let's give her something to watch.* He pulled off his wet shirt, undid the first button of his Levi's, and kicked on the blue light above his drums. His sticks fell into his hands like sixth fingers, caressing music from the tight skins in a slow tune that strolled across the room. He closed his eyes and played for the empty booths. His pulse quickened, and he felt as if he were larger than himself, larger than this room. *She's coming. I can feel it.*

Jenna appeared from the shadows of the bar, her bare arms glowing white in the blue light. She walked slowly across the deserted dance floor, and Jack watched her round breasts swaying like two white doves trapped inside the sheer fabric of her dress. It was her turn to be watched now. He licked her ankles with eyes, ran his gaze up her knees and smooth thighs. His belly tightened, and he wanted to run to her, but he kept playing, like a snake charmer reeling her in. She met his black eyes and bit her lip, swaying to the languid tune, and he thought of silk stockings wrapped loosely around her wrists. *She wants you tonight, Jack. Oh God, she wants you bad.*

Jenna stopped at the base of the stage. "Get down from there. I want to go home."

He kept playing. The bar was dark and empty now, except for a few busboys straightening chairs and clearing tables. She climbed the stage and kicked the blue lights off, but still he kept playing.

"No," he said. "You come here."

She moved toward him, ducked under his arms, and stood in front of him, between his body and his drums. He beat the bass with his right foot and tapped the snare with the stick in his left hand. With his right hand he

slid his stick along the inside of her arms, traced it over the curve of her nipples, and down her stomach. Jenna shivered.

"You want more?" he asked. His stick moved down, across her hips. She shut her eyes and whispered, "Yes."

He stopped playing, grabbed her shoulders with both hands, and pulled her onto his lap. She sat side-saddle across his legs, kissing him fiercely, biting his lips. He held her arms at her sides, but she broke free and swung her leg over his lap, facing him, and took his nipple in her mouth. The world went white and he moaned, and slid his hands under her dress filling them with warm ass. He pulled her stomach against his own. *Right here, Jack. Take her now, against your drums.* She ran her tongue along his neck and then bit him above his collar bone.

"Ow! Shit, Jenna," he brought his hands to his neck.

"That's for making me come to you," she moved in small circles on his lap.

"You shouldn't have hidden from me. Why do you do this to me?" He pulled her in close to him and buried his nose in her hair. "You're mine, baby. You know that."

She leaned her head back so he could kiss the nape of her neck. "I'm going home," she said. "I'll leave the backdoor open. If you want me, that's where I'll be."

"Fuck that," he shouted. "No more bullshit." She tried to pull herself out of his lap, but he held her arms and kissed her deeply, owning her lips and all of her mouth. When she softened, he pushed her out of his lap and

grabbed his shirt. "I'm coming in the front door this time," he said, "and your neighbors can just go to hell."

"Don't give me any shit tonight, Jack," she warned, her green eyes on fire.

Jack felt hot all over. His mind was numb, and he was pulled from someplace deep inside, a dark tunnel that whispered to him in her voice. "Honey, I'm your man," he pleaded, grabbing her by the hips and pulling her into him. He whispered in her ear, "We could be so good together, baby. I know it. I feel it."

Her arm shot through the fog of his passions, smashing his cheek, chilling him to the bone.

She kicked the stand out from under his snare drum and jumped down off the stage as it crashed to floor. "Don't say that," she screamed. "You're nothing to me. We have sex. That's all. You don't know or feel anything about me. Got it?"

Her whole body shook. He moved toward her, but she stormed toward the door and called back without turning around, "I'm leaving my backdoor open. I'll be waiting, if you still want me."

She left him in the dark of the closed bar, his cheek burning from the blow, his center aching to bury itself inside her. *You'll go Jack. She knows it. But when you do, this time you'll make your sweat stream from her pores. You'll make her ride you like the sea, and she will take everything you have to give her, and she will be happy, and she will need you.*

It was only 6:00 a.m., still dark outside, and cold with autumn's first hint of the approaching winter. Jenna was in a lackluster mood, unable to pump up the energy necessary to throw Jack out of her bed and send him on his way. She pulled her green silk robe closer to her body, wrapped her hair in a big wooden clip, and picked up the trail of last night's clothes strewn across the bedroom, hallway, and living room floor.

She set Jack's clothes in a pile on the couch but stopped herself from folding them. Jack had really pissed her off last night, laying claim to her like that, making demands. He wanted more from her than she could give. He was a lazy, good-for-nothing musician with no intention of ever getting a real job, earning money, or seeing the world beyond his own ego. But he was damn good looking, and he could suck the breath out of her lungs when he kissed her. Quite frankly, that was enough. In the morning, she piled his stuff on the couch, and he was gone by the time she got out of the shower. That was the way they always did it.

Last night, she left the backdoor open, as usual, but he made her wait. She thought he might not even come, and she was surprised by the idea that he might be the one to finally end whatever it was that they had together. In the end he came, and his need for her was frightening. He burst through the door, tearing his clothes off along the way, and entered her bed without saying a word, without even looking at her, his body demanding to be satisfied. She saw her own needs rising unanswered each time his chest heaved above her, each time he pressed his hips harder and deeper inside her, as if searching for a place inside where he could plant himself and grow. When he finally collapsed and lay beside her, she was horrified to discover

that she wanted to cradle his head in the crook of her arm; that she wanted run her fingers through the mass of black hair until he fell asleep. She lay next to him, awake, cold, and still for most of the night; afraid to test the waters of this new found tenderness; afraid to even admit feeling it.

Jenna heard Jack stirring in the other room and knew he would be feeling for her across the bed. The sky began to lighten. She had to make a decision. If she started the shower, he would take the cue and leave without saying good-bye. If she went back in there now, things would never be the same between them. She paced the floor as the sun rose, casting rectangles of yellow light across the room. A narrow shaft crossed in front of her, stretching across the hardwood floor leading to the bedroom. She paused, fixed on the spirals of dust like golden flecks spinning in the air. She remembered seeing lights the same color flashing in Jeff Casey's eyes. She heard his words, as he stared at her across the table and the steaming cups of tea: *"I think you would feel a love like you've never known. One without a face or body. I think Baba is full of mystery."* She saw Bob slumped over the bar, lost in his private grief: *"I've just been thinking I'd like to have that feeling. It doesn't sound so bad to me."* She saw herself reflected in Jack's dark eyes: *"Honey, I'm your man."* She felt a warmth, like strong arms, wrap around her as the room filled with the colors of the sunrise, golden reds and oranges. She moved to the window seat, and sat hugging her knees to her chest, rocking back and forth, following the fishing boats as they headed out to sea, past the ferries and sailboats docked at Coronado Island. She knew what she had to do. This would be Jack's last morning. It was time for him to go.

She rose, folded Jack's torn Levi's and black T-shirt, and left her robe beside them. Padding into the bedroom, she let her hair clip drop to the floor and slipped into bed beside him. He lay on his stomach, hugging a pillow under his right arm. She rolled him on to his side and slid under his arm, replacing the pillow. They lay still together, and then she ran her fingernails down his stomach slowly, cupped her hands around his balls, and stroked him gently once or twice until his dark eyes snapped open and looked into hers. He rolled on top of her, and growled before entering. Her lips parted as he slipped his arms under her back, pulling her up to meet his mouth in a graceful arch of breasts, neck, and chin.

She let him take her. She never opened her eyes. She completely gave in and was vulnerable in a way she had never been with him. When she came, she cried loud tears that blended with the sweat on the hairs of his chest, and he held her, breathing in her breath.

Before she fell asleep, she whispered, "Jack, I was wrong. I want love, but I need more than you can give me. Do you understand?"

"I guess so." His voice was lazy with sex and sleep. He rested his head on her pillow of white breasts and stroked her smooth belly.

She knew he didn't understand, but she let him drift to sleep anyway; he seemed so happy just to be in her arms.

CHAPTER 4

Avedana

(yearning)

Monday morning, at the corner of Front and Broadway, Jenna stopped and bought an arrangement of pink carnations. She hated carnations; they smelled like feet. But it was all the gray-haired florist had available at such an early hour.

"Nobody buys flowers in the morning," he said, "unless they're trying to apologize for a bad night." He smiled coyly. "You trying to make up to somebody?"

"They're for my secretary," she said.

"She do something real good or you do something real bad?" he asked.

Jenna paused, her wallet half out of her purse, "Do I get these any cheaper if I spill my guts to you?"

He laughed. "You do something bad. Better make it roses."

"It wasn't a roses kind of mistake. Carnations will be fine."

"She'll think you're cheap."

"Thinking is not one of her strengths. They'll be just fine. Wrap 'em up."

Jenna hated apologizing, but she loved the mornings and the short walk from her home to the office. She drank a cup of black coffee as she walked and scanned the headlines. On most mornings, she used the time to plan her day and review her calendar. Today the walk seemed longer than usual. She couldn't find the strident pace, the sharp heels clicking on cool pavement, that worked like a mantra to lull her into orderly contemplation. Every few steps she tugged at her slip, which kept bunching in a knot around her thighs. The white silk jacket that had looked so crisp buttoned at the waist over her pink blouse now seemed like a foolish mistake this chilly November morning. Even her jewelry seemed to conspire against her as the clink and jingle of her gold bracelets and pendant earrings sounded like the clash of cymbals in her ears with each step. She thought of the feel of Jack's cymbals pressed in her back and sticks as soft as fingers caressing her arm. Her legs felt heavy, her middle empty.

By the time she reached the white steps of her office, she regretted buying the flowers for Sophie. As quickly as the impulse had struck her to buy them, it was now gone. She raised her arm to toss them in the bushes, when a voice behind her called out, "'Hey, throw 'em to me. I wanna be next."

Jenna spun around. Bob stood at the base of the steps with a grin the size of his enormous mustache. "You scared the shit out of me, Bob."

"I couldn't resist. You look just like a bride standing there with your white suit and throwing the flowers."

"Hardly. I bought them for Sophie, as a sort of . . .," Jenna exhaled, ". . . apology for being so hard on her Friday."

"Naw! The Queen Bee apologizing? It's easier to believe you just got married than to believe that."

"What's so hard to believe about that? I can admit when I'm wrong."

"I've just never seen you do it, that's all."

Jenna reached for the brass doorknob. "Well, watch me do it now." She opened the door for Bob, then pulled his elbow, stopping him as he was about to enter. "Do I really look like a bride in this suit?"

He scanned the length of her small, familiar body. "You don't look like yourself. You look . . .," he searched for a word, ". . . soft."

"Shit." She shut the door, pulling Bob back out onto the steps. "Come here, I need to talk to someone."

He looked around. "Should I go get someone?"

"I need to talk to you, I mean." She led him to a small bench positioned between their offices and a row of trimmed hedges that separated it from the street.

"It's cold out here. Let's go inside."

"Shut up you big baby and listen to me." She took a breath and pulled at the slip still tangled around her legs. "You remember Friday, when we were at Croce's and you were thinking about Jeff Casey?"

Bob watched her suspiciously. "Yeah, what about it?"

"Well, after I left you I walked down to the waterfront and had dinner at a new Indian restaurant. I had a great meal, and I was just getting ready to leave, when who do I see but *him* bouncing over to my table, all smiles and holiness."

"What did you do?"

"What else could I do? I sat with him and his sister and some other guy and drank tea with them. They were talking about something . . . oh yeah, how they pray . . . they separate the men and women. Did you know that?"

"No."

"Anyway, he gets all excited and invites you and me to come to his house this Tuesday for . . . what did he call it . . . I forget what it's called . . . some kind of singing and dancing and dinner afterwards. He wants to repay us for handling his case."

"So what's the big deal." Bob swung his hand in front of his chest impatiently. "I know the guy is goofy, but he's harmless."

"Harmless! He had you pretty shaken up Friday."

"He just got me thinking, that's all. He didn't do it on purpose."

"Of course he did!" She stood up and paced the sidewalk in front of their offices. "I told you. These guys get in your head, Bobby. You're going along having a good life, and all of a sudden you start to question things. You start to wear white all of a sudden and begin to buy flowers."

Bob grabbed her by the hand and led her back to the bench. "What's going on, Jen? What else did he say to you?"

She shook her head. "Nothing."

Bob picked up the bouquet of carnations resting between them. He pulled the petals delicately from one of the blooms. "Did you go to Jack after you left him?"

Jenna followed the cracks in the sidewalk with her eyes. "Yeah, I went to him."

Silence. "And?" Bob said, after a moment.

"And, nothing."

"Oh." More silence. "Well, why am I sitting out here when I've got work inside. Is that all you wanted to tell me? You saw Jeff Casey and he invited us to dinner?"

Jenna thought back to Saturday morning. She could feel Jack's chest pressed against her cheek as they slept. That was the happiest she had ever been with him, and she had just told him it was over. She wanted to tell Bob about the sunrise and the voices echoing in her mind. She thought it would make him happy to know she had sent Jack away, but she couldn't find the words to explain what had happened. Then she felt foolish. She stood and ran her hands over her white suit.

"Yeah, that's all." She pointed to the carnations Bob still held. "Would you please give those to Sophie? I'm gonna walk home and change. Tell Jim I'll be back in a little while, would you?"

"Sure. You O.K.?"

"Yeah, I'm O.K. I'll see you later."

Jenna retraced her steps down Front Street, turned right past the flower stand on Broadway and headed toward home. She passed a coffee cart and bought a large French roast from a kid with a ring in her nose and blonde

cornrows. The morning fog had all but burned off. The soft sunlight and steaming coffee felt like hands massaging her inside and out. People in San Diego always complained when the weather dipped below seventy degrees, but Jenna loved it. It was like waking up from the lethargy of a long nap when the month of November marched in, daring to drop the temperature to the fifties, bringing a hint of rain that smelled of fish and surf wax. Fall was the only time of the year she really felt at home in San Diego. And yet, ironically, it was the only time that she ever considered going back home. In Seattle, it rained all the time, but at least there she could blame her foul moods on the weather, and she never inadvertently put on a white silk dress in November.

Jenna threw her coffee cup in a brass ashtray outside the security gate blocking her complex from the street. She fished in her purse for her keys and then passed through the gate and onto a walkway paved in Spanish tile and accented with white alyssum and broadleaf ferns. This led to a courtyard encircled like a keyhole in the center of the dozen condos forming the complex. The homes were all empty at this time of day, the curtains in the windows drawn and the blinds pulled down. Everyone living in the complex was a professional, like Jenna, single, or newly married. None of them had children. She put the key to the lock at her door. A drop of water landed on her cheek, she looked up, another hit her on the chin. The few scattered clouds of earlier had begun to pull together and form a larger, more ominous, one. She went for the lock again, and stopped. A third drop fell on her lips. She caught it with her tongue. It tasted sweet, not like the dry mineral taste of San Diego tap water. She was suddenly struck by the silence surrounding her.

She turned, facing the empty courtyard and the closed eyes of the drawn windows.

Clenching her hands into fists, she screamed. No one responded. No one was there.

She dropped her purse to the ground, left the key in the lock, and walked across the courtyard to a large willow tree situated in the center of a small slope. Ducking her head, she wrapped the draping branches and narrow leaves around her like green hair. After a moment, she stretched her arms up, grabbed a strong limb with both hands and swung, her knees just brushed the prickly spikes of the lawn. She closed her eyes, and the silence settled on her mind like a warmth, like the sun and coffee had done to her body earlier walking home. When her shoulders felt like the muscles might finally tear, she let go, picturing herself falling face first, arms still holding the branch while her body lay limbless below. She made her way back through the veil of leaves, down the slope of lawn and then stopped. She looked around; she was still alone. In one fluid motion, she pulled her skirt to her waist, threw her jacket to the ground, and fell backwards, catching herself with her hands. Laughter poured from her like a child, as she opened and closed her arms and legs wide at her side, making snow angels in the wet grass. The sky was as blue as glass above, and she stared into its space and felt that the world was really upside down, and the sky was really green, and she was flying over a calm sea, and if she tried hard enough she could fly through the sea-blue glass to find herself on the other side. She stopped, and held a still pose, a corpse pose, for perhaps five minutes, breathing in blue, then white, then blue again. She thought it strange that she could hear the waves

so clearly today, then realized it was the rushing of her own blood pounding in her ears.

Later that morning, Jenna knocked at Bob's office door and entered without waiting for him to respond. He looked up over a stack of files, his sleeves rolled, a few white doughnut crumbs caught in the tips of his moustache. She stood in the doorway holding the knob, wearing navy slacks and a tan sweater, no jewelry; simple, elegant.

"Now you look more like yourself," he said. "You ready to get to work counselor?"

She stayed in the doorway. "It's over with Jack. You were right. I want more."

Bob leaned back in his chair, pinching his lower lip between his thumb and forefinger, waiting for her to continue. She held her position, not speaking, not entering the room any further.

"I just thought you should know," she said.

"It's none of my business who you want to sleep with."

Jenna exhaled, bit her lip, and looked out the window over Bob's head. No more words. She dropped her chin to her chest, and turned to leave. With her back to him, she said, "And I decided to go to Jeff Casey's gathering tomorrow. Will you go with me?"

She held the knob in her hand, poised in the half-shut doorway. Her hair fell softly against her neck. She reached her left hand up and rubbed her right shoulder.

Bob didn't answer.

Jenna nodded. "That's OK. I understand."

"I never noticed how small your shoulders are," he said.

She turned around. His face had that same distant look she had seen in Croce's. "Does that mean you'll go with me?"

"I'll go with you."

She nodded. "*Kirtan*. It's called *kirtan*." She shut the door behind her, leaving Bob alone in his office.

After she shut the door, Bob worked in his office for the rest of the day, all the time wondering if he really knew who this woman was. Just when he thought he had her figured out, something had shifted, and it made him uneasy. That evening he popped his head in her office to say good-bye, but she had already left. The next morning, he found a rolodex card on his desk with Jeff Casey's name and address written on it and a note: *I've got an arbitration hearing that should take all day. Pick me up tonight at 7:00. Jenna*. Bob wasn't sure if she was purposely avoiding him or if she didn't think she needed to explain this change in her feelings about Jeff Casey. Either way, he was anxious about his decision to go with her and wondered now if it had been a mistake. He spent most of the day in the County Law Library researching patent law for a new case, but he couldn't focus and found himself instead stewing over this latest Jenna Donnelly incarnation. By the time he got back to the office that afternoon, he knew he had to talk to her before he could go through with the evening.

The office was unusually quiet as he walked down the bright hallway and lobby, past Sophie's desk with the pink carnations arranged in a Snapple iced-tea bottle.

Jenna's office occupied the opposite end of the hall. Two tall narrow windows framed the mahogany desk that her grandfather had shipped from Seattle when she became a partner. The chairs and other furnishings were antiques, all re-upholstered in an icy green velvet, except for the pale blue Tiffany lamp positioned on the corner of her desk. But she wasn't there. Bob looked at his watch. Four o'clock. She must have gone home. He sat in her chair and kicked his feet up on the edge of the desk. The door stood open. He thought about taking his feet down in case she returned to the office. Then he noticed her purse and briefcase weren't on the bench beside the door, and he leaned back, flipping the cards in her spiral rolodex. Cameron, Carpenter, Carter, Casper. No Casey. Of course not. She had given him the card this morning. He felt his shirt pocket and ran his index finger around the prong-edged outline. He took his feet down and swiveled the chair around. Why would she remove the card from her rolodex and give it to him instead of just copying the address onto another piece of paper? That wasn't like her.

His stomach growled. He was suddenly angry: angry at having to eat with Jeff Casey, who would probably serve him tofu for dinner; angry with Jenna, for dragging him through this and making him responsible for getting her there; angry with himself for always being there whenever she needed him. He had no idea why she wanted to go to Jeff Casey's house. All she said was that she broke up with Jack, and now she wanted to go to Casey's house for *kirtan*. Here he was again, looking after her, volunteering to drive her safely to her next man, and for what? He picked up Jenna's phone and dialed the first three digits of her number, but Jim entered, interrupting him.

He carried a stack of the large green files he used when preparing for a trial. "Oh, you're not Jenna," he said, surprised.

Bob hung up the phone. "Not unless she suddenly got a big dose of ugly."

"Did she leave already? I wanted to ask her how the settlement was going on the Peters case. We just got a trial date for February."

"She's gone. I was just calling her house; you wanna ask her?"

"No, I'll ask her tomorrow." Jim set the files on Jenna's desk. "That's not like her to leave early in the middle of the week."

"Well, she seems to be doing a lot of things that aren't like her," Bob began dialing again.

"Oh? What's wrong?" Jim looked worried.

"It's nothing. Don't worry."

"You can't say that and then tell me it's nothing." Jim sat in one of the green velvet chairs beside Jenna's desk. "You two never tell me anything. I want to know what's going on."

He was right. Jim was so straight, so square, Bob and Jenna almost never confided in him. Bob sighed and felt his allegiance switch. "Jenna ran into Jeff Casey Friday, after she sat in on my depo." Bob paused, remembering that Jenna had been asked by Jim to sit in on that depo. He added that to his list of insults. "Casey invited us to have dinner with him tonight and Jenna agreed."

"Jenna's having dinner with Jeff Casey? I can't believe that."

Bob stood. "We're both supposed to be having dinner with Jeff Casey, but now I'm having second thoughts about it. I sort of feel like the third nut, if you know what I mean."

Jim straightened his tie. "I'm sure it's fine, Bob. Jeff's a good man. I saw him on the beach just this morning, and he was very complimentary about your performance at his deposition."

Bob shook his head. "Yeah, well, I don't know. I just have a bad feeling about the whole thing now."

They were both silent for a minute. Jim rose, grabbed a post-it, and wrote in big letters, all capitals, "PLEASE UPDATE ME ON SETTLEMENT STATUS," and then stuck it on the top of the stack of files that he had brought in. "It's best to give Jenna a lot of space. In all the years she's worked with me, even when she was still an intern, I've always just handed her the reins and let her go with them. I can't imagine her doing anything unless she was completely in control of the situation."

"Well, she just handed me the reins, and I don't like it," Bob said.

Jim walked up to Bob and stood in front of him. He was taller than Bob, though narrower. "I'm going to say this straight out, and I hope I am very clear."

"O.K. Say it," Bob said.

"If there's something going on between you and Jenna, I don't care--as long as it's what both of you want. But if it isn't, I won't have any nonsense in this office; I won't have anything damage the integrity of this firm. Especially in a social situation with a client."

Bob slapped the heel of his hand to his forehead. "God, does everyone in this office think I'm an idiot? Where have you been, Jim? I'm crazy about her. I always have been." He walked past the older man, out the door, and into the hallway. "But don't worry," he called back as he left, "I won't embarrass you or the firm. I've decided not to go."

Sophie waved a fan of message slips at Bob as he passed. He pulled them from her hand without missing a stride, leaving the girl shouting after him, "Billy Bailey called. He's been in another accident. A mail truck hit him while he was crossing the street and he wants to know if . . . "

Bob slammed the door to his office. The phone was in his hand before he sat down. This time he dialed all seven numbers without interruption.

She answered on the first ring. "Hello." Her voice sounded distant, hollow.

"It's me. You sound like you're in a tunnel. Can you hear me?"

"Yeah, I hear you fine. I'm on my portable. I'm in the bathtub."

Bob took a deep breath. He pictured pink skin and white bubbles. He wanted to bite the tips of her toes.

"Listen, I'm feeling very confused right now. Why am I taking you to Jeff Casey's house tonight? Why are we doing this?" he asked.

"Because he invited us to dinner. What do you mean?"

"I mean, I don't think you're being straight with me, and I want to know what's going on. You owe me that much at least."

"I owe you?"

The tone of her voice became angry, and part of him grew excited. It was as if the curtains had been drawn, and he found something familiar in that voice.

"Yes, you owe me. Goddamn it, Jenna. I've sat by like a stupid loyal dog all of these years while you went out prowling for lovers. Now if you've got something planned with Jeff Casey, I don't want to be part of it. Just tell me up front, what the hell is going on with you?"

There was a long silence. He heard the sound of splashing water and the squeak of wet skin on porcelain.

"Jenna, are you still there?"

"I'm here."

"Will you answer my question or not?"

"What do you want me to say? You seem to have me all figured out."

"All I want is the truth. Are you interested in Casey or is there something else motivating you?"

"I'm just accepting a dinner invitation from a client. An invitation you were included in as well."

"You know that's not true. Either you're interested in him or you've suddenly found God over the weekend. I think the first is a hell of a lot more likely."

"Go to hell, Bob. I don't need this kind of interrogation from a friend, and I especially don't need it from a junior partner. I'll give your apologies to our client."

The phone clicked, and then a long dull dial tone filled the space where Jenna's voice had been. Bob set the receiver on the hook and dropped his

head in to his hands. He took several deep breaths. The fog outside his window rolled in off the harbor like great gray blankets. The light inside his office fell to a softer shade of white, an almost lavender hue, that made him think of orchids. He pictured Jenna in a white bathroom, steam dripping in long streaks of moisture down the creamy tiled walls, crashing into other streams, creating solid pathways that flowed into the tub, where she floated in a watery world surrounded by pearly white orchids, her hair floating on the surface like a sleeping mermaid. He had lost her. After all these years of waiting, to think that he would lose her to a man like Jeff Casey was amazing. He took solace in past experience. Jeff Casey was no match for Jenna. She'd chew him up and spit him out. No. Casey wouldn't last long. Bob would wait.

II. *Ananda*

(Bliss, joy, oneness)

Let love be the essence of your being. Worship with your body, learn with your mind, give from your soul, but live from your heart. There you will find the nourishment, the poetry, the joy.

-- *Baba Sai Ram*

CHAPTER 5***Atma***

(The soul; the spark of God within)

The first thing Jenna noticed was that there was no place to park her BMW. The only spot left on the street was a narrow patch of dirt in front of a row of tall oleander bushes. At least half of her car would be sticking out in the road, an easy target for all but the smallest of vehicles driving in that lane. She drove around the winding block one more time, hoping a space would open up, hoping that all of these cars in front of Jeff Casey's house didn't belong to other guests that might also be there for the evening's activities. And what were these activities? She pictured women in *saris* and air thick with incense. Would she have to remove her shoes? Would she suddenly get the urge to wear a sheet and dance in the street? She passed a van with a Grateful Dead sticker and was seized by the fear that the evening would be a descent into sixties retro-hell. She pictured beards, braids down the back, hairy armpits, lava lamps, black velvet posters, marijuana smoke, and upside-down American flags. She had always hated listening to people who

grew up in the sixties regale their youth. Nothing was worse for a person who came of age during the Reagan years than listening to stories about LSD, Woodstock, and hitchhiking across the country. She realized in 1984, her first year of college and the year Ronald Reagan was re-elected, that she had already missed the party, that there was nothing for her to do but get down to work.

The tour of the block proved fruitless. She parked in the narrow space next to the oleander and then crossed the street, passing between the fence and a row of cars lining the shoulder in front of Casey's house. A cool wind blew up from the sea penetrating her light sweater. Older model cars, VW's, and small foreign sedans filled the driveway. To her right, a row of camellias and jasmine bordered the fence, shielding the spacious yard from the street. A Japanese maple in the far corner had already turned bright yellow and red. Below, a bronze Buddha presided over a court of white and purple pansies arranged in a semi-circle around the trunk. A path of red pebbles led the way from the driveway through the lawn clipped neat and short to an enclosed redwood porch.

Shoe-box-sized cubbyholes filled with rows of tennis shoes, slippers, and Birkenstock sandals bordered the front of the house. Although the porch and yard looked neat and orderly, Jenna's earlier vision of chaos swelled back up into her thoughts. A sign on the door read, "YOU ARE WELCOME TO LEAVE YOUR SHOES OUTSIDE." She wondered if she was also welcome to leave them on inside. The idea of walking into a client's home in her bare feet seemed a bit undignified. She paused beside the door, then turned and slipped her soft brown loafers off and placed them in an empty cubbyhole.

She wouldn't start off making trouble; she'd go along with the shoe removal, but she had on only a thin pair of socks, and already her toes were cold.

The smell of cinnamon and ginger caught Jenna's attention. She turned to see Jeff's sister, Anne, standing in the doorway. Jenna remembered her initial impression of the woman and again was struck by the intelligence and life in Anne's blue eyes. Her apprehension slipped away as Anne grasped Jenna's hand in greeting.

"I'm so glad you made it," Anne said.

"I'm sorry I'm late. I hope I didn't hold up your meal."

"Oh, no. This is perfect timing. Dinner will be ready in a few minutes. Please come in."

The door opened into a tiled entry that led to a spacious, open living room with wood paneled walls and rust-colored carpeting. A dozen people of various ages sat on plush square cushions sipping tea around a low-legged table. The entire furnishings consisted of the one table and dozens of red, orange, and yellow silk pillows scattered across the floor and propped against walls. Photographs and oil paintings of gurus and gods hung from the walls. The odor of patchouli oil and sandalwood incense laced the air. Tall birds of paradise and sunflowers filled floor vases in arrangements that reached to the ceiling. Jenna's gaze fixed on the rows of white candles hanging from wrought iron fixtures on the walls and an ornate tiered chandelier hanging above the table. A soft glow pervaded the room, drawing her in, enticing her like a whisper. Jenna felt as if she had entered a cave, and she was suddenly struck by a claustrophobic suffocation.

Anne felt Jenna's arm stiffen next to her and she tried to soothe her guest. "Are you, OK?" she asked, "You look kind of faint."

Jenna took a breath and felt something slip inside her, as if she were falling into a deep, soft sleep. She ran her hands through her hair. "Anne, can we step outside for a minute? I'd like to talk to you alone."

"Sure." Anne opened the door again and led Jenna to a bench beside the shoe cubbies. "Let's sit here."

"I have to be honest with you," Jenna said. "I'm a little uncomfortable being here. I haven't spent much time . . . any time really . . . thinking about anything other than my career. I appreciate your offer for dinner, but I'm a little nervous about this *kirtan* business."

Anne laughed. "Are you thinking of our conversation in the restaurant the other night?"

"Well, no, I wasn't. I was just overwhelmed by feeling out of place when I walked into your home. I'm sorry." Jenna shook her head. "I don't mean to be rude."

"That's OK. But you don't have to worry. This isn't an evening of quiet devotion. When Jeff leads *kirtan*, it's a time for song and dance and play. He has a beautiful voice; did you know that?"

"No. He didn't tell me." Jenna looked out at the full moon and the blue light splashing over the garden.

Anne took Jenna's hand in her own. "Before I moved here to live with my brother, I was a principal in an elementary school in San Francisco. My career was the most important thing in my life, and then our mother died. Breast cancer. Her death was long and painful, and when she was gone

I felt empty inside. I wanted a community of people to live with, and love with, and play with. I've never been able to make that work in a relationship, but here, with Jeff, I've found that."

"So you do have a commune going here?"

"Not really, though it may look that way to you. Most of these people are passing through on their way to, or from, India. They come into town, and we let them live here and use the house to teach seminars or workshops, but all of them move on."

"As your attorney, I have to remind you that if they stay longer than two weeks you are in violation of your lease."

Anne laughed a strong, husky laugh that clashed with her willowy build and soft blonde hair. "Well, technically, yes, I guess we are. But Jeff doesn't understand any of it. If we're here, he believes it's because Baba wants it to be so. Is that a problem for you?"

Jenna thought for a moment and then shook her head. "For me, it's not a problem. But I'll have to talk to Bob about it."

"Fair enough," Anne stood. "Now let's forget all of this talk about how different our lives are. Come on inside and play with us. You do remember how to play don't you?"

"Play," Jenna thought. "What's that?" She didn't know if it was the ginger in the air, or the warmth of Anne's hand, or the cold in her toes, but Jenna felt that lump growing in her throat, and her eyelashes grew moist and heavy. She nodded, not answering.

Anne raised Jenna's hand in hers and kissed the knuckles. "Come on. I'll have just enough time to introduce you before it's time to eat."

Anne held Jenna's hand as she led her through the room, issuing a flurry of introductions that swept by in a blur of names Jenna could never pronounce, never remember. The first name she caught was Rhadja, a plump, pink woman with enormous dimples and the tiny toes of a nursing baby peeping from under the hem of her blouse. Next, Vanamali greeted Jenna with a cup of mint tea in a dainty gold cup. Her eyes blazed a fierce blue under lush black brows and a tangle of black hair. She wore a *sari* the color of her eyes, with silver thread in the fabric that made the pattern dance as she moved about the room under the glowing candlelight. A gray-haired couple table waved in greeting. They wore matching plaid shirts and loose cotton pants and looked like vacationing grandparents. A straight-backed, thin young man with a shaved head placed both hands in a prayer motion at his heart when introduced to Jenna. She thought of doing the same, but then thought it pretentious, so she nodded and said, "Hello." There were others also, equally friendly, equally open and accepting, moving about the room, preparing for the meal. Anne led Jenna to a man in a long white tunic, his dark hair splashed with gray at the temples and ears. He had his back turned to them as they approached. Anne tapped him on the shoulder, and when he faced the pair, Jenna recognized Rami, the olive-eyed gentleman from the restaurant.

"Hello, Ms. Donnelly. It is a pleasure to see you again." His voice had a beautiful lilt, but his eyes were steady, and there was no trace of emotion in his face.

Jenna extended her hand to him. He held it in both of his, holding her eyes, as well, in his gaze. A callous on his palm scratched the skin on the top

of her hand. She felt a tremendous heat pouring from his hands, entering her at the wrist, along the tops of her knuckles, and the curve of her thumb. She held his gaze but tried to slip her hand away. He held it tighter. She took a breath and thought of breaking the gaze, wrenching her hand free, but she didn't. His eyes remained steady, the dark pupils small in the dim light and the corners scrunched slightly, forming lines that wandered into his hair line and down toward his round cheek bones. There was nothing warm, nothing comforting in his gaze; and yet, there was no malice either. It was a countenance, she thought, that she would never want to meet on the witness stand. There was no judging what was in that mind. She knew he would hold her hand as long as she held his gaze, but she wasn't ready to give in. In fact, she felt herself relaxing into him. She felt a weight in her legs and stomach, and a slight tingling in her lips and tongue, as if thick words were crowding in her mouth, waiting to be spoken if only she knew the language in which to speak them. At last he smiled and she saw for the first time a light behind the eyes, and a jaw of straight, white teeth. Suddenly the words came bursting from her lips and she found her voice and laughed. "I felt as if you could see right through me."

He released her hand. Although the smile was gone, the impenetrability of his face softened, and Jenna saw the same spark of life and wit that she had recognized in Anne.

"I can not see through you, Ms. Donnelly. Only inside of you," he said.

He removed from his pocket a small white piece of paper folded like an envelope the size of a postage stamp. A lotus flower and writing of some unrecognizable alphabet adorned the front. He opened the flap, dipped his

index finger inside and then touched his finger to Jenna's forehead, between her eyebrows at the bridge of her nose. She felt something cold and chalky touch her skin.

"What is that?"

"*Vibhutti*."

"What's that?" She reached her hand toward the spot where he had touched her, but Rami stopped her and held her hand in his again.

"Sacred ash. It is materialized by Baba and given to his followers." He opened her palm and placed the envelope inside. "You may keep this. Use it so, when you meditate. It will open your third eye and bring you closer to the Lord."

Jenna opened the flap and peeked inside the small envelope. She had seen such packages used by her clients to carry small amounts of cocaine. The gray ash inside didn't look like anything her clients had ever been caught with.

"What do you mean he materializes it?"

Rami circled his hand above his head and then opened it, palm up in front of Jenna. "Just so. *Vibhutti* is materialized by Baba."

"The guy just snaps it out of thin air, huh?" She tucked the envelope in her hip pocket and smiled at Rami.

"Just so."

"Well, no offense Rami, but I think somebody's pulling your leg."

"Baba is all powerful. *Vibhutti* is just one of the many miracles that he manifests."

"Yeah, well . . . "

Anne pulled at Jenna's elbow. "Come on, Jenna. Dinner's ready, and we haven't found Jeff yet." She raised her eyebrows and nodded at Rami.

"Don't get him started in a debate. He'll never stop."

"Ms. Donnelly can appreciate the value of healthy debate. I have seen that it is so."

A thick, slippery weight tingled on Jenna's lips and tongue again. She thought she saw Rami nod in acknowledgment as the feeling slipped away.

Anne led Jenna away. "We'll see you at dinner, Rami."

He bowed, his hands at his heart in a prayer pose.

When they were out of earshot, Jenna turned to Anne. "Do I have a big glob of that shit on my forehead?" She touched her skin and then inspected her index finger looking for traces of the green ash.

Anne laughed. "Actually, yes, you do. But don't worry, everybody's used to it here. They'll just think you're one of us."

Jenna laughed. "Great. Should I take it off?"

"If you do, he'll ask you about it at dinner."

"It washes off right? He hasn't just branded me or anything has he?"

The two women laughed, and Anne linked her arm through Jenna's, leading her down the hall to the bathroom. She stood her in front of the mirror. "See for yourself. It's not so bad is it?"

Below the mirror, stumpy orange candles floated in a bronze dish filled with red rose petals. Jenna's chin and cheekbones were illuminated yellow in the light, while the rest of her face had the soft bronze glow of the dish below. The circle of *vibhutti* stood out like a nickel stuck between her eyes.

"Oh, that's very attractive," Jenna said.

Anne pulled a tissue from a box on the sink. She wet it and reached for Jenna's forehead. "Here, let's take it off."

"No." Jenna turned away from the mirror and faced Anne. She felt words crowding on her tongue again, but she couldn't speak. She felt heat in her wrist and knuckles, and a cool wash of air like sweet breath on her forehead. "Leave it on. It's OK."

Anne opened her mouth to speak, took a breath, and then looked at the floor and their four stockinged feet. "Jenna, I hope you don't mind my saying this. But I have the strangest feeling of familiarity with you. I'm glad you joined us. Do you feel any better about being here now or have we scared you off completely?"

Jenna turned to the mirror and fingered the mark on her forehead. "You sure this washes off?"

"I promise."

"Then I feel just fine, although I could really use something to eat."

Anne inhaled as a wave of tamari and garlic floated past the room. "I think we can take care of that. Let's go."

The two women entered the room as Jeff Casey pushed through the swinging kitchen door, his arms loaded with a platter of baked tamari tofu and crisp green beans. Dishes of brown rice steamed from earthenware crocks at both ends of the table and huge loaves of fresh baked bread filled baskets brimming with butter and honey. Like a clean sour breeze, glasses of water with lemon slices cleansed the air of the heavier odors of spice and fresh bread. Through French doors just left of the dining room, two dark haired children appeared carrying more garnet colored roses and branches of

honeysuckle. They placed the flowers in a shallow vase in the center of the table and then took their place beside a tall, angular woman waiting for them at the head of the forming line. Jenna noticed there were no chairs placed around the table. Like the living room, the only furniture in the dining room was the one table and opulent candelabras hanging from the walls and ceiling. She wondered where they would all sit to eat, and then she saw the two children take their plates into the adjoining living area to sit on the pillows scattered around the room.

Jeff clapped his hands and opened them wide at his side, "Once again, the bounty of Baba has provided. Let's join hands for prayer."

Anne took Jenna's right hand, and the bald young man she had met earlier appeared beside her to take hold of the other. Held between these bumpers of calm experience, Jenna closed her eyes, inhaling the honey scent of food and Jeff Casey's voice. He began.

