



THE
GOD
STATE

JENNIFER OTT

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Chapter 1

On a large television monitor, a video portrayed a fiery blaze across the desert, sparking fireballs of tumbleweed, exploding everything in its wake. Cowboys rounded up cattle in the smoky haze, and traffic snarled along Arizona's Route 64, stranding everyone on the south side of the Grand Canyon.

“What many believed as solely a Navajo issue, those who have protested foresaw the looming tragedy. Today smoke and ash has been seen as far away as Las Vegas and Tucson. The winds are predicted to blow farther into the American Midwest. Many climate experts predict this latest disaster can erupt into another Dust Bowl, which left many paralyzed without income and homes,” a female voice reported in a determined, British accent.

The camera focused on an attractive woman, late twenties, dressed in a crisp white shirt, and

her dark hair twisted in a loose bun. Beatrice Suffolk presented her story as the dusty wind gusted against her pristine attire. She appeared as an angel in the midst of darkest days.

“Despite the travesty of the situation, few news outlets are present. What we have seen out here is the public relations departments of corporations and oil companies doing damage control, yet no one here is doing anything about the actual damage. No one will be accountable for after the smoke clears and the ash settles.” She raised her fist and showed red handcuff marks on wrists. Her usual serious demeanor contorts into a wrinkled, wry smile. Arrested, it’s a journalist’s mark of pride, more so than any award. She continued on with her story with more passionate fervor. “Those of us really interested in the truth will not be silenced. Let’s get the word out before it’s too late.”

“Mr. Merrick, we are ready for you,” a female voice called, interrupting his attention to

the television.

Rotating his leather chair, Bruce Merrick turned away from the video screen broadcasting Beatrice's story and faced the bland interior of the conference hall waiting room. A tall man, with salt and pepper colored hair, gave the well-mannered woman with a clipboard and a Bluetooth in her ear a pleasant grin.

He rose from his seat and followed her through the hallway, entering a small backstage, and waiting for the overhead announcer to introduce him. "Ladies and gentlemen, our next speaker at the Shifting into the New Age Conference is the author of several books, including *Socializing on Social Media*, *The Psychology of the Critic*, and his new release, *Interpersonal Space*. Please give a warm welcome to psychologist and philosopher, Bruce Merrick."

A warm applause from a small audience of about one hundred people greeted Bruce as he walked onto the stage. "Thank you," he said in a

soft, slightly effeminate voice. The delicate man spoke in a tender tone. He adjusted the microphone on his lapel, and then smiled once more for the audience. “I was invited to talk to you all about my book, and the topic of interpersonal space. You may be thinking to yourself what is interpersonal space?”

The well-mannered audience offered a mild, yet enthusiastic applause. All in attendance were there for one reason – raising their level of consciousness, and they believed Bruce Merrick was one of the few in the world with the answers. Once silence overcame the room and the lights dimmed to complete darkness, they waited quietly for Bruce to begin.

He clicked a button on a hand-held device and a screen behind him portrayed a photo of the universe. “This is a passion of mine – space. I even have my reservation secured with Rick Marsden’s tourist shuttle service, which takes passengers on a voyage around our Mother Earth to see the planet in her truest form.” He gazed into the

blackness of the audience. He could see no faces and hear no reaction. Although he couldn't see a soul, he posed the question to engage his audience. "How many have imagined space travel?" A muted rustling of raised arms gave Bruce the awareness they were all still with him.

Turning back to his presentation, he flipped through a series of photos of Earth from space, he continued, "She, like all people, needs to be appreciated as a whole, not for her individual parts. Surely, we love her beaches and forests, but what about her deserts, frozen tundra? What about the lava, which floats underneath her surface? In order to truly love her, we need to appreciate all of her."

He switched to a picture of arteries in the human body. "This too is space, the space inside us. We contain within us different worlds and galaxies, each cell contains its own life, reacting to stimuli within our bodies, and our cells react to what we experience." Bruce clicked to a photograph of people crammed on a subway.

“Personal space, we all know how it feels to have it invaded by another’s presence, but is it close physical proximity that bothers us, or something different? Why do we let some people in close, and others we repel? The truth about interpersonal space is here,” he said, demonstrating an illuminating photo of a human head, with rays extending in every direction. “Interpersonal space is our consciousness. Our subtle energy body decides who we let in and who we reject. Call it a feeling, a vibe, or intuition, our consciousness dictates those who we allow into our interpersonal space.”

Pausing to get a reaction from the audience, he smiled knowing he had them engrossed. “Let’s take celebrities. There are some we have a fondness for without even meeting them. Personally, without ever meeting her, I have a fondness for Britain’s Environmental News correspondence Beatrice Suffolk.” He demonstrated a photo of Beatrice in the center of dying crops in the American Midwest. His heart

fluttered upon seeing her image on the screen. The volume of his voice raised and his speech excited. “She is purity in a dark and dying world, and yet there are many others who I have critical disdain for not ever meeting personally. Why is this?” He paced around the stage. “How can we *know* a person we have never met?”

“Now,” Bruce continued switching to a picture of a vast matrix of white lights. “Is it as quantum scientists proclaim as connectivity? Am I on the same energetic frequency with some, and not others, or is it as the spiritual community calls karma. Are their souls and consciousness we have a natural affinity for and those we don’t? This is the heart, the depth of what is considered interpersonal space. It is the space we don’t see, the space of our consciousness that connects with others. Tuning into this consciousness closes the gap of isolation when we find those most suited to what we call our soul.”

When Bruce wrapped up his speech, the audience offered an enthusiastic applause. He

bowed before them and walked off the stage, handing his microphone to the female PA.

“Great speech,” she said eager for more dialogue. “Are you really going into space? That sounds amazingly exciting, but scary at the same time.”

“If it’s not scary, can it be truly exciting?” He winked. “That is the plan. March 31st I will be on a three hour adventure around the world.”

“How much does that cost?” she asked.

He chuckled. “I’m a billionaire and I can’t afford it, but there are some things in this world worth doing despite the cost. There is no price to see our planet from orbit. I hear the photos and videos don’t do it justice.”

“Wow, I imagine it would spark another book,” she said.

“Well, it would help make up the cost of the trip,” he replied.

She hesitated and then continued. “May I ask a personal question?”

“They are all personal questions,” he

responded, his impatience growing.

“Why do you feel such a connection to Beatrice Suffolk, when you’re...?” she asked just short of finishing her question.

He grinned knowingly. “We all exist as personal, physical beings suited for this lifetime’s lesson. Our consciousness, our connections are on a completely different plane.” He patted her on the arm. “If you’ll excuse me, I must go wait for my car.”

Over the years, Bruce became increasingly aware of his disdain for small talk, and tried desperately not to appear an elitist snob. At times in his career, he didn’t care, or pretended to be interested when he wasn’t, playing the PC games. He discovered an irony as he wrote about human connectivity, most of the time he longed to be alone. He could philosophize about it, but not practice it. Now, he provided his fans with slight affirmation and headed on his merry way.

He quickly stopped back in the waiting room to collect his belongings, and headed out of the

conference center to find his limousine awaiting. He briefly interacted with a few fans outside, by signing autographs, dishing out advice, and politely excused himself.

Slouched in the soft, leather seat in the back of the limousine, Bruce pulled out his iPhone. He played Beatrice's story once more, and then shared it on his Bruce Merrick Facebook page for all his fans to see. He wrote:

Listen up, friends; the Navajo pipeline burst will reap greater havoc on our entire nation than just a small portion of the desert. Good thing there are people like Beatrice keeping it real.

He rested his phone on his lap, and laid his head back on the top of the seat. He took a deep relaxing breath and watched as the overcast clouds spread over San Francisco.

Chapter 2

Alexei Federov preferred to work in public. It gave him a perverse thrill as he tampered with the minds of strangers on the other side of the globe. Raised by Communists, in economically challenged Russia, this was his form of revolt. Like many of his predecessors who fought the Czar's Imperial Army in the Bolshevik Revolution, and as partisans during WWII, many only knew one way of living in a corrupt society – be a part of it.

It was survival in Russia, especially during the Soviet age. Everyone did exactly what was needed to do without bringing too much attention to themselves. His parents chose the black market as a means of revolt against the system, selling Levi's jeans in back alleys. His sister chose a profession in porn, which he swore on his father's grave his sibling's secret he would never share.

He proudly performed his job as a paid Internet troll, something he enjoyed, and why not?