Not only couldn't she understand the language, she couldn't even make out the individual words. The prayer was sung, like a poem, like a chant, like a long, slow kiss. The men and women joined with Casey, raising their voices in lyrical rhythms, high and low, and from the main room the sweet piping of the two children joined in slightly off beat. When the group came to the final line they stopped, and Jenna thought it was over. Then a vibration began in a deep tone that entered like a crack on the top of her skull, in one huge "AAAAOOOOHHHHMMMMMM", spilling over her tongue, neck, spine, toes. She felt soft and loose, rocked in their voices, when the different tones joined clearly together again to close with the repetitive exhales of "*Om, Shanti, Shanti, Shanti.*" Then silence, stillness, and a

tingling in the hand that held Anne's, a clammy cold in the hand that held the young man. She opened her eyes and saw Jeff Casey beaming at her from across the table. He took a large breath, his eyes and mouth smiling widely, and, placing both his hands at his heart, bowed to her, nodding.

The line began to move forward as each person collected plates and silverware. Jeff scooped generous portions onto the outstretched dishes. Jenna grabbed a blue enamel plate and silverware wrapped in a white cloth napkin. Anne was next in line to receive her food. Jeff had been watching Jenna approach, and she forced herself now to smile at him.

"Hello, Jenna." He bowed and placed a square of tofu and a spoonful of green beans on her outstretched plate.

"Hi, Jeff." She grabbed a slice of bread and added a scoop of the steaming rice. She felt like she ought to say something. "That prayer was quite a mouthful. I mean . . . it was lovely. I couldn't make out the words. What did it all mean?"

His eyes were saucers of dark excitement. "*Brahman* is the Absolute, the Supreme Reality. It is the energy or essence of *Brahma*, the creator god of the Hindu Trinity. The other two are *Vishnu*, the preserver, and *Shiva*, the destroyer. The prayer asks that this food bring the essence of these three into our bodies." Jeff took a breath before continuing. "Finally, *Om* is the sacred primal sound, the source of creation, symbol of *Brahman*, and *Shanti* is peace. It's repeated three times after prayers, like amen."

"I see," Jenna said. The line had stopped while Jeff addressed Jenna. Only the bald young man and a bent, red-headed old woman remained. Jenna was impatient for Jeff to serve them, to not hold up the line talking

with her. But when she glanced at the two waiting diners they simply smiled at her and showed no sign of urgency.

Jeff continued. "When I saw the circle of vibhutti between your brows, my breath caught in my throat and I felt a tearing in my center as if my kidneys had dropped to the floor. I hope you understand. I recognized your soul."

Jeff's face grew still, and he seemed to be attempting an emotionless gaze, like Rami's, but Jenna saw movement behind those eyes, as if he were studying the effect of his information as it reached her.

"That's very poetic," she said, "but I'm sorry, I have no idea what you mean."

The two dark-haired children, Michael and Lizzie, had finished eating and they passed beside Jenna on their way to return their plates to the kitchen. Jeff nodded at the children and surveyed the room full of loved ones.

"At moments like this, I am overcome by a sense of joy and love and the perfection of a destiny guided over by The Great One. Baba is love; in this moment we are living and breathing the Lord. Please, make yourself comfortable in our home, Jenna. I will hold you in my thoughts and direct love towards you in invisible cords of light to wrap around you like a vibrant ruby shawl." He closed his eyes and repeated, "*Om, Shanti, Shanti, Shanti.*"

This was too much. Jenna looked at Jeff, his nose sunburned and peeling in the center; at the couple behind her in line, waiting patiently; at Anne standing in the doorway, presumably waiting to guide her to a cushion in the other room. Through the French doors, in the darkness behind the

panes, Jenna saw her father in his navy blue suit, kneeling at the altar of The Church of our Blessed Lady, eyes closed, fat tongue pink and suspended, waiting for the airy wafer to be placed like a kiss in his open mouth. She saw her mother beside her, and felt her small hand held in those white-gloved fists that danced across ivory keys during the week, but on Sunday brought order and terror in the form of discreet pinches each time Jenna slouched or kicked the mahogany pews. Why did she remember her parents now, and why could she see, just as clearly, Father O'Malley, with his woman's lips and coarse hairs growing out of his flapping ears? She was filled with a longing to hear the chirping, pubescent choir boys; the same boys who chased her at school and snapped her bra when she was the first girl in the fourth grade to wear a real one. She could smell cut lawns, waffles, and sausage. The Hindu Trinity. This was all just the same thing over again.

She slapped a chunk of butter on her plate and nodded at Jeff. "That's all very interesting. Thank you for answering my question." She moved toward the other room, feeling his eyes follow her, thinking he was either an incredible asshole or she was a heartless bitch. Either way, she couldn't stand listening to him talk..

Anne motioned Jenna to sit beside her and Rhadja, the cherubic mother of the tiny-toed child. The baby, a boy, was wrapped in a downy white blanket and slept in his mother's crossed legs as comfortably as a cradle. The group ate in silence, which appealed to Jenna. Occasionally, the voices of soft-spoken men and women in the other rooms would filter into the meeting room where she sat, but Jenna wasn't listening. The food was warm, simple, and satisfying. Although it gave off a strong scent of spices, the tofu had a

pleasant, mild taste, a consistency like cheese, sweet, almost nutty. She realized she was very hungry. It was almost 8:00 and she had skipped lunch. Now, as she dipped the thick slab of warm bread in the drippings of honey on her plate, she couldn't figure out why she had been so nervous about coming. She glanced around the room, remembering her initial balking at the door. The candle light and plentiful arrangements of flowers now felt soothing and comforting. She crossed her legs, pushing the square pillow higher up on the wall, filling the curve in her lower back, happy that she had worn pants but wishing she had thicker socks. She leaned her head against the wall behind her and closed her eyes.

She felt like a chalkboard wiped clean; she had no words, only sensations. *Full belly, cold feet, soft buttocks, hard wall, candles above, incense--was it there before? Didn't notice. Rustle of a blanket, tiny squeak, a squeal, quickening in dry nipples, red, orange swirls on closed eyelids. Patterns like fire, burning water, center too full, bursting, tearing, relief. Music. Harps? No, a guitar, gently, and drums, cymbals, fluid, like rain, it trickles through the air, onto face and ears. So quiet, so still. The lights dancing on her lids disappeared. All was still; the music grew louder, and the moment slipped away. She took a deep breath, righted her head, and opened her eyes.*

Anne stood beside her. "They've started *kirtan*. Will you come?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure." Jenna exhaled. She was here, in Jeff Casey's home, eating his food, enjoying his peace. Everyone had been hospitable and open to her, and yet she couldn't open herself up. She wanted the words to go away again, to be able to just take in the sensations without

attaching thought. She pulled her knees to her chest and massaged her frozen toes. "Someone has cleared my plate away. Where is everyone?" Jenna said, needing to break the silence.

"They're gathering in the music room. Wait here," Anne directed.

Jenna heard whispers, female voices, and the opening and closing of a door or cupboard. When Anne returned she held a pair of wool socks and a vibrant red blanket draped over her arm. She extended her offerings to Jenna.

"These are Rhadja's. I've got to go help Jeff get things started. If you decide to stay, these might make you more comfortable." She squeezed Jenna's arm and then left in the direction of the music.

Jenna looked at the items. Jeff said he would wrap her in love and light like a vibrant red shawl and here it was. She wondered if Anne had heard him say that. "Oh shit," she thought. "I'm here. I can't stop half-way." She slipped the wool socks over her lighter nylon ones and snapped open the blanket. It was actually a shawl. Beyond red, it was crimson; a beautiful, deep, bloody maroon; the color of scraped elbows and knees; the color Jenna's mother said was a sign of strong healthy blood. She draped the fuzzy fabric over her back and shoulders, then pulled the edges tight around her arms. It hung almost to the floor, and she felt a little silly, but it was oddly comforting.

She started toward the music room. The distant music which had pulsed through the house, was now joined by a beautifully deep voice. Jenna was startled by the clarity of the voice; then it dawned on her that it belonged to Jeff Casey. She didn't know why that should surprise her, but it did. "A musician," she thought. "Another goddamn musician." She stepped out the

French doors and onto the deck outside. From the house, she hadn't realized how large the backyard was. The redwood deck wrapped around the entire rear of the house in a twelve foot span that dropped off in three tiered steps onto a neat lawn. Brown lunch sacks with candles inside lit a path to what Jenna assumed was the music room at the far end of the deck. Beyond, rows of rose bushes bloomed in a fury of reds and yellows, and then the yard dropped off, and on the beach below a sliver of ocean glinted in the moonlight. "Not bad," Jenna said, as she pulled the edges of her shawl closer around her. "Ocean view. Not bad at all."

She walked past square planter boxes filled with mint, oregano, and basil. The music room door stood ajar just enough for Jenna to slip in without opening it further and making a noticeable entrance. Her eyes landed first on Jeff Casey standing in the center of the room with his beaming smile and an old guitar hanging from his shoulder. Everyone sat in a circle around him, some on cushions, others on the hard wood floor. Anne sat on his right strumming a *sitar* that looked like a child's toy. Jenna felt embarrassed for her for some reason. On Jeff's left, Vanamali, of the blue eyes and wild black hair, cradled a drum between her legs, tapping a beat on the tight brown skins with the palm of her hand and long finger tips. She swayed with the music, setting the silver strings in her *sari* dancing once again in the flickering candlelight. The various guests and residents sat positioned on the familiar silk pillows scattered around the room. Occupying the corners, low tables brimmed with vases of white lilies and candles that threw backlight on the circle of devotees.

Behind Jeff, Anne, and Vanamali hung a life-sized photo of a charming man in orange robes, with a huge head of hair framing his beaming face in a wild tangle of curls. "That must be Baba Sai Ram," Jenna thought. But he was not what she expected. He was young, clean-shaven, and didn't look much older than her. He was ridiculous in his bare feet and absurd smile, and yet his eyes twinkled with childish joy. He seemed downright mischievous, and Jenna liked that. No blood, no nails, no pain, no torture, no guilt. She could live with this. For a while, anyway.

The two children, Michael and Lizzie, lay on a mountain of pillows at the end of the room engaged in building an airplane with their legos. The music, which had been slow and rhythmic as a lullaby when Jenna entered, picked up now, joined by finger cymbals on the hands of the elderly couple in the matching shirts. Jenna scanned the room, then chose a spot under a large window. She positioned her pillow in an "L" shape between the wall and floor and then pulled her legs up under her, wrapping them in the hem of her shawl. The young man with the shaved head sat next to another boy, younger than he, whose round belly hung into the diamond space between his crossed legs. They both held small black books in their hands, and in the center of their foreheads fresh dots of *vibhutti* glowed in the candlelight. The shaved-headed-one nodded at Jenna, and she smiled. It came easily, escaping before she thought about it, and they held each other's gaze for a moment before he nodded again and turned his attention to Jeff Casey. Their host swayed, his eyes closed, as he strummed the tune into an even faster rhythm. Vanamali picked up the shift in tempo almost immediately, her ringed fingers darting like a belly dancer over the hourglass drum held tightly

between her legs. Anne joined her, and the room rose into a higher gear, the energy increasing as if a switch had been flipped. They all swayed, hands on the knees of their crossed legs, ready, anticipating, electric. Then Rami placed his lips to a silver flute, and the electricity in the room broke like August rain, cool water, hot tears, and Jenna felt the last of her resistance ripped away.

In this moment of release, Jeff began to sing. *"I am God . . . I am God."* Slowly at first, then faster, he repeated the phrase over and over and over, no other words, just these three, married to the music of strings, drums, and flute. Then Anne joined: *"I am God . . . I am God."* Her voice was pure and clean, like an instrument in perfect harmony with her brother. Then Vanamali, and the young men, and the children on the mountain of pillows and legos, and the others in the room, and a cyclone of voice and music and love washed over everyone, swaying them rhythmically in a circle to the left then right. *"I am God . . . I am God."* It carried Jenna to a place of pure emotion where she cried freely now, and the tears tasted like salt and snot, and her feet were warm, and her heart hurt, and she thought if she took a breath she would burst, and no one would hear her screams. *"I am God . . . I am God."* The words crashed on rocks in her heart, breaking pebbles free that turned to her with smiling faces, singing, *"I am God . . . I am God;"* and Jeff Casey held her hand and kissed her knuckles; and Anne smoothed the hair from her face and rocked her into her breast; and Jenna cried into silver hair that smelled like her mother's face cream and felt her father's awkward lips pecking her cheek.

Then the music stopped, and she took a breath and opened her eyes. Through the veil of tears clinging to her lashes, she saw that the room had

not changed. Jeff Casey still stood in the center, guitar tucked under his arm like a baby. His eyes met Jenna's, and he held her in his gaze. His face was void of personality; he was everything, melting into the candlelight, still vibrating with the music, distorted through tears that continued to flow down her cheeks and drip onto her bloody shawl. Now Jenna understood this look. It was Rami. It was Jeff. It was Anne, Rhadja, and the sweet baby. It was without a face or body. It was Baba Sai Ram, goofy with love.

Then the drums started again, and Jenna realized that her feet had turned numb. She couldn't move her legs to uncross them. Her entire body had no feeling, only a searing pain, joy, release in her center and behind her eyes, and a tingling on the tip of her tongue. She glanced up at Jeff. He smacked his hand on thighs, set his guitar against the wall and began to sing once again as Rami and Anne began to play. *"All is love in this life . . . All is Baba in this life. . . ."* The people in the room repeated the phrases as he finished each one. *"All are one in this life . . . All are Baba in this life. . . ."* The room rose again to meet him and it didn't matter to Jenna that she couldn't move her legs. It didn't matter that she would think in the morning that this was corny as hell. For now, she wasn't moving; no amount of will power would make her leave this feeling. She would stay. *"Fill your heart with love . . . Fill the world with love . . . Spread the message of love . . . that's the power of God. . . ."* When the voices rose to meet Jeff's in the echo, Jenna joined in.

"Baba Sai Ram. . . Baba Sai Ram," she echoed. Anne blew her a kiss, and Jenna laughed. The others turned to look at her, and Jenna continued laughing, a newcomer, a virtual stranger wrapped in a borrowed shawl,

vibhutti, mascara, and tears running in streams down her pale face. And she laughed, and continued laughing, until the feeling came back in her legs, and she could breathe without pain once again. And then she lost track of all sense of time and of separation and of self. She simply closed her eyes and rocked and rocked and rocked, as if she were falling, upside down in an upward spiral. Her body tingled with heat and color, and her lips felt swollen and terribly sensitive; she felt a deep longing to be kissed and held and made love to. She was aware that time was passing; although she didn't know how much, and she didn't care.

When the music stopped, Jenna took several deep breaths, blinked, and adjusted her eyes to the candlelight. Anne and Jeff stood in front of her, beaming like Raggedy Anne and Andy. She laughed at the two of them, and they laughed also.

Jeff reached down, and Jenna let him help her to her feet. "I'm glad you came tonight," he said. "You know that you're welcome to come any time. You don't have to ask. Just drop in, any time."

"Thank you," Jenna said. She was beat. Forming words felt like bench pressing her tongue.

Jeff clasped his hands to his chest and bowed slightly. "*Namaste*," he said, and then he left.

"Are you dead?" Anne asked, a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

"No, I'm not dead. I feel like . . . well, like I have a hangover."

Anne laughed. "That's a good way to describe your first trance state."

"Is that what happened to me?"

"More or less. It doesn't happen all the time. You must have been ready for it. I saw you slipping, and then you were just . . . gone. You were beautiful."

Jenna licked her lips. "Yeah, real beautiful. I was probably drooling all over myself. My mouth feels like it's been hanging open for an hour."

They headed toward the door. "Naw. You were the picture of spiritual elegance."

"I feel like shit. I don't feel elegant."

"You need to sleep. You'll wake up feeling like five years have dropped from your life."

They crossed the rear deck and entered the main house through the French doors. Most of the candles had burned down in the living room, and long shadows spilled across the empty floor. Jeff stood on the front porch, hugging and saying his farewells to his guests as they pulled on their shoes. Jenna removed her borrowed socks and folded the shawl.

"Thanks for loaning these to me." She handed the items to Anne.

"The shawl is Rhadja's. I thought you'd like it," Anne said.

Jenna smiled. "You took good care of me."

"Taking care of people is what I do best," Anne said. "That's my job here."

"You do it well."

"Let's go see if Rhadja is still awake," Anne said. "She'll want to say goodnight to you."

"Does she live here, too?" Jenna asked.

"For the time being." Anne led Jenna down the hall.

"Rhadja, may we enter?" Anne poked her head inside the door.

The golden-haired mother appeared, and Jenna noticed for the first time the colors floating in Rhadja's face. Her eyes shone a lovely blue, and her cheeks blushed a contented pink. "I just fed Jordan and put him back to sleep." Rhadja whispered. She looked to be a few years older than Jenna, probably in her early thirties, with round hips that still held the shape of maternity. Jenna thought the woman was absolutely beautiful. The mother held one finger to her lips, and with her other hand urged the pair to enter the room.

"Oh, no. We won't disturb your peace." Anne backed up.

"No, please. Come in; he won't wake up now. His belly's so full he'll sleep for a few more hours anyway."

The room was lit by several silver platters holding cylindrical honey-colored candles. The child slept in a white wicker bassinet situated under the only window. Jenna noticed a single bed with a pink comforter drawn back, matching pink curtains, and a pink and white throw rug in the center of the room. A dresser beside the bed held an assortment of jars, bottles, and brushes; the smaller dresser near the crib brimmed with cloth diapers, powders, and ointments. From the open closet, bits of floral dresses escaped; sandals and slippers rested below. The room was entirely feminine. No man slept here. Rhadja was alone with her small son.

"May I?" Jenna asked, nodding toward the crib.

"Certainly," Rhadja said.

The boy slept wrapped in a yellow blanket, his thumb in his mouth, his index finger hooked around his upturned nose. His dark hair stuck in great

tangles of curls on his forehead and checks. Though his skin lacked the pink paleness of his mother, he had the same round dimpled cheeks.

"He's gorgeous," Jenna said.

"Yes, he's delicious. He tastes like cookies," Rhadja laughed. "When he falls asleep at my breast I sometimes chew on his head."

Jenna smiled. The three women remained by the side of the crib, silent, watching, their breath falling into the rhythm of the sleeping child.

Finally, Jenna turned to Rhadja. "Thanks for loaning me the shawl."

"I'm happy to loan you whatever you need," Rhadja said.

Jenna dropped her eyes, feeling very young. She wanted to protect Rhadja and the child. "It must be difficult raising him alone."

"I knew it'd be this way. I don't mind. When I was pregnant, I asked Jeff to lead me through a rebirthing. I wanted to clear away issues around my own birth before I had my child. I saw myself with Jordan, and then I saw that I was alone. By the time he was born his father was gone."

Jenna didn't ask; she couldn't imagine and didn't want to know what a rebirthing was. But she did know what being a single mom was. "I'm a lawyer. I can help if you're having trouble collecting child support."

Rhadja laughed. "Thank you. But I don't need any. Baba has always provided for us."

"But you must need some help. You can't possibly work; he's just an infant?"

"I don't have a full-time job, if that's what you mean. I'm a masseuse. My clients come here, where there's always someone happy to watch Jordy for me."

For a split second Jenna had a horrid picture of Rhadja in black garters, her large breasts squished in a push-up bra, attending to marines lined up outside a waterfront parlor. Just as quickly the image vanished, and she thought how wonderful it must feel to place your body in this woman's hands.

"Can you use another client?" Jenna asked.

"Sure," Rhadja answered.

"Great. How 'bout I come on Fridays, after work, around 5:30?"

"Fine."

Anne had been silently curling and uncurling a strand of the baby's dark hair around her finger, absorbed in her own thoughts of missed opportunity. She joined the two other women now. "Well, that worked out nicely. Now I know we will see you every week, and I don't have to worry about inviting you back," Anne said.

Jenna smiled. She liked both of these women very much; more than she felt she deserved to.

Anne took Jenna by the arm. "Come on. It's time for you to go. You look white as a ghost."

"I feel like one."

Jenna said good-bye to Rhadja and then retraced her way down the hall, through the meeting room, and out to the porch that was now dark and empty. She put on her shoes.

"You're welcome to stay here tonight. If you feel too tired to drive," Anne said.

"Thanks, but I just want to crawl into my own bed, under my own blankets, and sleep for days."

Anne nodded. They were each silent for a moment.

"Thank you," Jenna said, breaking the silence. "For everything." She extended her hand to Anne.

"No, we don't shake hands after someone has joined us for *kirtan*."

Anne opened her arms and pulled Jenna in. Jenna accepted the embrace, and remained there, her cheek resting against the sharp collar bones of her host and new friend. And she felt happy. Plainly, simply, cleanly happy.

CHAPTER 6*Yaga*

(external activity; sacrifice)

In the weeks that followed her first encounters with Jeff Casey's commune, Jenna avoided Bob, and he knew it. While she worked during the day, she kept the door to her office closed and then left in the evening without saying goodnight. If she passed him in the hall, she smiled, said hello, made small talk, but she was distant, and Bob could find nothing familiar in her face or voice to cling to and bring her back to him. He was scared. Despite all the years that they had worked together and been friends, Bob had never been able to crack Jenna's exterior, to look inside and figure out how to read her. She had a way of leveling her green eyes and looking right through people; which made her an excellent attorney, but a difficult friend. He constantly wavered between an unreasonable and aching desire to protect and take care of her, and a rational need to remain on guard and protect himself. Now more than ever, he found himself second-guessing her every gesture and word, searching for clues to what was going on inside that

hard exterior. Oddly enough, Bob realized he wasn't afraid that in some boomerang reaction to Jack, Jenna was falling for Jeff Casey. What he really feared was that she was falling for his ideas. If she had been only interested in Casey as a lover, Bob knew Jenna would have burst into his office the next morning full of sarcastic good humor, and together they would have shared a laugh over the silly little man and his holy food and rituals. But she didn't laugh at him. In fact, she didn't even talk about him. That was a bad sign.

Now, for the first time in weeks, she sat in front of him in his office, dressed in her familiar navy-blue suit, her honey-colored hair pulled back neatly in a barrette. He was glad they were meeting in his office. When she left, he knew that her faint odor of honeysuckle would remain, mingled with the dust, coffee, and cold leather of the room. At first he had been apprehensive about asking Jenna to read over Casey's deposition, but they had a settlement conference this afternoon, and he wanted her ideas on the case. Grudgingly, he buzzed her office and found that she offered to come down right away to read over the transcripts. He thought of the last time he had asked for her help preparing for the deposition; how he had to bribe her with dinner and drinks at Croce's; how she had worked him from across the desk without ever looking him in the eyes. Now, as she read over the pages, Bob saw a softness that looked faintly familiar, though out of context, around those same eyes. Then he remembered the morning when Jenna had stopped him on the stairs outside of their building and sat with him on the bench dressed in her white suit and holding pink carnations. Bob exhaled a snorting burst of breath, angry and pained by this softness, this penetrability

that had never been there for him, but had now, twice, opened for other men. He wanted in. Jeff Casey would not get her.

Bob looked at his watch. "Hey, it's almost noon. Let's finish these later and go grab a bite. The settlement conference isn't until 3:00; we'll have plenty of time."

"Hmm . . . what'd you say?" Jenna turned the page, running her finger down the center as she scanned the lines.

"I said, you need to eat." Bob stood up and walked around his desk to where Jenna was seated in a black, over-stuffed chair. He pulled the depo from her hands and sat it on the desk. "You look a little pale."

"It's December. People are supposed to be pale." She reached for the deposition, but Bob closed it and pushed it beyond her reach. "Now you lost my place." She squinted, lines forming over the bridge of her nose. "What are you doing? Do you want my help on this or not?"

Bob grabbed her hand in his, squeezing the thin fingers in his fleshy palm. "I want you . . . to talk to me . . . to eat with me." He let go and threw his arms out in front of him, gesturing to the door, but Jenna shrank away, slouching into the folds of the dark chair.

All the softness disappeared. She narrowed her eyes at him in a steely gaze. "What's with you, Bob? You asked me to come in here to read the depo, not go to lunch."

Bob stared at her. He had so much he wanted to say, but he didn't know where to begin.

When he didn't answer, Jenna exhaled. "This isn't working. I'm going to my office."

"Fuck it. Read the depo." Bob threw the file at her lap, but he missed, and it fell at her feet.

She picked it up; her lips pulled in a straight line across her face as she looked at him. Bob could feel the heat of her tongue waiting to explode, and he became excited. Fighting was good. Fighting was real.

"Go ahead. Say it. Rip into me. Gimme your best shot, counselor," he said.

Jenna rose. Even in heels she stood a head shorter than Bob and almost half his weight. Her whole body quivered, and for a moment Bob thought she might hit him. He imagined the cool sting of her palm on his cheek. And then it was over, and she was out the door with a final silencing slam.

He was still standing there when, a few minutes later, Sophie knocked lightly and then entered carrying a message slip folded in half. He took it from her, grunted, and turned toward the light of the window behind him. In Jenna's small handwriting, he read, "I'll return the deposition to the file cabinet. You don't need my help on this."

Bob slumped into his chair and rubbed his eyes with his large hands. He leaned his head back, smoothed his gray tie over the hump of his belly, and stared out the window at a crane lowering a steel beam onto the new bank building going up next door. Two men in hard-hats stood on a narrow brace of scaffolding directing the operator as he lowered the beam into place, guiding it onto the cement pilings that stood outstretched and readied for its arrival. But the beam defied their direction, tilting too far to the right or the left, or missing the pilings altogether. When it was finally set, the men

climbed down the scaffolding and joined the rest of the crew already positioned on the curb eating large sandwiches from coolers in front of them. Bob watched as the men laughed with each other and joked with the women walking by. One of crew, a tall man in a red plaid shirt, tipped his hat at a flash of blue that clicked past him in a hurry. They all laughed and then the woman in blue stopped, turned around, and walked back to them. Bob saw that it was Jenna.

He sucked air through his clenched teeth, making a whistling sound. "This is gonna be good," he said.

She stood with her back turned towards Bob, facing the men, hands on her hips, feet planted firmly, legs slightly apart. The men sat still and silent as she spoke. Bob leaned forward. By the way she spoke, using her hands and tossing her head, Bob could only guess the scathing words she must be unleashing on them. He smiled. They were done for. Then there was an explosion of laughter, and the tall man extended his arm and shook hands with Jenna, and she turned to the row of men and joined in their laughter as they nodded their approval and slapped the tall man on the shoulder. For an instant, she turned her face in Bob's direction, and her eyes were soft, her face relaxed and happy. When she walked away, still smiling, her honey-colored hair swaying with the rhythm of her hips, Bob, and all the other men, watched until she rounded the corner. Below, the men still laughed and teased each other as Bob sat alone at the window, pulling at pieces of lint on his dark trousers and trying to ignore the lump that burned in his throat.

Later that afternoon, Bob met Jeff Casey in the courthouse lobby. Despite his misgivings, he greeted his client amicably and professionally.

"I think we should be able to settle this today," Bob said. "Garrett's attorney's fees have got to be more than what he's trying to collect from you. I'm sure he wants this to be over soon. Are you ready?" Bob asked.

"Of course," Jeff answered, smiling confidently. "Don't worry. I'm sure everything will turn out fine. I have complete faith in you."

"Thank you," Bob said. "But I think *I'm* supposed to be the one reassuring *you*."

Jeff laughed. "Oh, yeah. Sorry."

It was hard not to like Casey, but Bob tried.

Their case was called and Bob guided Jeff into the courtroom to a table where they sat waiting for Judge Brommer to address them. He greatly admired Kathleen Brommer and regretted that his first appearance alone in her court room was for such a petty case as this.

"Mr. Stuart, will you please apprise the court of Plaintiff's settlement position," Judge Brommer requested, addressing the attorney for Casey's landlord.

Ron Stuart rose to address the court. He had a reputation for being very intense, but today he seemed distracted, almost bored. Granted, nobody was making any money on this case, but Bob wanted to win it.

"Your honor," Stuart began, "after evaluating the discovery presented thus far, my client maintains that Mr. Casey is in violation of the lease entered into in good faith by Mr. Garrett. Our evaluation of the discovery indicates that although the residence was leased to Mr. Casey as the sole

occupant, he has in fact allowed many other persons to occupy the home with him. Said lease agreement prohibits the lessee from sub-letting all or part of the residence, and requires that the lessor be notified of guests staying longer than two weeks. Failure to notify lessor of changes in the occupancy of the residence is in violation of the lease agreement. My client requests that Mr. Casey vacate the premises and pay the sum of six thousand dollars, or two hundred dollars per month, for the past six months, for an estimated additional occupancy of five individuals in excess of the lease agreement."

"Mr. Antonelli," Judge Brommer turned to Bob, "what is your client's settlement position?"

Bob cleared his throat and rose. His heart raced and he prayed that his voice wouldn't crack as he spoke. "Your honor, Plaintiff has yet to explain how he has arrived at the number of five additional occupants." Bob took a breath, and looked at Jeff, who smiled calmly up at him. It felt good to be trusted, but it was foolish of Casey to be so confident. Bob continued. "What plaintiff didn't say in his status report moments earlier, is that he has accused my client of not only breaking the lease but of turning the residence into a commune. The truth is, Mr. Casey earns his living by teaching seminars and yoga classes in his home, as Plaintiff knew when he agreed to lease the property to my client. Although it may at times appear that there are many people living at the residence, they are only guests or students. As to the allegations that Mr. Casey is sub-leasing the home, again Defendant is unsure where Plaintiff has acquired this information, but as we volunteered in Plaintiff's deposition, Mr. Casey does employ Rhadja Langley as his housekeeper, and provides her with both room and board in exchange for her

services. This is also entirely within the lease agreement, which allows for Mr. Casey to provide housing for no more than one caretaker for the property. During much of the time that Plaintiff contends Mr. Casey had these five mysterious other occupants living at the residence, he himself was outside of the country, as his travel records clearly indicate. The only occupant during this time was Ms. Langley, who served as his "house sitter" during his absence. However, my client is willing to concede that he failed to notify Plaintiff of his sister's decision to move in with him upon their return from India this past summer. It was an oversight and not an attempt at deception."

Judge Brommer interrupted. "Mr. Antonelli, we are not at trial here. Would you please tell the court if your client has a settlement offer at this time."

Bob's face went red, and he avoided looking at Casey. "We do your honor. I apologize for my long-windedness. Defendant is willing to pay Plaintiff two hundred dollars per month, for the months of July through December, and to continue paying said increase for as long as Ms. Casey lives with her brother. Defendant also agrees to pay, as an act of good faith, an additional two hundred dollars per month "guest fee" to cover any and all guests he may wish to entertain. Defendant makes this offer, which will increase the monthly rental amount by four hundred dollars, if Plaintiff is willing to allow the lease to remain in effect for the two years remaining. We remind the Plaintiff, that Mr. Casey has never made a late payment, and has considerably improved the quality of the residence and will continue to do so if allowed to remain there."

"Mr. Stuart, this sounds reasonable to the court," Judge Brommer said.

"Is your client willing to agree to this settlement?"

Stuart turned to Bill Garrett, and the two men whispered back and forth. Garrett shook his head several times, while Stuart whispered to him, but in the end he threw up his hands and conceded.

"We accept Defendant's settlement offer," Stuart said.

"Good. Let the records show the parties have agreed on a settlement in the amount of one thousand dollars, to be paid by Defendant, for back rent owed from the months of July through December. Defendant Casey will increase his rental payment by two hundred dollars per month for the duration of his sister's stay in the home. A two hundred dollar per month "guest fee" will also be paid for the duration of the lease. The lease shall remain in effect until the stipulated termination date, at which time the parties shall renegotiate the conditions. Judge Brommer turned to Bob. "Defendants shall draft a Settlement Agreement and Dismissal and forward said document with all moneys to Plaintiff's attorney within ten days."

"Agreed. Thank you, Your Honor." Bob sighed, relieved and surprised that they had been able to resolve the matter so quickly.

Jeff Casey smiled across the table at him, nodding. "I knew Baba would provide."

"I had a little to do with it too, you know," Bob corrected.

"Of course you did. I can't thank you enough." They shook hands and then walked out of the courtroom into the crowded lobby. "Are you going back to your office now?" Jeff asked. "I'll walk back with you."

"No." Bob said. "I have another hearing in fifteen minutes. I've got to stick around here."

"Oh," Jeff smiled. "You know the invitation is still open for you to join us for dinner and *kirtan*. We do it every Tuesday and Thursday. We'd love to have you."

"Thanks. I'll think about it," Bob said. He longed to leave. "I've got to hurry to my next hearing. I'll have my secretary call you when the papers are drafted. You can come in and sign them and leave a check with her." Bob extended his hand again. "Take care, Jeff."

He marched away before Jeff could say any more, a great weight removed from his shoulders with the knowledge that he was finished with Jeff Casey; that the firm was finished with Jeff Casey; that even Jenna would soon lose interest in him; he was sure of it. Then things would return to normal.

Bob moved through the rest of the afternoon hearings easily and quickly. He walked back to the office, whistling "*New York, New York*," looking forward to sharing the good news of his victory with Jenna.

Bob passed Sophie's empty desk, ignoring the ringing phones, and rapped once on Jenna's door. No answer. He rapped a second time. Still no answer. He opened the door, cautiously. Her desk was clear, not a single file or folder on it. The crystal vase, which always held fresh flowers, was empty; her appointment book was missing; even her favorite pen wasn't in the stand beside the phone. Before he reached Jim's office, he knew what Jim would say. Jenna had left. What he needed to know now was for how long. It never dawned on him that it might be for good until he passed the coffee

room and saw that Jenna's favorite Harley Davidson coffee mug was not in its usual place above the water cooler.

He passed Sophie in the hall and grabbed her by the shoulders.

"Where's Jenna?" he demanded.

Sophie pushed herself away and adjusted her hair. "It's 5:30, Mr. Antonelli. Everyone's gone except for you and me, and I was just leaving."

"I know she's gone, but where? Where did she go?"

Sophie picked at her nails anxiously, "I suppose she's at home."

"But her office is cleaned out. Even her coffee mug's missing. She must have been carrying boxes or something. Didn't you see anything?"

Sophie chewed her lower lip. "I think maybe she had a sack. I don't remember."

"Did she leave alone or was anyone with her?" Bob yelled. He thought of all the times he had defended Sophie against Jenna's caustic tongue, and now he wished he never had. It was her fault that Jenna had slipped out. She was supposed to know these things. They paid her to know everyone's comings and goings, and yet here she stood pleading ignorance, denying any wrongdoing.

Sophie's eyes widened. "Oh, wait. I do remember. She was talking to that nice man you had the hearing with this afternoon. I think they left about the same time, but they didn't leave together. I'm sure of it."

"You're sure of it?"

"I . . . I think so. Oh, no," Sophie cried. "Did I do something wrong?"

Bob turned red with rage. His gut instincts told him Sophie was covering up for Jenna, although he couldn't begin to imagine why. Sophie

knew where Jenna went, and it wasn't home; at least, not her own home. No, she had gone to *his* home, to Jeff Casey's home, the home he had just saved so that he could lose Jenna to it. Bob bolted down the steps and alternated walking and running in a comic march down the six blocks to Jenna's condo on Kettner Blvd. He knew what he would find. He knew she wouldn't be there but he had to see for himself. The way a person needs to view the body in an open casket funeral, he needed to see the closed, locked doors of her home before he could believe what his gut already told him: that Jenna Donnelly, with the mind sharp enough to cut glass, had left everything behind to join a commune of insipid tofu-eaters lead by that absurd little man, Jeff Casey.

The security gate was locked. He looked to both sides and then hauled his belly onto the top rail and swung his legs over the wrought-iron fence. He hit with a thud and fell to his knees, then brushed himself off and walked the perimeter of the neatly flowered path to her door. The curtains were drawn. He twisted the knob. Locked. He rang the doorbell. No answer. When she failed to appear, he sank to his knees on the doorstep and sat staring out at the grassy courtyard and lonely willow tree beyond. Then, as if he had primed and oiled a forgotten machine, he felt something in his center release and a stream of tears fell down his cheeks. He wiped them away with his hands, but he didn't get up, didn't move, didn't force himself to hush the throbbing moans that now escaped his racking shoulders even when he heard the windows next door open and felt the eyes of others watching him. He knew they had seen the trail of men enter and leave through this door; now they could witness the one who never got in.

When he could no longer understand why he was crying, Bob's grief turned to anger and then betrayal. He tried to picture his life without Jenna, because he knew she wasn't coming back. When she did something, she did it full tilt or not at all. No, she was gone. It had happened so quickly, so completely and all right under his nose. How could she have hid it from him? Then it dawned on him. Even if she hadn't shared anything with Bob, Jenna must have told Jim everything. She couldn't have left without telling him why; and yet, Jim had never even thought to consult Bob. His anguish doubled. He leaned his head against the door and felt the dull ache of the realization of his unimportance. He knew that he was not a handsome man, or an adventurous man, or even a particularly intellectual man. But he also knew that he was a good man. He knew that he was an honest man, an uncomplicated man. He had always thought that secretly, Jenna wanted exactly what he could offer: friendship, love, protection. He thought she would outgrow her recklessness, and he never doubted, until this moment, that someday she would love him; someday she would need him. He had waited. But now, sitting here, his ass cold and numb on the concrete, his mustache thick with snot, he realized painfully and clearly that he had been wrong.

He remained sitting there, leaning his back against the door and staring up at the stars peeking through the evening fog, until the manager of the complex approached him. She had been watching through a crack in her drawn curtains. Bob noted the sharp creases in her trousers and the perfect curl of the gray hair swooped under her chin. When she asked if she might help him in some way, he didn't answer, didn't shake his head or

acknowledge her in anyway. He simply rose, retraced his steps along the flowered walkway, and once again, hoisted himself over the locked security gate, this time landing on his feet.

He made the drive from downtown to La Jolla in less than twenty minutes, winding his way along La Jolla Blvd., past the huge architectural masterpieces and sprawling California bungalows, until he came to Vista Del Mar, the narrow cliff-side road leading to Jim's house. Bob saw that the lights still burned inside, and he knew that Jim would be up for hours reading, preparing for his cases tomorrow, probably stone cold sober, and most definitely alone. Bob parked his car and got out. A cool breeze drifted up from the sea, but it was still warm by all standards for December. Bob looked from left to right down the street. He knew Jeff Casey lived across the street, but he couldn't remember the address. He didn't need to; he spotted Jenna's black BMW parked under an unkempt oleander bush.

"Bingo," he said.

Bob walked up to the car and ran his hand over the hood. Cold. Already, a coating of leaves and pink petals covered the shiny surface. He brushed them aside and looked up, trying to peer through the branches. They were too thick, and he saw only a soft light in the direction of the home. Over the top of the bushes, smoke curled from a chimney, and a guitar whispered faintly on the shifting wind, blowing up from the ocean. He walked along the bushes to a redwood gate crossing the driveway and jumped up, trying to peep over the six foot fence. The roof of Casey's home was barely visible beyond. He paced in front of the gate and reached in his pocket for a cigarette. Another breath of music floated by as he inhaled deeply. Indecision

consumed him. He marched in circles in the street between Jenna, secure in Jeff Casey's home, and Jim, snug in his own digs. One way or another, he would get some answers tonight; the only question that remained was who would give them. He paused at Casey's gate and turned the handle. It opened, and he entered the manicured yard with trepidation. He walked as far as the maple tree when he saw Anne Casey inside the front window. She met his eyes and greeted him on the steps.

"I'd like to see Jenna." Bob held the cigarette in his lips, his face lit by a faint red glow in the darkness.

Anne shrugged. "She isn't here."

"Her car's out front."

"I know, but she isn't here," Anne insisted.

"Well, where is she?" Bob stepped up onto the porch, glancing in the cubbies, looking for shoes he might recognize.

Anne put her hand on his arm. "People come here for rest, Mr. Antonelli. We offer them that. That and privacy." She drew her arm back quickly as he turned and glared at her.

"She left. Something's wrong. I need to talk to her." He spoke calmly, but something unsteady flickered in his gaze.

Anne remained unrelenting. "I'm sorry. She really isn't here."

Beyond the doorway, the meeting room glowed in orange and yellow candle light. The scent of orchids and jasmine wandered out, encircling Anne in a fragrant mist. Bob dropped his head, feeling desperate and unimportant. "You're not going to let me in are you?"

"You're welcome to come in," Anne placed her hand on his arm again. This time he didn't flinch. "But I'm telling you honestly, she isn't here."

Bob shook his head. "You'd think I'd be used to never getting in wouldn't you?" He snorted, a painful half laugh that hung thick in the air. Bob knew that Anne could tell him what was going on with Jenna. He had the feeling that Anne knew more about Jenna than Jenna herself knew.

"I love her, you know." Bob looked away, beyond, around, at nothing.

"I know. We all do," Anne said.

He looked up, surprised, but then nodded. "Of course you do." He turned and started down the steps, exhaling a swirling cloud of smoke that remained thick in the air between him and Anne. "Why else would she be here, right?" He made a sweeping gesture with his hands, taking the surroundings in his arms. "She never could resist a good adventure."

He thought Anne followed him down the path, but he didn't look back to see. He knew where he had to go next. He knocked on Jim's front door. No answer. In contrast to Jeff Casey's bright and fertile yard, Jim's was dark and barren of life of any kind. The glass and straight lines of his modern home looked out over a narrow driveway and a clean gray cement porch. Bob peeped through the open window and saw that most of the lights inside were still on. He ground his cigarette into the driveway with the heel of his shoe, and then knocked again, this time louder.

Jim opened the door wearing a white terry cloth bathrobe; his hair was wet, and he wasn't wearing his glasses. "Bob? What's wrong?"

"Where is she?" Bob pushed the door open.

"Who?" Jim narrowed his eyes at the younger man, but Bob ignored him, searching the room. Bob was struck by the overwhelming presence of white. White walls, white carpets, white sofa. The only color in the room came from the yellow of the highly polished chrome light fixtures.

"Jenna. Where's Jenna?"

Jim stood in the doorway. He held the door open with his right hand and a small puddle of water formed at his feet. He squinted at Bob. "What are you talking about?"

Bob threw himself down on the soft cushions of the sofa and kicked his feet out in front of him.

"She's not here either then, is she?"

"No, she's not." Jim shut the door, grabbed a towel from the bar, and wiped the wet spot off the white entry tile. "What's going on?"

Bob sighed. "I was hoping you could tell me. It seems everybody knows except me."

"Knows what?"

"Where Jenna is. Why her office is cleaned out. Why she's at Jeff Casey's house right now, and they're protecting her like she's some sort of refugee. Why I just saved that asshole from getting evicted so that Jenna could go live with him. Why I'm the only person who seems to think that Casey is bad news and that this whole thing is crazy!"

Jim sat down beside Bob. "You aren't the only one who's worried about Jenna; although, I think we're worried for different reasons."

"What does that mean?" Bob turned to face Jim.

"I mean you are way over the lines of professional propriety. Did you follow Jenna to Casey's house tonight?"

"Yeah, so what? I went to her house, and she wasn't there, so I came here. I saw her car, so I went to the door."

"Bob, this has gotten out of control. You're stalking her for Christ sake. This is harassment."

"Shit, Jim. Don't give me this harassment crap. We're talking about Jenna here. Our friend and partner. She's living there, isn't she?"

Jim sighed. "I don't know. I think so. For a while, anyway."

"How can you be so calm!" Bob stood up and paced the floor in front of Jim. "Wake up, Big Guy. She has joined a commune. A commune, Jim. People who wear sheets and sell flowers in airports. People who give all their worldly possessions to some bearded guy in India and sacrifice their brains at the altar. Don't tell me you think this is OK?"

"No, what you describe is not OK with me," Jim snapped. "But I know Casey and I had a talk with Jenna . . ."

"She talked with you?" Bob was fuming. "God, she won't say a word to me."

"She was afraid to talk to you. I know she's always confided in you, so I was surprised when she came to me last week."

"Last week? You knew all this time and you never said anything to me?" he threw his hands up. "What is it with you two?"

"She asked me not to," Jim said.

"So what! You should have told me anyway. You two act like I had no part in this. I saved that goddamn little weasel, remember? It's because of me

that she is sleeping with him right now. And it's because of you, and your insistence that she sit in on my depo--a depo that I could have easily handled by myself, I might add--that she ever even met him. This is our fault, Jim. We have to get her out of there."

"No, you're wrong." Jim rose and stood in front of Bob. "You're out of line, Bob. Way out of line. Jenna didn't tell you because she knew you'd react this way. Your feelings for her have clouded your judgment and put you--and the firm--at risk. You are walking a fine line right now, and I would advise you to step down and get out of her life."

Bob held Jim's gaze. "I can't do that."

"You better do that." Jim tapped his finger on Bob's chest. "I care about you, Bob, but I care about the integrity of my firm more. Don't push her, Bob. She may be playing with these devotees right now, but she's still a lawyer; that's in her so deep no amount of chanting will take it away from her."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying you just better put your emotions back in your pants because I won't have any harassment suits in my firm. You got that?"

Bob felt the lump of betrayal in his throat again. "Yeah, I get it."

"Good. Now sit down; we need to talk."

"I thought this was over," Bob growled. "The Big Guy has spoken."

"It's just beginning."

Jim walked to the bar at the entrance of the room and poured them each a glass of Jack Daniel's, over, no water. Bob was shocked. He had never seen Jim drink. He took the whiskey glass, emptied it, and Jim set the bottle

on the coffee table in front of them. He poured another as Jim sat down in a chair across from him, pulling the edges of his bathrobe over his crossed legs.

"Jenna came to my office last week," Jim said. "She told me she wanted to take the rest of the month off since things slow down so much in December. She said she thought she would probably want to take January off as well, but she would know for sure by the first of year."

"Why?" Bob asked.

"She wouldn't say."

"How can she do that? She can't just walk away from all of her cases."

"That's what I said." Jim finished his whiskey and poured himself another. He took a long sip. "She said that she had settled the last of her big cases, and she had confidence you could take care of the smaller ones. Her next trial isn't until March, and she felt it would be good experience for you to handle the discovery in her absence."

"Oh, so I'm just supposed to clean up her messes while she's off playing with the guru?" Bob snapped.

"I was as surprised as you are. But she was adamant. She said if I couldn't agree to the time off, then she would have to quit. She said she would sell her partnership to you."

"That's ridiculous."

"I know."

They were both silent for several minutes.

Bob didn't want to ask the question that hovered over all of this, but he had to. Jim wasn't volunteering the information that Bob needed most. He took a deep breath. "Is she in love with him?"

"I don't know. I don't think so." Jim shrugged. "But who knows. I think she's telling the truth. I think she's just looking at the bigger picture for the first time and exploring her options. She's always been so focused on success she never really stopped to have a life. If she has to run off, better Casey than that last boyfriend of hers."

Bob laughed. "How did you know about Jack?"

"You guys think I'm so square. You think I don't know about Jenna's adventures? This isn't such a big town. Word still travels very fast."

"I don't know who's more dangerous, Jeff or Jack. I honestly don't."

"Either way, she's got to go through it on her own. I want her to come back. I don't want to lose her, and I know if I start pulling her back in she'll cut the strings for good. I don't ever want to find her on some other firm working against me. You know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I know what you mean."

"Good. Then let's wait it out. You pick up her slack, and I'll try to keep in touch since I'm right here. I'll keep my eye on her."

Bob wasn't satisfied, but he didn't know what else to do. "O.K."

"Don't you go following her either, Bob. I mean it."

"That was pretty stupid."

"You're right. It was very stupid." They were silent for a while, looking out the large window that filled Jim's living room. Through the trees, they could just see the smoke from Jeff Casey's home rising and twisting above. Jim leaned forward in his chair. "You know, I love her, too. We all do. She's a remarkable woman."

Bob sucked the last of the whiskey from his glass and sat it on the coffee table. He rose to leave. "That's almost exactly what Casey's sister told me. It doesn't make it any easier."

Jim nodded. "I know. But you'll get over it. You have to."

Bob shrugged, waved, and left through the polished white door. He walked to his car feeling as if he were in a vacuum. "She's gone," he whispered. "We've lost her."

CHAPTER 7*Kundalini*

(creative divine energy; the Godself within and without)

The thump of Anne's footsteps on the redwood stairs alerted Jenna. She looked up from the shallow, body-sized trench that she had almost finished digging in the sand below Jeff Casey's home. Anne's arrival signaled that it was nearly time to begin. With both hands, Jenna scooped, and pulled, and smoothed away the sand to make a narrow bed. When she had finished this to her satisfaction, Jenna lined it with a downy sleeping bag and crawled in. White candles propped in the sand about a foot apart encircled her. The cool night felt magical, suspended in a state beyond time and without any point of reference for her to compare it. Jeff moved from his place outside the circle of candles, and joined Jenna in the trench, sitting cross-legged beside her reclining head. Delicately, he lifted the soft nest of honey-sweet hair into his lap and began to massage Jenna's pulsing temples. He sang to her in gentle words that Jenna didn't recognize, but the cadence and rhythm had a soothing effect on her. After a moment Jenna sighed a long slow exhale, and

she felt her heart slowing and her neck and chest loosening. A shadow crossed her closed eyelids, and she opened them to see Anne sitting down at her feet.

Anne squeezed Jenna's toes and smiled. "Sorry I took so long to get down here. I was distracted."

Jenna smiled. "No problem. I'm not in any hurry."

"Did I hear someone come in the front gate?" Jeff asked his sister.

Anne smiled up at him, but her eyebrows pulled down sternly over her nose. "No. You probably just heard me locking things up. Nobody's been here tonight."

Jenna looked at Anne curiously. The older woman breathed heavily, and her face looked pale, even in the candlelight. "Are you OK?" Jenna asked. "You look upset about something."

"I'm fine. I just stumbled on the way down. I guess it shook me up a bit." Anne placed her hands on Jenna's legs. "How are you doing; that's what's important?"

"Never better," Jenna answered.

Jeff clapped his hands. "Good. Are we ready then?"

Jenna nodded, closing her eyes. "Let's do it."

Jeff cupped her face in his hands, lifting her head just enough to slide his legs underneath and rest it in his lap. On Jeff's cue, Anne lifted Jenna's feet wrapped in the zippered end of the sleeping bag, and slipped them into her lap. Like bookends, the two Caseys cradled her extremities.

"Are you warm enough? You're shivering," Anne said.

"I'm just a little nervous," Jenna replied.

Anne massaged Jenna's feet through the sleeping bag. "Relax. You're in for a beautiful ride."

"OK. You guys are driving. Let me know when we get there."

"No," Jeff interrupted. "You're the driver. We're just here to help you navigate." He placed his thumbs touching between her eyebrows, at the bridge of her nose, and cupped the tips of his fingers along the ridge of her cheekbones. "I'm going to guide you through a relaxation of your body, and then I'll help you set the rhythm of your breathing to facilitate the rebirthing. All you need to do is listen to my instructions, following your own body's intuition, and begin to see with your heart, not your mind. OK?"

"Got it," Jenna laughed.

Jeff sighed. "I'm so excited for you. Tonight, you begin a new life." He leaned over and kissed Jenna softly on the forehead. "Welcome to our home. May Baba shower you with his blessings."

Anne squeezed Jenna's toes. "See ya when you get back, kiddo."

Jenna winked.

"No more talking now," Jeff scolded. "Shut your eyes, and let yourself relax and be perfectly still."

Jenna took a deep breath and obeyed. Jeff glided his thumbs across her forehead in slow circles until he seemed to find the spot he was searching for just above the bridge of her nose. She felt him exhale and then push both thumbs deeply into her skull. Everything turned white, then blue, then purple, then white again, and she felt a hot tingling sensation wash over her face, behind her eyes, and stop like a lead weight at the root of her tongue. Then the colors vanished and her face felt heavy and numb, as if she had

been injected all over with Novocain. Her attention then turned to her feet, and she noticed that they also tingled with a strange heat that left them numb and heavy. Then the pressure on her forehead released, but Jeff's hands still cupped her cheekbones.

"Don't try to talk; don't even think in words," he ordered. "Feel the energy in your head and feet spreading outward, filling your neck and legs with light and life. See yourself wrapped in a circle of clear white light; no color, just pure light. Let it wash over you and clean you. Let it fill you with its soothing energy."

Jenna exhaled. She wanted to do this right. She wanted to cooperate, but the more she told herself not to think, the more she saw Jeff's words written in red ink across her eyelids, distracting, inflamed, enormous. She shifted her weight, trying to distribute it evenly on both hips, but a lump in the sand dug into the small of her back. The more she told herself not to think about it, the more exaggerated it became, until lying still became agony, and she was filled with the urge to stand, to run, to break free. Jeff began to sing the same soothing song he had whispered to her earlier. She tried to refocus her thoughts on him; to hear the words without seeing them; to take them into her ears as sound without meaning; to let the pitch and tone and intonation harmonize with the melody of the sea . . . and then it happened.

A sudden rush of warm energy exploded down her neck, her arms, her chest, spine, and lungs. At the same time, a cold energy shot upward through her feet to her ankles, calves, knees, thighs, and pelvis, filling her womb. In the center of her belly, the downward spiral of warm light met the upward spiral of cold light, and the two wove around each other, twisting, bursting

free, and spouting like a fountain over her prostrate body. She saw it all as clear as day in one burst of knowingness and imagery, seeing herself seeing it, and she never moved; she did not speak; she hardly breathed. When it seemed like she had been lying there for ages, the light pulled back and retreated once again in two separate streams, retracing the original paths out of her body.

Existence had shifted into a realm of gross distortion and extremes. The sleeping bag covering her felt like the dead weight of a body enclosing and pressing down on her. As if sensing her discomfort, Jeff and Anne slipped their legs out from under her head and feet. The shift in the position of her neck caused the tingling to leave her tongue, but now her fingers tingled, and the lump in the sand still pressed into the small of her back, jabbing her kidney. Limp and unable to move her own body, Jenna complied without hesitation as a pair of strong hands grasped her hips on either side and lifted them about a foot off the ground. Her back arched; her chest bones cracked; her lungs gulped the cool air. Then the hands set her hips down gently, and the pain in her kidneys disappeared. She felt completely weightless and free.

"Now breathe with me." It was Jeff's voice, gently commanding.

She felt his breath swooping around her, clockwise, on her left, then right, then left again, pacing slowly in a rhythmic inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale. Then more slowly: inhale . . . exhale . . . inhale . . . exhale . . .; until her breath seemed to move on its own with her slowing heart beat; until it seemed that the entire surface of her skin pulled in air directly, and her lungs had shut down completely. She thought, *"I'm not breathing anymore. I*

don't need to breathe." She saw a white light crack on the top of her skull and spill like a broken egg down the sides of her face in shades of purple, and down her throat in royal blue. She saw her lungs and heart pumping in emerald green, her ribs and belly tapered into a startling yellow that gradually melted at her hips into a fiery orange before disappearing in a red fury at her pelvis. She saw her legs curl up like trailing white banners that arched up and over her body in a perfectly whole circle of light. At this moment, she became bathed in an ocean of exquisite love, and for the first time ever in her life it felt absolutely right that she should have it. She let herself bask in it, become one with it, float in it, supported, timeless, weightless in her new sea. Then she heard her own voice boom over the sparkling ocean: *"I am the color of light."* As soon as the sound entered her consciousness and formed into words, Jenna disappeared into complete darkness.

As if a switch had been flipped, the vision vanished, and Jenna's body felt gray and heavy as concrete. She thought she would cry from the pain and dead weight of the sleeping bag touching her skin. The cold air slapped at her as it enter her lungs, and she gasped, and then coughed several times to wake her heart. With great effort, she opened her eyes and saw Jeff and Anne seated on either side of her. They weren't touching her, but Jenna felt the weight of their energy as if they were sitting on her.

"How do you feel?" Anne asked.

Jenna couldn't answer.

"Are you OK?" Jeff touched her forehead. "You stopped breathing. This is all my fault. I shouldn't have let you stay out so long."

Jenna noticed that the candles had burned down to stubs and the sky had clouded, blocking out both the moon and the stars. It had to be well after midnight. She must have been out for hours. She searched for words, like lost keys. "I can't feel my arms or legs."

"That happens sometimes." Jeff lifted both of her hands into his and kissed the inside of her wrist. "You'll be OK in a minute."

A warm tear rolled down Jenna's cheek.

Anne began massaging Jenna's legs through the sleeping bag. "Don't worry, Jenna. It's very common during rebirthing. The feeling will come back once we get your circulation going. It may hurt for a minute when the blood starts moving."

"Ow," Jenna screamed. "Oh, shit! My whole body is asleep. I hate this!"

"Let me help you." Jeff placed his hands under Jenna's shoulders and hips and rolled her up and onto her left side. He curled her legs up to her chest in a fetal position. "Lie still like this. It'll stop hurting soon. I promise."

As the life surged back into her body, Jenna began to breathe deeply. Although the cold air stung her nose, she swallowed it gladly. She stared at the sky, watching the clouds shift, hearing the ocean breaking a few feet away. She felt very small; as if the air she breathed were insignificant; as if life had nothing to do with whether or not she ever took another breath again. She had trouble separating herself from the surroundings: the cold, hard sand; the shifting colors and shapes of the sky; the roar of the sea; it all felt as if it flowed directly through her body, part of her but separate. She felt almost

liquid, spread out loosely, evenly, molecularly; she felt randomly scattered in patterns as minuscule and divisible as the night sky, the grains of sand, and the drops of water in the ocean. "I am the color of light," she thought. "What does that mean?" It didn't matter. It was too hard to think now. She just wanted to sleep.

"Don't forget to breathe, Sweet Angel," Jeff said, massaging her back.

"But I'm so tired." Jenna began to cry. She hated crying, but she couldn't stop herself; her body had a will of its own, and she was just along for the ride as it heaved and shook under Jeff's probing hands. She released the fluid from her eyes like a toxin and felt it sting her nose and throat.

"Let it out, Honey." Anne stroked Jenna's hair away from her face.

"I feel so stupid," Jenna sputtered. "I've been so stupid."

"It's gonna be, OK. You don't have to be smart. You don't have to be anything. We'll take care of you. We'll love you." Anne held Jenna in her arms and rocked her.

The last rampart surrounding Jenna's heart broke in that moment. She saw the light again. This time it swirled in front of her open eyes in the form of a glowing blue ball, like a tiny planet floating in a vast universe. And then, the blue ball of light burst like a soap bubble, and the tiny particles of light dispersed in a fine mist. She wanted to gulp the mist, to drink the light, but she sat still and simply let herself cry. As the feeling came back into her body in stabbing shocks, she let herself scream and let Jeff and Anne lay down on either side of her and curl their own bodies around her, their arms wrapped around her chest and back, their legs pressed against her legs. As the two Caseys held her and rocked her, stroked her hair and kissed her cheeks,

they all three drifted to sleep, but not before Jenna adjusted the rhythm of her breathing to match theirs and listened to the waves lapping at the sand repeating like a mantra, *"I am the color of light . . . I am the color of light . . . I am the color of light."*

Jenna woke up alone on the beach just as the sun began to cast streaks of purple, red, and orange in patterns across the sand and in dancing iridescent sparks on the blue-green sea. She saw all of these colors playing in the morning light and understood. She stepped out of the sleeping bag, shed it like skin, and walked barefoot to the edge of the water. She pulled her arms around her growling belly, and wrote her name with her big toe in the wet sand.

"JENNA."

She circled her name. Then, radiating out from the circle, she drew lines like a child's picture of the sun. At the end of each line, she drew other, smaller circles, and so on, until a web of lines and circles branched away from her name, each connected but separate. Then she stood in the center, straddling the letters, and laughed as the water washed up her legs, wetting the hem of her shorts and carrying her drawing away.

"Good morning, Angel," Jeff said, smiling beside her.

Jenna turned to him. Never had she looked into eyes more open and honest than these silly, sweet brown ones that held her gaze now. If she weren't careful, she knew she would break him. "Have you ever seen a more beautiful morning?"

"Never," he said. "But I've never woken up with you before."

Jenna smiled. "Thank you. Thank you for everything."

"You're welcome. But I didn't do anything."

"Yes, you did. You shared all of this with me." Jenna pointed out at the horizon and up toward Jeff's home on the cliffs above the beach.

"Don't thank me. All that you've experienced is Baba's doing. I'm honored to be able to bring you closer to him."

"Right now, I just feel close to you."

Jeff turned her so she was facing him. "Jenna Donnelly."

"Yes," she answered, questioningly.

"You are a beautiful radiant star. You are God, and I love you."

Jenna frowned, and backed away. "Don't say that! Don't love me."

"Don't be silly," Jeff laughed. "Of course, I love you. Love is love. It has no face or body. It's all the same, pure, sweet energy. It's all Baba. To love you is to recognize the God in you; to not love you is to reject God, and I could never do that. Like it or not, you are holy, and I love you."

Jenna snorted. "Then you don't love me at all. You just love God, and because of that you see what you want to see in me."

"I see God in you. I see both things at once. You, the individual, and God, the universal. We're all both things at once."

"I don't have a clue what you're talking about," Jenna snapped.

"Yes, you do. It's like light. Light is light, but within it are all the variant shades of color. We are the color of light; God is the light. Don't you see? Everything is connected. Everything is One."

Jenna turned around sharply and almost fell over as a wave sucked at her feet. Jeff grabbed her arm and balanced her. She felt dizzy. "Where did you hear that--about the light, I mean."

"It's what Baba teaches us. God--or universal consciousness, whatever you want to call it--lives in each of us in the form of energy. It's called *kundalini*. The energy vibrates in different colors that correspond to different aspects of ourselves, but it's all *kundalini*, just as we're all God. To awaken the *kundalini* is to know all of oneself and to know all of God. That's the goal of all our spiritual practices."

Jenna shivered, but she wasn't cold. "What do you mean, 'awaken' it?"

"Everyone is born with *kundalini*, but it lies dormant until awakened through spiritual practices."

"What kind of spiritual practices?" Jenna thought about her rebirthing and her stomach tightened.

"A lot of the things we do here: repetition of mantras, kirtan, yoga, meditation, and intense devotion to God. You can also have a *guru* give you his *shaktipat*, or initiation."

"How does he do that?"

"Sometimes just being in his presence, or touching something of his is enough. But usually a *guru* will touch you . . . here." Jeff touched Jenna between her eyebrows, in the same spot he had pressed his thumbs during her rebirthing. "Or on your heart." He pointed this time. "Or at the base of your spine."

"Is that why you're going to India? You want Baba to awaken your . . . *kundalini*?" Jenna felt stupid even saying the word.

Jeff laughed. "No. Baba blessed me with his *shaktipat* years ago. I'm going to India because I love him so much I can't stay away. I hope more than anything that one of these times Baba will allow me to stay with him."

They were both quiet for a minute, and then Jenna walked up onto the beach. Jeff followed her.

"I canceled my yoga class this morning so I could be here for you in case you wanted to talk about your rebirthing experience," he said. "Would you like to go for a walk?"

She hesitated for a minute but then decided she didn't want to be alone. "A walk sounds good. Sure, I'll come."

They walked in silence, picking their way past the seaweed that had drifted on shore, each thinking their own thoughts. Jenna replayed the images from her rebirthing. She wondered if this was what the message in her vision meant. She wondered if somehow Jeff had awakened her *kundalini* without even telling her. Part of her felt violated; another part of her felt slightly in awe; a third part just felt tired. After they had walked for almost twenty minutes, the beach turned into a rocky cove, and they turned toward home.

"You're unusually quiet," Jeff teased.

"What? I'm sorry. I was just thinking."

"About what?"

"Everything."

"Do you want to talk about your rebirthing? How was it?"

"It was pretty amazing. I don't even know how to put it into words."

"O.K., I understand. You feel all right about it though, don't you?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. But I'm curious. That stuff you were talking about earlier, the *kundalini*, how do you know if you've awakened it?"

"Oh, you know," Jeff said. "I don't know if I can explain it if you haven't experienced it, but when you do, you'll know it, believe me."

"Kind of like an orgasm?"

"I . . . guess so," Jeff stammered.

"I'm sorry," Jenna laughed. "Bad joke."

"It's just that it's different for everybody," Jeff said. "Some people hear voices and music; others experience a delicious nectar-like taste; still others see colors and light. The common factor is that there is a clarity--an awakening--and a sense of purpose, commitment, and peace. It's love, Jenna. When it happens, you're overcome by a love greater than yourself or anything you've ever known. It's addicting. Once it happens, you never want to lose it."

"This may sound stupid, but can you just do it half-way?"

"No, you don't want to do it half-way. Sometimes it happens, but in those cases the *kundalini* just becomes irritated, not activated. It can be unpleasant or confusing for the person whom that happens to because once stimulated, the energy needs to be released or else it just creates a painful blockage."

"I'm not even going to touch that; I'm just going to let that one go," Jenna said, laughing and shaking her head.

Jeff looked confused.

Jenna continued. "So once this thing is awakened properly, then what? You live the rest of your days blissful and holy?"

"No," Jeff answered. "The root of the *kundalini* is located at the base of the spine. After you've experienced the awakening, the *kundalini* energy must be guided up through each of the *chakras*."

"And a *chakra* is . . . ?" Jenna asked, beginning to weary of the whole thing.

"An energy center that corresponds to different levels of consciousness. There are seven of them in the body, and they each vibrate with a different color. The first is red, and it rests at the base of your tail bone; the second is orange and it is located in the reproductive organs; the third is yellow, and is in the stomach; the fourth, green, is in your heart; the fifth, blue, is your thyroid gland in your throat; the sixth, purple, is in your pituitary gland in the center of your forehead; and finally, the seventh, is white, and it is in the pineal gland at the top your skull. The goal is to awaken the *kundalini*, balance that energy in all of the *chakras*, and then incorporate all of the aspects of the individual consciousness into the God consciousness, and to then remain functioning and serving in the world. It's a long and arduous process that requires daily yoga and meditation, and, ideally, the guidance of a counselor or *guru* to see you through the process."

They were almost at the house, and Jenna still hadn't asked the question that was really on her mind. They walked together in silence for a while, but when they came to the stairway leading up from the beach Jenna stopped.

"I have one more question," she said.

"Sure, anything," Jeff answered.

"Can anybody cause you to have this awakening, or does it have to be a holy man?"

"No. A *guru* can channel his energy through chosen disciples and it is the same as if he were touching you directly. Over the years, Baba has chosen many such people to study with him at his *ashram*. When he feels they are ready, he sends them back home to serve in their communities."

Jenna narrowed her eyes at him. "And tell me the truth. Are you one?"

"Me?" he asked, startled. "No! Baba's disciples have spent years living at the master's feet, learning from him, and receiving his *darshan*. I'm just one devotee among thousands. I'm not special."

Jenna took a deep breath. "You're wrong. You are special." She leaned over and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

"What's that for?" he asked, smiling like a little boy.

"For the lesson." Jenna started up the stairs, walking ahead of Jeff.

"Would you want to be one of those disciples?"

"It's not for me to decide."

"But that's what you want, isn't it?"

"I want to serve Baba in whatever way he chooses to use me. I don't have any ambitions."

Jenna reached the top of the stairs and leaned down over the railing.

"Well you may be in for a surprise," she shouted down to him. "I think he's got something in store for you."

Jeff turned around and squinted up at her, shading his eyes from the sun light that framed her in a dark silhouette. "Why do you think that?" he asked.

"Because you woke my *kundalini*, you little shit! You put your thumbs in the center of my forehead, and you led me right into it. I didn't even see it coming. I don't know whether to thank you or smack you, but you did it, and now you better teach me what the hell to do with it 'cause I'm not gonna be left out here with an irritated *kundalini* and no place to stick it!"

Jenna didn't waste any time joining the Casey household. Without a second thought, she packed a few necessary things, locked up her house, and moved into an airy yellow bedroom between Rhadja and Anne. The room's furnishings consisted of a futon, a wicker rocking chair, a table, and reading lamp. Jenna loved the spartan simplicity of it, but Rhadja insisted on filling the table with vases of lilies and roses, and Anne provided a brass stand for a large vanilla-scented candle. The windows faced East, and each morning Jenna woke early as the first light broke through the trees and filled her room with a warm glow.

The morning routine began in the gray light of dawn with thick herbal tea seasoned with honey and milk and shared on the backyard deck with Anne, Rhadja, and the busily nursing Jordan. Although the little guy got to have his breakfast this early, Jenna soon learned that for the grown-ups the morning meal was postponed until after the morning meditation and yoga. Meditation began at 6:30 in the living--or meeting--room, but Jeff always cloistered himself at the feet of the altar well before anyone else arrived.

Usually, only the members of the Casey household joined him for early morning meditation, although occasionally some of the yoga students would arrive early and join the meditation group. The meditation classes were free, but Jeff and Anne charged a small fee for the 8:00 a.m. yoga asana classes. Although they did not segregate *kirtan* or meditation, they did divide the yoga classes for the sake of modesty and to lessen distractions. As Jeff had predicted, Jenna actually did prefer it this way once she got over her initial annoyance at being shuffled off into the music room with Anne and Rhadja and the other ladies while Jeff led the men in the larger meeting room. Soon it turned out that of all the activities that filled her day, Jenna looked forward to this morning ritual of quiet female companionship and gentle yoga asanas the most.

Physical activity and sports had always been a part of Jenna's life. She loved the competition, but mostly she loved winning, reaching the goal, pushing her limits. Yoga forbade this. Yoga was about losing the self while going deeply within it. At first, Jenna had a hard time sitting still, paying attention to her body, and not forcing herself into the postures. It didn't take long, however, for her to realize the sensual pleasure of the slow movements, of surrendering to the pose and breathing in the satisfaction of deep release. Anne usually spent the first twenty minutes leading the class through breathing exercises, followed by several minutes of guided warm-up stretches and then the asanas. The familiar daily postures began with standing poses, and then flowed naturally and gracefully into sitting, then lying, and then inverted postures. Once she got the hang of it, Jenna felt as if she were moving through a silent dance, like a ballet without music, as her

body breathed, stretched, compressed, relaxed, and flowed with a secure abandonment. The series of postures usually took an hour, after which time Anne guided the women through a deep relaxation and Rhadja checked on everyone, adjusting and massaging away any lingering stiffness or pain. For Jenna, the rest of the day--no matter how exciting or unusual the events--never quite lived up to the simple pleasure of the morning yoga asanas.

The yoga classes usually finished at around 10:00 a.m., at which time, after a light breakfast, Jeff, Anne, and Rhadja turned the day over to the more mundane task of earning a living. After she moved in with her brother, Anne had converted the master bedroom into a private meeting room and make-shift book store/music store/art gallery, wherein they sold everything a seeker could want in Baba paraphernalia. It was here that Rhadja served her massage clients and Jeff gave his private "spiritual counseling" sessions for new aspirants searching to improve their *sadhana*, or spiritual discipline. During these sessions, Jeff had explained to Jenna, he might teach his student advanced yoga postures, breathing exercises, meditation techniques, or guide the student through a rebirthing. Although rebirthing was not exactly a practice that was in alignment with Baba's teachings, Jeff had found that in many cases it accelerated the opening of his students' hearts to Baba. After agonizing and meditating over whether he should facilitate rebirthings for his students, and still receiving no clear answer, it was Anne who finally convinced Jeff that if it brought people closer to Baba it had to be good. Anne always remained with Jeff during the private sessions, looking after him, keeping track of the time, and handling the money. Before leaving, she guided the students through the Caseys' make-shift Baba Sai Ram store,

helping the guests find whatever they might need for further study and growth.

The yoga classes, private sessions, and bookstore seemed to be the only source of Jeff and Anne's income. Although Jenna had asked Jeff to teach her, and tried to pay for the classes and private sessions, he refused to see her professionally. He explained that because he had inadvertently awakened her *kundalini*, he had created a great karmic debt between them, and it was now his responsibility to look after her and repay it. As much as she protested that she didn't want to be his responsibility, he refused to have any money pass between them. So Jenna side-stepped him, and, after much pleading, finally got Anne to accept payment for her room and board. It didn't take long for Jeff to find out. He locked himself in his room and refused to see anyone all day. When he still hadn't come out by dinner time, Jenna banged on his door and told him to quit having a tantrum. She agreed to take the money back, and, reluctantly, he agreed to stop insisting she was his responsibility. After that, nobody ever talked about money, so Jenna stopped worrying. She knew that, as Jeff always said, "Baba would provide." And he did. And Jenna did, paying for groceries or whatever else was needed whenever she went out, which was rarely, but timed so that she returned with arm loads of supplies just when the cupboards were beginning to look bare. If Jeff noticed that it was her doing, he didn't protest.

As December passed, Jenna began to grow restless. The early afternoons were the hardest. While Rhadja, Jeff, and Anne were all busy with their private sessions, Jenna found herself with nothing to do. At first she had spent this time working in the garden--practicing karma yoga, as Jeff

called these acts of service--but then the weather changed and the rain sent her indoors. On these days, she tried to occupy herself by reading one of the many Baba Sai Ram books that Jeff had assigned to her. She'd read a few pages, and then get frustrated. It was all so allegorical, so ethereal, so metaphorical, that she'd soon be screaming for facts, for evidence, for just a smidgen of proof. Although her heart and body grew with a new strength and flexibility, intellectually she felt stagnant. At these times, she thought of Jim, and Bob, and the law practice she had left on hold. Ironically, she felt isolated in her new communal lifestyle. Even if she didn't understand why, in her heart Jenna knew that she needed to be here now, so she delved into household tasks, cleaning and cooking, or doing whatever else needed to be done in an effort to keep herself busy. By evening, things always picked up again. As the holidays approached, it seemed that every night the house filled with interesting guests, travelers, students, and teachers seeking companionship at the Casey home.

At last, Jenna's intellectual hunger found relief. She dove into the conversation and new experiences offered by these many new faces. She learned that in fact many of the people that wandered through the Casey home were not Baba Sai Ram devotees, but simply people, like her, searching for something more from their lives. She met Hare Krishnas, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Catholics, Jews, and Christians. She met astrologers, palmists, psychics, channelers, and hypnotists. Young and old, American and foreign, so many people wandered through the Casey home in the month of December, that Jenna quit trying to place each of them, and simply began to flow with the current of new faces and experiences that greeted her. For the

first time in her life, Jenna didn't return to her parent's home for Christmas. She didn't even try to explain that she wasn't going to Seattle for the holidays because she was living in a commune with Baba Sai Ram devotees; she just said she couldn't leave San Diego now.

As the number of guests staying with the Caseys grew, Jeff became more and more radiant. He hardly slept anymore; he lived on love, or the expectation of love, for January was the month that he led the pilgrimage to India and Baba's ashram. He and Anne had planned a big celebration to usher in the New Year and bless the trip. As the devotees arrived each day in the final week of December, families and individual travelers all squished together making beds where they could in the meeting room, music room, and even in tents pitched on the deck and back yard. Each night turned into a rollicking party of food, drink, and music. Although Jeff frowned on some of the more raucous festivities, Jenna loved every minute of it. She laughed, and cooked, and drank, and sang, and danced, and argued, and philosophized, and held babies, and wrestled with dogs, and even began playing a lap drum at kirtan. She took to wearing her hair down, and lived in leggings and baggy sweaters. At last she had found a balance of mental, physical, and emotional satisfaction.

But lurking underneath the love and community that Jenna felt, was a nagging fear of commitment. Although the talk had been all along that she would join the party on the journey to India, Jenna hadn't actually decided. Her heart pulled her toward India with the rest of the crew, but something in her mind continued to hold her back. At first she thought it was her career

that was stopping her, but she knew she could tell Jim she was taking more time off. He and Bob could handle things without her; they already had. The problem lay elsewhere.

The morning of New Year's Eve, Jenna woke feeling restless and angry. She didn't need a mirror to tell her that the old pinched lines at the corners of her eyes had returned. She remained in bed, missing the morning meditation and almost missing the yoga asanas as well.

"I missed you at meditation this morning." Anne smiled up at Jenna from the lotus position.

Jenna grunted. "I didn't feel like getting up."

"I'm glad you joined us for asanas."

"I almost didn't," Jenna snapped. She sat cross-legged beside Anne. Following Anne's direction, Jenna grabbed her right foot, placing it in the crook of her left arm, lifting and rocking it like a baby. She loved this warm-up stretch. It opened up her hips, and she immediately felt the tension in her buttocks and lower back melt away. She placed that foot on the ground and did the same with the left foot, nesting it in the crook of her right elbow, lifting and rocking. Next, she pulled the soles of both feet to the center, as close to her pelvis as possible, pressing her knees to the floor. Her hips popped, she raised her chest, arched her back, and exhaled. She felt lighter, as if someone were pulling her spine in a straight line, up through her skull. She leaned forward, stretching her belly over her bent legs, arms extended in front of her, forehead almost touching the floor.

Anne whispered beside her, "Don't push yourself, Jenna. Yoga should never hurt. Listen to your body and its natural limits."

"It doesn't hurt. I love it." The lines still pinched Jenna's eyes and brow.

Anne rose for the salute to the sun, and the other women followed. Placing both hands in a prayer pose at the center of her chest, Jenna exhaled and closed her eyes.

Anne's voice guided the women through the moving meditation postures. "Inhale, raise your hands up and above your head, arch your back; exhale, hands flat on the floor; inhale, right leg back, left knee bent in runner's pose; exhale, both legs back, hips up, hands flat on the floor in mountain pose; inhale, drop your hips, lie flat on the floor, back arched, in cobra pose; exhale, hips up, forehead flat on the floor; inhale, back in to cobra pose; exhale, back into mountain pose; inhale, right leg forward, back into runner's pose; exhale, left leg forward, both hands touching the floor; inhale, raise your arms up and over your head; exhale, hands in the center of your chest in prayer pose. Now one deep breath, in and out, feeling the light and energy move through you. Balance yourself in The One that is our Lord."

Anne's guiding voice was like background music for Jenna. Her focus remained on the postures: breathing, stretching, feeling the nerves opening, the shooting pain for an instant and then the almost liquid pleasure as the muscles and joints released and the blood flowed to all of her extremities. She felt light-headed, but she continued focusing on the breathing as the series finished. The group returned to prayer pose and then began the series again; this time starting from the left leg. They repeated this series--both legs, six times--until it became as fluid and natural as breathing. Eventually Jenna's anger began to dissipate, and she was left with only a restlessness that

stemmed, she knew, from her need to make a decision about India. The asanas ended in a short meditation, and then Anne closed with one long, slow, group chant of *om*. Jenna felt the sound bubble out of her in response to the others around her, but she felt disconnected from it and from herself. As the others rose to leave, Jenna and Anne remained seated.

"So, do you want to talk about it?" Anne asked.

"About what?"

"Whatever it is that's bugging you. You're not yourself this morning."

Jenna massaged the toes on her right foot. "I can't make up my mind about India. I know that you and Jeff have always assumed that I was going, but I just don't know."

Anne took Jenna's hand in her own and rubbed the knuckles. "Why? What's stopping you?"

"Everything."

"What? You can leave everything. You have no real ties here."

"I have a career."

"Oh, I know that isn't what's keeping you. You left that a long time ago. What's the real issue?"

Jenna paused. "I don't know. I honestly can't decide. I assumed as the day approached . . . that . . . I guess . . . I'd receive some sort of sign letting me know if I should go." She looked up at Anne. "Is that crazy?"

"Not at all. I'm just surprised you haven't seen the signs that have already presented themselves to you."