He was college-educated, but couldn't get a decent job to save his life, except to spy on the Western world. Alexei had a standing order at the Arbat Internet Café in central Moscow where the waitresses knew him by name, and some knew him much more intimately. During his days at the café, his teacup never went unfilled, and his ashtray always emptied. The dark, spicy aroma of cardamom always loomed, and it stirred his senses as he agitated anonymous souls on the Internet.

Those on American author Bruce Merrick's posts were his favorite to disturb, the media mogul with a sense of social justice brought out those from all walks of life. Alexei had no real opinion, nor did he have any perspective. He didn't care. All he cared for was the money he received for upsetting the West, and putting their tiny, superficial worlds in a tailspin.

Merrick's big story of the day was Beatrice Suffolk's reporting from the Navajo Nation. *Indians on fire*, was Alexei's first thought. *Interesting. I guess no one thought of a rain*

dance, he mused quietly to himself as he sipped his tea and winked at the passing waitress, whom he'd had a few nights ago. His attention was drawn back quickly when Beatrice appeared on his screen. *What a high-minded beauty, so full of herself, talking in her superior British accent.* He'd definitely like to peg that notch on his headboard.

How was it possible she managed to continue to remain clean and pristine despite the raging fire in the distance? He wondered. She seemed so entirely separated from the travesty. Setting his teacup down, he perched his fingers on the keyboard, pulling up a profile that had a handsome picture of an American army captain, wrote under the name Captain Hugh No Knuthing:

*Don't fall for the propaganda.
This is a false flag. Why do you think
none of the mainstream media is
reporting it?*

Alexei reclined in his seat, took a sip of his tea and waited until others were drawn in. It was then the real work began.

St. Louis, Mo., in a tiny phone company cubical, stained with coffee cup rings, and doodles on post-its, a young African American woman, attractive, fit and wearing a short afro haircut, Melody Johnson ignored the ringing phone to read a stupid Facebook comment by Captain Hugh No Knuthing. At this second, responding to this ignoramus on social media was more important than helping customers, besides one of her coworkers would pick up the call. This she considered world justice - fighting against idiots who had no clue what was happening in the world. Posting as Mel J., she wrote in response:

I see the willfully ignorant trolls have arrived. Have you no shame asshole? This doesn't just affect the Navajos, but the

Southwestern part of the country.

Leaning against a redbrick wall outside the hospital emergency room in Atlanta, Georgia, EMT technician, Brian Dawson took a sip of his Dr. Pepper, chowed down on a handful of Cheetos and fumbled with his phone with orange-dusted fingers. He just had to respond to the lunatic liberal, Mel J. He chided their faux compassion and what he believed was their false sense of justice. With his profile picture, brazenly boasting the confederate flag, he was to take aim at Melody. He wrote:

*Here we go with the libtards.
Hey Mel J., don't you have some
place to riot and loot.*

Melody reclined back in her seat and rolled her eyes. Her fingers could not type her response fast enough, and without much thought, she posted:

Mr. Patriotic's first thought is

to insult his fellow Americans instead of understanding what is really going on in this country. You're the main problem with this country jerk off.

In the Ardat Café, Alexei ginned. It had begun. He picked up another device, this one a handheld computer and under the profile picture of a middle-aged woman, and the name Fancy Nancy, he responded to Melody by typing:

*YOU'RE the main problem.
Poor grammar takes away from the
credibility of your post.*

Melody lurched forward and angrily typed:

Hows that for grammar.

Alexei wrote as Fancy Nancy:

*It is How's. It's called a contraction
for how is.*

Brian laughed, tossing a few more Cheetos in his mouth. He wrote:

@Mel J. moranic libtard. Can't even spell.

Not only were Americans so easily riled, their spelling was atrocious. *Good thing I am here in Moscow to correct them.* Shaking his head, Alexei laughed, typing as Fancy Nancy:

@Brian Dawson. Mel J. is not moranic. She is moronic.

Around the world in Bangalore, India, curled up on his bed, Sandeep Swarma breezed through the comments. He was not really interested in what was being said, but by whom, engaging with American girls was his main goal. His eyes landed on Melody's profile picture, and not only did he engage in the chat, he sent a friend request and instant messaged her. When he didn't get an instant

gratifying response, he posted a comment on Alexei's thread in response to Melody:

I love strong women. Keep up the good fight Mel J.

It was Brian first to read and respond to Sandeep. He took another sip of his Dr. Pepper and wrote:

Hey Omar, why don't you go blow yourself up? Say hello my name is Sandeep terrorist Swarma to Allah. ALALALALAL.

"Oh for Christ's sake," Melody muttered at her desk, again ignoring the ringing phone and avoiding the scolding eyes of her coworkers. She had no time for her job. Illuminating others of their ignorance was her current mission. She typed on her phone:

Dingbat Dawson, he's from

India. Damn dude, you're an embarrassment to the country.

Sandeep smiled reading Melody's response and posted:

Thanks Mel J. for standing up for me.

Melody wrote back instantly:

Fuck off Swarma and stop instant messaging me. Oh, and I don't want to be your friend.

Sandeep felt a slight twinge of a sting when he read Melody's comment. "Bitch," he muttered and then immediately lost interest seeing the sexy profile picture of a redhead named Crystal Ball. He was in love.

In the Moscow Internet café, Alexei paused to light a cigarette and take a long satisfying drag. Crystal was one of his favorite aliases. He found it

interesting to see how others reacted – did they treat a beautiful woman differently. His alias Crystal could post the most inane stuff and people would take her more seriously. Under the profile Crystal, he posted a YouTube video about the illuminati staging fake news to divide the population:

Hey guys wake up and smell the coffee. This is all a plot to divide and conquer. This was all staged in a Hollywood studio just like the moon landing. It's all fake, you know. You're all so gullible believing this is real.

Sandeep eagerly responded:

You are so right, Crystal. I was just thinking the same thing.

“Oh geez,” Melody muttered, posting.

@Crystal Ball, what kind of

mushrooms are you smoking sister. You must have lost all your brain cells during your boob job.

Alexei posted as Crystal Ball:

Bah. Don't be a sheep.

A new participant to the conversation, Anna Miller, a comely, blonde Midwest housewife wrote after taking a break from pureeing beets for her toddler:

It's all true Mel J. It's the same with the vaccines and pesticides they are using to poison us. It dulls our pituitary glands so we can't think clearly. This is how they are controlling us.

Melody quickly responded by posting:

Wow. The paranoia runs deep.

It looks as if your mind is already poisoned Anna Miller.

Brian began to feel ignored as the conversation started to go on without him. He stood straight from the brick wall he was leaning on and typed:

Mel J. you're such a hypocrite. You get off telling us not to insult others, then there you go. Go back to the projects where you belong.

Melody's eyes widened, and she rushed to publish her response:

@Brian Dawson WTF. Talk about racist POS.

Cassie Heart, A sweet, demure young woman, with a golden retriever puppy on her lap read the comment thread. Her heart hurt with all the hatred. She set the puppy down and typed:

People, can we have some kindness and compassion? If you ask me, you are all the problem with this world. There is so much hate in the world, can't we all just agree to disagree.

Brian laughed, choking on his Cheetos, and coughing up orange crumbs. Once he recovered, he typed:

LOL. Why don't you tap your little fairy wand and get rid of all the hate in the world. Cassie Heart, you're an idiot. Get off your computer and go ride your unicorn over a rainbow.

Cassie responded promptly by writing:

I can't help it. I'm an empath. I am very sensitive.

Anna took a break from pureeing beets and stepped away from the counter. She sidestepped her two-year-old son, Samuel, who trailed at her footsteps. She commented to the thread, completely oblivious to him:

So am I, but I do see truth and need to speak of it in the midst of all these falsehoods. I am an Indigo Child. It is my mission, and if you had any purpose in your life, Cassie, you'd be a prophet for the truth as well.

Cassie bit her bottom lip before responding:

Anna Miller, if you were truly an empath, you wouldn't judge others, but live with acceptance and love.

Anna simply wrote:

LOL.

Now that her head had cooled, Melody decided to step in and offer advice:

@ Cassie Heart, honey, I hear you, but you need to buck up. We need to fight against all the ugliness in the world. And it has a name – Brian Dawson.