Jenna sighed. "I can't help it. I'm sorry. The lawyer in me runs deep. I guess I've been looking for physical evidence, not circumstantial." Anne

moved behind Jenna and massaged her shoulders in gentle circles. Jenna bent her chin to her chest to allow Anne's hands to move up her neck and ring the base of her skull.

They both were silent, breathing at the same pace.

"What do you do, when you're stuck like this?" Jenna asked.

"I haven't been for a long time. Not since I made the decision to move here with Jeff. But I was very confused before I made that change. I went up North and spent a week alone in the mountains meditating on the stuck place until the answer came to me."

"Did it work?"

"Yes. I needed to get away from all of the muck and clutter of my life in order to listen to what my higher-self had planned for me."

"I thought that was what I was doing here all this time."

Anne laughed. "Maybe. Or maybe you've just removed your body, while your mind is still clinging to the past."

"I wish I knew. Everytime I meditate I can see myself here and that's great, but when I try to look at my future, all I see is empty space. I can't stay here indefinitely. Isn't the goal of all this spiritual practice that you return to the world again to do something meaningful?"

Anne leaned forward and kissed Jenna's right cheek. "Yes. But I would meditate on that empty space . . . and ask Baba to help you see."

Jenna snorted and rolled her eyes.

Anne raised her left eyebrow. "Or maybe that's why you can't see."

"Why?"

"It's Baba, isn't it?" Anne asked.

Jenna winced. "I don't know. I love the yoga. I love the *kirtan*. I love it here. I love you and Jeff, but I just don't feel any connection to Baba. I'm sorry. I feel so bad. I feel like I've lied to you all this time."

"Don't be. All of this is Baba. You just don't know it yet."

"No, I don't."

They sat in silence for a moment.

Anne rose and helped Jenna to her feet. "We have a friend who has a cabin in Mount Shasta. It's very rustic. She spends her winters in Arizona and leaves the cabin as a retreat for anyone who wants to use it."

"Is that where you went?"

"Yeah. I think it's exactly what you need."

Jenna raised her hand to her forehead. "Why do you and Jeff always think you know what I need? God, it's positively maddening!"

Anne crossed her arms. Her voice became serious. "All of us here have made tremendous sacrifices to create this place of peace that you love so much. It wasn't just handed to us. I'm willing to bet you were never handed anything that you valued either. If you're serious about the path you've chosen, then you'll have to work just as hard to find inner peace as you worked to create external success."

Jenna's eyes flashed bright green, and she lowered her voice as she spit out her words. "Well, that's my decision to make, isn't it? I'm not one of these naive little waifs that stroll through here every night, Anne. I'm a grown woman. I had a life before I came here, and I'm not sure if I want to walk away from all of it. I have to think about it."

"No, you don't," Anne said, unintimidated. "You can't think about something like this. It's not about what's in your mind. You've got to know it in your heart. Either you can tell me right now that you have the courage to face yourself, or you don't. What's it gonna be?"

"If I say no, then what?" Jenna asked.

"Then you probably won't see us anymore. We're leaving . . . and I don't want to lose you. Not yet."

Jenna sensed disappointment in the older woman, but also fear, or maybe grief. She took a deep breath and walked slowly around the room. The sun fell in a rectangle from the skylight above. She stood in the center of the beam of light, raised her hands above her, and then centered them at her chest in the prayer pose. She took a breath and began a round of the salute to the sun. When she bent forward, Jenna felt a rush of blood enter her skull, and then all was black. Her body knew the postures so well she moved through them--breathing, but not thinking--just feeling and seeing nothing except endless space in front of her. Somewhere off on the horizon, if she didn't look directly at it, she could see lights, stars maybe, twinkling and shifting just beyond her gaze. Within her direct vision there was nothing but an unending black expanse without color or shape or reason. Deep in the center of the darkness, she sensed a place of calm, but she couldn't find it. Ever since her rebirthing, Jenna's awkward beginner's meditations were filled with this same enormous black expanse and elusive lights, but never the vibrant colors, and never the all-consuming feeling of love that she had experienced that first night on the beach. She wondered if perhaps she had .

never really awakened her *kundalini*. Maybe it had all just been her imagination.

Jenna finished all twelve variations of the salute to the sun. "I have to talk to Jeff." She walked away without looking at Anne.

Jenna found him in his room folding a basket of laundry. He snapped the wrinkles out of a shirt, and the warm smell of cotton and soap floated across the room.

"Good morning," he called, cheerfully. "Looks like we're going to have a gorgeous day for our New Year's Eve party tonight."

"I need to talk to you," Jenna said.

"O.K. What's on your mind."

"I'm not sure if I'm going to India."

Jeff's hands stopped in mid air, a white T-shirt suspended between them. "But you said you were?"

"No, I didn't. I was never sure, and I never said I was going," Jenna snapped.

"But you have to go," Jeff wailed. His face dropped into a pitiful frown and his eyes brimmed with tears.

"I don't have to do anything, Jeff. I'm not sure what I want."

"This is all my fault. You asked me to teach you. I should have spent more time with you. I should have sensed your confusion. You were my responsibility." He wiped his eyes. "I told you I'm not special. I'm not worthy of you . . . or Baba." The tears streamed down Jeff's cheeks, and he wiped them on his sleeve.

"Don't do that," Jenna pleaded. "Don't cry. Get a grip, will you."

"But you have to go to India. Baba's all knowing. He'll help you."

Jenna exhaled. She knew what she had to say might crush him, and she honestly didn't want to hurt him, but she had to tell him the truth. "I know you worship Baba. But I don't feel it. I tried to read the books you gave me, but they seemed like fairy tales to me. I tried to find him in my meditation, but he wasn't there for me. He may be a very evolved and enlightened soul, but he's not a God, for Christ sake. He's just a man."

Jeff's mouth dropped open and he stared blankly at Jenna. "How can you say that after everything you've experienced here?" he asked. "He's not just a man. He's Baba. He manifests miracles. He's an avatar, like Jesus and Buddha. He's divine, Jenna."

She shook her head. "I have to go away. I have to decide on my own. If I'm not back when you leave, then that's my answer. Go without me."

"Of course you'll be back. Baba wouldn't have allowed me to awaken your *kundalini* if he didn't have great plans for you . . . for us. You'll see."

Jenna put her hands on his shoulder. He was so fragile, like a little boy. She couldn't stand to hurt him, but she couldn't lie. "Jeff, you did that. You rebirthed me, and you woke up my *kundalini*, and you taught me to meditate and practice yoga. It wasn't Baba." She kissed him lightly on both cheeks. "If this is as far as we're going together, I want you to know that I'm very grateful for everything you've shared with me."

He shook his head, and pushed her away. "But you're wrong. It was Baba; you just can't see it yet."

"No, I can't. I don't know what else to do except go away for a little while to think." Jenna watched him carefully, looking for some sign that would indicate he understood what she was saying. She didn't see any.

After a moment, he nodded. "Go. We're not leaving for ten days. You'll be back by then. Everything will be fine." He smiled. "You'll see. Baba will provide."

CHAPTER 8*Yoga*

(union of the individual soul and the universal soul)

It felt good to be moving. Jenna took Interstate 5 the whole way from San Diego, through Los Angeles, over the Grapevine, and across the flat and seemingly endless miles of the middle stretch of California. As the farms, orchards, cattle ranches, and miles of black highway slipped away, she tried not to think of anything except reaching her destination. Now her eyes burned and were swollen from staring straight ahead all day. Ahead stretched the final leg of her thirteen hour non-stop drive from one end of California to the other. Next stop, Mount Shasta.

A thick covering of clouds blanketed the black and moonless night, hiding all but a few stars that managed to peep through in the open cracks. Even in the dark, Jenna could see Shasta Lake shining radiantly as she wound her way up the steep grade. Patches of dirty white ice lined the sides of the road, while further back great stands of pine trees rose from the white carpeted mountainside. The trees looked almost angelic hovering over the

hills, their branches coated with downy icicles like arms in lace dresses. Jenna couldn't wait to see Mount Shasta's magnificent peak, which even in the summer was snowcapped and ringed with clouds. She suddenly longed for the cold, wet squish of slush beneath her boots. As she rounded a crest and sank into a little valley, the clouds opened and a faint light fell on the mountain beside her, painting the landscape in shades of gray and purple-white. The small patch of night sky held such an abundance of bright stars, it was as if the whole universe were trying to make itself visible to Jenna through that one pin-hole opening. A calm washed over her like a hot shower, like a liquid warmth that filled her inside and out. She leaned her head back against the seat, focusing on the light, the stars, and the darkness beyond. The world felt as if it were expanding, swollen to grotesque dimensions, and she was shrinking, insignificantly small, unimportant, and forgotten within it.

At the town of Shasta, Jenna turned off the interstate and took a room at the first motel with a vacancy. The room was drafty and smelled of mold, but she desperately needed sleep, so she ignored it. At midnight, cars honked and nearby someone fired a rifle to celebrate the arrival of the new year. She fell asleep and dreamed she stood in the clearing of light that she had passed on the way up the mountain; only this time, the hole in the clouds continued to open up and pour light through, until the opening became so large it blocked out everything else in her existence. She stood on a precipice, balancing on her tiptoes, as the Earth crumbled away below her. She tried to fly, to out-run the disintegrating ground, but her arms and legs wouldn't

move. She woke just as she lost her last toehold and fell away with chunks of earth flying around her.

The rest of the night she slept fitfully, until finally, with the first light, she rose, grumpy and impatient to be on her way. After packing her few belongings, she went through the motions of a few yoga asanas to loosen up her stiff neck and shoulders, but she couldn't focus so she didn't even bother to try meditating. Instead, she checked out of the room, walked to a small coffee shop around the corner, and ordered a large French roast and a chocolate croissant. This was her first cup of coffee in over a month, and she savored it like good sex.

"Jenna Donnelly?" A tall man wearing a green down vest approached her. "Are you Jenna?"

"I am," she said.

"I'm Sean. I'll be taking you out to the cabin." He extended his hand to her and she met it across the table.

She motioned for him to sit down, and he took the chair opposite her. "I really appreciate you meeting me here. I hope I haven't ruined your holiday."

"Not at all. I hate watching the Rose parade on TV, and I'll be back in plenty of time for the bowl games."

"Good," Jenna said. "I'm almost finished. Would you like some?" She pulled off a section of her croissant and held it out to her new acquaintance.

"Sure. Looks good." He pushed the whole section in his mouth and glanced around the room lazily.

Jenna studied him. He was taller than she expected, and older, probably in his early fifties, though it was hard to tell. His hands were large, callused, and red. When he removed his baseball cap she saw that he wore his graying hair cropped close to his head. His face had the hard lines and coloring of a man who has worked outside for many years, but there was a softness in his deep-set blue eyes, and Jenna felt she could trust him.

"Is the cabin far from here?" Jenna asked.

"No, not in miles. But it'll take us a good hour and half to get up to it because of the roads. You can't get there without a four-wheel drive."

"Well, I'm ready to go. The motel manager said I could leave my car there. I only have this one bag." Jenna pointed to a backpack on the floor at her feet. "I'll need to stop somewhere though and pick up some food and water. Do you know if this place has heat?" Jenna asked.

"Last time I checked there was plenty of wood in the shed."

"How long ago was that?" Jenna asked.

"Few weeks ago. I took a guy up there for the weekend."

"All right," Jenna stood. "Let's get going then."

They drove in silence for the first stretch of the drive, and Jenna appreciated not having to make small talk. She let her thoughts drift to the terrain and felt herself relaxing into the landscape. There was very little snow on the road, most of it had been cleared or melted away, and they made good time getting out of town. Soon the streets turned into quiet country backroads, while the snow capped peak of Mount Shasta loomed ahead, encircled in a ring of lavender clouds.

"Pretty isn't it," Sean said.

"Oh, much more than that," Jenna agreed.

"Is this your first vision quest?"

"My first what?" Jenna laughed.

"Vision quest. Isn't that what you're going to the cabin for?"

"No. I'm just going up there to be alone and make some difficult decisions."

Sean nodded. "Most people I take up here tell me they're on a vision quest."

"I don't even know what that means," Jenna admitted.

Sean laughed. "Doesn't matter. Words are just words. It's intention that matters."

Jenna looked at him and nodded. "I like that. Can I quote you?"

"Better not. I like being anonymous."

"And what do you do up here anonymously? You look like a man who does more than drive people to their vision quests for a living."

"No, I just do this as a favor to Sally--the gal who owns the cabin. Me, I find rocks."

"You find rocks?"

"Yeah. Crystals, geodes, gem stones. I have a store in town, but most of the time I travel around the world hunting and digging. I like being outside. I get restless sitting around in the store. I have a lady friend who watches it for me when I take off."

"Sounds exciting. I'll bet you have some great stories," Jenna said.

"Some."

"Tell me one," Jenna asked.

Sean thought for a minute. "How 'bout if I tell you a local story, since you're up here visiting."

"O.K."

"It's kind of a ghost story. You don't scare easily do you?"

"Not at all," Jenna laughed.

"Good. It goes like this." Sean turned onto a narrow road cut through the thickly forested hillside. "Some people here in Shasta believe that those clouds there--at the top of the mountain--are created by UFO's. They believe that the aliens have a landing base there, where that big hollow on the East side is. They say that the aliens are able to create weather to disguise their comings and goings. They even believe the aliens live inside the mountain. Some old guy even wrote a book about it. He claims there's an entrance on the west side. You have to be clairvoyant to find it, but if they choose you to enter, you'll be shown the door that will lead to an underground city of dreams, inhabited by twenty-foot Lemurians who know ancient psychic and spiritual secrets and occasionally choose a disciple to live among them."

Jenna stared at him. "You're not serious. Nobody could believe that. Aliens? Twenty-foot Lemurians? What the hell is that?"

Sean laughed. "I'm dead serious. There are people here who claim to have seen all kinds of things on this mountain. Aliens, Lemurians, Big Foot, even Jesus. Did you notice that clearing, just before the exit to town?"

Jenna remembered the clearing and thought of her dream about it.

"Yeah, I noticed it," she said.

"A few years ago a stand of trees mysteriously fell over on a perfectly clear night. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, or a drop of wind. The next day a

terrible storm hit, and in the morning the trees were covered in six feet of snow. People said they saw a vision of the Virgin Mary in the patterns of the snow. When the sun hit it mid-day, the snow wouldn't melt, even when everything else around it had melted. Naturally, people flocked by the hundreds to see it. Some said they saw Jesus hovering in the trees above, and others said they heard singing rising out of the earth, kind of deep and gospel-like. People said the singing was the voices of the Lemurians rising right out of the Earth to honor the Virgin Mother."

"Oh, bullshit," Jenna laughed. "What a load of crap. Nobody would believe that."

"It's true. I assure you. People believed it." His eyes shone a playful blue in the white morning light.

"People will believe anything," Jenna snarled.

"People need to believe in something, no matter how ridiculous it may seem to others."

Jenna turned to Sean and watched his large hands gripping the steering wheel with an intense devotion.

"You have a bit of the philosopher in you. With a name like Sean, you wouldn't happen to also have a bit of the Irish in you, now would you?"

"Welsh. Close enough I suppose."

"Close enough, indeed," Jenna laughed. "Aliens and Lemurians. You may as well believe in leprechauns and fairy people."

"Some people do," he laughed.

"Well not this one," Jenna insisted. "I'm having a hard enough time believing in one very real Indian guru, without worrying about imaginary space beings."

Sean nodded knowingly. "So you're a Baba devotee, too, like Sally--the owner of this cabin?"

"No." Jenna exhaled and looked out the window at the silent gray-green pine trees. "I hate that word--devotee. I'm just exploring, digging things up, and seeing what I find underneath."

Sean smiled. "Looking for treasure, hm? Like me."

"I guess so." Jenna smiled.

They turned onto another narrow road, this time heading north on the steeply winding grade. "The drop-off point is less than six miles from here," Sean said. "It won't be long now."

They drove in silence the rest of the way. A peaceful stillness surrounded the landscape as the morning grew brighter and the sleeping trees yawned and stretched in the sun. Although the sky had cleared, there had obviously been a recent storm, for the hillside below the trees stood draped in a fresh white blanket of snow.

Sean stopped the truck at a pull-out beside a small shed and a mailbox.

"Tell me that isn't the cabin," Jenna said, motioning toward the rickety shed.

"Nope. That's home to the final leg of our journey. Come on."

He stepped out of the truck and his legs disappeared below his knees as he crunched through the drifts of snow and made his way to the shed. Jenna

grabbed her backpack and followed, stepping in his large footprints. Sean unlocked a padlock on the door, kicked the snow away, and swung the two sides open. Inside waited a snow mobile. He pushed it out of the shed, closed the doors again, and straddled the machine.

"The cabin is just over that rise, in a little ravine," he said. "You can't see it from the road. Hop on and I'll have you there in no time."

Jenna smiled. "I've never ridden on one of these. Is it fun?"

"It's a ball! Better than a motorcycle. Come on!"

Jenna cinched her backpack down tightly and climbed on behind Sean. "This is great," she said.

"Hold on," he ordered. "You have to wrap your arms around my waist. Just follow my lead and lean with me. OK?"

Jenna did as directed. Her chin hit him on his back, between his shoulder blades. "I can't see anything," she laughed.

"Look off to the sides. If you want to, I'll let you drive on the way home. How's that sound?"

"Great," Jenna said, adjusting herself on the seat. "Let's go. I'm ready."

Sean started the engine and they raced off, gliding over the pristine blanket, leaving a chewed up swath in their wake. The wind bit at her nose, and she gulped at it awkwardly before figuring out how to breathe by tucking her chin and breathing into her chest. They wound their way up the hillside, weaving under tree limbs and over low moguls. Jenna took a breath, closed her eyes, and pretended she was flying. They dipped below the ridge and began making their way downhill into a little meadow that had been cleared

of most of its timber. In the center, a small log cabin with a covered porch rested in the brilliant blue morning light. "Church," Jenna whispered.

"What?" Sean turned around. He had snowflakes in his eyebrows. "I can't hear you," he yelled over the roar of the machine.

"Never mind," Jenna said. "It was nothing."

It didn't take long for them to make their way down the slope, through the trees and then across the flat surface of the meadow. Dark boulders, like sleeping buffalo, lined the path to the cabin. Old growth redwoods and pines encircled the little meadow like soldiers standing at attention, guarding a secret spot. Sean stopped the snow mobile at the steps of the cabin and the two dismounted. Jenna's breath was completely taken away, and she sank to the ground surveying her new home. At the east side of the canyon, a sheer purple rock face boxed in the valley floor. At the base of this, a steady trickle of water escaped from a slit in the rocks, as if the granite turned liquid when exposed to the sunlight. She closed her eyes and breathed in the cool air, tasting the moment, filling her lungs and mouth with the mineral flavor of pine, wet rock, and spring water. A cloud passed over the sun, and Jenna opened her eyes. For the first time that day she relaxed; really let go. Everything would be OK.

"What did you say when we came down the slope?" Sean asked.

"Hmm?" Jenna, turned to her friend.

"You said something earlier. I couldn't hear you."

"Oh. I said, 'Church'." She laughed nervously. "That's what my oldest brother, Patrick, used to call the mountains outside of Seattle where we grew up."

"I like that," Sean said.

"Yeah. Me, too." Jenna sighed and looked away. "He's eight years older than me . . . my favorite brother . . . an absolute wild man. Unfortunately, my dad had it in his head that his oldest boy should be a priest." Jenna laughed, shaking her head. "Patrick would have none of it, of course. When he was sixteen, he refused to attend mass anymore. Just to avoid it, every Friday he'd take off, and we wouldn't see him again until Monday morning."

"Your folks were OK, with that?"

"Hell no! My dad would always ask him, 'Where are you going, Patrick?' and Patrick would always say 'I'm going to church, Dad' They'd yell and scream, but Dad never stopped him. He couldn't. To this day, he still thinks Patrick went up there to smoke pot and get laid. Patrick probably did do that sometimes, but Dad never understood. For Patrick, being in the mountains really was going to church."

Sean nodded knowingly.

Jenna smiled. "Thanks for bringing me. I needed this."

"You're welcome. Let me show you around, and then I'll leave you alone."

Sean showed her the outhouse and woodshed, and then guided her to the small cabin. There was no electricity, and no indoor plumbing. A sturdy iron stove did double duty for cooking and heat. Compared to the primitive facilities, the furnishings were luxurious. A double bed, wooden table and chair, and a well-worn rocking chair occupied the single-room building. Two

raw pine cabinets served as counter space and storage for the cooking supplies, bedding, and lighting.

"How did she ever get all of this furniture in here? Dog sled?" Jenna asked.

"No. When the snow melts you can get up here on a dirt road that leads from the main road down into the meadow here. The snowplows won't clear it 'cause it's a private road, so we take the snow mobile."

"Well, this is wonderful."

"Yeah, it is."

They stood in silence for several minutes, each lost in their own thoughts, staring out over the blue-white meadow.

Finally, Sean slapped his hat against his thigh and broke the silence. "I'm gonna go," he said. "Do you need anything else?"

"I don't think so."

"OK. Then I'll be back in a week. There's no phone, and your nearest neighbor is twelve miles south of here. So take care of yourself. I'll leave the keys in the shed with the snow mobile if anything happens and you need to get out."

"I'll be fine," Jenna assured him.

He winked at her. "I know you will."

Jenna followed him outside and leaned against the porch railing. She closed her eyes and took a long slow breath.

"God, I could stay here forever."

Sean laughed. "We'll see if you're still saying that when I come back for you next Sunday." He straddled the machine and adjusted his hat down

low over his brow. "There aren't any storms forecasted, just clear and cold weather. Take care of yourself.

"I will."

He started the snow mobile, and turned to Jenna. "If you get cabin fever, there's a pair of cross-country skis in the woodshed. You know how to use 'em?"

"I haven't since I was a kid. But I'm sure I'll remember."

"Good. There's a trail off to the West there. It's marked by blue arrows on the trees, just above the snow line. You'll come to a steep incline after a mile or so, and then things level off a bit. After about three more miles, you'll come to a V-shaped canyon. I haven't been over there for a few years, but as I recall it's worth the trip."

"Thanks. I'll do that."

He smiled and pulled away. "Not a bad way to start off the year," he called back.

"The best," she yelled at his back as he disappeared into the tree line.

After Sean left, Jenna sat cross-legged on the planks of the wooden porch and let herself be perfectly still, trying to melt into the landscape. The temperature outside was crisp but not terribly cold, probably in the forties, and the cool air massaged her lungs with each breath.

Jenna surveyed her surroundings one last time, and then went into the cabin. The air inside was no warmer than that outside. The first order of business was to get a fire started. She found plenty of wood already cut into manageable pieces and stacked neatly on the porch. She found a box of

matches on top of the stove, but no kindling. Everything outside was either wet or snow-covered. For a moment, she thought about using pages from her journal but then remembered a trick her brother had once showed her. Grabbing a butter knife from the counter, she tromped back outside and through the snow, and then began prowling the treeline inspecting the trunks on the gray-green pines. At last she found what she was searching for and started whittling away at a yellow waxy deposit on a large pine behind the cabin. The yellow wax chipped off into her hands, and below a thicker substance peeled away from the bark in gooey chunks like caramel. She broke off a narrow twig and poked it into the ball of oozing sap. With solid chunks of pitch in her hand, and the amber sap clinging like a lollipop on the end of her twig, she marched back through her own foot steps and set her prizes carefully underneath the wood stacked in the stove. When the lit match touched the ball of sap it burst into a tiny flaming orb. She stared at the burning ball that shone like a sun in the center of her stove. Gently, she blew on the small flame, and as it became stronger, the pitch below it also ignited. Gradually the stacked wood began to smoke. After twenty minutes, she had a roaring fire.

"Just like riding a bicycle," she said, admiring her work. "I guess some things you just don't forget."

That first day, Jenna spent her time acclimating to her new surroundings. Unpacking was quick and easy; she was already wearing most of the clothes she had brought on the trip. Other than the clothes on her back, she had only brought a few changes of socks and underwear and another long-sleeved T-shirt and sweats. The remainder of her belongings consisted

of books, a journal, toiletries, and food. Everything else was already stocked in the cabin. For almost an hour, she just rocked in the chair beside the stove and looked out through the window at the mountains and billowy clouds gliding across the bright blue sky. The cabin received plenty of light and warmed quickly. Chimney smoke snaked in front of the windows, winding its way into the trees, while somewhere off in the distance two hawks circled below the granite cliffs of the eastern ashen mountain face. Stripped of clutter, Jenna remembered how much she loved living alone and thought about her condo back home, sitting dark and empty this past month while she had lived in the bustling, colorful Casey home. A mood of simplicity--of the tidy perspective that all was as it should be--settled upon her, and she breathed it in deeply. A cloud passed across the sun, throwing a shadow on the floor that looked like an elephant, the arched trunk pointing to a stack of books on the floor beside the bed. Reluctantly, she rose and placed more wood on the fire. The moment had passed; it was time to get to work.

The books on the floor in front of her represented all of the texts which Jeff and Anne had felt would educate Jenna the most quickly in the complicated history and philosophies of the Hindu religion, and in particular, of Baba's teachings. Baba, Jenna had learned from her readings, was considered an avatar, a god living in human form. He was said to possess miraculous healing and psychic abilities and could even materialize objects and present himself in many different places at once. The ancient Hindu stories, pantheon of divine beings, and Baba devotee testimonials, so far had only stirred a restless anger and confusion inside Jenna. She understood them, but she didn't believe them. There was, however, one book which had

made a strong impact on her, *Achieving Yoga Grace*, written by an elderly Indian woman who had devoted her life to the study and practice of yoga. When she had discovered Baba Sai Ram, Mahari Govanan was already an old woman and had already found her spiritual center. Baba, she said, was simply her reward for already achieving yoga grace.

Jenna stared at the collection of books, and then, like the little ball of sap that had burst into flames when she held the match to it, she felt in one great burst of knowingness what she had to do. Carefully, she stacked all but *Achieving Yoga Grace* into a pile and shoved the books under the bed. Although her intention upon packing all of the books had been to come up here and re-read them, she realized now that was a mistake. She didn't need more words. She wasn't going to find the Baba that Jeff loved--the Baba that Jenna truly wanted to know--in the pages of these books. She had to find him in herself, like Mahari Govanan had done. She had to cleanse herself, open herself--her heart--to receive Baba. Only then, only when she, Jenna Donnelly, had found some crumb of grace within herself could she expect to know anything divine.

The program was simply written, but contrary to all that Jenna had practiced in her daily life before meeting the Caseys. According to Govanan, the way to achieve grace was everything in moderation, or not at all. Jenna's main tenant all her life was everything passionately and fully, or not at all. Though simple, Jenna knew the road ahead of her would not be easy. She tore a single sheet of paper out of her journal and then tucked the book under the bed beside the others. At the top of the piece of paper, she wrote, "Daily Program" and copied the outline of the schedule of daily living that Govanan

described. The plan was designed to strengthen and purify the body, open the heart, and ease the mind. According to the author, the combination of these three in a healthy relationship naturally led to spiritual well-being and balance, a grace that allowed for the experience and expression of a healthy, loving soul. Imbalance came from the senses, which, when allowed to define or motivate, can lead the seeker into illusion and false belief. To prevent this over-emphasis on the senses, aspirants should avoid meat, alcohol, tobacco, stimulants, sex, material gain, and negative thoughts. Aspirants should fill their day with physical exercise (preferably yoga), meditation, vegetarian diet, celibacy, charity, and positive thoughts. Under any other conditions, Jenna would never consider such an ascetic lifestyle, but up here--alone in a cabin without any meat, alcohol, tobacco, stimulants, sex, or chance of material gain--this was a commitment she could keep for one week. What was there to distract her except her own negative thoughts? With all the other temptations eliminated, she felt she could tackle this one.

Her goal was to purify. She wanted to wash away all of the layers of self-perception and look at the stripped down image of Jenna Donnelly. To do this, she improvised a little on Govanan's suggested daily routine to create one for herself that began with waking at sunrise, meditation, yoga, tea and toast, housekeeping, play, and then a rest and relaxation in the afternoon, followed by yoga again, and then a single meal at night. Before bed, she would meditate again and record her day in her journal before sleep.

Jenna felt satisfied and excited about the coming week. When she had finished outlining her plan, the sun had disappeared completely, and darkness settled upon the cabin. She lit the lamps on the table and beside the

bed, and then prepared a pot of rice and sat it on the stove to cook. The tea pot whistled beside it. While the food cooked, she pulled the quilt from the bed and stretched out on the floor to rest beside the fire. She lay there staring through the window at the stars and listening to the fire crackling, and the evening noises of scrambling animals, and the tentative calls of birds outside in the meadow.

The tea finished first. She gulped the warm liquid, then poured a second cup and settled back to draw a map of the stars in her journal. The names of the constellations had been long forgotten, but she wanted to remember the picture of that enormous sky with all the twinkling lights. When the rice finally finished, she warmed a jar of thick cashew gravy and spread it over the steaming rice. To Jenna's growling stomach and tired body, it was a feast. She scooped the food directly out of the hot pan, leaving nothing but a thin coating of sauce on the bottom.

After dinner, she cleaned things up and then lay watching the fire and listening to the night. Although it was barely 8:30, she felt herself drifting to sleep. After building up the fire one last time, she crawled into bed and fell into a deep sleep.

Once during the night, she woke and couldn't remember where she was. Shadows from the firelight danced on the gray walls. She remained awake, listening to flying insects smack into the windows and watched the sky turn from black to gray to fiery pink.

The fire had gone out hours earlier. She hated getting out of her warm bed to start it. The embers at the bottom of the stove still had a bit of life left in them. With a little gentle coaxing and patient feeding, the sparks soon

leapt into flame. Once the fire burned briskly, Jenna slipped her boots on her bare feet, pulled her coat over her shoulders, and walked outside to the outhouse. Behind this, the spring gurgled out of the rock face, and ran in a trickle down to a puddle of melted snow. She cupped her hands in the cool flow, and splashed it over her face and neck, and cleaned her teeth with her finger. Grooming completed, she sat on a round boulder and pulled her knees to her chest to warm her bare legs. The sun had risen over the eastern range, and the sky was filled with morning pinks and blues. The smell of smoke hung heavily over the crisp wet pine smell of the meadow. For a brief moment, she had a terrible longing for a cup of coffee and strips of warm bacon, but she pushed it aside and scooped a handful of cool water into her mouth instead.

Meditation that morning started off poorly, as she could not settle down at first and still her thoughts. Time moved so slowly she kept opening her eyes, squinting down at her watch to see if the twenty minutes had elapsed yet. Finally, she settled down a little and was able to concentrate on her breath and stilling her thoughts.

She did her yoga postures on the quilt spread out on the floor in front of the fire. As she flowed into the standing postures, leaning sideways into the half moon and down and across her body into the triangle, she was filled with a comfortable, simple feeling. She shut her eyes and released her restlessness, envisioning it leaving her like bright orange and red and green snakes slithering out of the soles of her feet. She moved into the warrior pose, her left leg bent at a 45 degree angle, and her right extended out behind her, with her arms stretched out at shoulder height in front of her, as if she

were about to throw a javelin. This posture always pulled her hips and upper back into alignment and made her feel a rush of strength. She thought of India and Baba and Jeff, and did as Anne directed, meditating on them, seeking to move past the stuck places. She inhaled and dropped into the swan position, a seated posture that required her right leg to extend behind her, while the left leg was bent in front, like a half split. She raised her hands over her head and arched back, and her breastbone cracked in the center, opening up her chest and lungs. She inhaled and exhaled, holding the position, and closed her eyes. It felt almost too good to leave the posture . . . but everything in moderation. She finished her asanas with a series of the salute to the sun, and then moved into a shoulder stand. Her head had cleared, and she was more focused when she came down out of the shoulder stand and lay down in savasana, or the corpse pose, for her final relaxation.

After yoga, Jenna made a cup of tea and toast and then occupied most of the morning with housekeeping, cleaning up the little mess she had made in the cabin and splitting more wood. The sky was clear, and the day had blossomed into a gorgeous afternoon full of sun and promise. Although she thought about taking the skis and going exploring, she decided against it and stuck close to the cabin, exploring tentatively along the exposed boulders and poking her feet tentatively into snow drifts to see which would support her weight. Not until she was wet from toe to hip, did she finally come in and remove her clothing and set them by the fire to dry. The rest of the day passed gracefully, according to her plan. By the time she fell asleep, Jenna was beginning to feel hopeful and to believe that maybe she would make the trip to India after all.

She went to bed early and fell immediately into a deep sleep. Although she didn't usually have very vivid dreams, that night she dreamed she was running up a white sand dune. The hot wind stung her cheeks like insect bites. When she reached the top of the dune, she was struck by a blinding flash of light, and she clutched her burning eyes as she stumbled down the dune and fell against the sandy bottom just as a terrible scream echoed across the blazing open space. Squinting her eyes against the heat waves, she could just make out a row of people lined with their backs turned to her. They walked in unison toward a line of trees at the horizon beyond. Jenna called to them, but none stopped. She ran after them, and by the time she staggered to the tree-line, the people had all disappeared into the forest, and Jenna was alone, and the world behind her was amazingly bright, and white, for as far as she could see. She plunged into the trees, groping in the darkness, guided only by touch and a compelling need to feel, and be felt, by others. At last she reached a clearing and saw through the rising morning mist a barren landscape, charred and smoldering, filled the entire horizon, with trees chopped in grotesque stumps like the burned skeletal remains of man and beast reaching toward something frozen in a permanent state of unrest.

Jenna woke with a scream, alone, feeling as if she were being watched.

The rest of the night she tossed and woke frequently until morning finally arrived and she had an excuse to get up and get busy. She followed the same routine, though she didn't find as much peace in her activities as she had yesterday. Her dream faded from her immediate consciousness, but a distant feeling of dread hovered over the cabin all morning. With effort, she convinced herself that she was just working through negative thoughts and

that the best way to erase them from her mind was to keep active and busy. She found the cross-country skis in the shed and decided today would be a good day to go exploring.

The trail that Sean had told her of was easy to find, but once in the trees it was harder than she thought to follow the guiding blue arrows. Once, she lost the trail, and then spotted it again almost forty yards to her right. She had wandered off, but not badly. The incline appeared shortly after she found the trail again. The push up the mountain strained every muscle in her legs and arms, but it felt good to exert herself. She found a comfortable pace and trudged forward, eventually finding a bit of grace in the even rhythm and stillness of thought. After several hours of traveling, the land opened up, and before her spread the valley that Sean had guided her to.

The entire landscape had been clear-cut and stood barren of vegetation. Mist rose out of scarred stumps, desolate and otherworldly, like a vision of the apocalypse; like a manifestation of her dream. She sank to a rock beside her and sat on the ridge looking out on the valley below her. As far as she could see, the entire downward slope of the hillside had been cut bare, and the gnarled stumps poked through the soft layer of snow like deformed nipples on dried white breasts. She ran her fingers through her hair and felt ashamed and embarrassed, as if she were witnessing something very personal, very painful, and not intended for her viewing. Jenna couldn't continue. The sun shone directly overhead, warming her shoulders, and suddenly the juxtaposition of such strong forces of life and death made her quest, her existence, seem insignificant. Try as she might, she simply felt silly and pretentious being here waiting for a vision, as if the universe had

nothing better to do than help her decide whether or not to go to India. She turned back around and headed down the ridge to her cabin.

It was well past noon; two o'clock she estimated. Moving quickly, she could probably make it back in two hours. The closer she came to her meadow, the more the apocalyptic vision of the other valley seemed as unreal as her dream. Entering the meadow, Jenna had an eerie feeling that someone was following her. She turned to look behind her, but there was no one there. As she traced her way along the creek, a cold wind whipped at her neck.

It was almost time for her afternoon yoga, and she was ready for it. Her body ached. She gathered more wood and glanced at the sky as a cloud passed over the sun. She hated to admit it, but it looked like a storm was ahead. She decided to move a pile of wood under the shelter of the porch so she wouldn't have to walk to the shed if a storm should hit. Despite her worries, the evening passed uneventfully. The storm kept moving, but Jenna didn't feel she would be lucky enough to avoid a good blast during the night. She drifted to sleep with the whispering voice of the wind sighing outside.

On her fourth day at the cabin, Jenna woke well after sunrise. She pulled her boots on and stepped out into the morning, unprepared for the sight that greeted her. A pristine blanket of new snow covered the meadow. The sky rumbled; at any minute Jenna expected it to break loose and begin to storm again. After her meditation and yoga, the first flakes began to slowly drift down. She sat in the doorway of her cabin, wrapped in a quilt and sipping hot tea. The flakes moved silently through the air, each individual bearing its own identity until guided by destiny it fell into the welcoming

carpet below and became part of a larger identity. Jenna found great fulfillment watching the silent show from the warm and comfort of her blanketed position on the porch. After a while, her breath slowed, and she imagined she was drifting through the sky as effortlessly as the flakes falling in front of her, in a white place undulating with the clean silence of peace. She threw off the blanket, removed her clothes slowly, and approached the steps of the porch where the snow flakes collided and melted on her warm skin. Threadlike rivers of virgin, pure, sweet water ran down her arms, dripped faintly off her reaching nipples. She stepped away from the porch, into the billowy snow drifts, her flesh stinging and then relaxing in the prickly ice. A soft wind blew at her back and her hair stuck in wet clumps on her neck. She knew she could only stay out in the cold, naked and exposed, for a few more seconds before her skin would start to burn. But she wanted more; she couldn't get enough of the cold flakes swirling in the air around her. Never had she felt more completely exposed, or so protected. She bent and scooped up a handful of the new snow and ate it hungrily, and smoothed the rest over her belly and thighs. It melted instantly and blended with the other vein-like rivers of melting flakes that had found her body. Just as she thought she could stand in the snow no longer, an icy breeze whipped across her back and she slipped forward, plunging into the snow. She sank through it like a hot iron, the edges of the drift collapsing around her, completely encasing her in an icy grip. Only her head poked out of the snow, as if it were sitting all on its own in snow. She gasped for air in short choking breaths. Suddenly her breathing stilled, and for what seemed to be several minutes, she felt as if she weren't breathing at all. She remembered when she had

similarly experienced this state of breathlessness during her rebirthing; how then she had also felt severed from her body. For one brief moment, she felt as if she had herself melted into the snow, and in the stillness of that amazing white space she felt weightless and new and clean.

Barreling into this peace, her breath found her body again, and she jumped with the stinging memory of her bare skin freezing in the blanket of snow. She scrambled to her feet and found something solid to push off of. She pulled herself up and into the house.

Two hours later, wearing everything she had brought with her and huddled under all of the blankets in the cabin, she was still shivering. Unable to warm herself, she abandoned the rest of the day's daily routine and spent it in bed, instead.

She curled up in a ball to wait out the storm. But then what? Suddenly, she had the overwhelming feeling that her work up here was done, though she didn't know why or what she had accomplished. It was only Wednesday. Sean wasn't coming for four more days, and she still hadn't made up her mind about going to India. If she went to India, it had to be because she wanted something in herself, not because she wanted Jeff and Anne. And further, she knew enough about Baba Sai Ram to know that if she went to see him, it had to be because he was calling her. And, quite frankly, he wasn't. She hadn't realized how much she wanted to go to India, to stay with Jeff and Anne, until now when she knew she couldn't. She thought about going back to her law practice and maybe finding some way to still have the yoga classes and maintain her friendship with the Caseys when they returned. But she knew that wouldn't work. She either had to go in for

all of it, or none of it. Either she was willing to go to India and honestly explore the deeper aspects of herself, or she was wasting everybody's time. She knew she would miss Jeff and Anne, but she was willing to let them go if she had to. As she said this to herself, she felt sad and alone but accepted the truth of her feelings. The snow outside the window blew in soft circles like tiny fairies flying in a synchronized dance. She slept to take her mind off of the deeper question that hovered just below the surface: that maybe there wasn't a deeper aspect to herself; that maybe she couldn't discover her spirituality because there just wasn't any in her.