Back in Moscow, Alexei had a hard time keeping up with the drama he created. He read through the thread quickly, ready to interject yet another character to the mix. He dragged his cigarette as he considered one of his many profiles. He didn't really have a reason, but just decided to throw a wrench at this clueless bunch. He chose a profile with a hunky, muscle man picture, posted as Randy Rhoads and typed:

Actually Cassie, what you need

is a rock, hard dick.

“Wow!” Melody exclaimed loudly in her cubical, causing several of her coworkers to turn and look. She cowered in the corner, hiding her phone as she typed:

@Randy Rhoads. I bet the size of your dick is the size of my pinky finger. Only dickless losers have profile pictures of their naked chests and biceps.

Alexei laughed at Mel J’s response. “If you only knew,” he said aloud in Russian faraway in Moscow. He quietly commended himself for changing the subject of the conversation to the plight of indigenous people to penises. Mission accomplished.

Melody had her fingers on her cellphone ready to take down that meathead Rhoads, when her boss, a lanky, bland-looking white man in an

ugly suit loomed over her desk. Beside him, Delores, her gossipy coworker, always in everyone else's business.

“Ms. Johnson, what can be so pressing other than our customers?”

“Nothing,” she mumbled, betrayed by her own coworker.

“I suggest you put that phone away,” he said.

She slid it into her purse. *Damn, now those meatheads, Brian Dawson and Randy Rhoads will be all over and I won't be there to defend myself.* She could hardly stand it, but she couldn't afford to lose her job.

The phone rang, and reluctantly she answered. “Central St. Louis Mobile, how can I help you?” she asked dully.

Chapter 3

With commotion surrounding her – dogs barking, people shouting, Cassie stared at the social media thread on her phone, discouraged and frustrated with people. *Why is everyone so mean?* She wondered.

It had always been this way, as long as she could remember, for it was hard being an empath, as she always used to describe herself. Her heightened sensitivities made her a target for bullies, and even if they weren't threatening her, they mocked her talking to caterpillars squirming on leaves, or helping a snail find its way back to wet grass. She loved all creatures, yet people not so much, mainly because they could be so cruel as a species.

In order to cope, she succeeded at achieving invisibility. Soon, no one paid her much mind, and she was fine with that. Only at times when she was intensely lonely and wished for once someone,

specifically a knight in shining armor, would come to her rescue. No one ever did.

She finally gained purpose when she volunteered at an animal shelter, where she had come to believe she could communicate with animals. The stray dogs and feral cats, shared their pains and horrors, as well as she told them the tales of her loneliness. Her success with the animals gave her purpose, and even a bit of acceptance from others who shared her passions. Eventually, she came to own her own company – Dog-Gone Doggie Day Care.

While most of her days were filled tending the animals in her care, occasionally, she had to deal with a human being – a paying customer. She chocked up her sensitivities to remain calm in their presence, even though her spirit collapsed.

Lately, with all the divisiveness and angst in the world, people were harder to deal with. Compassion was gone, in its place grew impatience and entitlement. Everyone believed they could say anything they wanted without any

repercussions. It wore on her heart, and she found it increasingly hard to face. She stared at her phone, re-reading over the conversation, her heart breaking.

“Excuse me! Excuse me!” A sharp-dressed, and even sharper-looking woman pressed, trying to get Cassie’s attention. “You should be tending to your customers, rather than your phone.”

Cassie glanced up with a pitiful, apologetic grin. “I’m sorry,” she said putting down her phone. “How can I help you?”

“You said Duke would be well-cared for,” the woman said.

She glanced down at the muscular pit bull, and gave him a scratch behind the ears. “But he was.”

“Look at him,” the woman scolded.

Studying the dog, Cassie was at a loss.

“Let me tell you, sunshine,” the woman said, “He’s looking a little slim. I suspect he lost weight while staying here. Did you skimp on the food?”

“No ma’am,” Cassie replied. “He may have

been a little anxious, which decreased his appetite. It's quite common for animals when they're away from home."

"Well, isn't it your job to make sure he's not anxious? That's what Dog-Gone Day Care is supposed be for, right? Isn't it your slogan," the woman started in a mocking tone, "It's a dog-gone goodtime."

Cassie nodded. "Yes. Right. How is a twenty-five percent discount?"

The woman straightened to a near military stance. "Fifty."

Cassie had no backbone to argue. This woman, no matter how horrid she was, was a new paying costumer. She sighed apologetically and with a sad smile, she processed the woman's discount, hoping she wouldn't leave her business a scathing review. Giving discounts was the least of her worries; it was the judgments and the criticisms for doing something she loved, which hurt her so much. Each was like a stab to the heart and most were things out of her control. If dogs

were not properly trained at home, they wouldn't behave and react well to being left at the day care. Yet, of course, she could never blame the pet owner.

As the afternoon dragged on, thoughts consumed her mind, and tainted her heart with sadness. During lolls in her day, she strayed back to the conversation thread, wishing people were more like dogs. Even those of different breeds got along, and played together. Occasionally, a tiny dog would exert its dominance over a bigger dog, but in the end all would be friends.

Rereading over the social media thread of those anonymous souls who sought to destroy her with insults to her good nature, she wondered if they were all just small dogs, barking to find some power in their own lives. The difference is, people could destroy each other with their weakness, whereas dogs would eventually simply overcome their differences. *So sad, dogs are thought as a lesser species, when they are so superior in their wisdom*, she thought.

“Yo, Cas,” a young hipster with his nose pierced, and earrings so large, they pulled down his lobes down beckoned her attention. “Mind if I check out early?”

“Did you feed the dogs?” she asked.

He hesitated before answering. “Yeah. Sure,” he replied in a smug tone.

Dogs she could control, her own staff she could not, but she wasn’t one for conflict. “Okay.”

After he left, and when the evening shift slowly filtered in, taking her place at the front desk, Cassie walked back into the kennels and found the dogs’ food dishes near empty. “Jerk,” she said aloud and then berated herself for her meanness. She perched down outside the kennel of a Jack Russell and cried. “I’m so sorry guys. I’ll find someone to take better care of you.”

All the dogs gave her doleful expressions. She hated seeing the sadness in their eyes, their loved ones, the people they gave their loyalty to abandoning them to a cage. Cassie could hardly stand their pain. She retreated to a back

examination room, used in case dogs needed to be settled with a light sedative.

She retrieved a dozen or so needles, filling each with pentobarbital and placing them in the pockets of her heart-printed smock. She walked past her employees gossiping at the front desk, returned to the kennels and opened the gates, leading them into the playroom.

A fluffy terrier bounced toward Cassie, pouncing at her legs. "Trixie, my dear little sweetie," Cassie said, lifting the dog in her arms. "You, my love, are one of my favorites." She set the dog down and gently administered one of the needles into the dog's leg. "Who's next? Who wants to be freed," she asked sweetly, as more dogs crowded around her, looking for her affection. "Rufus, how about you?" she asked of the Jack Russell. She arranged the same fate to Rufus as Trixie, to the other dogs and then finally herself. As the dogs drifted to sleep, Cassie injected herself and lay down in the middle hugging the torso of a golden retriever. Her final

moments of life were peaceful. No one could ever hurt her or her furry friends again.

Chapter 4

A thick smog hung heavily over the Manhattan skyline as she watched the people below on the streets. Mother Earth was dying and she felt her pain. *How silly*, she thought. *We are all connected to the earth, why shouldn't we feel it? Perhaps, I am just more sensitive to it? Maybe I care more?* The questions at the moment were too much to bear.

She lowered her head and meditated on the milk clouds dissipating in her tea, seemingly foretelling a bleak future. With a sip of her tea and a loud sigh, she backed away from the window and sat behind her laptop computer. Shuffling through the news of the day, she witnessed the stories of continued protests against the unpopular president, and even those protesting against the protesters. Yes, it was a crazy, and even unfortunate, time to be alive. "Soon we'll have protesters protesting the protesters of those protesting the protesters,"

she said aloud with a sarcastic chuckle. “So many people worried about the actions and attitudes of others, yet they are blind to what is really going on in the world.”

“Good afternoon, Beatrice. Are you there?” a chirpy, male British voice radiated from her computer.

She took another sip of her tea before answering, and then pressed a key on her laptop. A middle-aged man, with angular features and cheeky attitude, appeared. “Yes,” she replied.

“How was Navajo Nation?” the voice asked.

“Arresting,” she said, gazing down at the red marks on her wrists.

“Yes, I heard of the arrests. Glad you made it out safely.”

“It’s a travesty, Nigel. People are sick and dying a slow death. I have seen the carcasses of cattle and jackrabbits. The land is scorched, and worse yet, the wind that’s blowing smoke and dust will devastate farmlands in the Midwest. Most people don’t care. They go on as if nothing ever

happened.”

“Beatrice, my dear, caring is the death of a journalist’s career. Report the story without getting emotionally involved. That’s what we hired you to do.”

“Isn’t that the problem with the world? No one in our profession cares, cares for the truth, cares for the people, or even cares for the planet. It breaks my heart.”

“Darling, if you need a break, you have a place back home in the London office. You can have your old editor position back, sit in a tiny office overlooking the Thames and edit the journals of your peers. Is that what you want?”

Beatrice rolled her eyes. “I’m fine, Nigel. And don’t call me darling.”

“Right. I expect an update on your report on the Navajo pipeline burst by tomorrow. Try not to wet the page with your tears. Melancholy may sell, but it’s not reputable journalism. If you want melancholy, join the tabloids. Oh, and by the way, you’re getting a nice little promotional boost from

celebrity New Age author and speaker, Bruce Merrick. He shared your video online.”

“Fan-fucking-tastic,” she muttered. “That hack!”

“That hack has a huge following,” Nigel retorted.

“A following who wallows in melancholy tabloids,” Beatrice replied.

“Then you two are a perfect fit,” Niles joked. “Look, a man like Merrick taking an interest in your work can skyrocket your career.”

“Sure. I’ll get right on the story,” she said with a sigh, adding a tinge of rebellion in her voice, and switched off Nigel without another word.

Outside, the rain pelted against her window, and it bought a relieved smile. Rain always seemed to release the pressure in her mind, melting her into a comfort zone. She rose from her seat, wearing her designer Lululemon sweat suit and fuzzy slippers, and walked to a small, cluttered kitchen, which she seldom cleaned, her mind

always on a new idea. While her thoughts glazed over her story and the happenings of all the world, she spread Nutella on brioche bread, poured herself another cup of tea and returned to her laptop.

She logged onto social media, finding Bruce Merrick's post of her story on the Navajo Nation pipeline burst, yet as soon as she read the thread of comments her emotions fell to dismay. "People are so fucking thick-headed. False flags? Illuminati? Hollywood stage? Indigo Children? Dicks? I have the scars to show for it, assholes! Why do I even bother if no one is paying attention? Why do I bother reporting the truth, if people are going to believe a fake profile under the name Huge No Knuthing? Are these people totally stupid?"

Not able to take any more of the bullshit, she turned off her computer, slipped on her rain boots, and grabbed her slicker on the way out the door. She needed space from the insanity brewing in the world. As a reporter who spent a great deal of time investigating and researching the news, for

people to believe the fictional tales broadcasted as truth boggled her mind. “People are so thick,” she muttered again to herself.

Hustling down Fifth Avenue she shoved past pedestrians. Despite being surrounded by people, she felt isolated. The more people bumped into her, the more worked up she became. *People are so fucking careless and clueless.* Her mind swam in a series of story ideas – “People’s Indictment of the Truth” and “The Bias of Fact.”

She turned down Forty-Ninth Street, and once she passed Broadway, she took a few breaths to calm her mind. Checking her watch, she had a half an hour before a Buddhist meditation group she frequently attended. She sighed, finding calmness in the sign of her favorite pizza restaurant. Nothing stopped the world from spinning better than a slice of New York City’s best pizza.

Stepping inside, she slid into a private booth. When the waitress came by she ordered two vegetarian slices and a Diet Coke. It did the trick

to calm her down, the dough and the heavy cheese acting as a sedative. Soon, she would be able to face the world again.

She sipped her drink, and dared to check Bruce Merrick's social media post again, hopefully now she would be able to stomach the comments. The pizza and the New York City smog distilled her mind enough to digest the madness on the thread. She studied Captain Hugh No Knuthing's profile and his American Army picture, wondering upon the identity of this troll, in fact, it had become an agenda, as she thought who she could contact to get this person's IP address.

After finishing her meal, she headed back outside, the rain clearing and the sun breaking through the clouds. Yes, it could end up being a nice day after all. Her meditation group was only a few more blocks away, and a few more minutes until her mind melted into nothingness. She couldn't wait.

Finally, within her peer group of conscious meditators, she was able to breathe in deeply. She

held it for a moment and then let it out in a long sigh. She could feel all the negativity of the day expelled with her breath. Sitting in a half lotus position with her eyes closed, her hands resting upward on her knees, her mind cleared. It was her only way of getting through and progressing forward. If only she could maintain this clarity throughout her days. She hated that it was only fleeting, but she always tried to hold onto it as long as she could.

She lifted her eyelids slightly to view her fellow meditators. They comforted her just with their presence, realizing there were good-hearted people in the world and those who wanted a connection to others. When the leader of the meditation brought them to a close, Beatrice lowered her head and felt a few tears stream down her cheek. A release, it is what she needed. She wiped her tears, stood, ready once again to face the world.

New York City always seemed different after a meditation. She sensed her feet a foot above

the sidewalk. The street people appeared as angels calling out their deep wisdom from secret places, even the subway offered a delicious scent of the varieties of life. This was always when she was able to do her best work, and approach her journalism with objectivity. Time to go home and work.

She arrived home to her apartment. It was the typical tiny Manhattan space, but it was hers, her tiny oasis in sea of chaos. Several photos of her escapades around the world on a story – riding an elephant, tasting foods in Bangkok, and hiking ruins in Turkey. She lived an exceptional life, despite not having a significant other. Her career was her lover, but at times it was a love-hate relationship.

Slings off her coat and boots, she flipped on the television on her way to the kitchen to make herself a cup of a tea. Dangling a jasmine flavored tea bag into the cup, she heard the broadcast: Distraught woman Cassie Lockhart, owner of Dog-Gone Day Care, euthanized herself and over a

dozen dogs. Beatrice walked into the living room to see the news. A picture of Cassie was broadcasted with the emergency scene outside the day care.

“It was a grim sight for the employees of Dog-Gone Doggie Day Care in Rochester, New York when the owner was found dead among twelve deceased dogs. Apparently it was a murder/suicide of a canine kind,” reported the broadcaster on television.

The whistle blew from Beatrice’s kettle. She rushed to the kitchen to pour her tea and returned quickly before the television. She watched as the Rochester chief of police gave his brief. “We have found no suicide note in Lockhart’s home, only to find her last correspondence was on a Bruce Merrick social media post about journalist Beatrice Suffolk’s story about ongoing travesty on the Navajo nation.”

“What!” Beatrice exclaimed, nearly spilling her tea. She set her cup down on an end table, and watched the horrifying news. All the peace and

bliss she felt into after her meditation suddenly dissipated and her integrity as a journalist diminished.

“Lockhart’s last words, under the name Cassie Heart were, ‘People, can we have some kindness and compassion? If you ask me, you are all the problem with this world. Please we must pray for all those in the wake of this tragedy,’” the chief of police said. “Employees and customers of the day care are in utter shock, saying Ms. Lockhart loved dogs, and always went out of her way to ensure their safety.”

Beatrice bounced from her seat and turned on her computer. There it was – the continuing horror of a social media thread that got way out of hand, killing innocent souls. It was the world’s greatest threat, the taunting and bullying of people without thought to their personal sensitivities. Some simply couldn’t take it and she found herself in the middle of it.

A fury so strong came over her; she logged onto her computer and hunted for Bruce Merrick’s

information. She went onto his website where he had a contact button. With one click, prompted an email and she let loose writing:

Dear Mr. Merrick,

While I appreciate you sharing my story with the world, I would request you never do it again. Today's posts resulted in a murder/suicide. I would think a man of your merit, would understand the responsibility of sharing posts on social media, and would monitor the comments being posted. If conversations get out of hand, it should be your responsibility to delete and block certain bad actors, who destroy the integrity of the story.

*Thank you,
Beatrice Suffolk*

She included the link of Cassie Heart's crime and upon sending it she felt the world lift from her shoulders, and placed succinctly on Bruce Merrick's. She grinned proudly of her effort, and headed for a shower to wash off the news of the hour.

Chapter 5

The evening sky sprinkled with stars. Dressed in a loosely tied silk robe and designer boxer briefs, he focused the telescope toward the night sky until he made out the constellation of Orion. He shifted the telescope across the sky, silently identifying the stars, constellations, and the planets. His attention turned to a handsome young man entering from the bedroom and plopping onto the sofa.