In the middle of the night she woke soaking wet, stripped off all her clothes, and climbed back into bed with only a sheet. Almost immediately, she began to dream.

In the dream she walked in the woods until she stumbled into the clear-cut valley that she had discovered yesterday. This time she walked down into the grove and touched the charred and mangled remains of trees. From a distance, they almost looked like dead bodies, and she touched them to be sure they weren't. She had crossed most of the length of the valley when she felt that she was being watched. She ran back into the living trees, trying to find her cabin, but the forest was dark and she couldn't see. Her hands and knees bled from stumbling, and her bare feet froze in the snow. She saw a shadow of a man to her left, but when she turned he disappeared. She continued on, but then the man's figure appeared again. This time, she didn't look at him, though she began moving toward him against her will, presenting herself to him. She stood in front of him and the man smiled at her with Jack's confident black eyes, and she wanted him like she had never

wanted any other man. Her whole body begged to be touched, and he accommodated her, holding her in a grip so tight she felt his skin entering her own skin, and she liked it. Then, deep in the back of her head something told that this was wrong, very wrong, and with an enormous force of will she pushed him away--she pushed everything away--and as she inhaled deeply, she felt the suction of every one who had ever loved her leaving her, and then all was silent and empty; she stood in a dark enormous place, naked and cold. In this empty place, everywhere she turned there were lights, but each time she looked directly at them they disappeared. She could only see them if she looked out of the corners of her eyes. Just when she thought she would die of grief and pain in this emptiness, she saw a tiny thread of light, just the barest string, floating above her. She reached up and grabbed hold of it like a ribbon and pulled. There was still nothing. She couldn't feel anything, but with the string she began to weave a circular pattern that reoccurred and joined together with other circles through spokes that jutted out like wagon wheels. Eventually, the circles turned to tiny flashing lights of every color imaginable and some colors she couldn't even name, and the connecting strings suddenly seemed to make perfect sense, and she felt order forming in the chaos she floated in. "We are The One," the lights sang to her. "We are The One." The web of light filled the emptiness, sealing all of the spaces of darkness with its pulsing color, and then, like a filmy skin, it pulled away spinning and spiraling into a single point--and then disappeared all together. "No," Jenna screamed, fighting her way through the darkness, trying to follow the light. "Don't leave me here alone." But the light was gone, and

once again she floated in space, an expanded space larger than she had started in, and she was completely, painfully, alone.

She woke with a jolt, instinctively curling herself into a ball and sobbed. With each wrenching breath, a knotted ball of pain grew in her chest and choked her throat. The cold air stung her lungs, but she gulped it anyway, welcoming the physical pain over the emotional. After she had cried all she could, Jenna's body still shook convulsively. The sheets, which were all she had left on the bed, were now also soaked through with perspiration and tears. She felt her brow and realized this dream was more than just a nightmare. She was burning up with fever and desperately thirsty. She tore the sheets from the bed and wrapped herself in the quilt. Although she knew it had to be close to morning, the night was still pitch black, and the wind howled and rattled the windows. Although she couldn't tell, she assumed it was still snowing. She fell onto the bed, wrapped naked in her quilt, and drifted in the delirious timelessness of a fever.

"A love without face or body." Jeff had said that was what Baba was. Though she searched for him in her heart, she couldn't find anything. Then it hit her like a slap in the face: that place of emptiness in her dream, that big expanding darkness, that was her heart, and it was cold and full of nothing, and that was all she was left with now, nothing. She cried again, as if mourning for a lost lover; for the emptiness in herself; for the disconnection; for the chance and the loss of family; for the lack of love and God and stability. She cried for everything, until she began to throw up and had to stumble outside in the wind and black night to allow the pain to flow from her in loud, dry heaves.

"Even my purging is empty," she thought. "I'm nothing. I'm not the color of light; I'm nothing."

She decided to go back to her life and law practice. This would be her last adventure with the Caseys.

Jenna woke Thursday morning with a terrible headache and couldn't stop shivering. Her throat was swollen, and she was burning up with fever. She knew she had to make a fire and eat something, since she hadn't eaten anything yesterday. But when she tried to stand up, she nearly fainted, and she fell back down again. Most of the morning, she lay in bed drifting in and out of fitful dreams, having the impression that others were dreaming her dreams with her, that she was being dreamed about, and that somewhere there was a discussion occurring about her. Once, she woke, thinking it was Sunday and she had missed Sean. By evening, her fever still hadn't broken. She was so disoriented she didn't remember where she was anymore. Her only guiding thought was that she had to stay, to wait, but she couldn't remember what she was waiting for.

That night Baba came to her. In years to come, Jenna still wouldn't know if what she saw was a vision, a dream, or fever delirium. He never spoke. He didn't need to. He simply sat by her bed and held her hand, and in his touch she felt the most overwhelmingly gentle love, like pure golden sunlight held in her hand. Before he left, he placed his thumbs gently on her forehead, and she felt the pressure leave her head and throat, and the fever drained from her like a poison liquid. He smiled, and the last thing she saw before he walked away were brown sandal-clad feet walking out the door.

When she woke, the fever was gone, and she was able to focus and locate herself for the first time in days. She was pretty sure it was Saturday, although to be honest, she knew it could easily be Sunday. All she knew for sure was that she had been delirious for many days, and she was starving, positively famished. She couldn't wait to build a fire, but instead opened a can of lentil soup and ate it cold. Her stomach hurt for a moment after she finished, but then she felt a deep relief and wanted more and knew that was a good sign. Her body was terribly dehydrated, but she had to drink the water slowly because her stomach couldn't hold it down. Her hands shook so much, it took a long time to get a fire started in the dead coals. But once it began, it took off quickly. She warmed a pot of water, took a sponge bath in front of the stove, and then washed her hair out on the porch. It felt as if layers of filth had washed off and she wore brand new skin. Her body still ached with the poisonous residue of a prolonged fever, and she felt like she had forgotten something very important. It was a haunting feeling that hovered over her just beyond her grasp, the same way the stars in her visions had disappeared each time she tried to look at them. She wouldn't rush it. She knew she would remember everything once she was back home again.

"Home," she thought. "Which one? Jeff's? Mine? India?" Then she remembered that she had decided to go back to her law practice. Now she couldn't remember why she had decided that. Going back to her old life, to her old self, seemed impossible--physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Something inside of her had shifted, and Jenna felt a new clarity. Without any doubt, she heard Baba--not Jeff, not Anne, not a voice, not a face or body at all; just something deep in her heart--and it called her to India.

III. *Karma*

(consequence, moral compensation)

Release and make right all of the petty hurts and desires that stand between you and God. All pain, all grief, all loss is ultimately a step away from God; just as all love, all joy, all healing is ultimately a step toward God. The right path requires moral honesty and courage, for it will lead you toward an intimacy with the Divine that is in you and the God that is without, such as you have never before known.

-- *Baba Sai Ram*

CHAPTER 9***Bharath*****(India; Land of the Lord)**

Travel in India is never easy. Only in a land of such devout and varied faiths could a population master the necessary patience and acceptance of the delays, confusion, lost baggage, and bureaucratic nightmares of travel to, and within, the country. They left on January 11, 1995, because Jeff figured out numerologically that date was a "9", the number of spiritual growth and expansion. This placed their arrival at Baba's ashram two days later on Friday, the 13th, the most powerful day in numerology. Jeff couldn't have been more delighted by this cosmic coincidence. The irony, however, was not lost on Jenna.

After twenty-nine hours of air time, they had traveled from San Diego, to New York, to London, to Bombay, and still had a full day's journey ahead of them to the southern state of Karnataka and Baba's ashram south-east of Mysore. To circumvent the lost baggage problem, they each brought only one carry-on bag. They depended completely on Anne to navigate the group

through all of the travel changes, and she accepted her job with a heroic excitement. This was Anne at her best.

Jenna's first view of India arrived as the plane broke through the layer of smoggy brown light wrapping the Bombay skyline in angry orange rays. Even from the air, the incredible mass of humanity populating the island city of Bombay was apparent and shocking. Stepping out of the plane in the international terminal was even more overpowering. Though this was mid-January and supposedly the "cool" season--the three Indian seasons being the "hot", the "wet," and the "cool"--the temperature was well into the 80's, made all the more uncomfortable by the very density of the air laden with the odor of spices, exhaust, sandalwood, musk, animal and human waste. The powerfully exotic scents entered directly into her brain like electric shocks. Her body was still programmed for the cold solitude of Mt. Shasta when she stepped out into the orgiastic sensory overload of Bombay. Like a bear blinking its eyes in the sun after a long hibernation, she took in her surroundings in clipped images. Bike bells, honking cars, screeching street vendors, clamoring thin-limbed children, extended arms of toothless beggars; all of it pressed upon her in a frightening and exciting rush of color and texture and emotion. As Jenna marveled at her new surrounding--pausing to inhale and gawk and listen--Anne tugged at her arm, completely focused on leading her troops without delay toward the bus that transported international passengers to the domestic terminal.

"How much time do we have before our connecting flight?" Jenna asked Anne as they pushed their way through the throngs of bodies making their way to the bus stop.

"Two hours," she replied, looking over her shoulder. "Help me, Jenna. There are thirty-two of us. Do you see everyone still?"

"Nope. I lost everyone somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean. Don't worry, they'll find their way," Jenna laughed. "Baba will provide."

Anne tugged at a heavy bag hanging from her shoulder. "Jeff might be willing to trust Baba to guide us smoothly to his ashram, but just the same, I think trusting him with the uncertainty of bus schedules is taking faith a bit too far."

"Come on," Jenna urged. "We have plenty of time. Let's go explore! I can't just pass through Bombay and not even say I had my pocket picked."

"Give me your wallet, if it will make you happy, but if you don't get on this bus now I guarantee you, you won't make that flight to Bangalore."

"Then I'll take the next plane."

Anne laughed. "You never know if there will be a next plane. Come on, there's our bus. Help me count heads."

Jenna sighed and helped Anne herd the group onto the bus. It seemed like such a shame to breeze through Bombay as if this part of India, this vibrant, anguished city, were only a bus stop on the way to the "real" India--Baba's India--the secluded ashram named *Premarasa*, "the taste of divine, unconditional love."

An hour and half more by air and they were in Bangalore, an entirely different city from Bombay. Bangalore had the burning desire for modernization and held a reputation for being an intellectual and political center of the region. The downtown was more Westernized than Bombay, with discos, cafes, and tall office buildings. This was modern India at its best;

this was also where the train that was to take them to Mysore derailed, and they waited in the train depot under Anne's watchful eye for nearly five hours before they were told that no more trains would be going south that day. The small man in the ticket booth suggested quite cordially that the group stay in Bangalore and get on a waiting list for tickets on a train leaving for Mysore tomorrow or the next day. Undaunted, Anne walked across the street to the bus station, and returned twenty minutes later with thirty-two bus tickets to Mysore. Jeff didn't even ask how she did it; he took it for granted that everything would work out. Jenna, however, saw that the lines in Anne's brow had deepened, and she was pale and shaking. Within an hour they were on the road again, and only seven hours late for their appointed meeting time with Rami, who had left several days ahead of the rest of the group to secure a private bus to take them all to *Premarasa*.

They drove that night through urban sprawl, outlying shanties, farms and villages tucked between the spotted thickets of trees. Jenna watched it pass by her like a movie; this was the closest she would get to the India outside of Baba's ashram, this view from her dirty square window. Once on the highway, Anne opened a metallic thermos and passed around cups of warm green tea and cheese sandwiches wrapped in wax paper. The group ate their dinner noisily. Jenna tried to shut the chatter out, and flow with the patterns of the land that passed her by. She still was unsettled by the heat and the thick air, and longed for a cool, sharp mountain breeze. The moon shone on the white spires of a Hindu temple, the sides carved with figures of bulls, elephants, and gods with many arms. The road began to wind up a hillside,

and they passed a school with large banyan trees circling the front patio.

Jenna pointed to a sign above the door.

Anne translated, "Our Lord Baba Sai Ram's School for Boys. They're orphans. Most of their mothers were prostitutes. AIDS. There are thousands of children like these all over India. Baba has started several schools here in the south to house and educate the children in their country's historical and spiritual heritage."

"Why just boys? Where's the school for the girls?" Jenna asked.

Anne shrugged. "Things are different here. Baba has started a group home in Mysore--a sort of convent if you will--where the girls learn a trade, or homemaking skills. Sometimes, the girls are fortunate to be placed in homes with families who raise them until they are old enough to marry. Baba watches over them and helps them find suitable mates. He makes sure they do not return to the streets that their mothers came from."

"That's it? That's the best they can hope for? No education, no career, just prostitution or marriage? Doesn't seem like much of a choice."

Anne shrugged again. "Although Baba can't alter the karma that caused these children to choose to be born into such conditions, the lessons they need to learn can often be achieved less painfully with the proper support and environment. This is one of Baba's goals for the future. To help young people move out of the drama of false attraction to find suitable mates that will create the right opportunity to evolve and grow. Baba has always tried to guide his devotees toward meaningful unions that will serve the individual and the community."

Jenna's brow pinched over the bridge of her nose. "What about love? Doesn't that have anything to do with it?"

"Ah, love," Anne said nodding. "That's the easy part. Once you have Baba in your heart, you love everybody. Finding the right person to share your life with is the tricky part. Baba helps his devotees find mates that they can live with respectfully and purposefully--with meaning. When Baba arranges a marriage, it's an incredible honor. They are powerful unions that have the potential to heal lifetimes of karmic misery."

"I dunno," Jenna said. "Arranged marriages. Sounds pretty archaic to me. What's in it for Baba?"

Anne laughed. "Nothing's in it for Baba. Why would you say that?"

"There must be. Why else would he do it?"

"Because he's an avatar, and it's his gift to us to guide us where we can't see."

They sat at the back of the bus and Jenna considered the heads of her companions as they bobbed in front of her. Some of the company were married; many had children with them on this journey. She wondered if any of them had found their mates this way.

"Did you ever ask Baba to fix you up?" Jenna asked.

"No." Anne paused for a moment and then looked away. "My sexual preferences run contrary to Baba's approval." She laughed nervously. "It's better for me this way. Celibacy has grown on me. And I have Jeff and our friends, so I never lack family."

Jenna studied Anne's profile as she considered this new information. In the faint light she could just make out the fine lines that branched from

the corners of her blue eyes to her hair line. She wore her blonde hair cut short and blunt at the chin, and never a drop of make-up. It was a handsome face; not quite pretty because of the sharp lines of her square jaw, high cheekbones, and straight nose, but striking nonetheless.

"Anne?" Jenna asked.

"Hmm?"

"How old are you?"

"Why?" Anne turned toward her friend and Jenna saw the strain of the past few days written in dark circles under her usually bright eyes.

"Because I think you are far too young and far too lovely to turn yourself into a monk." She took Anne's hand in her own, kissed the knuckles, and then spread it back out on the seat beside them, smoothing each finger individually.

Jenna nodded. "Then you should get on with living--even if Baba does disagree with your sexual preferences. Love is love; it's all Baba no matter what form it takes." Jenna laughed. "At least, that's what Jeff tells me."

Anne smiled. "Yes, there are many different kinds of love, but right now I'm content with the kind that comes without a face or body."

"Yeah, Yeah. I've had that same love for nearly two months now. I'm about ready for a body."

Anne laughed. "You're good for me, Jenna. For all of us. I'm glad you came."

"So am I," Jenna said. "Now I want you to march right up there and ask Baba for a good woman and we'll all throw you a big wedding."

Anne sputtered on her tea. "Would you shut up? I never should have told you anything."

"But you did. And now I'm going to be looking out for you."

They drove for several hours, and the night blackened and the countryside flew by blanketed in shadows. Jeff slept peacefully in the seat in front of them, and most of the other pilgrims dozed also. Jenna fidgeted on the narrow seat, unable to get comfortable. Only Anne sat wide awake, refusing to sleep until they met Rami in Mysore and her job as guide was done. At 11:45 p.m., on Friday the 13th, they found him waiting patiently outside the Mysore bus depot, trusting completely that Baba would deliver his friends to him.

"This is cause for celebration," Jeff shouted when he saw Rami. "Here is our dear friend Rami, waiting for us still, even into the night. Baba has once again watched over our journey and blessed us with a safe arrival."

Jenna looked at Anne, waiting for her take a little credit, but the elder Casey said nothing. Although exhausted, Anne held her composure until the last member of the group had boarded the bus. Once Rami slipped behind the wheel of the tattered silver-blue bus and coaxed the transmission into gear, Anne collapsed into her seat and fell into a sleep like death.

Mysore slipped by like a hot, dark ocean. The only impressions Jenna could wring from the darkness were the overwhelming smell of sandalwood and the pleasant warmth of the night air, which was lighter and more fluid than Bangalore. *Premarasa* lay approximately forty-five miles east of Mysore near the town of Somnathpur, surrounded by rural countryside on an expanse of land that included a creek and small lake, and abutted an expanse

of forested mountains. Jenna felt she knew all about the ashram already from Jeff's reverent descriptions of it, but she was anxious to finally see it now that they were so close.

"How much longer until we get there?" she asked Jeff.

He sat beside her, literally on the edge of his seat. "About twenty minutes. Do you see that break in the trees up the east side of the mountain there?"

Jenna squinted. "Yes."

"That's *Premarasa*; that's Baba's ashram."

Jenna kept her eye on the clearing as they wound their way up the hillside. As they continued, Jenna gulped the clear air after the choking dust and odor of the city. Finally the bus rounded a bend in the road, and the gates of Baba's ashram rose like a wave of gray stone in a clearing of lush grass and wildflowers. The wrought iron gate stood closed, framed within two huge white marble tigers, their mouths open and roaring upward at the blue sky. Jeff sat rapt in silent devotion, crying unashamedly, bowing and whispering the words of a *bhajan* as the bus neared the gates and finally stopped. Rami pulled the lever and the door opened. A rush of sweet air filled the stuffy vehicle. Jenna felt a powerful desire to plunge herself into the lush waving grass and drink the cool night breeze.

Everyone on the bus sat still. Not a soul stirred or spoke, which made Jeff's crying and rocking and chanting in the still vehicle all the more eerie. Rhadja balanced Jordan on one knee and then the other, trying to distract the fussy child. Everyone waited for Jeff's signal to leave; or if nothing else, to

join him in prayer. But he was conjuring his own images, lost in a private reverie that everyone waited to release him.

Jenna wondered if they had come all this way only to be denied entrance at the gates. She had heard that many Hindu temples didn't allow Westerners inside, especially in the south where Hinduism was the strongest and ancient Indian traditions changed the most slowly. Her stomach sank as she envisioned streams of tie-dyed and bearded freaks driving up to these gates, turned back by peaceful monks who wanted nothing more than peace and freedom to worship without busloads of foreign groupies showing up on their doorstep. For some reason, she remembered how as a child she often took the long way home from school, ducking under the barbed wire fence to cut through a cattle pasture and hop the brick fence of the Forest Hills Cemetery. On Mondays, the air was filled with the scent of fresh roses and lilies placed there by weekend mourners. This was where she had convinced herself she could fly if she could only get enough speed, racing over the clipped lawn all the way to the southeast corner, where she had to climb the lower branches of a maple tree to peek over the fence. Below, in the garden of The Valley of Our Sacred Mother, the nuns weeded the vegetables, or pruned the rainbow array of roses, or strolled quietly in peaceful devotion. Jenna knew they saw her there, but never once did they ever look at her. Never once did they smile and ask her in.

"Where's Rami?" Anne tugged at Jenna's elbow. Her eyes were puffy with sleep and held a frightened, cornered look as she glanced around the bus.

"I don't know," Jenna said, lifted from her memories. "He was right here a minute ago. Why are we waiting?"

Anne shook her head. "I don't know. I don't know what's going on. I wrote that we were coming, but maybe they thought we wouldn't be here until the morning."

"I'm gonna go check it out," Jenna said.

"No. Let me," Anne insisted. Just then, Jeff let out a strange shriek and fell back into his rocking prayer.

The walls felt like they were closing in. Jenna pushed Anne back into her seat. "I need some air. I'll find him."

The gate stood firmly closed, chained with a thick twist of coils and locked with a heavy lock. It seemed strange to have such security in a spiritual oasis. The darkness obscured the view of the road beyond, and the wind whistled in the grass in the surrounding fields. Rami was nowhere to be seen. To her right, a footpath followed the rock fence. After feeling her way through the dark a short distance, she came to an embankment and a small covered temple filled with flowers and candles. The flames blew horizontally in the wind. Rami sat cross-legged in front of a picture of Baba, praying in the same manner as Jeff had in the bus.

"Are we getting inside tonight or not?" she shouted above the wind whistling outside the shelter.

"I am calling Baba," he said. "Our Lord will send an escort when he chooses to receive us."

"Calling him?" Jenna scanned the small enclosure. "There's no phone here. How are you calling him?"

Rami remained facing the photo. "One need only call Baba from his heart, and he will hear."

"From your heart?" Jenna laughed a snorting laugh that blew noisily from her lips. "We just wait here for Baba to hear your heart calling him? That's the plan?"

"It is so."

Jenna stepped out of the temple and walked in a circle through the dewy grass. "Guess you couldn't call while we were driving, so he could have met us here at the gate, huh? I suppose he can't hear you long distance, right?"

Rami didn't answer. Jenna picked a tall flower growing in the grass; the petals were blue around a white center. She would have liked to know the name for it, but guessed it was some sort of daisy. "It's the middle of the night. How long do we wait? I mean, how do you know Baba has heard you?"

Rami rocked and chanted, ignoring Jenna. She threw the flower at him, but it missed and landed at the foot of Baba's picture. A blast of wind smoked through the temple, and the candles sputtered and then flared and went out. Rami rose and bowed to Baba's picture, and then turned to Jenna and repeated the same motion. Dipping his left thumb into a small white packet in his right hand, he placed a bold dot of vibhutti between her eyebrows.

"Again with the vibhutti, Rami?" Jenna asked. "Can't you leave my forehead alone?"

He smiled. "Baba has heard you. Now he will come." He turned and traced his way back to the bus.

Jenna followed, dabbing at the smudge of ash. "I hope he didn't hear me. I wasn't exactly calling very nicely."

"Nevertheless, he has heard you."

Jenna looked up at the sky expecting lightning to smite her.

There was a bustle of activity in the bus as everyone located luggage and backpacks. Anne sat beside Jeff now, pulling a red wool blanket over his shoulders. She smoothed the hair from his eyes and kissed his pale cheek. When Jenna passed, he took her hand and held it to his heart.

"It was you he heard, Jenna. You brought him."

Jenna looked questioningly at Anne and then sat down opposite Jeff. He rocked with her hand against his chest, whispering a silent prayer. She had never seen him so frail; he was like a child, and she was drawn to the slope of his shoulders under the blanket and the swirl of red hair descending from his downturned head. When he looked up at her, his eyes were absolutely golden.

An ancient stooped man appeared at the front gate, unlocked it, and waved them on. The road into the ashram was narrow, paved in gravel that pelted the underside of the bus as they drove over it. The night was too dark for them to fully appreciate their surroundings, but from what she was able to see, the land on either side of the road was fully forested and carpeted in a lush grass. Groups of cattle lay like pale boulders under the trees content and unimpressed with the new arrivals.

"Does all of this belong to Baba?" Jenna asked Jeff.

"It's all *Premarasa*. It's all Baba. It doesn't *belong* to him; it *is* him."

Jenna wasn't sure what he meant, but she didn't argue with him. The bus stopped at a cluster of white-washed buildings. A dozen dwellings, each no more than 20 x 20, formed three sides of a square courtyard; the fourth side opened to the road they just traversed. In the center, three enormous Banyan trees extended their branches over the dwellings, providing both shade and shelter. Each dwelling had a covered patio that opened out into the grassy courtyard. There were no cars, no bicycles, no clutter at all. In fact, the entire complex was eerily neat and quiet.

Anne walked to the front of the bus. "This is the compound for the women and children," she said. "Boys over eight years old should remain with their fathers and continue to the men's compound." Anne directed her attention to Jeff. "Let's all meet in the morning in the dining hall. Is that OK?"

"Wonderful."

Anne nodded. "Good. Then we'll see you all then."

The women filed out the door, following Anne to a dwelling at the far corner of the courtyard. "This is where we'll stay," she said.

"All of us?" Jenna asked incredulously. She did a quick head count. Eight women, four children, one baby. Thirteen total.

"Yep. All of us," Anne said.

"But that's impossible. Lying side by side that gives us each about a foot and half in these huts. We'll never fit."

"We'll make do. We won't be in our rooms much anyway."

"But the kids." Jenna tried her best not to panic at the thought of sleeping with five children in such a small space. "This isn't fair to them to be cooped up in here all day."

"Jenna, this country is full of children who will be sleeping tonight in the streets--or worse. This trip is about modesty and austerity. Baba takes no money, he won't even take gifts from his devotees. Anyone who wants to serve him, is directed back to serve in their community. All of the schools, the hospitals, the orphanages are created and funded by his devotees. These homes," she gestured at the small dormitories, no more than shacks really, that made up the guest compound, "are a concession to his popularity. We have to sleep somewhere, and he has graciously provided us a place. We wait all year for this month that we are allowed to remain here with Baba. Jeff would sleep in the mud for this opportunity, and so would I."

Jenna bit her tongue. "I just thought . . . I mean . . . your house . . ."

"This isn't San Diego." Anne swung open the door, and the group entered a small room with walls covered in the same white-washed plaster. The wood floors had been swept clean, and the walls glistened in the dark night. The room was void of furniture, except for a table with a dish holding a white candle in the center. No plumbing, no electricity. At the far wall, a window peered out on a grassy meadow behind their room.

"Where does that lead?" Jenna asked.

Anne laughed. "To the facilities. Shower and latrine *ala* Mother Nature. Do you see that rock face there?" Anne pointed behind the trees.

"Yes."

"Just below it is a waterfall. It's all curtained off, and the water is simply delicious."

"And cold, no doubt."

"You bet. Kills the carnal desires right quick."

"That and the dearth of men may turn me into a monk after all."

Anne squeezed her arm. "Don't do that. One's enough in this group." She winked at Jenna and then went to help the children out of their muddied shoes.

Perhaps it was the time change, or the excitement of finally arriving, but the small room brimmed with energy despite being nearly two o'clock in the morning, India time. At home, it would be mid-afternoon, and their bodies were still on San Diego time despite the dark night surrounding them and the exhaustion of the journey. Once they had arranged their bags and bedding, the group stretched out to relax, talk, and maybe--if they were lucky--sleep. Vanamalli sat cross-legged on the patio flanked by a pair of blonde college students who had left home and scholarships to trek across India and meet their guru. The other women, except for Rhadja, were new acquaintances to Jenna. Menakshi, was a quiet, devout woman who had two red-headed little girls, both under five, who looked just like their loud and jovial father. The girls had cried pleadingly to their father when he stayed on the bus and continued on to the men's compound. Modesty and austerity or not, it was terrible to separate families. Maria Teresa had been at the Caseys' home since Christmas, but Jenna had not had much of a chance to visit with her because she always seemed in motion, hot on the trail of her six-year-old twins, a boy and girl, book-ends of dark oval eyes and curly hair.

Anne draped a pink and orange scarf over the table, then placed a 5x7 photo of Baba beside the candle in the center. She sprinkled the room with the vibhutti, and Rhadja raised her clear sweet voice in a song of praise and thanks. She had untied her thick yellow braid and her hair fell over Jordan like a curtain as he nursed at her breast. Jenna closed her eyes and breathed deeply. She was hungry and light-headed, and ashamedly admitted that she would kill for a beer right now. Instead, she drank Rhadja's song like a warm and soothing brandy and was filled with a delicious yellow light. It felt wonderful to be here, among friends, in this room humming with feminine voices and energy.

It didn't seem as if she had been asleep for more than an hour, before she awakened. Jenna wasn't sure if the elbow in her kidney or the foot in her nose woke her first, but she was definitely sure that the baby spit on her cheek was the final blow to her attempts at sleep. She wiped her cheek, and scooped Jordan up, high above her head, then pulled him down in a sweeping motion that made him squeal and drool all over her face again. The world was dark still, their room lit by two candles, throwing shadows on the rousing figures. Anne and Rhadja sat cross-legged on their sleeping bags on either side of Jenna, brushing their hair.

"I'm sorry," Rhadja said, dividing her thick blonde hair into three chunks and braiding it. "Did we wake you?"

"Nice trick, sending the little guy to wake me up. How can I get angry with anything so cute." Jenna tucked the squirming little child inside her sleeping bag, where he snuggled between her breasts, searching for a way in.

She laughed. "Sorry kiddo. You'll find no breakfast here." She rolled him over and tickled his tiny collar bones, and he giggled and crawled to his mother, diving head first under the hem of her shirt. Jenna tickled his feet, and he kicked and batted at the air.

"Leave him alone when he's eating, Jenna." Anne thumped Jenna's head with the back of the hairbrush. "The child will get a belly ache."

"Ow," Jenna rolled over and faced Anne. "All he does is eat. He's like a little bird with his beak open all the time. If his belly aches it's only because he's milking his mother dry."

Jordan poked his head out from under his mother's blouse and smiled at the women, his lips still wrapped around Rhadja's dark nipple. His cheeks exploded in a well of dimples.

"See! You've ruined him, Rhadja," Jenna laughed. "He's never gonna be without a tit in his mouth. I can see him at forty, buried in breasts, staring up at his wife with that same smile."

Rhadja squeezed the child's toes. "He's not spoiled. He's just loved."

"Trust me. I've known men with that same smile. He'll never be as happy as he is right now."

"Good," Rhadja squeezed him, and he burped. The three women laughed in the flickering light.

"What time is it anyway?" Jenna asked. "This time change has got me all screwed up." Jenna turned the face of her watch toward the candlelight, trying to make out the numbers.

"It's just after 4:30." Anne rose, searching for her shoes.

"In the morning?"

"Yes," Anne scolded.

"It's the middle of night still." Jenna rolled on her back. "Why are we waking up?"

Anne frowned. "For the *Omkar*. You don't have to go if you don't want to."

Jenna looked around the room. Vanamali and the two other young women had already left. Their sleeping bags were rolled up and carefully stacked against the wall. Menakshi and Maria Teresa slept like question marks positioned around their snoring children. Jenna watched the dark twins' little bellies rise and fall, the two red-headed sisters tiny mouths open like pink hearts. Beside her, Jordan gurgled and cooed under his mother's shirt, and Jenna felt both full and empty in a surge of blue feelings. She took a deep breath and rose out of her sleeping bag.

"I'll come. I wasn't sleeping very well anyway."

"I can never sleep the first night I'm here." Anne smoothed her lavender shirt over dark blue cotton pants. "I guess it's the excitement of being here."

"Or jet lag." Jenna rose. She wore a one-piece pair of red long underwear, and oatmeal colored wool socks.

Rhadja laughed. "I love those. You look like Festus on *Gunsmoke*. Remember that show?"

"Yeah, very sexy. Do you see what sleeping with a room full of women has reduced me to?" Jenna took the brush from Rhadja and ran it through her own hair. She thought about tying it back in a ponytail, but didn't want to search through her bag for a rubber band, so she left it down and pulled the

few wispy bangs off to the side of her eyes. "Where have you ladies stashed my clothes?" Jenna stepped over their sleeping bags in search of the jeans and T-shirt she had on last night.

"Over there," Rhadja motioned to a corner by the table. "But I wouldn't wear jeans if I were you. You will be spending most of the morning in the lotus pose. You'll be more comfortable in something else."

"Maybe I'll just wear my fancy red underwear." Jenna placed her hands on her hips like a fashion model. "Do you think Baba will like them?"

"If you've got a long sweater or blouse to pull over them, I think it would be perfect," Anne said. "You'll be modest and comfortable."

Jenna shook her head. "OK, ladies. If you say so." She found a light cotton sweater and slipped on her hiking shoes, then turned for the ladies to admire. "That's me. Jenna Donnelly, slave to fashion."

Rhadja stood, balancing Jordan under the crook of her arm while he finished his breakfast. She wore a pink cotton blouse and loose pajama style pants with silver threads running through them. The color illuminated her pale skin and made the blue of her eyes as bright as glacier ice.

Jenna stomped her foot. "Well, look at this one. Five o'clock in the morning and she's ready for the prom. Do you think she'll marry me?"

"I saw her first," Anne winked at Jenna.

Rhadja laughed. "Let's go, you two. I'm sure we've already missed the opening prayers of the *omkar*."

"Drag that child off your tit, and we'll get out of here."

Rhadja placed him in the blankets beside the sleeping red-heads. He smiled and shook his arms up at her as she tucked the blankets in around the

three of them. Menakshi and Maria Teresa and I agreed to take turns watching the kids. I think he'll be OK. I'll come back at 9:00 to feed him again."

Jenna ushered the woman out the door. "He'll be fine. He's so full, he'll sleep like a lumberjack. Now let's go, Mama. Anne's already got a head start on us."

They walked briskly up the gravel road, the rocks crunching under their feet as they felt their way towards the meeting room in the darkness. They crested a hill and entered into a large common area housing an enormous central meeting room and several smaller buildings on either side. Rows of banyan trees and wooden benches lined the path to the front door.

"Wow, this is beautiful," Jenna said. She hadn't expected anything so colorful or tidy or permanent. She thought the ashram would be a hodgepodge collection of tents and temporary, shoddy buildings. This was a whole community. This was like the gateway to OZ.

They heard the opening rounds of the *omkar* like a great crack of thunder rolling across the sky. The ground vibrated, and Jenna felt the sound entering her body through her feet "aaaaooooohhhhhmmmm"; the breath held loosely but controlled in order to make it to the end in one long, slow, exhale. The three women raced to the building and tore off their shoes. They padded as quickly and quietly as they could into the main meeting room and sat on the floor on the women's side of folding partition. At *Premarasa*, men and women were separated at all functions of devotions.

Jenna inhaled quickly, in order to catch the next round of *o m* on the exhalation. She was out of breath and couldn't make it to the end of the

chant without inhaling. Her timing was off for the next three rounds, but finally on the fourth, she slipped into the rhythm of the room and fell into the same breathing pattern as those around her. She lost count of the rounds, and was lifted in a surge of energy, blended in the synergy of the deep tonal boom of hundreds of voices chanting the *omkar* in unison. She kept her eyes closed and imagined she was the only person in the room and all the sound came from her, as if she were swimming in a dark sea of sound. Then with a crack as sharp as lightning, it was over; all sound stopped, and the group remained seated in silent meditation.

Jenna let her mind drift over everything and nothing at all. She was aware of being alert yet perfectly still, but she didn't dwell on it; the feelings simply washed over her, and she allowed herself to flow with the rhythms of her own mind and heart and think of nothing. After some time, a woman's voice began in the darkness, and through great force of will Jenna began to bring herself back from the corner of consciousness she had been visiting. Although her eyes were still shut, she could feel and hear the bodies around her stirring in response to the cue given by the voice singing the *bhajan*. As more stirring arose, a drum joined the voice, and then a harp, and finally more voices, until the room was once again joined together, brought back from private reverie.

Jenna's legs had fallen asleep, and she was gripped by an urgent need to stretch them out in front of her and shake them back to life. She was surrounded on all sides by other women, and she had no room to move. Thrown out of the contented moment by the urging of her body, she rose and staggered to the door as unobtrusively as she could, willing her legs to move

and by sheer effort not falling in a pile of jelly on the floor as the pins and needles descended at once on all the nerves of her hips and legs. An old woman in a white cotton blouse and pajama style pants, like Rhadja wore, sat in a chair at the doorway. Jenna staggered past her and leaned against the wall, alternately raising and lowering her knees to her chest trying to bring them back to life. The old woman watched silently, as Jenna stomped her toes and stretched her calves. The woman rose, shook her head, and waved for Jenna to follow her down the hall. Jenna followed. The woman took her into a room and motioned to two pillows that rested against the wall. When Jenna did not move, the woman shook her head again, then walked over to the pillows, bent down on all fours, and clasped her hands together in a triangle on the floor in front of her. Placing the center of her head at the apex of this triangle, the woman kicked her legs up, and used the wall to balance in a headstand. She winked at Jenna, and Jenna repeated the same procedure. Within minutes, her legs were no longer asleep and the horrible prickling had stopped. She laughed, and the old woman pushed off the wall, bowed, and left the room, leaving the door ajar.

Jenna had never tried a head stand. For some reason she thought it would hurt, but resting here now she was surprised how supported and relaxed she felt. She amused herself by watching the legs that strolled by the open door, upside down from her looking glass view. The *bhajans* in the other room had stopped, and the halls were filled with people. When her ears began to pound with the blood rushing to her head, Jenna decided to kick down out of the posture, but a pair of bare feet and thin legs wrapped in an

orange robe approached her and stood in front of her, leaving her no way to come down out of the posture without knocking the person over.

"Excuse me," she said, attempting politeness. "Could you move to the side? I'd like to come down."

The legs did not move. She hadn't seen the face that belonged to these legs when they walked in, and now that they stood right in front of her she couldn't angle her head back enough to see it. Her ears were pounding and a nerve in her neck was pinched as she tensed up with the strain of holding the position.

"I'm coming down. Watch out." She pushed her foot against the wall, but hands that belonged to the legs pushed her feet back against the wall, grabbed her by the hips and lifted her straight up, the crown of her head leaving the floor by at least two inches. When the hands set her back down again, her spine was straight, the weight balanced on the plane of her arms stretched out in front of her and the nerve that was pinched in her neck was gone. She felt completely relaxed and focused, like she could hold that position for hours.

"Wow. How'd you do that?" Jenna talked to the dark toes inches from her nose. "Come down here; let me see who you are."

The upside down legs bent and folded in front of her, the orange robe collapsing into a barrel chested body, broad shoulders, and smiling dark face, both puzzled and amused. He got down on all fours in front of her, and kicked easily up into a head-stand facing her. Then he laughed a delicious, full throated laugh, and in the lilting voice of child, he said, "I am Baba. Upside-down or right-side up, it is still me."

Jenna couldn't speak. She was standing on her head with the man she had crossed the globe to meet, and she couldn't think of a single word to say.

As quickly, and gracefully as he had risen up into the posture, he dropped back down out of it and walked to the door. She watched his back leave the room, head where the floor should be, feet on the ceiling. As he exited he said, without turning to face her, "You will come to my asanas tomorrow morning and look at the world upside down with me. I will teach you to see things differently." Then he turned, smiled, and waved his hand as he left, as if catching flies in the air, and a shower of golden light rained in the spot where he had stood.

CHAPTER 10

Asanthi

(Absence of peace)

When the group gathered that morning in the dining hall, Jeff was noticeably absent. Jenna didn't think it was anything to worry about, but Anne was concerned so she agreed to help her look for him.

After more than an hour of searching, they had failed to locate him, but Jenna did succeed in orienting herself in her surroundings. She discovered that *Premarasa* encompassed several hundred acres of woodlands and community living areas. In addition to the meeting hall and dining commons that were situated in the center of the ashram, the outlying area included farmland, orchards, a dairy, school, medical center, carpentry shops, artists studios, library, store, campsites, and many guest homes. The clammer of construction rang everywhere. Kids, dogs, and cattle roamed freely. Jenna felt an overwhelming sense that these people were still in the upward curve of creating their society here, and it was going well. By following the road past the main meeting center, she soon found a pond, tidy colorful cottages,

an enormous fragrant flower garden, and statuary. Situated behind this lush park was Baba's temple, glowing a pristine white in the noon sun. Spiraling columns towered skyward, supporting an enormous gold domed roof. Carvings and sculptures of tigers, elephants, and bulls stared back, etched or carved into the stone facade. The powder-blue and gold stained-glass windows looked like tiny replicas of the union of the golden domed roof and vast blue sky. In this temple, Baba granted private audience to his devotees. Sheepishly, she passed over the marble stepping stones, up the steps, and slipped through the open temple doors. She didn't know if she was allowed to enter, but she had to see inside.