“Are you losing interest in me?” the young man asked.

“Not in the least, David,” Bruce replied, still gazing through the eye of the telescope. “There simply are earthly pleasures and heavenly ones.”

David massaged Bruce’s back. “I would like to think I am both.”

Bruce gave him a quick peck on the lips. “You are. You are my passion, but it is wise for man to divest his passions. Too much of a good

thing can be a man's ruin.”

A beep sounding on his computer captured his attention. He walked over to his laptop resting on a polished mahogany desk and found a new email. “It’s from Beatrice Suffolk.”

“First the stars, now I’m losing you to a woman.”

“Nonsense.” Bruce’s demeanor soured upon reading. “Murder/suicide?”

“Who was murdered?” David asked.

“I don’t know.” He clicked the link and read through the horrifying details. “Some girl euthanized twelve dogs at a shelter, and then herself. It was said to be in response to one of my social media posts.”

“How are you responsible for someone else’s mental illness? Besides, it’s just animals. It’s not like she killed people,” David said, still trying to maintain a romantic aura by caressing Bruce’s shoulder.

Bruce pushed away his hand. “Sorry, this is too disturbing. I just can’t.”

“Well then, do you want me to leave?”

Bruce admired his lover, cut like a Greek God, but the intelligence of Koalemos. Even for Bruce he had to admit, a hot body could induce boredom. It was the mind that truly captivated him. “Yes. For tonight. I need to figure out what happened here.”

“Suit yourself,” David scoffed. “Betrayed by a woman.”

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic, David. Your lack of romance can survive one night, in the light of a travesty of death.”

“I guess you’re right. You, of course, are a genius,” he said, giving Bruce a quick kiss on the cheek. “That’s why you rake in the big bucks.”

Bruce nodded slightly, and waited for David to leave before digging deeper into Beatrice’s accusations. His intentions were pure in sharing her story. Surely, he had no idea it would inspire a tragedy.

Finding the post on his page, he read the comments through the thread looking for Cassie’s.

Upon locating them, he studied the stream of vulgar comments, all stemming from a troll's twisted response. "Why are fragile-minded people so prone to bait?" he asked himself aloud. As a man who studied psychology, he knew the answer. People are generally insecure. They need to respond to be heard and to feel validated and the current state of the world left everyone feeling uneasy.

He sat back in his swivel chair and contemplated the situation. Something had to be done, but what? *What would be so life changing that would challenge people's beliefs, yet give them the confidence not to fall into the well of negativity?* He wondered.

Stepping away from the computer he walked toward the window and looked out at the sky. Despite not having the depth of vision through the telescope he could see clearly. He realized the opportunity, which could be shared.

He reached for his cell phone and pressed one key. "Hey Rick, it's me Bruce. Sorry, for

calling so late, but I'm going to need to alter my reservation for the shuttle." He stepped out onto the patio, lifting his head to the sky. "Instead of one, nine."

He hung up and made another call. "Hannah, I need you to look up contact information – telephones, or better yet addresses, for these people – Brian Dawson, Mel J., Anna Miller, Sandeep Swarna, Crystal Ball, Randy Rhoads and this one may be a bit tough, Captain Hugh No Knuthing. Look on my Navajo Nation posts for their profiles to start. Check with the social media services and check for IP addresses."

"Captain Hugh No Knuthing?" she questioned. "Seriously, Bruce, you don't think that's a real person."

"It's a real person behind the profile. Find them, and I'll talk to you in the morning."

"Bruce, is this even legal? Aren't their privacy laws?"

"Real-life hackers have done a lot worse, and I know you're clever enough to figure it out."

“Sure,” Hannah replied. “Wasn’t planning on sleeping tonight anyway. I’ll put my computer hacker pants on tonight.”

“That’s my girl,” Bruce said. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow. After hanging up, he placed his phone on the desk and scanned over the comments several times on his post. This was going to be a long night, and he knew he was not going to get much sleep.

After several hours of studying the comment thread and profiles on social media. He had nearly written an entire book, psychoanalyzing the commentators, each one with an imagined psychological emotional issue. He had them all figured out and hadn’t even met them personally. His eyes ached. He yawned and rubbed his chin. It was time to get some rest. He laid his head on the table and fell asleep.

She opened the front door, and strode down the Oriental rug wearing worn Doc Martins. She found him slumped over his desk asleep. Tapping

on his shoulder, she whispered, “Mr. Merrick? Mr. Merrick, wake up.”

Bruce lifted his head and stared at his assistant through blurry vision. “Hannah, find anything?” He sat upright and wiped the grogginess from his eyes.

She set a large paper coffee cup in front of him. “Mocha cappuccino,” she said.

“You are the best,” he said, removing the lid, and blowing to cool. “What did you find?”

Hannah plopped down on a seat beside Bruce, kicking her Doc Martins donned feet onto his desk. “You got one hell of a crew here. Your conservative troll, Brian Dawson from Georgia, is an EMT technician. His hateful rhetoric doesn’t seem to match his profession. Customer service rep, Melody Johnson from St. Louis, Missouri, is an active and very vocal member of Black Lives Matter. Anna Miller is a homemaker in Indiana, and general conspiracy theorist, you name it, and she believes it. From Bangalore, India, Sandeep Swarna works as technical support for a computer

company, desires love and attention from American women.” She paused and gave him a suspicious grin. “Captain Huge No Knuthing,” she paused and shook her head. “These people really fell for this guy?” When he nodded, she continued, “Also Fancy Nancy, Crystal Ball, and Randy Rhoads hail from the same internet café in Moscow, Russia. It seems like the person correcting everyone’s grammar was a Russian. How’s that for the dumbing down of America?”

Bruce choked and coughed on his coffee. “What?”

“Different IP addresses, but definitely out of the same location in Moscow. Either they are one person, or there are more people engaged in the stirring up trouble.” She chuckled. “My guess is you have one paid Russian troll working several different devices at once.”

“I need to change my reservation on the shuttle,” Bruce muttered.

“Excuse me?”

“I’m taking these people into space,” he

replied.

Hannah burst out laughing. “Wow! Are you planning on starting an intergalactic war?”

Bruce rubbed his hands together excitedly. “Don’t you see? It’s perfect,” Bruce said rising from his seat, finally feeling awake and invigorated. “All these people see the world from one narrow view. You take them in outer space, and see the planet from the distance, my bet is they will either change their beliefs, or at least moderate them. It’s the greatest of social experiments.”

“I’m sure it would make a great book as well. Imagine the money and notoriety you could achieve,” Hannah said.

Bruce massaged his chin. “And a documentary, maybe awards. All I need to do this is their consent. I’m going to need your help to book some flights. Before the shuttle tour, I’m going to do a world-wide tour to personally make the invitations.”

Hannah rolled her eyes, planting her feet

back on the floor. “Whatever you say, boss.”

Walking to the French windows, Bruce sipped his mocha cappuccino, the sugary sweetness sending an orgasmic chill through his body. He smiled purposefully at the sunrise. The earth had rotated to a new day filled with opportunities.

Chapter 6

Another day, another ruble, as Alexei packed up his equipment, downed the rest of his tea, and headed out of the café. He walked down the street where he had parked his silver Mitsubishi Eclipse. With a beep, he unlocked the doors and climbed inside. He drove down the streets of Moscow, parking outside a brown brick, Soviet-style building.

While he waited, he searched for Beatrice's video on his phone and played it a few more times with the sound down. He didn't care for what she was reporting; he just liked to watch her lips move and her eyes light up with drama. Her appearance and persona didn't touch him in a sexual way, but she touched his heart. For all the cynicism in his job, he found real beauty within her.

A sweaty young woman swung open the car door and sat in the passenger seat with a loud sigh.

"You smell like dick," he muttered without

looking at her.

“I smell like two dicks,” she said casually.
“DP day. Double the pleasure, double the pay.”

“My sister, I’m so proud,” he replied dully.

She flipped down the shade and viewed herself in the tiny mirror, straightening her frayed ponytail. “I get people off in a good way; you twist people into rages. I’d say I have the better of the two jobs.”

He grinned at her as he turned on the ignition. “Tell that to mother.”

“I doubt she’d care. I think she forgot what sex is since father died. It’s been what? A decade?”