The doors opened into a bright entry, full of the spicy sweet fragrance of exquisite exotic flowers filling the room in every shade of color. She recognized lotus blossoms in a shallow dish in the center of the entry way, and sunflowers by the windows, but all the rest of the flowers were foreign to her. In an alcove beside a towering portrait of Baba, a tall red and yellow arrangement of something that looked like birds of paradise, but more full and softer, spilled over into a pile of pillows made of pastel silk. Incense and candles burned on tables lining the walls, and through the golden dome, sunshine fell like liquid honey upon the white marble floors. The entry opened into a large open room with an altar and two ornately carved mahogany and red velvet chairs---thrones almost. Again, flowers, candles, and incense lined the walls of the room and were grouped in profusion on low tables on the altar. Except for a few benches on either wall, and the two thrones on the altar, there was no other furniture in the room. All of it looked exactly as Jenna imagined, except for the artwork on the wall behind

the altar. Here, as in nowhere else on the ashram, Baba's picture shared space with many other divine images. In gilded frames, each identical in size and ornamentation, the portrait of Baba hung beside paintings of Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, Krishna, and several other faces she didn't recognize. Jeff had told her long ago that Baba taught that all forms of avatars served the same purpose, to bring man closer to God; therefore, all should be honored. Nevertheless, she was greatly surprised to see them all behind the seat of honor in Baba's temple. Alone in this cool, fragrant oasis of color and light, she felt full and satisfied. She put her hands to her chest in the prayer pose and bowed to the altar.

A breeze blew across the back of her neck.

Jeff stood behind her, the look of love overwhelming in his eyes. She smiled.

He clasped his hands at his chest and bowed. "Jenna Donnelly, I mistook you for an angel."

Jenna snorted. "You'd be the first to make that mistake." She squeezed his arm. "Where've you been? Anne's worried about you."

He motioned for her to follow him. "Would you walk with me. I'm feeling light-headed, and I'd enjoy your strength and company."

They re-traced their steps back out of the temple and into the shaded garden where couples and small groups of Indian and Western visitors were similarly strolling. "What's wrong with you?" Jenna asked. They came to a bench under a shady banyan tree. Jenna motioned for him to sit down. "You don't look well."

He shrugged. "I'm just a little weak, but I'll be OK. I started fasting before we left. I want to be as clear as light when I see Baba."

"You can't do that. You've got to eat something."

"No. Tomorrow I'll eat. Tomorrow Baba will see me and I'll eat after that."

"Baba's granted you audience tomorrow?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes. In the morning."

"But how'd you do that so quickly? I thought you said people wait weeks for a private meeting?"

"It's a miracle, Jenna. I only wish you'd been there."

"Where? Where've you been all day?"

"This morning, after the *omkar*, Baba's secretary approached me to welcome us and confirm our length of stay. We were just making small talk, discussing the trip and the upcoming events at the ashram, when Sanari-- that's the secretary--suddenly stopped in the middle of his sentence and looked to the doorway. At that moment, the room filled with golden light. Jenna, it was as thick as honey pouring over me, and then Baba entered." Jeff shivered and paused.

Jenna could only guess at the private reverie unfolding behind his closed eyes. "What happened, Jeff?" she asked impatiently.

"I still can't believe it. Baba walked right up to me. He looked me straight in the eye, and I went numb. My joy was so intense, I thought I would faint; then he placed his palm on my forehead and smiled at me. He was like a child. He laughed at me, or with me, I don't know, it doesn't matter, because after that he materialized this ring. Do you see?" He held up

his hand, and on his left ring finger a twisted band of gold shimmered in a pattern woven like the threads of a plaited tapestry. It seemed to move and leave a trail of gold dust in the air as he waved it about, speaking excitedly.

"My God, Jeff. He didn't actually give you that ring?" Jenna was dumb struck.

"No, he didn't give it to me. He materialized it for me. One minute his hand was on my forehead, the next it was holding out this ring. Of course, I couldn't speak. I just sobbed, like a baby. Sanari had to place it on my finger, and I was so filled with Baba's light I couldn't even feel the ring."

"Jeff, this must have cost a fortune. How can he give you something like this?"

"It cost nothing, Jenna. It's Baba. It's another manifestation of him. He told me to wear it while I was fasting. He said it would ground me and feed me. And then he laughed and he was gone."

Jenna sat silently. Strange things were happening already. She searched for order, but she couldn't define what had transpired in the few hours since she had landed in this strange sanctuary.

Jeff turned to face her, and Jenna felt like she saw him for the first time. She knew he was thirty-three, but his face was so young, so completely free of complication, that he looked like a boy, a man-child. She took his hand, the one with the ring, and they sat together in silence, breathing slowly and peacefully together. He leaned toward her, his face wet with tears.

"You're crying again," she said. "What is it now?"

"Jenna, how did Baba know I was fasting?"

"I don't know, sweetie." She stroked his unruly wave of red curls. "I don't know anything about any of this, Jeff. You're supposed to be teaching me, remember?"

He smiled. "No. You know more than me, Jenna. Baba is love. You only have to know love to know Baba."

Jenna looked at the grass tufts sprouting under the tree. "That's why Baba chose you. You're the one who is love, Jeff. Not me." She kicked at a pebble glowing blue at her feet. "No, I'm something else. That's why I'm here. That's what I'd like Baba to show me."

Jeff put his arm around Jenna and pulled her head down onto his shoulder. She relaxed and let him cry into her hair, and she pulled his chest close into her own and focused on the beat of his heart, feeling herself wrapped in threads as golden as the ring on his finger, and experiencing through him--just for a moment--the exquisite joy of Baba's love.

Mataji clapped her hands, and the class came to attention. Jenna was startled by the sudden appearance of the tall Anglo woman with gray hair pulled back in a severe bun and perfectly rosy cheeks. Though obviously well into her sixties, she glowed with health and vitality. Jenna's heart beat excitedly. She tried to calm her breath as the other women in the room bowed respectfully to their teacher. She followed suit. The only American in the group of students, Jenna felt like an awkward, colorless blob in the gathering of rainbow clad, graceful, dark-skinned women. As instructed by Baba, Jenna had joined this smaller yoga class. All other devotees attended a large one in the meeting room directly following the *omkar*. Judging by the

familiarity of the other women, this seemed to be the class for the permanent members of the ashram, and Jenna was puzzled--but honored--by her inclusion in it. Baba had said he would teach her, but she hadn't thought she would actually be allowed into the inner sanctum. Her heart beat even more rapidly as she awaited his arrival.

The group began with a series of breathing exercises. Mataji spoke to the class in Kannada, the most common language in the state of Karnataka, and then explained everything in English to Jenna. All of the exercises opened the breathing passages to allow the maximum amount of oxygen to enter the brain, waking the third eye, the pineal gland, which grants access to the higher consciousness, the divine God-self. Mataji's English was flavored with a British accent and a deep, straining voice, the voice of a woman who had once smoked many cigarettes. Jenna loved the incongruity of the barmaid's voice and the loving openness of Mataji's face, a Madonna face. They finished the breathing series and rose for what she expected to be the salute to the sun. Jenna clasped her hands in prayer pose at her chest, took a deep breath and leaned back, arching her arms over her head in the first movement of the series. Halfway into the pose, she stopped as Mataji's voice informed the class that, as instructed by Baba, they would be performing the forgiveness series--in Jenna's honor.

"This is a focused prayer with a progression of poses," *Mataji* explained. "We move from standing to kneeling to lying down to bowing to kneeling to standing again. Each time we do this, we ask Baba to remove a specific negative quality from our nature, such as deceitfulness, corruption,

envy, lust, passion, and immodesty. We ask that he forgive us for our weakness and fill us with his strength. Do you understand?"

The women nodded, glancing excitedly at each other, but Jenna balked. She sensed trouble immediately. As the first series began, she moved through the postures but couldn't bring herself to repeat the mantras. When they came to "ambition", Jenna tensed. "I don't want to be rid of this quality," she thought. She began to tune out the mantras and just focus on the moving and breathing, moving and breathing. By the twelfth vice, "desire", rebellion simmered within her, ready to hit full boil at any moment. She felt she should at least try to participate, so she devised her own mantra. If the vice were something she thought she might be out of balance on, like "acceptance", then she asked for balance not removal. "Who wants to be all good and pure anyway?" she reasoned. "Cynicism is OK in small doses." This new strategy helped her finish the series with less resistance, though it wasn't wholly satisfying and she felt guilty for deviating from a lesson planned in her honor.

After about thirty minutes of this, the series ended, and the women fell into the lotus position for the final meditation. Once again, Jenna was disappointed. Baba had not so much as shown his face in the class, and it was almost over. On top of that, she hated the lotus position; it was so constrictive sitting with her legs crossed on top of her thighs and her arms crossed behind her back. She always felt like busting free and could never sit still for the duration that everyone around her was able to hold the pose. When she felt herself growing fidgety, she thought about leaving--just getting up and walking away--but she didn't want to offend Mataji. She tried to focus

on a fly on the window, and then on a blister on the foot of the woman in front of her, and finally on the pattern in the rug which they sat upon. Just as she was about to come out of the pose and stretch her legs, Mataji walked over to her.

"It is important to have a final sealing posture," she said to Jenna. "If you do not find peace in the lotus, you may choose another."

"Thank you. I'd like to do the headstand, if that's OK."

"By all means, feel free."

Jenna moved the pillows aside and made room around her so that if she fell out of the posture she wouldn't hit anybody. She knelt, made the triangle, fit her head into it, lifted her knees, balanced them on her outstretched elbows, then rose with her legs straight, but wavering a little, until she found her resting point. The blood rushed from her legs, filling her head with tingling energy.

From where she held the pose, she could see Baba across the hall in the men's yoga room. His orange robes glowed in a gentle circle as he moved among the men, touching some, simply standing near others. How could she have been so naive as to believe she would be taught by him? She was a woman; as such, her access to Baba was limited. She hated the men for being able to have Baba as their teacher. She wanted to simply walk up to him, shake his hand, and invite him to speak with her over a cup of tea. But she couldn't; she had to wait for him, or one of his disciples, to approach her and grant her audience, as if he were some kind of medieval king and she a waiting handmaid. Once again, she felt her blood boil and wondered if maybe she should have been more willing to relinquish some of her negative

qualities. She quickly dismissed that idea. She was what she was, good and bad, and candy coating it with false prayers to an indifferent avatar wasn't going to change that any. She took one last look at Baba, then kicked down out of the posture. As her feet touched the floor, she thought she saw him glance at her, and wondered if perhaps he had heard her mental rantings.

Anne stabbed a square of runny curried tofu, and repeated her question. "Earth to Jenna. I asked you how the class went."

"Huh?" Jenna turned her head to Anne and laughed. "I'm sorry. I was spacing out I guess."

"I noticed. Anything worth sharing?"

Jenna pushed a pile of boiled vegetable mush around on her plate. "No. I was just remembering a casserole my mom used to make. It had noodles and hamburger and tomato soup and . . . sour cream, I think. She always cooked it to death so it resembled some kind of recycled food. Not a vegetable in it. Vegetables only came in cans in my house. I used to sneak out for salads when I was a teenager. Pretty sick, huh?"

Anne laughed. "No. A salad sounds really good, actually."

"Doesn't it?" Jenna agreed. "Oh, well. Cafeteria food is cafeteria food. In India or America anything mass produced is going to be dead by the time it reaches you."

"January's a bad month to come. It's always crowded. But with the weather the way it is, any later than March and you're asking for unbearable heat or drenching rain."

Jenna pushed her plate away and turned her attention to a bowl of mung *dahl*, a legume soup that tasted like lentils. It was warm and bland, but satisfying. The dining hall hummed with conversation and the clinking, scraping noises of people eating. Most of the visitors to *Premarasa* were from India, and the many varied dialects and languages could be heard throughout the room. However, Baba's popularity continued to grow outside of his country, and there was always a strong gathering of foreign visitors at his ashram, particularly American and Australian. To her left, Jenna listened to a German family laughing over their meal, the two young children fussing with their food. Behind her, she heard French, and somewhere, off in the distance she could just make out a group speaking Spanish.

"How many people do you think are here?" Jenna asked.

"I don't know," Anne replied. "Several hundred I guess. About one hundred, including children, live here with Baba and manage the ashram and his affairs. The rest are guests, like us."

Jenna looked around the packed room. "It sure seems like more."

"That's because of the day guests. The gates are always open during the day, and anyone can come in for the activities or to visit the temple."

"The classes must get pretty full."

"They do. You're so lucky to have been invited into the residents' class. I'd love to be able to attend."

"To be honest, I liked your classes at home better."

"Don't be ridiculous. Mataji is a world renowned yoga teacher. It doesn't get any better than that."

"Just the same, she had us do the forgiveness series. Do you know that series?"

"Yes, I've done it several times."

"Well, it felt intrusive. They should call it the punishment series. I don't think I have a problem with most of those vices, and some of the others I like. The whole thing felt very shame-based." Jenna shuddered. "I didn't like it."

"I can see that," Anne laughed. "But tell me what you thought of Mataji."

"I liked her right away. She looks like she's lived quite a life. What's her story?"

"Her real name is Barbara Fitzsimmon. Her father was a British military officer, but she was born here. The old boy was killed in World War II, but Barbara and her mother stuck it out until India finally won its independence. By then, Barbara was a nearly twenty, and she refused to leave. The story goes that she fell in love with an Indian boy." Anne shrugged. "Who knows."

Jenna leaned forward in her seat. "Then what happened."

"I don't know. Somehow, she found her way here to *Premarasa*."

"What does Mataji mean?" Jenna asked.

"Loving and wise mother. She has taught the asanas here forever, even before this was Baba's home."

"There was a *Premarasa* before Baba?" Jenna asked incredulously.

"Yes and no. Baba founded it in another lifetime, when he was also a teacher and yogi, though not an avatar--not yet divine. That lifetime ended

in 1955. In 1964, it was discovered that he had been reincarnated, and he was brought to *Premarasa* as a small child to study and prepare for his destiny. Mataji cared for him during this time."

Jenna sighed. She had heard so many amazing stories about Baba that they didn't even startle her anymore. So Baba had lived here in more than one life. So he had been plucked away as a child and raised here as an avatar in the care of this beautiful British convert to Hinduism who had somehow earned the privilege of being chosen as his foster mother. It all made as much sense as rings materializing out of nowhere, and Jenna tucked it away beside all of the other facts that she had to take on faith and not think about.

They finished dinner and joined the group for Sunday celebration in the temple. This was the only time during the week that Baba joined the evening meditation, kirtan, and lecture, so the emphasis was high on celebration and less on ascetic study. When Jenna and Anne arrived, the rest of their group was already waiting at the steps of the temple. Once inside, the sexes observed an invisible line and divided themselves into separate halves of the room. Rhadja, Anne, and Jenna made their way as close to the front as possible, but already the room brimmed with several hundred people. They were forced to take seats toward the back. While she was waiting for the activities to begin, Jenna leafed through a photocopied booklet containing the Sanskrit words to the *bhajans*. At 8:00, Mataji arrived through a door to the left of the altar.

The crowd stilled within minutes, and Mataji spoke to the gathering in an Indian language without translating into English. Anne and Rhadja both rocked slightly in the lotus position, their eyes closed, and face blissful. Jenna

had no idea what was going on, but she didn't want to ask. She copied them, leaving one eye open to watch and follow the other women's movements. Soon, Mataji took her place on the altar in the lotus position, and the room settled into a silent meditation. Baba still hadn't arrived, but knowing that he would be here was so exciting Jenna had trouble calming her mind. The room undulated with energy from so many bodies pressed into all the corners of the temple. After a short time, perhaps only twenty minutes, Mataji began a low, throaty om. The room joined her, and the vibration rocked Jenna to her very bones as the sound washed over her. Then Mataji raised her voice in an energetic *bhajan* and the room exploded in an echoing response. As if materialized, all around the room musical instruments found their way into the hands of the devotees. Drums, finger cymbals, and tambourines joined the voices in an ecstatic reverie of song and music and prayer.

At that moment Baba appeared on the altar. Jenna had only looked away for a second, and then he was there. The energy level amplified even higher. As one *bhajan* ended, a voice in the crowd would begin another, and the gathering would echo the chant in response, so that the musical prayers never ended but flowed gracefully and naturally into the next. The effect hit Jenna powerfully in her heart, and she remembered the penetrating joy of the first time she had ever shared kirtan at Jeff and Anne's house. This was why she had come to India. This moment, here and now. She tossed aside the songbook, trusting her tongue to repeat the words and find the language that welled up deep in her soul. A woman on her right fainted, and all around her men, women, and children cried tears of ecstatic devotion. Baba smiled lovingly and held his hands out to the crowd, palms up, as if showering

energy directly out of his hands and over the crowd. The devotees raised their hands in the air grasping at Baba's *darshan*--the "blessed air of a holy man"--crying, sighing, bowing, and pressing to the front of the temple to get closer to the altar. Jenna watched from the back of the temple, envying those who were up closer to Baba, but seeing no way to move through the solid wall of bodies that stood between her and him. The *bhajans* continued at this fevered pitch for over an hour and then slowly, as if of its own will, the songs slowed, like cool rain falling on the worn out, sweating crowd. Then Baba raised his voice and the final closing om spilled from him like a breeze washing over the gathering.

As if waking from a dream, the devotees blinked their eyes and yawned and stretched and settled into their seats again. Baba took a seat in one of the mahogany thrones on the altar. Mataji then moved to the front of the altar and began making delicate, intricate movements with her hands, like a ballet with her fingers. Jenna was mesmerized by her grace and beauty. The gathering chanted a slow, lyrical *bhajan* in response to the movements.

"What is she doing?" Jenna whispered to Anne.

"The *arati*, the light ceremony," Anne answered.

Mataji finished the hand *mudras*, or postures, then picked up an intricately etched brass decanter and poured it into a similar brass bowl. She lit this on fire and waved the smoke in all four directions, then picked up a brass bell and waved it in the same pattern, the music ringing out over the *bhajan*. When she had finished she picked up a larger bowl and dipped her fingers into it and placed it beside the bowl of burning oil at the altar. Then she offered it to Baba, who removed something and ate it. Mataji walked that

bowl around the room, and each devotee dipped into it and tasted from the contents as the *bhajan* rang on. When she reached Jenna in the back of the room, the bowl was still full. The handful of raisins, coconut, and sunflower seeds tasted like candy as she chewed it slowly, savoring every bite. After everyone had tasted from the offering, Mataji took a handful and then returned it to the altar and took her seat beside Baba. The room stilled in anticipation of his lecture.

Baba spoke in Kannada, and Mataji translated his words into English. They were a fluid pair; she seemed to know what he would say before he ever finished. Once she slipped, and, speaking in English, Baba corrected her translation. The crowd laughed delightedly.

He spoke for twenty minutes about the cycle of life and death and the laws of karma that send the soul on the spiral of incarnations. Jenna focused on Baba's face, on Baba's words, and heard Mataji's translation like an echo. His forehead pinched in the center in a severe frown as he spoke, and the playfulness and love of earlier disappeared completely, replaced by the scolding tone of an angry father. She squirmed in her seat, suddenly feeling hot and claustrophobic pressed against this sea of humanity. Perspiration built on her upper lip and brow, and she wiped it with the back of her hand. In contrast, Anne and Rhadja looked cool and comfortable beside her.

"Why do you fear death?" Baba's voice boomed over the crowd, echoed by Mataji. "It is life which is the illusion. This body is no more you than the clothes you wear. Like your clothes, you will some day wear out your body and require a new covering. At this time, you will return to your source, to God, and will be fitted accordingly. The cost of this new body is not free. No.

God is the ultimate accountant. He knows how much of your life you have spent wisely and how much you have frivolously gambled away. Only those who seek God in every moment, who have spent their life in his service, who have conquered desire and praised his name in the moment of death, will find him waiting with the golden robes you long to wear. All others will be sent back in the same tattered clothing to try again to mend their karma."

The heat in the room grew unbearable. Jenna's blouse stuck to her back. She tried to stretch her legs out in front of her, but there wasn't room, so she leaned onto her left hip and tucked her legs underneath her. Anne looked questioningly at her, and for a moment, Jenna saw her mother's eyes staring back at her from the end of a dark mahogany pew, fingers extended, ready to pinch her thin squirming leg.

Baba continued, "I speak to you this evening about conquering those base aspects of your nature, to focus your thoughts always on the divine in life so that you may be ready for death at any moment. Harbor only pure thoughts, spend your life in service and prayer, eat no flesh, drink no alcohol or stimulants, practice cleanliness, cultivate celibacy, place no attachment on material reality, and release all pride and egoism. In all moments, at all times, be pure. Deny all thoughts that lead you astray. Give yourself faithfully and without question to God. You cannot meet God in a king's garment; you must approach him humbly in a beggar's robe."

Baba bowed and exited out the side door. The room of devotees remained transfixed, staring at the altar. No one moved.

"Most people will stay here, and pray for the rest of the night," Anne whispered in Jenna's ear. "You can leave if you're uncomfortable."

Jenna glanced around the room. A few people had risen, but most remained in their seats. She spotted Jeff across the room. His cheeks and neck glistened with tears.

Jenna sighed. Was she completely dense or was this just the same old story? With the exception of the reincarnation stuff, she may as well have been twelve years old and listening to father O'Malley's sermon on abstinence and morality. It made sense; it was good advice, but she felt that--just as she had as a child in her father's church--the task of living up to these standards was impossible. Her head hurt with memories of oppressive discipline. All she heard in Baba's message was more fear, denial, and repression. So many words. Where was the love? Where was the acceptance? Where was the forgiveness? She left Baba's Sunday celebration feeling like such an enormous sinner, she might as well give up.

During the next two weeks, Jenna struggled to adjust to life at the ashram. The first few days, she thought she was still orienting herself to the time change and the early wake-up routine. But she found that even into the second week of her stay, she was always either half asleep or electrified with energy--with very little in between. She woke first, sometimes as early as 3:00 a.m., and couldn't go back to sleep, so she took over responsibility for waking the rest of the women before the 5:00 *omkar*. The *omkar* was her favorite part of the day and she looked forward to those hours in the dark, when the world was asleep but alive with mystery, pregnant with energy. She left the *omkar* more rested than the hours of thrashing in the confines of her room surrounded by so many other bodies.

More and more she was uncomfortable and restless. Although she attended the next two Sunday services with Baba, she shied away from the large afternoon classes taught by his disciples. These often lasted for hours and sometimes contained as many as two hundred people packed into the main meeting room. During these times of intellectual discourse, she felt as if she had to walk and converse with some part of herself that could only be heard during movement, as if pulled in through her muscles and skeletal frame, taken in pictures and sensation without words or meaning. In the crowded classes, the images became jumbled and confused; she felt caged, angry, territorial. She tried to explain this to Jeff but found herself stumbling over her words, unable to express herself or her feelings. Jeff explained that this was a normal reaction to being in Baba's presence, rather like fine-tuning a radio to a new frequency. He assured her that if she stuck it out she would feel Baba's *darshan* as strongly and completely as he had. Then, he assured her, her life would never be the same again. Jenna wondered if maybe that wasn't the root of the problem. She wasn't sure how much she wanted her life changed.

On her fifteenth day at the ashram, the middle point of her stay, Jenna volunteered to perform karma yoga--community service--in the ashram dairy. Although Baba accepted no money from any of the devotees who stayed at his ashram, all guests were required to perform two hours of karma yoga each day.

She was already late, but as she walked to the barn she passed the ashram store and decided to take the opportunity to purchase a comb and toothpaste--both of which she had forgotten to bring and had been borrowing

from Anne since the first day. She grabbed her items and walked to the line, not taking time to browse. Several other shoppers stood in line ahead of her. Behind the counter, a young cashier held a 3 x 5 inch blackboard slate and used it to communicate with the customers. Jenna had seen other permanent members of the ashram who had taken a vow of silence carrying these same slates. The girl struggled to communicate with her patrons through gestures and this small chalkboard. Jenna shifted her weight from foot to foot, trying not to get impatient as the clerk went through the painstaking process with the first four people in the line.

Finally, there was only one person ahead of Jenna--a pale, spindly middle-aged woman. The pale one began to make motions, pantomiming her needs to the mute sales clerk. Apparently, the pale one had also taken a vow of silence. The clerk shook her head, bewildered, as the woman in line made a pulling motion between her nose and mouth as if she were moving a string in from one and out the other, back and forth. She held up three fingers and repeated the whole process again for the clerk. The silent girl behind the counter realized what the customer wanted and gave the pale woman three gauzy cotton strings, rolled up like shoelaces.

Jenna watched, morbidly fascinated with this scene before her. What could these shoe strings have to do with this woman's nose? She turned to a man behind her.

"Do you know what those are for?" she asked whispering.

"I do actually," he whispering back. "I just read about them." He raised a book up, apparently the item he was waiting in line to pay for. "They're used to clean the nasal passages."

Jenna crunched her eyebrows in the center of her forehead and grimaced. "You mean like flossing your nose?"

The man laughed a sputtering chortle that made the two mute women turn and glare at him crossly. "You won't catch me sticking nothing up my nose but my finger," he said.

Jenna nodded in agreement, and then turned as the man pointed to the counter where the two women were once again moving through the gesture ritual for the next item needed by the pale one. She made motions now as if she were eating. The clerk pulled out candies and food items from behind the counter, but the pale woman shook her head and made the same eating motions once again.

It was worse than watching bad street mimes. Jenna wanted to slap the both of them, and was just about to say, "Use the goddamn slate, why don't you!" when the clerk figured out that the pale one wanted several long, inch wide, cotton cloths rolled up like socks.

Jenna turned to the man behind her and raised her eyebrow questioningly.

He whispered, "The locals swallow 'em slowly and then pull the buggers back out . . . inch by inch." He patted his book, *Complete Guide to Yoga Practices*. "Cleans the stomach lining after fasting."

This was the second glaring example of how she wasn't fitting in. Her hygienic needs consisted of toothpaste and a comb. Never once had she felt the need to floss her nasal passages or stomach lining. Never before had she entered a store where a pantomiming clerk could provide her with the tools

to perform these acts. She placed her items on the counter, feeling shallow and ordinary for wishing to clean only her outsides.

By the end of their third week at *Premarasa*, everyone in the group had been invited to share an audience with Baba, except Jenna. On a night that Baba had arranged for a visiting professor from Delhi to speak on the *Bhagavad Gita*, Jenna asked Jeff if he would walk with her. After much prodding, he reluctantly agreed to miss the class. They wandered downhill in the growing darkness, all the way to the gates at the entrance to the compound, and followed a footpath along the west side of the wall. Jenna stopped, reached the top of the fence, dug her foot into a toehold between two large stones, and swung her legs up. She motioned for Jeff to come up beside her. He looked around to see if anyone was watching.

"Come on. We're not doing anything wrong." She reached her hand down to him.

Jeff looked around again, grabbed the top of the wall, and scrambled up the rock face. Jenna grabbed his leg and helped him right himself beside her.

"Wow," he said. "This is incredible."

Jenna nodded. "Isn't it? I found this place yesterday."

"You can see all of the valley and the lights of Mysore. This is really special."

"I thought you'd like it," Jenna smiled. "Can I tell you a secret?" she asked.

"I don't know," he shook his head. "Is it a big one? I'm not very good with secrets."

"No, not especially. I just don't want anyone to know because I don't want to make a big deal out of it."

"OK," he said hesitantly. "You can tell me."

"Today's my birthday. I'm twenty-nine."

"Happy birthday," he said, giving her a hug and laughing. "Aquarius. I should have known."

"How could you?"

"I'm very good at guessing these things. You should have told us. We could have thrown you a party and asked Baba for his blessing."

"That's exactly why I didn't tell you. I didn't want any special treatment."

"Oh, but I love birthdays. Shoot," he said disappointedly. "It would have been so much fun to give you a party."

"I don't like birthday parties. I always spend my birthday with just one special friend. Here's my gift to you on my birthday--this spot and this sunset."

Jeff smiled. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

They sat in silence, dreaming their own dreams, as the sun made its final dip below the horizon, turning the sky a fragrant orange and red before disappearing finally in a trail of purple.

"What were you expecting when you came here?" Jeff stared ahead at the spot in the dark sky where the sun had been.

"When you first mentioned India I envisioned the usual stereotypes: dirty streets and bustling bazaars; well-fed cows and starving children; incense

and snake charmers; emaciated holy men and exotic women. But by the time I decided to come, I don't think I had any expectations."

"And Baba . . . isn't he more than you expected?"

Jenna swallowed. "To be honest, no. He's actually. . . rather disappointing. I haven't made that connection you talk about. I haven't seen or experienced anything that makes me believe he's divine . . . but then I haven't had a private audience with him either. Except for that first morning when he stood on his head with me, I haven't gotten closer to him than a 100 feet, so it's probably unfair of me to be critical of him."

"But what about the Sunday celebration? Don't you feel his *darshan* then?"

"No. I never feel anything." Jenna shook her head. "I'm getting lost, Jeff. I feel like I'm regressing, pulling inward and away. Sounds, touch, smells, all of it are so sharp, so powerful to me right now that I just want to make everything go away. I feel like tucking my head in and hibernating. I feel like something inside of me is fighting for its life . . . or dying . . . I don't know which."

Jeff turned to Jenna, excited and glowing. "Not dying! Awakening! This is your birthday! You're being reborn, Jenna Donnelly!" He clasped his hands at his chest and bowed to her.

She jumped down from the fence. "You just don't get it. I'm not being reborn. I'm wasting my time; I'm running away and hiding out here, chasing something that I can't even name. It's stupid. This isn't me. I'm not like you."

"You're right. You're more than me."

"I'm a fool. I've got to go. Either I get an audience with Baba soon, or I'm going back."

"No, you have to wait. It'll be worth it. You know how my private audience affected me."

"How? Baba didn't even say anything. You sat there, and he waved his hand in the air, and he stared into space, and he said nothing. For two hours you sat at his feet, and he said nothing. Shit! I could do that, Jeff." She shook her hips and wiggled her arms in the air like a snake charmer. "How does that make him divine? What did that really do for you?"

Jeff sat dumb struck, his mouth open, tears forming in the deep wells of his eyes.

"Damn it," Jenna stamped her feet. "Don't do that. Why do you always have to cry every time I raise my voice?"

He turned away, looking at a pair of cows grazing nearby. The animals stopped eating and watched the humans.

"You see, this is what I mean," she said. "I'm not being reborn. I'm still the same mean person." Jenna tore out a handful of grass and threw it in the air.

Jeff sniffed. "I don't know what to say. I'm sorry. I guess I failed in my duty to help guide you. This is all my fault. I'm not worthy of Baba's *darshan*." He hopped down inside the complex, and Jenna could hear him running through the brush, snapping branches and churning gravel along the way.

"Shit!" She kicked and punched at the grass, making the cattle skitter away and watch her from a distance. "What the hell are you staring at?" she screamed at them.

The crunch of rock beneath Jeff's sneakered feet died away. "Jeff," she called. "Wait." There was no answer. She thought about chasing after him, but she didn't know what to say if she found him, so she let him go. She felt awful. Everything she said was true, but something got lost in the translation. She kicked a dirt clod in her path, and then coughed as she inhaled the dark dust. She never wanted to hurt Jeff, but now she had made him feel like it was his fault that she was as barren and dense as that clod of dirt. She lashed out at a branch in her path and tore it from the tree limb. She shook the branch in front of her and spoke to it, "How could he blame himself if Baba couldn't even spark anything in me?" She threw the stick away. "Arrogance and vanity. That's all it is."

The clouds moved in front of the moon, and the night grew even darker. The air changed to a wet coolness before she saw the stream. She felt acutely awake and alert to everything. A family of bonnet macaques skittered on the branches above her, cursing her in screeching monkey threats. She didn't belong here. This was not where she was meant to be . . . but she couldn't leave yet even though she didn't have any idea why, and no one seemed willing, or able, to provide her with the answer.

As she rounded a corner, three chital raised their heads and froze. Only their jaws remained in motion, chewing the grass they had been grazing moments earlier. She crept closer to the beautiful spotted deer, yet they remained still, watching her. The young females were so close she could

have reached out and touched them. Suddenly, the brush crackled to her right. An old buck broke through the tall grass. He narrowed his eyes at her, his randy smell filling her nostrils. She didn't move. He snorted and stamped the ground. The does beside her darted away, crashing through the brush into the protection of the trees. The buck held his ground, eyeing Jenna. She held her ground. The buck bobbed his head and stamped his front hooves one last time, before he dashed away with a kick of dirt. She watched him until his tail disappeared into the trees.

That night, she slept fitfully, hyper-sensitive to the oppressive closeness of the many bodies in the small room with her. She rose and walked barefoot into the meadow where the chital had grazed, then stretched her sleeping bag down in the grass and crawled inside. Here, the air was warm and clean, and she felt as if she could finally breathe. She burrowed down into the bag, curled up in a ball on her side, and dreamed of home; not of Jeff's house in La Jolla, or her condo in San Diego, or her parents home in Seattle, but of a warm, comfortable place that smelled like bread and old baseballs and firelight.

CHAPTER 11*Sadhaka***(Conquering ego and greed)**

Jeff spent the night praying in Baba's temple, asking for guidance and begging his savior to remove the doubt from his heart. He lit candles and lay prostrate in the temple all night, chanting and calling to Baba to enter him and use him as his tool. He wanted nothing more than to serve as a guide and custodian for Baba's love in the world. Yet, somehow, he had failed to reach Jenna. He feared that now if he didn't bring Baba to her, his chance to prove his worthiness to Baba would be lost forever.

Before dawn, he heard footsteps approach. A caretaker lit the altar candles and arranged new flowers for the morning's private audience with Baba. Jeff remained lying prone on the cold floor. The man paused to join Jeff in a prayer, and then he bowed and left the temple. Jeff couldn't bear to face Jenna without an answer from Baba. Though not invited, he remained

in the temple. The rumbling of the many voices chanting the *omkar* washed over him like waves from the nearby meeting room. He sat up in the lotus position, facing Baba's glowing picture that hung centered above the altar. His whole life was in that smiling face. His whole world in those dark eyes. A soft round *om* rolled out of Jeff's mouth. He ate the sounds, licking their sweet music into his heart, praising the beauty of his lord, begging for guidance in this time of need.

He felt a dizzying wave of hunger pass through him and blind him for a moment, but still he continued. Despite his promise to Jenna to eat after his first audience with Baba, he had not; for although he couldn't admit it to Jenna, or even himself, he had been disappointed with his meeting with Baba. The guru hardly looked at him and never even spoke directly to him. Only as he left, did Baba place his hand on Jeff's shoulder, and Jeff had cried like a child at his feet. He couldn't help feeling that if he had been more clear, more pure, Baba would have shared himself more completely with him. So Jeff remained on his fast, taking only tea and a light broth when Anne was looking. Now he prayed for Jenna, not himself, that Baba might give her what she needed. He realized that it wasn't for himself that he was fasting but for her. Baba must be testing his faith. He would demonstrate that he was a worthy servant. Then he might be allowed to remain at the ashram with Baba and be taken into his inner circle of disciples.

He prayed, and the sun rose, and he prayed. The worshippers passed by on their way to the asana classes, and he prayed. The morning bell rang for breakfast, and Jeff remained, his voice hoarse, his thoughts swarming in colors and sounds and pictures, and still he prayed. When the first group

arrived for their private audience with Baba, Jeff was still praying and almost delirious.

Sanari, Baba's secretary, found him nearly passed out on the tiles before the altar. He called for a glass of cool water and raised Jeff's head into his lap. Jeff reached up to him, imploring with his eyes, his lips still uttering the endless prayer and chant. Sanari held Jeff's head back and brought the glass to his lips. A few drops found their way in, the rest spilled down his chest. Sanari and another man laid him out on the floor and loosened the neck of his shirt and covered him with blankets and whispered to each other. As they decided whether to carry him back to his room or call for a stretcher, Baba entered. The devotees dropped to the floor in the child's pose. Baba smiled down at them, and they sang a song of welcome to him. He moved his hands over the group in a blessing and motioned for them to rise.

Jeff felt a flush of heat over his face and squinted his eyes toward the light. He sighed as warm hands cupped his cheeks. He thought he saw Jenna standing before him in the golden light, her hair loose and flowing over a white robe, her feet bare beneath it. He called to her, weeping, and a man's voice answered in a lilting tone and told him there was no Jenna here. Jeff blocked his eyes from the light, and turned, glancing sideways at the voice speaking to him. Baba sat on a pillow beside him. Jeff reached for the vision, grasping the air with his hands, air that felt full with flesh and life, and he pulled himself up to the form, fighting the heat and rush of blood in his ears.

"Baba," he cried. "I must see Baba."

Baba pulled Jeff's hands from his arms and made him lay back down.

"Baba is everywhere. Haven't you learned that? One need only call him, and he will hear your prayers."

"No." Jeff shook his head, rolling, shaking off the arms that tried to cover him again. "No. He is not listening to mine. He must see Jenna. She needs him, though I've failed to convince her. Baba must hear me."

Baba smiled at the devotees around him and at his aides who stood in a semi-circle around Jeff, unsure how to proceed. "Baba has always heard her. It is she who has not heard Baba." He placed his hands on Jeff's forehead and Jeff's body grew still, his chest rose and fell in gentle rhythms, and his eyes finally shut as he drifted to sleep.

When Jeff woke, the room was empty and the long shadows of late afternoon fell across the tiled floor. He glanced around the room to orient himself and realized he was still in Baba's temple. A boy, perhaps twelve years old, sat by his side. Seeing that Jeff was awake, the boy held out a bowl of smooth yogurt.

"Sanari said when you woke you were to eat this. Sanari said 'a devotee can not serve the Lord Baba if he is too weak to rise for prayers.'"

Jeff sat up, rubbing his eyes. The room wobbled and swirled before him. He patted the child on the shoulder. "Thank you," he said, taking the bowl and dipping his fingers into the cool paste. After a few bites, he felt nauseous and sat the bowl down. "What's your name?" he asked the boy.

"I am Mani."

"Thank you, Mani." Jeff nodded to the boy. "Do you know how long I've been sleeping here."

"I came after the morning audience. I don't know how long you were sleeping before then. But I've been here almost five hours with you."

Jeff rubbed his neck. He tried to piece together the previous night. He had come in here to pray for Jenna after he realized how he had failed her. He must have passed out after that; everything else was blank. He stood, and then fell back to the floor. Mani rushed to his side and placed Jeff's arm around his shoulder.

"Sanari said I was to escort you to your compound when you awoke. He said to tell you that Baba has ordered you to stop your fast."

Jeff turned to the boy excitedly. "Baba spoke of me?"

"Yes. He said you were to stop your fast and return in three days for evening audience after you had eaten the bulk of six meals and were strong enough to hold his light and energy."

Jeff beamed. He felt as if he were walking on air. What luck! Granted audience twice in one week. It was more than he had hoped for. His joy was soon extinguished as he thought of Jenna. "But what of my friend? Jenna Donnelly? Did Sanari say Baba would receive her as well?"

Mani shook his shoulders. "He mentioned no such name."

Jeff felt an even worse failure. All his work, all his prayers had gone unanswered. How could he ever face Jenna again?

The evening meal sat like a stone in Jeff's belly. He had followed Baba's orders for the past three days, but it hadn't been easy to eat six meals after so many weeks of eating nothing. He was weak, his stomach had shrunk, and now he struggled to hold down food. Just the smell of all the

spices sent him racing outside to vomit. He wondered anxiously how he would ever make it through his audience without getting sick.

The other guests began to arrive. They nodded at Jeff, who sat on a bench beside the temple doorway, nervously picking at fuzz balls on his sweater. He glanced around, counting the bodies as they arrived. So far, not counting himself, there were only three. An elderly couple, both using walkers, hobbled down the lane to the temple. The woman carried a large purse that swung at her side as she struggled to maneuver her body and her belongings along the narrow path. Jeff rose, took her burden on his own shoulder, and guided her to his seat. She sat, bowed a blessing, and whispered to her husband.

Baba was late, and Jeff grew even more nervous. His stomach gurgled and growled. He ran his fingers through his hair, trying to remember the words to a relaxation prayer; trying to reconnect to Baba; trying to forget his own puny needs.

A hand fell on his shoulder, and he opened his eyes.

"Hey, how are you?" Anne smiled at him questioningly.

"Anne," Jeff squeezed her arm. "I'm glad you're here. I feel so anxious about this meeting."

"I know. I just spoke with Jenna; she was packing her things. She's convinced Baba won't see her. On the outside, she's stomping around acting like she's furious, but truthfully, she's really hurt."

Jeff ran his fingers through his hair. "I don't know what to do. It's breaking my heart. I don't understand why Baba won't see her."

"You can't take responsibility for this. It's as Baba wishes. We can't always understand his ways, but you know there's a purpose and a reason for everything. It's not like you not to trust Baba."

Jeff nodded. "I know. You're right. I've been riddled with self-doubt and questioning these past few days . . . and I feel so unworthy. I don't deserve to be at this audience. I don't deserve to bask in his *darshan* when I've doubted his ways and others have longed for his presence so devoutly." He turned to his sister. "Even you were only granted one audience. I don't want to question Baba, but I'm having difficulty understanding why he should choose me when there are others that are more deserving and need his guidance more than I."

Anne stroked the hair from his eyes. "No, Jeff. You deserve to be here more than anybody. You are the best of all of us." She rose. "Now, stand up and give me your hands."

He stood in front of her and placed his hands in her firm grip. "Give me some of your strength, Annie. I feel so weak."

"Who loves you, best?"

Jeff smiled. "Annie."

"Who always looks after you?"

"Annie."

"Who has never let you down?"

"Annie."

"Wrong."

Jeff stared at her questioningly.

"Baba." Anne released his hands. "Baba does all of these. Baba is your strength Jeff. Not me. Baba is who has made you what you are."

He looked away and then folded himself into her arms. "What would I do without my sister? Thank you."

"You'd probably marry a beautiful woman who would take even better care of you than I do." She kissed his forehead. "Now, go on. There's Sanari ushering everyone in."

"I love you."

"I know. Now go say hello to our Lord for me, and stop worrying. Everything is perfect and as it should be."

He smiled excitedly. His big eyes cleared and the color rose again in his cheeks. Before he entered through the turquoise doors, he bowed to Sanari. The man smiled at him and bowed in return.

Incense filled the air and soft yellow light streamed through the windows at the apex of the ceiling, throwing patterns of light in geometric forms on the tile floor. Baba sat in the plush red chair at the center of the room, his hair unusually wild, his feet bare and brown below his customary orange robe. Bowls of lotus petals and a tray of steaming tea and small blue cups filled the table beside him. As the group entered, Baba rose.

"Come in," he beamed. "I've been waiting for you."

Jeff's heart leaped in his throat. He felt the sting of tears immediately, as Baba looked directly into his eyes, through his heart, and into his soul. All doubt was washed away, and Jeff's entire consciousness filled with complete love and devotion. Somehow, he found his seat on one of the large golden pillows at Baba's feet, and Sanari poured tea for the gathering. Jeff accepted it

gratefully and humbly, then waited for Baba to drink first. The sweet liquid washed over Jeff's lips and tongue like warm honey. It was intoxicating, the most fragrant and satisfying tea he had ever tasted. The gathering whispered prayers in honor of Baba's generosity, and then one by one Baba began to speak to the devotees in his company. He was in high spirits that evening, joking, laughing, listening in one language and answering in another. The guests timidly presented pictures, offerings, requests, and questions, and Baba sometimes answered them at length, or dismissed them with an irritated wave of his hand. At the end of each conference, he asked the devotee what he or she wanted from him. His answer was as likely to be a bit of verbal wisdom as a wave of his hand and some gift materialized.

The old couple sat on a bench to the side of the gathering, unable to sit on the cushions in their enfeebled state. When Baba turned his attention to them, the wife spoke for her husband, explaining that he had been a physicist, and had left the profession disgraced because of his attempts to prove the miracle of Baba's manifestations. She asked if Baba might explain how he performs these miracles so that her husband might be able to write on it and untarnish his name before he died.

Baba was quiet for a moment, investigating the man and his wife. Then he rose, stood beside the couple, and spoke.

"It is as so," he wiggled his left hand in a circular motion and produced a thin copper chain, no more than four inches long. "Like this chain, each link is separate, yet part of the other links. So you are still attached to your own ego and greed. You can't explain the way this occurs because you still see yourself separate and unattached from all that is around you. If you saw

yourself as one inseparable link of all that is, you would know that all matter is the same whether this tea, or this room, or this body; it is all God, and when we truly know and are God, we can shape God in any form we like."

The man looked at Baba questioningly, trying to understand.

Baba continued, "That chain, just like your own divinity, was already here, you just couldn't see it. It took me to give it shape and expose it to you. Contemplate its meaning, and when you can let go of your own ego and selfish needs, you will be able to explain it to your colleagues, though only a few may understand. But if you seek only to clear your name, none will know you . . . or me."

The man stared blankly ahead, but his wife cried softly beside him. She accepted the chain from Baba, and kissed his hand as he offered it to her.

"And you, dear one, what would you like from me?"

She shook her head. "Nothing Baba. I want nothing. I am complete."

"You must want something."

"I want only to feel your love more strongly."

He took her frail hands in his own, tracing the patterns of the lines in her palm with his index finger. She swooned, dropping her hand to her chest; her lips moved silently; her eyeballs pulsed rapidly behind the closed lids. The husband spoke urgently in her ear and looked at Baba for direction. But Baba smiled peacefully, whispering in words Jeff didn't recognize. Then he clapped his hands and the woman opened her eyes, and tears streamed down her face, and she was unable to speak. She seemed to be surrounded in purple light, and the peace in her wrinkled brow said everything.

Baba walked among the other guests, taking their hands, placing his touch on different parts of their bodies, seeming to read what they needed, where their ailments lay, or their deepest pains. Jeff saw the room through a moist haze as he followed the workings of his own heart and allowed himself to weep, silently and gently, the deliciously full tears of a heart filled with satisfaction. When Baba came to him, Jeff timidly offered his hand, but Baba shook his head, placed both hands on Jeff's shoulders, and made him rise and stand beside him. They were both small men, but otherwise almost perfectly opposite: Baba had a large chest and belly, dark skin and hair; while Jeff owned a skeleton's frame, covered over with pale skin and carrot hair. Baba smiled broadly and Jeff continued to leak tears in a peaceful, steady stream. Then Baba made a circular motion with his hand in front of Jeff's heart, and thumped his finger on the pale man's bony chest bones.

"Do you still doubt me?" Baba asked.

Jeff hung his head, shamed, and fell to his knees on the floor, bowing at Baba's feet. "Never Baba. I am yours completely."

"Stand up," Baba took Jeff's elbow and helped him rise. "What do you want?"

"Nothing, Baba. I need nothing." Jeff choked on his words. He had so much wanted to say more, but he could find no language. He stumbled on forms that resembled words but had no meaning.

"Why have you come to *Premarasa*?" Baba held Jeff in his steady gaze. "I feel you are filled with desire."

Jeff shook his head. "I come only to offer myself to you in service. I desire nothing but to serve you."

"That is a very strong desire, indeed," Baba said, raising his left eyebrow.

Jeff was near panic. "My desire is all for you, Baba."

"To have me, you must desire nothing. That is the way to your Lord."

Jeff's shoulders heaved, and he dropped his arms to his side dejectedly. The words spilled from him now in sobbing rushes. "I've been filled with ambition, Baba. Like my brother here," Jeff pointed to the older gentleman who had received the chain. "I've been blinded by my own ego and greed. I brought a friend here with me on this trip because I thought I wanted to share with her the glory of your love. When she failed to know you as I do, I thought the fault was mine. In my vanity, I thought that I could actually serve as your vessel. I thought you might use me to bring others closer to you."

Baba stood silent and stern.

Jeff sobbed. "Oh Lord, forgive me. My desire to serve you was so great, I put myself in your place and have been filled with vanity and ambition." He wiped his nose on his shirt and sat on the pillow, holding his head in his hands and crying.

Baba suddenly smiled a joyous grin that rippled through the layers of Jeff's pain.

"Please don't mock me, Baba. Give me penance, send me away, but please believe my grief is sincere."

"I don't mock you," Baba assured. "I love you."

Jeff looked up and smiled timidly.

"There. You have learned much today."

Jeff felt the weight in his chest leaving. His head cleared, and he felt deeply humbled.

"Now, I will ask you again," Baba said, "What would you like from me?"

Jeff answered without hesitation. "I would like only to know you, and thereby know myself better."

"Very good. I think you have just done that, hmm?"

Jeff laughed. "Yes, Baba."

"Good. You are not ready yet to serve me, but you and your friend may come see me tomorrow because you didn't ask."

Jeff clasped his hands at his chest and bowed. "Thank you, Baba."

Baba waved his hand. "I intended all along to see her. You should have had faith in me."

"I'll never doubt you again, Lord."

"Yes. We will see."

CHAPTER 12 *Samskara*
(past life tendencies)

As the stars and the clouds moved across the full moon, Jenna stretched her legs on the railing of the porch and listened to the chatter of the four children inside playing farm with red clay animals they had made that day in the children's program. She had agreed to watch all of the kids while their mothers attended the evening classes. Only Jordan had been unable to stay awake this late. He slept in a pile of pillows at her side, his small fingers wrapped around her index finger. She thought it was probably time she put the others to bed, too, but she couldn't bring herself to put an end to their play.

"Psst . . . Jenna."

She turned to the open door. "Did you call me?" she asked.

"No," all four children chirped in unison.

She looked at the sleeping Jordan. "Did you call me, mister?"

A sliver of drool slipped out the corner of his mouth, onto the purple and blue pillows.

"Charming."

"Psst. . . Jenna. Over here."

She stood up, squinting into the dark shadows beyond her room.

"Who is that?"

A shock of red-hair peeped out and a thin white arm waved at her, signaling her to come closer. "It's me. Jeff," he whispered. "I have to speak with you."

"Well then why don't you bring your skinny butt over here, and quit whispering at me in the dark as if I were some school girl."

Jeff warily approached the central courtyard. A few of the rooms in the compound had lights on inside, but most were dark. Jenna was the only one seated outside. "I know I shouldn't have come into the women's compound, but I had to speak with you." He glanced around awkwardly. "Can we go inside?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Sit down. The night is beautiful."

"I don't know if I should . . . I mean."

"Would you sit down and stop being so paranoid. This whole segregation thing is stupid. Breaking up families and making people ashamed of their sexuality. Come sit with me and Jordy and tell us what's on your mind." She pulled the sleeping child into her lap, wrapping him like a taco in his yellow comforter, and patted the empty spot beside her. Jeff took the seat and raised his feet up on the railing, like Jenna's. They both sat in silence for several minutes taking in the sights and smells of the evening. The banyan trees danced gracefully in the warm evening breeze, like shadows

against the starlit sky. More than anything, India was a smell to Jenna--the hot, sweet odor of close bodies, incense, curry, and lotus petals.

"It's so beautiful," he said. "I could live here forever, and I would be happy."

"Yes. It's beautiful. I have to admit, I'm sorry to leave." Jenna turned to him. "I want to apologize. I shouldn't have yelled at you that night--on my birthday. Tomorrow I'll be going home, so nothing I said matters anyway."

"But that's exactly why I came tonight. You can't go home early."

Jenna squinted at him suspiciously. "Why?"

"Because Baba will see you. I saw him tonight, and he told me to bring you to his audience tomorrow evening."

Jenna straightened her back. "Did you ask him to see me?"

"I was going to. But I didn't. He asked for you himself."

Jenna sighed. Now that she had received an audience, she wasn't sure if she wanted it. She had already reconciled herself to leaving early, and now on the eve of her departure she was told to stay. "Why now, Jeff? Why today?"

"I don't know. We can't understand the ways of Baba. He has his own plan and his own timing. It's just up to us to be open to receiving him and to not question it."

"But that's what I do. I question. People pay me to question. I have been trained my whole life to question."

Jeff looked away. "I'm confused. I thought you wanted to meet with Baba? I thought you were leaving because he hadn't received you?"

"I was . . . I mean . . . I am . . ."

"Now he will see you, and you don't have to leave. You can stay here with us." He petted the dark fuzz on Jordan's head and tucked the blanket in tight around the sleeping boy. "Stay, Jenna. Please stay with us."

She leaned back against the cold plaster walls, and watched a dark cloud move in front of the moon. Everything she needed she had in this moment. What would she do if she left now? What was there to go back to? But by the same token, what was here for her? Eventually, she had to get on with her life. How could one meeting with Baba make a difference?

"I'm at a loss. Before, I had so much I wanted to ask, to know, to experience. But now I don't know what I want anymore."

"You don't have to ask for anything. Baba will answer whatever comes up for you. He knows what's in your heart, and he'll dig out what's needed for you at the moment."

"But what did you ask him for, the first time you met with him?" Jenna shifted Jordan onto her left shoulder, crossed her legs, and then placed him in the center like a cradle.

Jeff laughed. "I don't remember. It was so long ago, and I was so moved by everything that it's all a big blur for me now."

Jenna sighed. "I was hoping that Baba might help me understand something that has been rumbling around through me since the night you rebirthed me. It's more of a feeling than an idea, and I can't seem to express myself when I try to describe it, even to myself."

"What's the feeling?" Jeff asked.

"It's more like a place than a thing. I keep seeing this place that is completely dark. There is no color, no light, no end of one thing or beginning of any other. It is just . . . everything . . . but nothing really. Sometimes it's terrifying and I feel like I am bloated and heavy and suffocating when I am there. At other times it's completely restful and I'm weightless and at peace. Do you know what I mean?"

"I think so."

"I keep hearing over and over in my head, 'I am the color of light, I am the color of light', like a mantra. I thought it had something to do with how you explained the *kundalini*--that God is the light and we are the color within it."

"I agree," Jeff nodded. "That's a powerful mantra. You should consider yourself blessed."

"But when I'm in this other place there's nothing; no light, no color, nothing. If God is the light, then what is the darkness? If it's hell, it doesn't feel that bad--and that's more scary than anything." She threw up her hands. "So tell me, guru, what do you think? Am I some kind of terrible evil woman? What does all this mean?"

Jeff shook his head. "It's not for me to answer, Jenna. You need to ask Baba."

"It's not like I'm searching for the meaning of life or anything. I just feel like something has opened inside of me, and it is really big, bigger than I know how to describe or live with. Now that I've seen it, I keep asking myself, now what? Everything seems so limited, so unimportant, something is missing." She paused, playing absently with one of Jordan's feet popping

out of the blanket. "Maybe, I'm just being stubborn. Even here, I'm still rebelling. I feel like the answer is right under my nose, but my eyes are closed and I'm in that place of darkness and I'm so dense, so thick, so stupid, the light can't penetrate me."

Jeff closed his eyes. "I wish you hadn't told me that. I wish you had waited and told Baba what you just said." He turned to Jenna. "I could respond to what you've told me, but it would be all from my perspective, which is limited to me and my own ego, and I'm not going to put myself between you and Baba anymore. Say that again, word for word, in your meeting tomorrow with him. Please stay, Jenna."

"Why? Why is this so important to you? Is it too much for you to bear that you couldn't save my soul? Is the life that I would be returning to so sinful? Is that just too hard for you to live with?"

Jeff winced. "No, Jenna." He cleared his throat and looked away. "Maybe before I thought that way . . . at first . . . but now, I just . . . if you leave . . ."

"What?" Jenna held his gaze as they sat in soft moon light, somebody else's child sleeping in her arms.

He took a deep breath. "You're family now, Jenna. We love you. If you leave tomorrow, I know we'll never see you again, and that's what I couldn't live with. You have to stay here with us."

Jenna shook her head. "Appealing to my heart. That's a low blow."

"It's a good heart. Don't take it away."

She sighed. "All right. I'll stay. For the audience. That's all I'm promising."

Jeff leaped to his feet. "You won't be sorry." He bent down and kissed her forehead.

Jenna caught his arm and pulled him back down beside her. She smoothed the long hair from his eyes, and they sat in silence for a moment, trying to read each other's thoughts. Jenna put her hands on his cheeks and leaned forward and kissed him. She tasted his lips and parted them with her tongue and inhaled his breath in an explosion of color that filled her eyes and mind and heart, and then the world went black and something felt very wrong. She let go of him and pulled herself away and strained to find even a speck of light in the starry sky.

Jeff sat still, his mouth frozen half open, his eyes closed, like a baby bird. After a moment, he opened his eyes. "Jenna . . . I . . ."

"Don't say anything. I just wanted to thank you." She stood, holding Jordan close to her chest. "I'm going inside. I don't feel like talking anymore. I'll see you tomorrow, OK?"

He nodded. "All right."

Jenna shut the door behind her, but not before she saw Jeff touch his lips and look back once more before disappearing beyond the courtyard and the shadows of the banyan trees.

When the appointed time finally arrived, Jenna almost missed her audience with Baba. She was nervous, but not in an excited way. She was nervous in a doomed way, as if this were the last day of her life, and she was on her way to meet her executioner. As she strolled, she knew she would arrive just moments before the allotted time for her audience with Baba, and

she knew that Jeff would be at the door early, pacing anxiously as he waited for her arrival. She rounded the bend and saw Sanari ushering several people into the room. Jeff saw her and waved, clutching Sanari's arm and speaking to the man as he prepared to close the doors. They both squinted in her direction and Jenna sighed, quickened her pace, and went to meet The Great One.

Jeff smiled. His face was flushed and his eyes darted around the room in search of a spot for both of them. "I was worried you'd miss your audience."

"You should have had faith in me," Jenna said.

"Faith? Yes, that does seem to be an issue for me now, doesn't it?"

Jenna saw an open spot on the rug off to the left. There was room for one body. "I'm going to sit here, Jeff. I'd like to sit apart from each other, OK? I don't want you sitting next to me, reading over my shoulder so to speak."

"Of course." Jeff looked hurt. "I understand completely." He took a seat on the opposite side of the rug.

Jeff and Jenna were the only Westerners in the gathering that evening, and Jenna listened to the ebb and flow of the different languages being spoken in the room. There were five other women in the gathering, all wearing *saris*, some ornate, others simple and discreet. Jenna noticed that the women all seemed to glow from a golden center and explode outward in limbs of blue, purple, yellow, and pink, like exquisite flowers cast at Baba's feet. Except for Jeff, there was only one other man in the room. He was quite ancient and sat at a bench behind Jenna, his hands balancing a twisted and carved walking stick with a handle shaped like an elephant's head.

Mataji entered wearing a *sari* of pure white. A brilliant white orchid had been draped over her left ear, as if born from the foam of her gray hair and pink cheeks. The old woman led the gathering in the lighting of the candles and the performance of the *arati*. Jenna didn't even try to follow in the hand movements; there was no way she could come close to *Mataji's* ballet-like grace. Once the prayer was complete, *Mataji* and Sanari proceeded down opposite sides of the room, lighting the candles on the wall, and then returned to the center of the room and sat on cushions on either side of Baba's chair. The gathering said the sacred prayer of sound and creation together in unison. The deep rolling *oms* spilled into the room. Jenna closed her eyes and felt the vibrations fill her, order her, calm her. When she opened her eyes, Baba was seated in his chair, smiling, and looking directly at her. Her breath caught in her throat, and she felt flushed and faint.

Baba questioned each of the members of the gathering individually, asking them what they wanted. Because he spoke to the individuals in their native tongue, Jenna wasn't able to follow what was going on, although she could usually get a pretty good idea by the tone of voice and reactions. His discourse continued for over an hour and finally Baba had addressed everyone in the room except Jenna and Jeff. He walked among the gathering singing a sacred prayer and sprinkling them with *vibhutti*. He demeanor turned stern, and he waved his arms in the air and stamped his feet. Jenna grew apprehensive. She envisioned herself being scolded for some spiritual *faux pas* she had committed and expected Baba's anger to come crashing down on her at any moment. He brushed past her, the hem of his robe touching her leg and then took his seat again in the mahogany chair. It

appeared like Baba didn't plan to speak with her. Jenna looked at Jeff across the room. He shrugged, his face more worried than her own.

And then it didn't matter anymore. Nothing mattered. The whole production seemed absurd, and Jenna simply didn't care anymore. Her heart must have been made of stone because something just wasn't clicking, but that was OK; she could accept that. It was stupid to think that the answers to her questions would be dished out to her in some magic formula. She realized in a sudden, relieved blast of awareness that Baba was not the way to her wholeness.

In that moment, Baba rose and walked directly to Jenna. He sat in front of her wearing the same goofy grin she had seen on the day they viewed the world upside down together. Jenna smiled back. She felt wonderful, flirtatious almost. He clapped his hands twice, wiggled his hand in a circle three times, and then held his closed palm out in front of her.

"What do you want," he asked in perfect English.

Jenna sighed. "Ten minutes ago, if you had asked me that I would not have been able to give you an answer. But now I know very clearly. I want to go home."

Baba nodded. "And what else."

The words leapt out of her mouth before she could think. "I want color." She touched her lips. "Did I say that?"

"I gave you the light. Now you must find the color."

Jenna shrugged. "OK, I'll search for color." She looked at Jeff questioningly. He shook his head, motioning for her to pay attention to Baba.

Baba began speaking in the even tone of a storyteller. "Before, you looked at the world from one side. Then you fell through the looking glass so to speak, and saw the world from the other side. You have looked at the world right side up and upside down, and still you only see things as they are, as you are, and not what is inside, hidden within the light. This is why you want color. For you, the world is black or white. Wholeness is in the space of light where everything comes together and all the colors are one."

Jenna looked questioningly at him and spoke slowly. "OK. So now what?"

"I have three gifts for you." Baba opened one hand. "Here is your looking glass." He held up a small mirror framed in copper. "Meditate on going within, without going beyond." He opened his other hand, holding out a round clear crystal, faceted and shaped like a hexagon. "Here is your color. Hold it up to the light and find the color you seek."

Jenna took both items and held them up gingerly. "Thank you," she said.

Baba's familiarity and good humor suddenly vanished, and he rose with a stern force that made him appear larger than he actually was. "Thirdly, you seek wholeness. You can't find it or see it despite your desire because you owe a great debt. You are blocked by a karmic imbalance that prevents you from receiving this missing part of yourself. Until you have healed this past injury, you will never bring peace to these conflicting aspects."

"What's the debt," she asked suspiciously, thinking, *this is when he finally asks for money.*

"You suffered a betrayal that caused you to reject God. Because the essence of God is love, in your life you consistently reject love, even though your desire to return to God continues to attract people who want to love you. You see, the last of what was trusting in you died with this betrayal, and the beginning of what was doubting in your betrayer, sprang from you. You are deeply entwined in each other's karma and the only way you two can heal and be whole again, is through loving and forgiving each other. Instinctively, you know this; you move through men, searching for this one, but you don't find him because you are blind to this pattern. Until now."

Jenna became dizzy. Her skull felt as if it were being squeezed to the breaking point; at any moment she expected her eyeballs to shoot across the room and splatter against the wall. She felt a terrible sense of doom, enormous, engulfing, swallowing her in its black tentacled arms. She swallowed, rubbing her temples. "And this man. I'll bet you know where I can find him, right?" She spit the words out venomously.

"You already have. He's here in this room."

Jenna looked at Jeff. "No," she screamed.

"Yes. This is the one." Baba waved to Jeff.

Jeff looked between Baba and Jenna, his eyes searching and enormous, his pale skin glazed in sweat.

"To break the karmic chains that bind you, you two must marry. You must give yourselves unselfishly to God, and love each other. You may stay here, at *Premarasa*, in my service. Through your trials together, you will release your ego-selves and know your God-selves completely."

Jeff crawled on his hands and knees, sobbing, and threw himself prostrate at Baba's feet. "Thank you, Lord. Thank you," he blubbered. "We will serve you humbly and give ourselves up to your safekeeping." He kissed the dark toes that peeked below the robe, then turned, extending his arm to Jenna. "Come, Jenna. Come sit with me at Baba's feet and thank him for this blessing." His face was wild with excitement and tears and snot and a horrible combination of fear and adoration.

Jenna sat stony and silent, staring at both men. She didn't move. Didn't breathe.

Jeff repeated. "Come, Jenna," he laughed nervously. "Come join me."

She looked at Jeff, blissful and terrified. She looked at Baba, closed and stern. She glanced around the room. All eyes rested on her in this moment, willing her towards the altar like many pairs of magnets. She didn't move.

Jeff wailed, "Jenna?"

She didn't move.

He crawled to her, looking over his shoulder at Baba. "You must trust Baba. He knows what's best for you." He clutched her arms, but she threw him off.

"Jenna," he moaned. "Please come. Let me love you. Don't deny God again."

She stood. Jeff scrambled to his feet beside her. She looked at him with his wild hair and child's eyes. He was nothing but a weak shell of a man. It wasn't fair to do this to him.

"If I stay I'll only hate you, Jeff. . . and you'll hate me."

She met Baba's eyes, flashing dark and fierce in the candlelight, and then dropped the mirror and the crystal on the floor and walked out of the temple.

"Jenna!" Jeff called after her. "You can't run. You can't escape your karma."

She never turned around; never looked back; never said good-bye.

IV. MOKSHA

(balance)

It is funny; when we are the most lost, we are usually on the road home.

-- *Baba Sai Ram*

CHAPTER 13 *Darshan*

(Blessing of a holy man; "to breathe the same air")

"More coffee, hon?" the waitress hovered over Jenna's cup with a steaming glass pot, swishing the dark liquid in circles.

"Yeah, fill 'er up." Jenna folded her newspaper in half, scanning the classifieds. The coffee was strong and hot, and Jenna drank it in loud mouthfuls.

The woman ran her fingers through a pile of blonde hair, pulling the stray ends up and around the bun at the top of her head. "Aren't you the one living out at the Johnson place?"

"That's me." Jenna extended her hand across the counter. "Jenna Donnelly. I guess we're neighbors."

"Not hardly. I live in town here." She looked at Jenna, appraising her. "You an artist or something. That what you're doing out there all alone?"

Jenna laughed. "Do I look like an artist?" She wore her shoulder length hair down, no make-up, Levi's, hiking boots, and a long oatmeal-

colored wool sweater. The days had just begun to lengthen into spring, and Jenna already had a brown tint to her skin.

"No. Can't say that you do." The woman wiped the counter next to her. "You staying long?"

"I'm not sure," Jenna nibbled a piece of bacon. "Things are kind of up in the air for me right now."

The woman nodded. "Well, you picked a good spot to sort things through."

The woman kept an eye on a man in a dusty gray cowboy hat sitting in a booth behind Jenna. He cut pancakes and doled ketchup on eggs for his two little girls, mirror images of him, dark and brooding. Jenna watched the girls pick at their food as the man tried to coax them to eat. None seemed interested in the meal. The waitress walked up to their table, her hand behind her back and whispered something in the father's ear. The man nodded, and the waitress pulled a can of whipped cream from her concealed hand then doused the pancakes in a foamy blanket. The girls' faces lit up with excitement as they dove into the mess, shoveling great bites into their mouths. Jenna smiled and returned to her paper.

"Can I get you anything else?" the waitress asked Jenna.

"No, that's fine. Just the check when you get a chance."

"Sure."

"Hey," Jenna called to the woman. "Do you know what time the museum across the street opens?"

"Ten o'clock, bein' it's Sunday. You headin' over there?"

"I thought I might."

"That's my husband and my girls," the waitress nodded at the table of dark-haired folks. "They're headed over there, too." She placed the bill beside Jenna's plate and smiled at her. "Arizona's full of people running from or running to something. There's a lot worse places to call home than Wickenburg."

Jenna nodded. "Today's my wedding day." She put a twenty on top of the bill and pushed it toward the waitress. "I can't go home."

Jenna had an hour to kill before the museum opened, so she stepped out onto the main drag and went window shopping. Most of the stores were still closed, but she peeked through the glass into the hat store, the souvenir shop, and the pottery gallery. Wickenburg may once have been part of the Wild West, but today its main industry was tourism. The wooden sidewalks and western facades painted to look like saloons and general stores reflected this. She saw a door open across the street and cut across the empty road to enter a narrow bookstore. A large man waved from behind the counter, his glasses resting on the bridge of his wide nose.

"Got a 1/2 price sale on all the bestsellers today."

"Thanks," Jenna said, thumbing through the titles, "I'll just look around." She toured the shelves and found a small room off to the side, separated by a beaded partition in the doorway. She parted the jangly strands and entered. The bare walls were painted bright orange with stacks of books on Eastern religion and New Age self-help manuals piled haphazardly on the floor. Several large blue corduroy pillows lay propped against a wall under an antique reading lamp. Jenna quickly pushed her way back out and turned to

the man, "You know what I'd really like is a Sunday paper. You carry the *San Diego Union*?"

"Sure do. Only place in town that does." He reached behind him and flopped a thick bundle on the counter.

"That's great," Jenna said, handing him the money.

"See ya 'round," the man called, but Jenna was already out the door.

The street was quiet. "Everyone must be in church," she thought, feeling uneasy.

She headed back up the street toward the museum. Halfway there, she spotted another open door. The Green Room had the unmistakable windowless, dark paneling, stale air odor of a drinker's bar. Jenna slid onto a stool and cracked the rubber band off her paper.

"What can I get you?" The woman behind the bar was about Jenna's age with large hips wrapped in denim and a low cut blouse, fringed and beaded at the neck line.

"I'd like a Bud. Room temperature if you got one."

The woman nodded, disappeared for a moment, then set the beer down on a square napkin, no glass. "Dollar seventy-five."

Jenna gave her two bucks and took a long slow drink. Beer for breakfast. How long had it been? She looked around the room. A couple of guys sat at the end of the bar. They wore baseball caps with "Danberry Feed" printed on them, their Wranglers slung low over dusty boots. One fellow pulled a can of Copenhagen from his rear pocket, a perfect white circle worn smooth in the center of the blue fabric. He offered the can to the other man, who took some, then spit into his empty beer bottle. Jenna smiled, then

opened her newspaper. The man with the white circle on his back pocket moved next to Jenna and sat on the stool beside her. He was quite old, with weathered brown skin criss-crossed into deep lines on his forehead and around his eyes. His hair stuck out in white patches below his hat, and his hands had the worn dry skin of a man who has made his living with them all his life.

"Mind if I look at the business section?"

"Go right ahead," Jenna said, pushing the stack towards him.

"I knew it," he yelled to the other man. "Interest rates rising. We better buy that land while we can."

"Johnson ain't got no other offers," the other man called back. "Let 'em stew a little. I bet he'll drop the price another twenty grand."

"You talking about the Johnson place on Watershed Road?" Jenna asked.

"Yeah," the man next to her said. "That's the one."

"I didn't know it was for sale. I'm renting it." She extended her hand. "My name's Jenna Donnelly."

"Fred. Fred White." He motioned to the other man to come join them. "This is my son, John."

"Howdy," the other man said. He had a large nose with blue veins scrawled across it and his mouth drooped in a right angle down the left side of his chin. Jenna guessed he was her age, though the scar on his cheek and chin made him look much older.

"You're new in town aren't you?" John said.

"Yes, I am."

"What brings you to Wickenburg?" Fred asked.

"Nothing special. I just ended up here and liked it." Jenna smiled at the men, enjoying the male company.

"Pretty woman like you shouldn't be out there alone," Fred said, raising his white eyebrows.

"I can take care of myself just fine."

John laughed. "We'll I'm sure you can. Ya know, our ranch butts right up against the east side of your place."

"Then we're neighbors," she said.

"Nearest one," he said with a crooked smile. "You planning on staying in Wickenburg?"

"I don't know. I'm here now. That's all I can tell you."

"Well, that's enough," John said.

The old man nodded in agreement with his son. "Person can't be expected to do no more than take each day as it comes."

When they finished their beers, Jenna shook hands with the men. "It was very nice meeting you both," she said.

"Hope to see you again," Fred said, his blue eyes twinkling under his white hair.

"Me too," Jenna said.

"Whoever it was that made you run this far must have been crazy to let you go."

Jenna looked into Fred's old eyes. "What make's you think I'm running?"

He winked. "I know women, Miss Donnelly. And you've got the look of one on the run."

She stuck her hand in her pocket, tracing her fingers around the hard edges of an envelope. She shrugged her shoulders. "It was for his own good."

The men laughed. "Yep," John said, his crooked mouth righting when he smiled. "My wife always says some women just won't never be broke to lead. Those is the best kind."

Jenna laughed. "Thanks for the company, boys."

"Anytime. See ya," they said.

She waved at the barmaid, and blinked her eyes against the sun as she stepped out onto the quiet street.

Jenna strolled through the cactus garden outside the museum, then took a seat on a bench hewn from a log and leaned her head back, soaking up the warm morning sun. Purple lupines and sage bloomed in the open spaces between the saguaros and barrel cactus. The dark-haired little girls from the diner climbed on the wheels of a covered wagon parked in the center of the garden. Their father leaned against the porch railing, his hat tipped low over his sharp nose. The doors opened and a gray-haired woman flipped the sign in the window to declare the museum now open. Jenna watched the girls and their father enter, and then rose and followed.

She made a five dollar donation at the front door, picked up a glossy brochure outlining the town's raucous frontier history, and then proceeded to her right through a room filled with western oil paintings. Russells and Remingtons hung beside bronze eagles, buffaloes, and downcast Indians. She stuck her hand in her hip pocket, fingering the thick envelope made of

smooth linen paper and embossed lettering. In another room, she surveyed local geological finds, huge geodes glowing with amethyst and amber, fools gold, and jagged crystals in bright jewel tones. The dark-haired girls soon entered the room, their purple cowboy boots clattering on the institutional tile. They pressed their hands and faces to the displays and their father pulled them away by their thin arms, telling them not to dirty the glass. They pouted in unison, their faces drooping into similar scowls. Jenna smiled, and the girls noticed her for the first time.

"Hi," the oldest said. She wore a blue cotton dress, the hem just grazing the tops of her boots.

"Hi, yourself," said Jenna. "Those rocks are awful pretty aren't they."

"Sure are," the girls said. "When I grow up, I'm gonna marry a man who'll bring me buckets of them, and then I won't never have to work like my mama does."

The man frowned at the girl, and she skirted away to another window filled with clear white crystals. She glanced back at Jenna several times, but Jenna didn't say anything more.

It was quiet in the room when the girls and their father left. Jenna pulled the envelope from her pocket and held it out, inspecting Jeff's fine black printing on the upper left-hand corner, the yellow forwarding label stuck over her old San Diego address. She had received at least a dozen of these same envelopes since she ended up here in Arizona; she assumed there had been a dozen others that never reached her during the months she wandered around. All of them she had thrown away unopened; except for this one. It arrived yesterday morning, and for some reason, as she sat

drinking her second cup of coffee, the pink morning glow filling the sky, she relented and broke open the seal. Inside, on beautiful ivory paper and printed in embossed silver letters, was a wedding invitation; the name of the bride, her own; the date, Sunday, April 10, 4:00 p.m. Tomorrow. No letter, no explanation, no plea or pledge of love. Just an invitation to her own wedding, as if all she needed to know was the date and time, and she would come. She had torn the invitation in half, and then torn it again, and spent the rest of the day furiously painting her new house, cursing the arrogance and stupidity of Jeff Casey and all who knew him.

When she woke this morning, her anger was gone, but in its place had settled a painful loneliness. The vast expanse of open horizon that had attracted her to Arizona, now seemed suffocating, and she longed for the company of other people. She dressed, ran a brush through her hair, and decided to come to town. As she passed the kitchen table on her way out, she put the pieces of the invitation back in the envelope, folded it, and tucked it in her right hip pocket. Dave Johnson had loaned her the use of his spare truck for fifty extra dollars a month tacked onto her rent. She fished the keys from the glove compartment and pulled out onto the dirt road. By the time she hooked onto the highway, five miles down, her mood had already lifted, the way the red and yellow lines that rimmed the barren hills beyond turned into the bright expanse of endless blue sky, piercing in simple clarity.

The rest of the afternoon she toured the museum and wandered through the shops that had now opened. In the souvenir store, she bought a silver bracelet and earrings with Hopi etchings of the sun and moon. The

salesgirl was young, not much more than a child, and she snapped her gum as they exchanged small talk.

"Those are pretty fancy boots," Jenna said, nodding to the girls feet.

"You like 'em?" The girl twisted her thin legs poking out below a short denim skirt. This gave Jenna a full view of the white and yellow flowers stitched on the sides of the red cowboy boots.

"Red's my favorite color," the girl said. "I got such narrow feet I have a hell of a time finding any boots that'll fit me. My husband had these made special for me for our first anniversary." She leaned forward, whispering, "Cost a fortune, but he said he'd pay anything for a cheap woman in boots."

"Jesus, you don't even look old enough to drive. How can you be married?" Jenna thought of the envelope in her pocket.

"I'm nineteen. I got married when I was seventeen, right out of high school. He was goin' in the marines and couldn't wait." The girl shrugged. "You know."

Jenna nodded, awash in images of a skinny virgin bride in red cowboy boots. She glanced around the store. "Hey, you sell boots here?"

"Some." The girl motioned for Jenna to follow her. "These are the only women's boots we carry. You can find more at McIntyre's on the West side of town." She looked Jenna up and down. "You ever wear cowboy boots?"

Jenna laughed. "Not since I was a kid."

The woman took a pair of black boots down from the shelf. They had simple stitching, nothing fancy, but a fair sized heel. "These are a good boot.

They're Justin's. Last you forever and go with everything. I think this one's about your size. Slip 'em on."

Jenna sat down, tried the pair on and walked in front of the mirror admiring her new duds. "What do you think?" she asked the girl.

"I think it's a good beginning, but you need a little . . . pizzazz." The girl disappeared for a minute, then returned with a lemon-yellow leather jacket with blue rhinestone stars stitched across the chest. "Here. Try this on."

Jenna obeyed, pulling her sweater off and slipping the jacket over her white T-shirt..

The girl stepped back appraisingly. "Don't you look special. Better not let my husband see you."

Jenna appraised herself in the mirror. "I look like something that just stepped off a Nashville tour bus. I better just take the boots." She removed the jacket, but left her sweater off and tucked her white T-shirt into her Levi's.

"Suit yourself," the girl shrugged. "My husband always says older women look better in more conservative colors anyway."

Jenna felt heat rising in her cheeks as she realized she had just been shot down by a skinny little tart barely old enough to have graduated out of her first training bra. The girl wore her wedding ring like a shield. Anything Jenna said would be deflected by that. She paid for her boots and wandered outside, puzzled but amused.