Alexei put the car in gear, pulling away from the curb. His sister’s statement was most likely true. Most of the older generations cared little what was happening in the world. All seemed just happy they had a consistent supply of toilet paper. For the younger generations, there was a desire to make it out of the dullness of life. They dreamed of possibilities and opportunities the current regime

dangled before them, but never really offered.

When Alexei arrived home, he and his sister climbed the stairs to a second floor, three room apartment, small in size, yet still a luxury in Moscow. He opened the door, heading straight to his mother and planted a kiss on her cheek, giving his sister an escape to the bathroom where she washed off the remnants of her occupation.

His mother grabbed his chin and sniffed his breath. “Were you smoking? You know what happened to your father,” she scolded.

“I know,” he replied, pulling away from her grasp and heading down a narrow hallway to a room no bigger than a walk-in closet.

He plopped on a twin bed, placed headphones over his ears and turned on a television, which played the American movie, “The Burbs.” ““No one kills an old man in my neighborhood and gets away with it,”” he quoted aloud in English, but with a heavy Russian accent.

His mind drifted to the suburbs of America. Closing his eyes, he imagined what it would be

like to have a house, a backyard and a beautiful wife. Once again he retrieved his phone and admired Beatrice. *If only I had a way to get her attention.*

*

A bluish light illuminated under a white sheet. Sandeep lowered the sheet from his head and sat upright in his twin bed. On the night table his alarm read 4:30AM. He yawned. He had a half an hour before he had to crawl his ass out of bed, and get ready for work.

All of India seemed to be on silent mode, as no sound came from outside - no car horn, trucks, jackhammers, no loud clamor of people's voices, which normally resounded daily in Bangalore, a city where it was hard to find a moment of quiet. This was his favorite time of the day, when he forgot he lived in India, and dreamed he was an American, or at least fantasized of American women.

Checking last night's post, he noticed continued activity. After reading Brian's insulting post, he couldn't understand why any American woman would have the slightest bit of interest in their countrymen. They were rude and disrespectful. He studied the thread, wanting to write something witty, but nothing came to mind. Instead he instant messaged the pretty, sweet-looking blonde with a nice name, Cassie Heart:

Hi. Are you there? Sorry about the asshole who keeps bothering you. If you need a nice person to talk to, I'm here.

When he received no response, he tossed his phone on his table, resting his head back down on his pillow for a few more minutes of shuteye.

*

Since her boss' spy kept leering over the cubical, watching her every moment, Melody had a

hard time checking her phone for updates on the conversation thread. She was beyond pissed she was held down by *the man*, her boss. While listening to a customer on the line, she rolled her eyes and checked her glitter nail polish. *Damn, I'm due for a manicure.* "Yes, ma'am, I'm listening," she said dully into the phone. "Let me transfer you to our technical department." She clicked a button and hung up the phone. Raising her eyes, she saw her beyond pale, string bean boss looming above. "I'm working," she said.

"I'd like to encourage you to be chatty and pleasant with the customers," he said.

Melody gave a broad, forced smile. "Oh, I am pleasant. I can be real pleasant." As he nodded and walked away, she glanced up at the clock. "Thank God, it's five."

She collected her purse, checking the social media post to see if there were any more comments. Damn, she missed demeaning comments from that repugnant Brian Dawson and the meathead Randy Rhoads. Her leaving the

conversation because of work, made her look weak, and a quitter. She quickly wrote:

*Are you two queers still jerking
off to one another?*

Melody dropped her phone in her purse, striding toward her used Ford Escort. She was deep in thought of her next response, as she peeled through a stop sign nearly causing an accident. When the cars honked at her, she wound down the window and gave them the finger. “Assholes!”

She was all in a rage when she pulled up outside Memorial Baptist church. Usually, on calmer days, she would go inside and wait, sometimes even offer a prayer for peace at the altar. Not today. While she waited, she retrieved her phone to see if there was any response. Damn. Not yet. She was in it for the fight.

Looking up, she saw an elderly African American woman teetering toward the car. Her grandmother, even in her aged face bore an angelic

expression, which always soothed Melody's angst. Her heart melting at the sight of her grandmother, she leaned to the side, unlocked the door and opened it. "Hi Grandma."

"Hiya darlin'. Give your grand-ma-ma a kiss."

Melody obeyed, planting a wet one on her grandmother's wrinkled cheek. "Just you and me tonight for dinner. Ma's got bingo tonight. I was thinking pizza."

"Ah, a pretty girl like you should be having a fella take her out for pizza."

"Grandma, you know, I don't have a fella."

"You haven't met a nice at one of those protests? In my day, there were a lot of good men protesting in the name of justice. Your grandfather was one of them, until the war took him."

Melody gripped the steering wheel. She had marched every opportunity, for nearly every cause, yet found no man, only a lot of angry people shouting in the streets. It gave her pause. *Was that all it was – anger.* It had to be more, or else

everything she believed in was futile. “Times are different. Men are different,” she said. “Just today I was debating the most ignorant men on the face of the Earth.”

“You can’t debate ignorance, sweetie,” her grandmother said.

She nodded in agreement, yet often she couldn’t resist being triggered into debate. She was in these cases, an easy score. “What do you want on your pizza?”

“You know I love those Hawaiians.”

“Alright grandma, Hawaiian it is,” Melody replied and drove off.

*

Brian opened the car door, reaching for a pizza box on the front seat of his pick-up truck and carried it into a ranch-style house. It was quiet inside. Thankfully his girlfriend, Tina, wasn’t home yet. In fact, he liked it better when she wasn’t around.

He set the box on the kitchen table and flipped over the lid, meat lovers – the carnivore special – his favorite. He reached for the biggest slice, dripping with cheese, sausage crumples falling off the side. As he chewed, he headed to the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of Bud. With a quick flip of the cap, he tossed the pizza in his mouth with a swig of beer. It was good to be home.

Storm clouds covered the Georgia sky. He was partial to dark days, often suiting his mood. The bright sunshine exposed his deep-seated angsts when everyone else was happy. Carrying the pizza box to his back porch, he sat on a wooden rocker.

In between slices, he retrieved his phone from his pocket and read aloud from the post, “Queer? The hell I’m queer, bitch. I have a girlfriend. I have many satisfied girlfriends.” He typed on the post:

@Mel J, only lesbos assume men are gay. You wouldn't know a real man if he bitch-slapped you

across the face.

He chuckled as took a sip of beer. “That will get’er.” He reached for another piece of pizza.

“Are you going to save some for me?” a woman with a squeaky voice asked. Tina, a young woman with a baby-face and big breasts, found a seat on Brian’s lap. She took a bite of the slice of pizza in his hand.

He shoved her off his lap. “Get your own piece.”

Tina stood upright and gazed down at him. “What’s with you? Why are you being such a dick?”

“Look, a man just needs his time, and not have some chick crawling all over him.” He took a swig of his beer, anticipating a reactive response from Melody. He waited a couple seconds and when he didn’t have immediate gratification, he slid his phone back in his shirt pocket.

“I’m sorry,” Tina said. “Rough day at work? Someone die on you again?”

He gave a faint recollection to an elderly man with a heart attack, the high school footballer with a broken leg, and the woman who slid on the floor and fractured her hip. “No.” All the real drama he faced during the days, it was social media that kept his heart beating, and now he was waiting for a woman in St. Louis to respond to his bombastic remark.

*

“Mommy. Mommy, wake up!” a little boy called out.

Anna opened her eyes, and through the fog of sleep saw her five-year-old son, Samuel. She lifted her head from a pillow on the couch, and stretched the kinks out of her neck. “Sweetie, can you tell mommy what time it is?”

“The big hand is at the five, and the little one is at the top,” he said.

“Oh shii-oooot,” she started to swear but corrected herself. “Is daddy home yet?”

Samuel shook his head dramatically no. “Joshua is still sleeping in his playpen.”

Anna stiffly peeled herself from the couch, and rubbed her son’s head. She walked to the kitchen to see dinner in covered pans on the stove. She lifted a lid and briefly touched a quinoa burger to test if it was still warm. Feeling lukewarm, she raised the temperature a bit.

Turning around, she saw her laptop on the kitchen counter. She pressed a key to light the screen and the comment thread appeared. She read the continuing degrading comments between Mel J. and Brian. She typed furiously:

Oh for God’s sake people grow up, wake up. These petty arguments are for morons, and worse, sheep.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, giving her a kiss on the cheek.

“What?” she asked surprised and then turned to see her husband, Daniel, arrived home. “Oh

social media,” she said, turning off the computer and slamming down the lid. “So many dangers in the world, and morons waste their time calling each other names. It’s stupid.” She turned toward him and gave him a hug. “I’m so worried for the boys. What kind of world will they have if we don’t do something about the Rothchilds? I swear contrails are destroying everyone’s brains.”

“That’s why we need to keep telling the truth about the new world order.” He lifted the lid of the pan. “Quinoa burgers, my favorite.”

“And I made a treat,” she said pulling a baking sheet from the oven, “baked kale chips.”

“All of this wonderful food and you’re still trying to spread the truth,” Daniel said, wrapping his hands round Anna’s waist. “I am a lucky man.”

Anna released a loud sigh. “I’m doing the best I can.”

Chapter 7

The next day, Alexei returned to his office at Ardat Café, finding his favorite seat by the window vacant. He didn't even have to flag down a waitress; she was there with his tea, and an empty ashtray.

While waiting for his laptop to boot up, he sipped his tea and dragged on his cigarette. His first order of business was not stirring international trouble, but searching for information on his crush – Beatrice Suffolk.

Finding an article written about rising sea levels, he logged on as Fancy Nancy and commented:

Sweetheart, I love your articles, and would be more impressed if you'd write with proper syntax. Also, you could reduce the melodrama. Much more credible if you'd stick with

objective reporting.

Alexei grinned, reclining back in his chair, and imagining the rise he would get out of her. He didn't mean it as an insult, only as a gateway to her. *Sometimes to get the attention of a smart woman is to piss her off. Would it work? Probably not. But what chance do I have with her anyway?*

He sat forward and scanned the internet for more information on her, staring at her picture on Environmental News for nearly twenty minutes. He had her bio memorized. Born in Eden Park, a suburb of London, Beatrice Anne Suffolk began her environmental crusade by age nine when she won a science award for cleaning creek water. She is a graduate of Oxford University with a major in journalism and a Rhodes Scholar in environmental science. *Beautiful and brilliant*, he admired her credentials, lit a cigarette, and then searched for a husband or boyfriend, yet he found no story of her personal life. She remained free to fill his fantasy.

Entering the café, Bruce studied all the

patrons of young men and women plugged into their computers. Some wearing headphones, and others deep in their reading. Trying to narrow down his search, he looked for those who had one or more devices. There were several, so he circled the room until he saw Beatrice's picture over the shoulder of one young man. Bruce found his man.

Standing above Alexei, he waved slightly to get his attention. "Do you speak English?"

Alexei nodded, and gave no other response.

"May I sit?" Bruce asked, gesturing to a seat.

"No," was Alexei's quick response.

Bruce ignored his declined invitation and sat at Alexei's table. "I'm looking for Captain Huge No Knuthing, Fancy Nancy, Crystal Ball and Randy Rhoads. Do you know them?"

Alexei sat stiffly in his seat, looking around at the other patrons to see if someone was listening. "No."

"It's alright. I'm not here to call you out. I'm here to make you an offer." Bruce opened his coat pocket and pulled out a manila envelope. "My

name is Bruce Merrick. I'm an American author, self-help coach, and public speaker. I'm taking a select crew on a tourist space shuttle ride. Have you heard of Rick Marsden?"

Alexei laughed and shook his head. "No. Why should I?"

"Doesn't matter. He runs a tourist shuttle service through his company Marsden Travel. His shuttle Angel Wings has already taken several trips into space successfully. Do you want to go space?"

"How'd you find me?" Alexei asked, still having a hard time believing what was happening. He opened the envelope and surveyed the contents, wondering if Bruce was legit, or setting him up for trouble.

"I suspect you're savvy with computers, and if prompted you could hack some secure sites," Bruce expecting a reaction from Alexei and when he didn't receive one, he continued. "I have people who can trace information. We found you, Alexei Nikolay Federov, graduate of Russian Academy of Science with a degree in language, and

surprisingly, American literature, parents Nikolay and Anna. We even know your sister's profession. I see she's quite popular on several American sites. She goes by the names Angelina Sweet, Betty Fox, and Bailey Luv. It seems your family has a penchant for aliases."

Alexei twisted uncomfortably. "What do you want from me?"

"I want you to come to America and meet the people you are stirring into a frenzy."

"I don't think so," Alexei responded with a chuckle.

"No? There is no honor, no courage in words without a face," Bruce said and by Alexei's stiffening posture, he knew he struck a nerve. He nodded at the envelope. "Inside the packet is information about the program, consent forms, medical forms and a round trip ticket to the United States. Don't think of this as a negative. This is an opportunity I want to extend to you. I look forward to your participation." Bruce rose from his seat. "Beatrice is a beauty, isn't she?" He walked out of

the café, leaving Alexei completely confounded.

Alexei waited a few minutes after Bruce left, and glanced around to see if anyone was watching. He packed up his computers into his backpack. Upon arriving home, he opened his family's apartment to an aroma of cabbage and coriander stewing on the stove. His sister sat by the front window, painting her toenails shrouded in the dusty sunshine raining through, and his mother on the couch knitting.

His stoned demeanor gained both their attention immediately. "What happened? Are you alright? Are you in some kind of trouble?" his mother asked.

"I don't know. This American came into the café today. He offered me a ticket on a tourist shuttle in space."

"Space?" his sister asked.

"Yeah, like the sky. Space."

"Pop would have been so jealous," his sister replied.

"You're not going are you? It'll be

dangerous. Can you trust this American?” his mother asked.

“I don’t know.” He opened the envelope and shuffled through the papers, the forms written in both English and Russian. Reading through it all – the information on Marsden’s shuttle travels, the consent forms, and the airline tickets. It all seemed legit. “Pop would have jumped at the opportunity.”

His mother rose abruptly from the couch. “Your father is no longer here.” She brushed past him on her way to the kitchen to stir her cabbage stew.

“Pop would think you’re crazy if you don’t go,” his sister said. “This is your ticket out of hell.”

Alexei waved the papers in his hand. “I know.”

He walked into his bedroom, and plopped onto his bed. He wasn’t sure what to think about this whole situation. The opportunity, if real, was incredible, but worse he felt vulnerable. His anonymous identity was discovered. He was

exposed, and wondered how many people knew. Did Beatrice Suffolk know he was trashing her story?

Glancing at a photo of Yuri Gagarin on his bedside table, he lifted it and read the signed autograph to his departed father: *Dear Nikolay, May you find inspiration in the stars.* Alexei reflected on his father, an engineer by trade, and a dreamer at heart. He missed him a great deal, and now he was presented an opportunity in which to honor him, if only he had the nerve.

*

Bangalore, India, Sandeep rode a packed bus. Seeing a pregnant woman with two small children, he rose and gave her his seat. He didn't mind. Now, he could squash himself between the bodies of two nubile young ladies. He smiled down at them, with every bump of the bus pressed their flesh against his. When the bus halted at his stop, he jumped off and headed down the crowded

streets, which smelled of curry.

“Sandeep! Sandeep!” a female voice called.

He spun around, looking for his mother, and wondering what she was doing stalking him at the bus station. This could seriously ruin his reputation with the ladies. He rushed up to her. “What is it?” he asked in a hushed voice.

“There is a man waiting for you at home,” she said urgently. “An American man.”

“Mother, you left an American man waiting alone in our home?”

“What’s the problem? He’s an American? What harm can he do?” she asked in return, taking his arm and rushing him through a swarm of people.

Sandeep’s mind swirled – the mysterious American man, his mother’s naivety, and thoughtful answers to her question, *what harm could an American man do?* But still, as he tried to keep pace with his mother, his curiosity intensified. What could an American man want with him? He wondered.

When they arrived home, his mother opened the door to their apartment. In the corner of a white-painted room with a few scattered paintings, the American man sat casually with his legs crossed on their beige couch, haloed by an amber light from the sun shining through a sheer orange curtain.

While his mother rushed to the kitchen to prepare tea, Sandeep studied the man. His heart leapt from his chest, finally recognizing Bruce Merrick sitting in his mother's parlor. "Oh my! Mr. Merrick, I am a great fan! I have read all your books, and looking forward to *Coexisting, the Guide to Understanding*. I can't believe it. Is this is a mirage?"

Bruce uncrossed his legs and stood from the couch. He reached out for Sandeep's hand. "Always nice to meet a fan."