The rest of the afternoon limped along slowly. By three o'clock, Jenna had seen most of the town. She bought a hot dog from a truck-stop at the end of town and then walked back to where she parked her truck. She didn't

really feel like heading back home, but she didn't know what else to do with the afternoon. She tried not to think about Jeff and Anne, but she couldn't help wondering what they were doing right now. The wedding was in an hour. She pictured them all sitting in the music room, patiently trusting that she would come. She pushed the thought aside. Anne was practical. Anne wouldn't let this thing go on. Jenna quickened her pace, playing with the feel of her new boots, swinging her arms, clearing her mind of thoughts and focusing only on the feel of the sun on her back and the clear air in her nose. She heard music to her right and turned. The Green Room. She was back where she started from.

The bar was filled with the usual assortment of couples, groups of men, and solitary individuals. Jenna took a stool at the far end where Fred and John had sat earlier. The same bartender stood behind the bar.

"Bud. Warm," she said, smiling at Jenna.

"Perfect," Jenna said. She took a drink and glanced around the room. Deer heads, Michelob and Jack Daniel's mirrors, little league team photos. Travel half-way across the world and back and end up in a small town bar. How could she ever have known? She glanced in the mirror in front of her and saw Fred and John seated in a booth behind her. A tall man slid from the bench and shook Fred's hand, and then John's. The man turned, and Jenna recognized Dave Johnson, her landlord. He walked past her on his way out.

Jenna called to him. "Dave. How ya doing?"

"Jenna," he said, smiling. He was tall and lanky, with a neck like a turkey, red and jutting forward with an enormous Adam's apple. He sat in

the stool next to her. "What a coincidence. I was just on my way out to see you."

"Oh, yeah?" Jenna questioned. She liked Dave. He had the quiet manner and directness of a man who has lived most of his life alone.

"I'm afraid I've got some bad news for you. I sold my place today. The Whites bought me out. Their ranch borders my land." He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, but I imagine the old man'll be moving into the house. If you'd like, I'll introduce you. Maybe you can work something out."

Jenna looked at the booth and saw that Fred and John were watching. She waved and they tipped their hats. She turned to Dave Johnson, "We've already met. They had a beer with me for breakfast this morning."

Dave laughed, kicking the ground. "Well, nothing's done or signed yet. We got to bring all the Realtors and lawyers in to draw up all the papers. It'll be a while 'fore anything changes hands, so you don't have to worry just yet. You know how those blood suckers drag their feet, soaking you for all they can on these things."

Jenna smiled. "I know how that goes."

"I'll keep you posted," he shook hands with her.

"See ya, Dave," she called as he ducked his head out the door.

She turned to Fred and John and glared at them. They both laughed, and Fred motioned for her to join them. She picked up her beer and walked across the smoky room.

"Those are some damn fine looking new boots you got on," Fred said, nodding to her feet.

"Never mind the boots," Jenna said. "You had your mind set to buy that place all along, didn't you?"

"Yep. I wasn't about to let that land get away from me. I've been waiting to buy it back my whole life."

"And here you are being neighborly, and you didn't even tell me I'd have to leave."

He motioned for Jenna to take the seat beside him, and she slid in next to him. He leaned his white head against the wall. "You see," Fred continued, "that land used to belong to my father. I was born in that house you're living in. He sold it just after World War II. He lost a leg in the war, and when he came home he couldn't pay the taxes on all of it, so he sold off half the ranch. We kept the other half, the part we're living on now, because there's better water. We have a creek and a better well. We been waiting to buy it back all these years, and this is the first time we ever had the money to swing it."

Jenna took a drink of her beer. "Can I continue renting the place?"

John glanced up at his father, who hesitated to answer Jenna's question. When Fred didn't, John answered for him.

"Dad's taking the old house--your house. My family's going to stay in the big house. We've been living there together all these years, but now our kids are getting so big we need more space." He glanced at his father. The old man studied the label on his beer bottle.

"Oh," Jenna said. "I understand. That's a shame. I really like that place."

"If you'd like, Ms. Donnelly, I can help you find something," Fred offered.

"All right, I may take you up on that. But please call me Jenna."

"I've never heard that name before. I like it."

"Thank you."

Fred leaned closer to Jenna, "Now tell me what brought you here. I've got a feeling you're carrying some pretty interesting stories, and there's nothing I love better than a good story."

Jenna shifted her leg underneath her and emptied her bottle. She sighed before answering. "I used to be a lawyer in San Diego. I'm afraid that's not a very interesting story."

Fred raised his eyebrow. "A lawyer. I'll be damned."

Jenna continued. "I was very good. I made a lot of money, and I was very successful. But one day I realized I wasn't happy. Something was missing. So I put everything on hold and went to India with a group of friends. But that just made things worse. I've been bumming around ever since. That's how I ended up here."

"And the fella?" Fred winked. "The one you're running away from. What about him?"

"Dad, that's none of your damn business. Leave her alone." John scowled at his father.

"It's OK." Jenna said. "Yeah, there was a man." She looked at her watch. Four o'clock. "A lot of men."

They sat in silence.

"I just thought of something," John said. "Why don't you come to our place tonight for supper. It's the least we can do after throwing you out of your house."

Jenna laughed. "You don't have to do that."

"I know, but I'd like to. My wife would love the company, and my sister and her family are coming anyway so it's no trouble at all."

"Then I accept. I'd really like to be with family tonight."

"It's settled then. 'Bout six o'clock?"

"Sounds great."

"Come earlier and I'll make you one of my famous Bombay bourbon cocktails," Fred winked.

"What's that?" Jenna asked.

John stood. "You don't want to know."

Jenna rose also, and Fred slid out and stood beside his son. They had the same body, same slope of shoulder and tilt of head. Jenna wondered if their faces had resembled each other before John had acquired the scar that dragged his features down the left side of his face. "How do I find your place?"

"Just keep going up Watershed Road. About a half mile past the turn off for your place, is a yellow mailbox. Turn there, you'll see the house as soon as you 'round the bend."

"OK. I'll see you at six. Should I bring anything?"

"Just a smile," Fred said, tipping his hat.

Jenna laughed. "You got it."

She stuck around after the two men left. She bought another beer and chatted with the bartender who had just moved to town after a nasty divorce. Jenna thought of Jeff and hoped he was OK, then wondered if a lawyer could make any money in a town this small.

On the way out to the White ranch, Jenna stopped and bought a bouquet of yellow daffodils and red tulips to give to John's wife. She passed her own driveway and found their place easily. The White's home looked exactly as she pictured it: two new Ford trucks parked in front of the garage, a couple of bicycles on the hard dirt in front of the house, potted cactus and geraniums on the porch. John's wife Livy was bright and friendly and reminded Jenna of Rhadja in an aching, empty way. Their two boys wrestled constantly on the living room rug, blocking the TV and sending their Grandpa Fred into a flurry of curses. Jenna was helping Livy with the salad when John's sister arrived. Jenna immediately recognized the waitress from the diner that morning, her brooding husband and daughters following behind. Fred greeted his daughter, shook hands coolly with his son-in-law, and scooped his little granddaughters into his arms.

"Want you to meet our neighbor, Jenna Donnelly," Fred said motioning to her. "She's renting the Johnson place. Jenna this is my daughter Eve and her husband Paul. And these two little mudhens are my granddaughters, Janine and Jamie."

The girls waved. "Hey, you're the lady from the museum," said the little one.

"Yes, I saw you there this morning," Jenna said. She wondered why Fred still referred to her house as the Johnson place since he just bought it. She smiled at Eve and her husband. "I guess we meet again."

Eve looked older than Jenna, in her late thirties probably, with blue eyes just like Fred's except for the dark circles under them. She carried a sadness with her that made Jenna uneasy.

"You girls go outside and play with your cousins," Eve said, scooting the girls out the door. She turned to Jenna and said, "Let's go see if we can help Livy with the dinner."

They ate a simple meal of chicken, mashed potatoes, salad, and buttermilk rolls. Eve brought a chocolate cake from the diner and they ate it for dessert with vanilla ice cream. Jenna soaked up the company of the three generations of the White family like a starving woman at her first meal. Fred was warm and protective of her, making sure she had enough to eat and that she felt welcome in his home, while Eve and Livy juggled children and conversation with acrobatic ease. In the presence of their wives and the children's larger personalities, the two husbands, John and Paul, faded back, enjoying each other's silent company. After she had finished two cups of coffee, and the children began to argue with the exhausted irritability that signals bedtime, Jenna thanked her hosts and took her leave. Fred pulled a flash light from a table beside the door and walked her to her truck.

"This was wonderful," Jenna said. "You have a beautiful family."

"They ain't perfect, but they're mine."

"That's good enough," Jenna said. "That's more than I've got."

Fred studied his feet. "You know," he said finally. "After all these years of living, I've realized that the only thing that really matters is God, the land, and family. For the first time since my sweet wife died, I have all of them together again." He stared off into the distance. "I wish she were here to see."

Jenna touched his arm. "I'm sure she is."

He smiled at her and nodded, and she shook his hand and thanked him before getting in. He rapped his knuckles on the hood and waved as she drove away.

The moon had risen in the clear sky by the time Jenna drove home. The color of the Arizona night still surprised her. Without the glare of city lights, the sky was beyond black, it was a purple black, with waves and depth and forms like shadows flowing across its open enormity. The stars shone in such abundance that Jenna wondered if this were the same sky she had looked at all her life or if she had pulled layers from the universe and was seeing the world from a completely new angle. She pulled off the highway and turned off the lights as she coasted up her driveway to her little cabin. The wood siding had once been white, but was now gray and weathered, and the roof over the porch sagged like an old horse. It had a new wood stove, and in the morning the sun burst through the bare windows and filled the room with white and yellow light.

She tried to sleep, but the moon shone through the window like it was high noon. She rolled over. The new sheets were stiff and cold. "Some wedding night," she said. When it became apparent that she couldn't sleep, she quit fighting, pulled her jeans and boots back on, and went outside. It was

almost midnight, but the sky was so bright it had the gray light of dawn. She wrapped a blanket around her shoulders and sat in a chair on her front porch. Crickets screeched all around her and somewhere, off to her right, an owl called. She followed the horizon as far as she could see, to where it dipped into an arroyo and a flowing creek. The tops of the cottonwood trees swayed in the night breeze. Beyond, the mountains circled the valley in golds and reds, their peaks crowned with gray pines. She saw the scars in the hillsides from the mining companies and the patches of green where ranchers struggled to grow enough feed to keep their animals alive. A mouse skittered across the dirt in front of her. It paused, its black eyes holding her in their small globes, then rushed under the side of her house. She breathed deeply, and in one startling moment of clarity saw herself and the world as it truly was, and she didn't feel like running anymore; she didn't need to open any new doors because they all led back to the same place; to herself. When she turned her gaze to the sky again, she didn't see a black night, but stared instead at waves of light flowing gracefully among particles of stars, some dark, some light. All bursting with color. All whole. All one.

CHAPTER 14

Sathya

(Truth, past and present)

April is paradise in San Diego. The air warms to a perfect eighty degrees and is laced with a tropical balminess that coats everything in a soft orange hue. Jeff planted tulips and daffodils along all the walkways and in the planter boxes lining the decks and patios. For Jenna. If she needed color, he would fill her life with every shade and form of it. He had the lawn manicured to a rolling plush blanket of green. The sky above the ocean broke into a dozen shades of blue, soft and powdery above, deep turquoise where it fell into the sea. The lemon and cherry trees bloomed pink and white. Purple iris danced in the breeze below the fruit trees. The roses exploded in reds, from shy pinks to lusty crimson. The world spun with color, and he would give it all to Jenna when she arrived to take her place at his side.

He pulled a dying yellow bloom from the last daffodil at the end of the walk, and then surveyed the scene. Anne had lined the lawn with white chairs, and he had himself cut and sewn the white gauze that draped from the

trellis under which he now stood. He woke early to tuck fresh roses--yellow, orange, white, red, lavender--in the fabric, and they gleamed now with morning dew. He looked to the empty space on his left and sighed. When she arrived, he would drape Jenna in the flowing white gauze gown that Anne and Rhadja had sewn for her, the same roses embroidered carefully on the neck and sleeves. He pictured her hair loose, her feet bare, their hands joined in the perfect union blessed by their Lord. And the world was good. Very good.

"Jeff. I need to speak with you. Could you come here for a minute?" Anne waved to him from the deck, and he righted the chairs along the aisle as he walked across the lawn to her.

He beamed. "Yes? What is it, Annie?" He turned again to the garden and sighed.

"Jeff, look at me. I have to talk to you." She turned his face to hers and then stopped and took a deep breath. "Come sit here with me--where Jenna and I used to sit--and have some tea with me."

Jeff nodded, and plopped himself down next to her. Anne handed him a cup of steaming tea, and they both drank in silence for a moment.

"It's lovely." She waved her arm in the direction of the trellis. "You did a beautiful job with the garden this year."

"I want it all perfect for Jenna. I'm glad she waited until today to arrive. This makes it all the more special, don't you think, timing it this way? Won't you be excited to see her again?"

Anne bit her lip and set her cup down. She took Jeff's cup from him and sat it down beside hers. Then she placed both of his thin hands in her own. They were so pale, so refined. She wanted to tell him he should never have come back. He was too good. He didn't deserve this. "You know," she said, "when you were a baby I used to sit and hold you for hours and turn your hands over in mine, just like this, curling and uncurling your tiny fingers. I couldn't believe anything so tiny and fragile could actually be my brother."

"What's the matter, Annie?" Jeff's smile pinched in an odd question mark below his bright eyes.

Anne took another deep breath. "You really believe she's coming don't you?" She thought of the box of returned envelopes under her bed. All but the last one had come back unopened.

Jeff laughed. "Of course. Baba said it would be so. I swore never to lose my faith in him, and I won't. She'll be here--wearing the dress you made for her, and she'll be the most beautiful woman that ever kissed an April morning."

Anne smiled. "I hope you're right." She pressed his wild hair neatly behind his ears. Finally, she nodded and slapped her hand loudly on her thigh. "We better go inside and finish cooking. I believe you've invited everyone we've ever known to this wedding."

"That's the spirit. This is a day of celebration. No more sad faces, OK?" he said.

"No more sad faces," she agreed.

"Good," Jeff said excitedly. He stood and made a pathway for his sister. "Now lead the way."

Inside the kitchen, Rhadja was elbow deep in bread dough. Jordan clung to her pants, wobbling on new legs. When he saw Jeff enter, he worked his way toward him, grasping one cupboard handle to the next until he was close enough to make the leap and clutch Jeff's knees in a tight grip.

"Little Buddha," Jeff said reaching down to the boy and swinging him up in his arms. "Are you making bread for your Auntie Jenna?"

Anne and Rhadja glanced at each other, and Anne shook her head menacingly. Rhadja looked to the bread and remained silent.

"Something smells good," Jeff said putting Jordan back down on his teetering feet. The boy began to cry and stretched his arms to be picked up again.

"That's the soup," Rhadja said. She turned to her son. "Jordan, come here. Leave Jeff alone. Play with your bear." She motioned with her head, her hands still planted in the dough. "There he is."

Jordan fell to ground and crawled rapidly to a battered brown bear in the middle of the floor. He wrapped his lips around the thread-bare nose.

"Not taking to weaning very well, is he," Anne laughed.

"He sticks every thing in his mouth that's brown and round. It's so funny. Poor baby." Rhadja shook her head, laughing.

"Remember what Jenna said that morning in India? He will never be happy again until he wraps his lips around the real thing."

"I do remember that." The women laughed, and then Rhadja looked away, her eyes brimming with tears. "I miss her so much."

"She's coming," Anne fought a lump in her throat and looked at Rhadja sternly.

"Of course she's coming," Jeff stepped between the women and placed an arm on each of their shoulders. "And we'll have a beautiful wedding waiting for her."

They spent the rest of the morning in a flurry of activity, hanging streamers and balloons from the ceiling, cutting flowers, arranging candles, cooking pastries and candy delicacies. As the day wore on, Anne strained to keep her high spirits up for Jeff's sake. But with each passing hour it became more difficult to contain her disappointment and anger. Although he was discreet about looking, she could feel Jeff's every cell hinged on the driveway, waiting for the arrival of his bride.

At noon, Anne went to his room with a cheese sandwich. Ever since India, she had to watch him carefully or he wouldn't eat anything at all. His room was empty. She combed the house and the beach, fearing the worst, and still didn't find him. Just as she was about to enlist Rhadja's help to call their friends in search of him, an old blue Volkswagen van pulled into the drive way. Anne's heart skipped a beat and her face flushed with hope. The guests weren't due for four more hours. It had to be her.

Anne raced into the front yard, slamming the screen door behind her. A tattooed teenage boy stepped out of the driver's seat and slid the side door open. Jeff sat inside steadying a five-tiered wedding cake, the white sides laced with icing and roses, just like those embroidered on Jenna's dress and woven into the draperies of the trellis.

The adrenaline rush of the moment came to a crash in the pit of her stomach, and she stared blankly at the enormous monument to Jeff's faith and love. She thought of the days when his devotion had been only for Baba, and marveled at how Jenna had been incorporated into it, as if they were one and the same.

"What do you think?" Jeff asked excitedly.

The act of speaking felt like dragging her legs through waist high sand. "It's beautiful."

He clasped his hands at his heart. "We have to have a wedding cake. It's perfect."

The driver helped them unload it from the van and the three of them carefully placed it in the center of the dining room table. The top nearly touched the ceiling.

He tipped the driver, and turned to Anne as the boy ducked out the door. "Is she here yet?" he asked, excitedly.

She shook her head.

"That's OK. We'll just get dressed and wait for her." He smiled, and turned in circles in the middle of the meeting room brimming with rainbow streamers and roses and honeysuckle branches. Color and fragrance filled the room with a poetic opulence. "Won't she love this, Anne?" he asked. "Isn't it beautiful? Baba was so right to send me home. Of course, it's best to have the wedding here. This is where it all began after all." He smiled. "Look, my hands are shaking." He held his arms out parallel to the floor. "Silly nervous groom," he said in a child's voice.

Anne wanted to wrap him in her arms and shake him.

"I think I'll take a nap," he said. "Just a quick one."

Anne nodded. "That's a good idea."

"You'll wake me as soon as she gets here won't you?" he asked.

She nodded, forcing the tears back into her eyes.

He smiled faintly and started toward his room.

"Jeff," she called to him, but he didn't stop. "Everything's going to be fine."

"Of course," he mumbled. "Baba will provide."

When the door to his room clicked shut, she turned to the table brimming with the sculptured wedding cake, picked up the vase in the centerpiece and threw it against the wall. The water dripped in long gray streaks onto the broken crystal shards and white roses below. Rhadja appeared quickly from the kitchen. She looked at Anne shaking and pale, and then at the broken vase on the floor. Rhadja never said a word. She just picked up the pieces and cleared the mess.

Anne placed her hand on Rhadja's shoulder. "Thank you."

Rhadja nodded. Her white cheeks were stained and wet like the wall.

"We better get dressed," Anne said. "The guests will be arriving soon."

The appointed hour drew near and cars began to line the street and driveway. Anne rushed between friends and family, guiding them to their seats. To their questions regarding the bride, she only shrugged, and smiled, and shook her head. She mingled, a pained smile painted on her face, the clock ticking. A persistent hum hovered over the gathering. Anne saw betrayal and pity written on their faces, as the heads turned in quiet

consideration of the decorations and cake. She knew Jenna wasn't coming; everyone knew that Jenna wasn't coming, but she would be damned if anyone heard those words come out of her mouth.

By five o'clock, the guests began to leave in silent procession of downcast eyes and shaking heads. They nodded in sympathy, and gave her cool kisses before leaving. She knew Jeff would never have their respect again. They would never remember the man who helped them discover Baba's love; who guided them to India; who looked after their spiritual--and quite often physical--needs. They would never remember the man who opened his home, night or day, to them and their children; whose voice brought tears to their eyes and made them breathe the light and love of true ecstasy. No, Jeff would forever be the man whose bride left him waiting at the altar. More importantly, he would be remembered as the man that had failed to manifest Baba's prophecy. Anne knew their life here was over. But what really made her angry was that she didn't know who to blame. So she mingled, and tried to make the remaining guests happy, and waited for Jeff to appear.

At six o'clock, all but their closest friends and family remained. By eight o'clock, the house was empty, and Jeff still had not come out of his room.

The wind blew the gauze draperies from the trellis and the rose petals blew in disarray on the lawn.

Anne sat on a chair by the edge of the cliff looking down at the ocean. The line between water and air seemed invisible. The edge of the world was one small step into an eternity of blue.

Rhadja sat on the grass at Anne's feet, watching the sunset. "You have to tell him she isn't coming."

"I can't," Anne cried. "It would kill him."

"I know he loved Jenna--we all did-- but you never should have let it go this far. How could you be so mean?"

"Mean?" Anne hissed, "I did this out of kindness, out of love. Can you imagine how he would have felt if I told him that his Lord had betrayed him? That his bride wasn't coming? Baba said she would return, so how could I tell Jeff she wouldn't?" She turned away. "All of his faith is in that man, not me . . . and not Jenna. He didn't love her anymore than he loved you or me. This," she waved at the deserted wedding scene, "was about faith. This was about proving himself worthy."

"And he did," Rhadja said.

"But where is the reward for him?"

"In the relief." She stood, and pulled Anne to her feet. "You must stop his suffering."

Anne fell into Rhadja's arms, and the women held each other and cried. "I can't bear to see him hurting." Anne cried into Rhadja's pillow of hair. "I can't do it."

"You have to. You're all he's got left."

Anne wiped her nose on her sleeve, and then nodded her head.

She knocked on Jeff's bedroom door. "It's me, Annie. May I come in?"

"Please, go away. Just leave me alone," she heard him sniffing behind the door.

The door had no lock, but she hated to walk in. She paced the hallway, running her hands through her hair and staring at the knob. After a few minutes had passed, she opened the door slowly and peeked inside.

Jeff sat cross-legged on his bed in his new white gauze shirt and pants with roses embroidered on the neck and sleeves, just like the dress she had made for Jenna. He cradled his guitar in his arms.

"Jeff?" she crept up to him. "Are you, OK?"

He shook his head. "I did everything he said. I gave my whole life to him," he cried.

She put her hand on his knee. "I know, sweetie," she whispered. Her heart was breaking, and she could do nothing.

"She's not coming," he wiped his nose. "Of course, she not coming. Why would she ever marry me? I'm nothing."

Anne bit her lip, "God . . . Jeff . . . don't say that."

"It's OK," he smiled thinly. "Everything has a purpose, right? But, Baba wouldn't purposely hurt me, would he?"

Anne sniffed. "No. He wouldn't."

"And Jenna wouldn't either, would she?"

"No, neither would she."

"Then, it's OK, see? This is as it should be, and it's perfect and in time, I'll understand the meaning."

Anne couldn't speak. She sat with her hand on his knee, trying not to cry.

"Would you tell everyone to leave?" he asked.

She nodded. She couldn't tell him they already had. "What do you want me to say?"

"Whatever you think is best."

She stood.

"No wait," he grabbed her arm. "Tell them we loved her, but she wasn't ready. Tell them we'll wait and pray and continue to hold the space for her. Tell them we know some day she'll find us, and then she'll know Baba and herself completely and be whole once again in our love."

Anne kissed his cheek. "I love you."

He smiled, but he wasn't present; his eyes were completely empty.

"And I love you."

Anne returned after a reasonable time had passed.

"Are they all gone?" Jeff asked.

"Yes."

He sighed. Anne studied him helplessly. He had grown so thin since their return from India; none of his clothes fit him. Even his new wedding clothes had grown too large since his last fitting.

"You need to eat something, Jeff." Anne took his arms. "Come on, let's have some soup." She guided him out the room and toward the kitchen.

He paused in front of the untouched wedding cake.

"It's very pretty, isn't it."

"It's lovely, Jeff," she said. "Hey, let's have a piece. Just you and me. What do you say?"

Jeff nodded. "Yes. Let's do that."

He cut two large pieces from the bottom tier, and then cut a third.

"I'll go call Rhadja," Anne said, reaching for the third piece.

"No," he grabbed her hand. "That's for Jenna. We'll save it for when she comes back. The rest we'll give away."

Anne nodded. "That's a good idea." She stuffed the white cake and rich butter frosting into her mouth in huge bites, not tasting it, not wanting to.

Jeff only took one bite, and then set the plate aside. "I'm going to the music room. I'd like to be alone, OK?"

"OK. Then we'll have some soup, or maybe go for a walk."

He heard her voice as he passed through the French doors, but the words didn't make any sense. Rhadja nursed Jordan on the deck; he thought she was done with that; it didn't make sense. Something white blew in the wind. He saw it out of the corner of his eye, but didn't focus on it. Inside the music room, he lit one creamy candle below Baba's picture at the altar, and sat on the wood floor.

He picked up a guitar leaning against the wall and began to play. The song had only one verse, repeated over and over. The tempo sped up each time it was repeated, until it exploded in ecstatic reverie at the end. Jenna loved to dance in circles with the children to this song. At the end, they would all fall laughing in a pile on the floor. Tonight, he couldn't move past the first progression; the tempo never changed as he repeated the same slow melody over and over, in the same melancholy echo. He prayed to Baba to enter his heart, to fill him with understanding and help him know what he

should do. He prayed to Baba to forgive him for his failure and his weakness. He prayed to Baba to let him back in; to accept him with his imperfection; to take him into his safekeeping because he didn't think he could remain here. Not now.

Soon, he felt lighter. The fog in his head cleared, and he felt warmth spreading in his heart. He sped up the tempo and focused on the flickering candle in front of him, imagining the orange flame filling his whole being, imagining Baba growing inside of him. He strummed his fingers over the strings, and lifted his voice to the night, and thought he heard the waves singing with him in a sweet female voice that licked his ears and called to him in a memory from his dreams. He walked to the window, praying to Baba, singing his name, and watched the night sky, dark and clear. The stars seared through the purple blackness; blinking; calling. He sat his guitar down and stood for a moment in the silence. The woman began singing again. He stepped outside the music room, onto the carpet of rich grass, sinking his bare feet into the cool blanket. The voice came from below, in the water, in the waves. He descended the dark steps to the beach, and walked into the dark water, into the reflections of light. Each spark of light, each star and shimmering drop, sang to him in a female voice.

"Jenna," he cried, questioning. "Is that you?"

He saw her face in the curve of the moon, and her hair in the breaking waves and he lay on the sand laughing, and singing, and praying to Baba. He rolled in the cool wet hardness, in the same spot where they had slept after Jenna's rebirthing. The waves crashed at his feet, and still he heard her voice calling from the sea, filling the sky. He dug in the sand, frantically scooping it

to his side, until he had made a hole big enough to lay down in, then he pulled the sand up over his feet, his legs, his belly, and chest, leaving only his arms free, which worked now to bring all of the loose sand within reach up and around his chin. The sand warmed quickly from his body heat, and he lay there laughing, listening to the waves crashing at his feet, licking his toes, Jenna's voice singing to him, and Baba's smile twinkling in the stars above. The waves came to his knees, and Jenna was there lying beside him; to his hips, and Jenna was laughing with him; to his chest, and he felt all of his grief leave him. He cried, and she soothed his tears and Baba came down out of the stars and blessed them, for they were reunited in love, finally, and all else was erased. The water washed over his lips and eyes, and he drank Jenna in, and she washed completely over him, in him, through him, and he breathed Jenna out, and he was cleansed, and Baba was before him in a shower of white light. Jeff handed Jenna a rainbow, and she gave him a pillow of gold, and he waved at her, and she smiled, and the water rained, and the sky turned to light, and he sat on his pillow of gold at Baba's feet, and he was love; he was whole; he was one.

CHAPTER 15 *Satchitananda*

(Supreme state, existence, knowledge, bliss)

Jelly donuts are the worst. Too small a bite, and all you get is dough. Too big, and chances are you will end up with a big glob of gooey red filling all over your tie. Bob was dealing with the latter when Jim entered, slapping a folded up newspaper in the palm of his hand.

"Did you read the paper yet?"

Bob dabbed a napkin in a glass of water and then approached the mess on his tie. He didn't look up. "No, not yet. At the moment I'm struggling with a jelly donut malfunction."

Jim dropped the opened paper on Bob's desk, and pointed to the top left column.

Bob glanced at the date. "This is yesterday's paper, Jim. I read it yesterday. Today, I thought I might read today's paper."

Jim saw that it was in fact yesterday's paper. "Well you couldn't have read it very carefully." He thumped his finger on the newsprint.

Bob read the headline. "So we've sunk that low, Big Guy?" He looked at Jim questioningly, "Now we're reading the obituaries. Boy, that gives new meaning to term 'ambulance chaser'."

"Look, here, third down." Jim slapped the page impatiently.

Bob looked down at the paper, and then up at Jim. "Is that our . . . Jenna's . . . Jeff Casey?"

Jim nodded.

"Oh, shit." Bob pulled the paper to him. "Friends and loved ones will give a final farewell Wednesday to Jeff Casey. The thirty-three year old man died Sunday, in an apparent drowning. He will be remembered always as a man who gave unselfishly to others and devoted his life to God. He is survived by his sister, Anne Casey. Services will be held at nine a.m., at the Casey home in La Jolla."

Bob flipped to the front page and scanned the other articles. "But what happened? How'd he drown?"

"I don't know," Jim paced the room. "I live right across the street, and I didn't even know. All kinds of people poured into his house Sunday. It looked like they were having a wedding or something."

Bob pushed his chair against the wall. "A wedding? Oh, shit, Jim. Jenna."

Jim shook his head, "Don't be ridiculous. Jenna would never marry Casey. She wasn't even there. I looked for her."

"Exactly." Bob grabbed his coat and headed toward the door. "Nobody drowns at a wedding . . . except a jilted groom."

"Oh, God." Jim followed him down the hall. "It's almost nine-thirty. The services have already started."

"We can be there in fifteen minutes," Bob said.

"I have a ten o'clock hearing. You have to go. I'll catch up with you."

Bob nodded. "She's there. I know she is."

"If she knows he's dead, she'll be there. Now hurry." Jim pushed him toward the door.

Bob stopped in the opening and turned to Jim. "So you really don't know where she is?"

"No. I honestly don't."

Bob snorted. "All this time I thought you were lying."

He rushed out of the office and raced up the coast to Jeff Casey's house, remembering the night he had made this same trip, the night Casey's sister had kept him from seeing Jenna, and Jim had told him to leave her alone. He said he would keep an eye on her. Said she knew what she was doing. Now she was gone, and Casey was dead.

There were only a few cars parked in front of the Casey house when Bob pulled up. He pushed the wooden gate open and entered the front yard. The pathway was still as neat and well-cared for as he remembered, though the abundance of blooming flowers startled him on this somber occasion. He walked to the front porch and noticed that the shoe cubbies were empty. Not a single pair lay anywhere to be seen. He knocked. No answer. He knocked again. Still no one responded. He opened the door.

"Hello," he called, but there was no response. He shut the door behind him as he entered the room. Moving boxes filled the large front entry and

the window coverings were pulled tightly shut. He blinked his eyes to adjust to the darkness. "Hello," he called again. "I'm here for the services. Is anyone here?"

He wound his way to the dining room. The table was piled with boxes marked "kitchen" in blue felt pen. He passed through the French doors, out to the deck. Music drifted from a room off to the side of the house. He thought about going in, but then decided to sit on the deck benches and wait. He would let Jenna say her farewell. Again, he was startled by the beauty of the April morning and the clarity of colors and life exploding in the yard around him. After about twenty minutes, the music stopped, and then a long slow wail echoed from the room. Bob stood, as more voices joined in. He ran his hands through his hair and paced the deck. Then there was silence, and as if the sky were opening up, a single rolling *om* poured out over the morning, and then silence again, except for the crash of the waves below and the call of a pair of doves in the cherry tree above him. The doors opened and people milled out of the room, across the lawn and through a side gate, bypassing the house all together. Bob saw Anne walking on the arm of a blonde woman guiding a toddler across the grass. He went to them.

Anne looked at him vaguely for a moment and then nodded her head, recognizing him. "She isn't here," she said.

"That's what you told me last time, and I know she was."

Anne shrugged her shoulders and looked away.

"I'm sorry about your brother," Bob said. "I never met a man so full of kindness."

Anne bit her lip, still looking away. Tears rolled down her cheek in a steady, silent progression. She was so pale, Bob thought she might faint. He looked to the woman holding Anne's arm, and saw that she too was puffy and pale from crying.

"Can I help you some way?" Bob said, feeling like he had to say something to ease their pain. "Do you need anything?"

"Go away," Anne hissed. "And take her with you." She pointed to the stairs that led down to the beach. "She killed him. She may as well have held his head under the water herself."

Anne shook free of the other woman and walked out the gate.

Bob's legs shook. He took a breath, walked across the lawn to the stairs, and leaned over the railing. As far as he could see, the beach was empty below. He started down the stairs, having no idea what to expect at the bottom. The sky was perfectly clear, and the turquoise water looked as if you could walk on it. Before his mind could put his feelings into words, he saw her sitting alone on the sand, her knees pulled up to her chest, her feet bare.

"Hey, kiddo."

She looked up. Her eyes were red and swollen. "Bobby?"

His heart caught in his throat. "Oh, Jenna."

She went to him and folded herself into his arms. He patted her--awkwardly, at first--and then he wrapped his arms around her and rocked her. A wave licked their feet. Jenna laughed and wiped her nose on his shoulder.

"Hey, that's my shirt."

She laughed again between sobs. "No one will notice. You're such a slob anyway."

"God, you're beautiful," he said. "I had almost forgotten."

"I missed you, Bobby."

"Not as much as I missed you."

She touched his cheek. "Don't you start crying too. I've cried enough for everybody."

"What happened, here?" He wanted so badly to take her pain inside him.

She sniffled and ran her fingers through her hair. "It all fell apart. They think it was all my fault, but I just tried to save him. I couldn't hurt him. I loved him, too." She sank to the sand again and hugged her knees to her chest. "When I think how they let it go this far . . . actually letting him have a wedding . . . how could they have been so cruel? I was the only one unwilling to betray him, and yet everyone thinks that's exactly what I've done. I couldn't marry him. I would have destroyed him."

Bob sat down next to her. He raised his hand to stroke her hair, but then thought against it. He sat quietly beside her, waiting until she was ready to talk.

After a long silence, she sighed. "I didn't think he'd kill himself. It never occurred to me."

"It's not your fault, Jenna. You didn't kill him. Although, I can understand it. I've wanted to die without you, too."

She shook her head and held up her hand between them. "Don't say that. Don't give me your heart. I don't want to hold it."

He laughed. "But you do. You hold everybody's. Everybody loves you. That's just what you do, Jenna."

"I don't mean to," she said, almost apologetically.

"Of course you do, but that's OK."

Jenna stared out at the ocean, but this time he couldn't leave her alone in her silence.

"What now?" he asked. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," she shrugged. "Go back to Arizona I guess."

"Is that where you've been all this time?"

"That's where I've been lately."

"I saw your condo for sale. The Realtor wouldn't tell me where you'd moved."

"I wrote to Jim when I left India. I told him I wasn't coming back to San Diego."

"I know," Bob winced. "Why didn't you ever write to me? Didn't you know I was worried sick about you?"

"I knew."

He took her hand. "Don't leave. Don't go away again."

"I don't have anything here anymore. My friends think I'm a killer. I sold my house. I don't even have a job."

"You know you do. Jim would take you back in a second, and you can stay with me until you find a place to live . . . you can stay with me as long as you want."

She didn't answer.

"Jenna," he took a deep breath. "I love you. I always have. Please, give me a chance. Let me take care of you."

"Don't say that," she screamed. "Shit, Bob! I just buried someone I loved today. He killed himself because I wouldn't marry him. So don't talk to me about love; I'm through with it." She started toward the stairs. "I just want to be alone."

"Bullshit." He grabbed her arm and pulled her back down onto the sand. "You've never wanted to be alone a day in your life. You live to be center stage. I know exactly who you are, Jenna Donnelly. I know you better than anyone else in this world, and I don't want to change one thing about you. I never have. You can do whatever you want; worship any God you want; paint yourself blue and dance around oak trees for all I care; I just want to be with you." He let go of her arm. "Jenna, I hurt without you."

"I hurt, too." Her eyes filled with tears. "Please don't make me cry again. I'm no good to anyone like this. Everything inside of me hurts right now. . . I need some space for a while."

"No, you don't. All you've ever had is space. You need intimacy. You need love."

"Damn you! Why do you think I ran halfway across the world with these people? I had intimacy! I had love!"

"Not the love of a man. If you had, you never would have let it go."

"Stop it! Don't talk to me like this! I don't want to cry in front of you."

Bob laughed. "Why? Are you afraid I might discover that you're vulnerable? That you need people. News flash, sweetie. Everybody does."

"I'm not vulnerable! I've never needed anybody."

"Jenna, you are so vulnerable you've turned it into a strength."

"Shut up!" She screamed and bent over holding her belly. "I hurt so bad! Just shut up, and leave me alone."

"I don't want to hurt you."

She looked at him over her shoulder and whispered. "Then make it go away."

"Everything's gonna be OK."

"Be my friend, Bobby," she sighed. "Please. Can you do that for me?"

"Is that all you want?"

"That's all I can give."

"I've always been your friend. I can't pretend anymore." He cupped her head in his large hands and kissed her. At first she stiffened, but then a strange thing happened. She turned almost weightless in his arms, and kissed him back. It felt so familiar--so honest--it felt like home.

When she stopped kissing him, he held her away from his body and saw a softness in her eyes that had never been there for him before. "Will you stay?" he asked.

She nodded. "For now."

"Forever," he yelled.

She shook her head. "No promises."

He took her hands in his and laughed. "I wouldn't expect any."

"Well, I sure as hell do." They turned, as Jim walked up, his shoes in his hand and the cuffs of his pants rolled up. "I want to hear you say you'll stay."

"For now."

"Forever," Jim yelled.

She laughed and shook her head. "No promises."

"I guess I wouldn't expect any." He smiled at her. "Are you OK, counselor?"

"I think I will be."

"Good, then let's all go have a drink at my house and renegotiate your percentage of the partnership."

She laughed. "What percentage. I want my full partnership."

"I don't know. No promises. Remember? How do I know you won't call me from Bangladesh or Sri Lanka or Tibet next time, or tell me you're living with the Dahli Lama and I have to buy you out again?"

"You don't. You'll just have to take that risk."

They walked down the beach, away from Jeff Casey's home, taking the long way to Jim's house. "OK." He stuck out his hand. "You've got a deal. It's good to have you back."

She shook it. "It's good to be back."

"Bob, give her the new Billy Bailey case to start with."

"Oh, no," Jenna shrieked. "What part was it this time?"

"It's tragic really," Bob said shaking his head. "Seems Billy doesn't like wearing underpants. He had an unfortunate encounter with a defective zipper while trying on a new pair of Levi's. He wants to sue the manufacturer, the store, the sales clerk, everybody."

Jenna exploded in laughter.

"Oh sure, go ahead and laugh woman." Bob shook his head. "But it's a very serious matter. Billy's even got his new wife listed as a plaintiff. Inability to perform his conjugal duties, you know."

"Don't tell me any more. You can keep that one."

"What? There's money to be made on this. Don't tell me you're going to turn your back on the Bailey Boys."

"From now on, you can have all of them. I don't ever want to see another damaged Bailey body part again."

"Well, I'm shocked with you." Bob turned to Jim. "I think the woman has grown some moral character in her absence. What do you think?"

"Nonsense," Jim laughed.

"Get used to it boys. No more sleazy cases. That's not why I went into law. Not for the money. I did it for the challenge."

"No." Bob laughed. "You did it for the fight."

"Well, maybe so," she agreed. "Perhaps that'll change, too."

They reached the road. Jim and Bob each held one of her hands.

"I love you," Bob whispered in her ear.

"Me too," she whispered back.

He wondered if that meant she loved him or herself, then decided it meant both.