"I am, very much," Sandeep replied shaking his hand. "Is that why you're here?"

Sandeep's mother scampered from the kitchen with a wicker tray filled with teacups.

“Mister sit, please.” As Bruce returned to his seat, she poured him a cup of spiced tea.

“What are you doing here?” Sandeep asked.

“Are you doing a speaking tour in India?”

Bruce tried to take a sip of tea, while Sandeep’s mother kept trying to add cream, lemon, or honey. He shook his head, no with each suggestion. “No, not exactly. I’m offering people the opportunity to tour around the globe.”

“Wow, I’ve always wanted to travel around the world,” Sandeep said.

“Yes, but I mean space, a shuttle tour around the Earth,” Bruce said.

Sandeep’s mother stood upright. “You want to take my son into space?”

Bruce glanced up at her, not sure how exactly the best way to respond.

“It will be like riding a vimana, mother, like the gods,” Sandeep said excitedly.

“Do you consider yourself to be a spiritual person?” Bruce asked.

“Yes sir. Very much.” Sandeep reached

inside his pocket, and showed it to Bruce. “I always carry a copy of the Gita with me.”

“He was once considered to be a young yogi by our Swami Aashirya, but my son prefers girls to his spiritual studies,” his mother said with a tone of disappointment.

“Mother,” Sandeep sighed.

“All that talent, and you waste it at a computer company. Why? So you can buy fancy clothes and colognes to attract women,” she continued.

“Mother, I’m sure Mr. Merrick isn’t interested,” Sandeep replied, giving Bruce an embarrassed smile.

“Well, I believe enlightenment and romance do not have to be separate from one another,” Bruce said. He opened his sports coat and retrieved a manila envelope. “Think of the enlightenment you can gather from space.” He handed Sandeep the envelope. “Think of how it would attract the ladies. Inside this packet, you will find more details of the trip, as well as a

plane ticket to the United States. All you need to do is sign the authorization, and return by March 21st to secure your reservation,” Bruce said.

Sandeep glanced up to his mother. His face lit up with excitement. “I’m going to America! I’m going to America!” he shouted.

*

A few days later, Bruce strode through a car rental lot at Atlanta International Airport. His cellphone rang as he neared a silver Buick. “We just got an email from Sandeep Swarna, with all his signed consent forms,” Hannah said on the other end of the line.

“What about Alexei Federov?” he asked, clicking open the trunk and setting inside his small suitcase.

“Not yet,” she said.

“Send him an encouraging email.” He hesitated. “No don’t. I’m going to call him tonight.”

He hung up the phone and slid it in his pocket. Climbing into the driver's seat, he checked his rental car. When everything seemed in order, he put the next address into the GPS. He had to admit, he was enjoying the journey to get to know his guests before the space expedition.

The humidity hung low over Atlanta as he drove the freeway, a female voice guided him on the GPS, "Take exit 238A for I-285 E toward Augusta to Lithonia."

Bruce followed the directions as a few drops of rain fell on the windshield. Thunder bellowed and lightening flashed. Even a storm couldn't deter him from his goal. He knew his fate, meeting the next passenger on his trip was only a half an hour away.

He drove up to a ranch style house and parked in the driveway. A stocky blond-haired man with somber eyes appeared behind the screen door, waiting and watching.

As Bruce stepped out of the car, Brian called out, "Can I help you?"

Nearing the house, Bruce noticed Brian holding a pistol. He raised his hands in the air. “I come in peace.”

“Who are you? What do you want? Are you with the government?” Brian asked.

“I’m author Bruce Merrick. I posted a link to Beatrice Suffolk’s story on Navajo Nation a couple days ago.”

Brian cocked his head and shrugged. “Yeah, so.”

“You commented, in fact, you got into quite a little debate with a couple people – Mel. J, for one.”

“Oh yeah. Did she complain about me? Gotta figure she’d report me.”

“No.” Bruce stood outside the screen door in the rain. “Can I come in?”

Brian nodded. “Yeah sure.” He opened the screen door for Bruce to enter, and judged his appearance as an uptight Liberal, possibly a queer by his neat dress. “Is there anything I can get for you? I don’t have any Chablis, or Rosé.”

“You can drop the gun.” Bruce stepped in and studied the room – antique rifle cabinet in the corner, large screen television and two old, stained recliners. There were no pictures hanging on the wall, nothing to offer decoration. He smiled at Brian. “A beer would do.”

Brian rested the gun in a drawer of an end table. “Sorry. Can’t be too careful these days. Don’t know what kind of freaks will show up at your door,” he said, walking into the kitchen to get Bruce a beer. “No offense. Have a seat.”

“No offense taken. This freak means no harm.” Bruce checked to see which recliner was cleaner. Neither of which seemed appealing. He rested his butt on the edge of a brown leather one with scratch marks carved on the arms.

Brian returned with a beer for both him and Bruce. “What can I do for you, Mr. Merrick?” he asked and swigged back the beer.

“This has to do with what I can do for you,” Bruce replied and then took a drink of beer. It tasted like piss, but he tried not to show his

displeasure. “Have you heard of billionaire Rick Marsden?”

“Heard of him,” Brian said relaxing in the other recliner and crossing his legs.

“He has a tourist space shuttle company, Marsden Travels.”

Brian chuckled. “Like Mars travels.”

“Not quite. He’s not yet offering travels to Mars, just around Earth. I’m here to offer you a seat on the shuttle. A three-hour trip, two times around Earth. What do you say?”

Brian sat forward in seat. “Space? Are you joking?”

“No. I am not joking,” Bruce said and dared to take another sip of the shit drink.

“Why?” Brian asked.

“I had a reservation on the flight for myself. But where’s the joy in traveling alone. I randomly picked people who commented on my posts.” He paused to get a clue of Brian’s reaction. “Melody Johnson, Mel J, is on the list.”

“Really? You must be real a brave man,

Bruce. That's one feisty chick," Brian replied.

Bruce reached inside his jacket and pulled out an envelope. "Inside is information about Marsden Travels, consent forms and a ticket to California. We will be lifting off at Marsden's airfield in the Mohave May 1st." He presented the envelope to Brian. "Are you in?"

Brian hesitated. "What's the catch?"

"No catch. Consider me a bridge, bringing people together to have the experience of their life."

"So cool. Like I'm going to be an astronaut? Do I get to wear a space suit?" Brian asked, taking the envelope. "What do I need to do?"

"You're going to be a passenger, and you get to wear a space suit. Just review the material, sign the consent forms and show up at Bakersfield Airport. There, a shuttle bus will take the passengers out to the airport." Bruce said, rising from the recliner. "I hope to see you there."

Brian stood and escorted him to the door. "Ah, thanks for stopping by," he said numbly, still

processing this strange and sudden opportunity.

Bruce shook his hand and strode to his rented car in the driveway. By now the storm passed and the sun's rays poured through the clouds. Already, he could feel the negativity dissipating like the storm clouds. With the ease people were seemingly on board with his scheme, his confidence in his mission began to mount. Success for his new project was within his reach and he didn't even need to put forth much effort.

*

Beatrice paced before her computer, talking aloud. "Why even bother being a journalist? Why even bother reporting the news? There are people putting their lives in fucking danger to report the truth, yet some dumb fuck from who-knows-where Arkansas has a different opinion, than the man standing in the heart of the action. What is this world coming to when ignorance weighs more than facts? What happened to the world when people

listened to journalists and reporters? Now we have random people, with random agendas making shit up and the gullible have no idea what is true or false anymore.” She plopped in her chair and buried her forehead in her palm.

“Are you done with your tirade?” Nigel asked from her laptop screen.

“No. Just taking break.” She sighed before starting up again. “Comment sections need to be deactivated from news articles. The news, the facts should not be open for debate, especially from people who have no clue.”

“Bea, this is our world as it is today. You either decide to be a journalist, continuing to pursue the facts of a story, and face those who don’t want to hear it, but know this, you will be reaching people who want to know the truth. They will appreciate you for your efforts, and fuck the rest. Their opinions are meaningless.”

“Nigel, a girl killed herself because of one of my stories,” Beatrice said with a whine.

“Not because of your story, because some

asshole stirred the pot to incite discord. You didn't provoke this girl's suicide, the anarchist did. And one more thing, Bruce Merrick didn't incite it either. You owe him an apology. He shared your post because he believes in you. Don't be so proud, you cut off people who support you." Nigel paused. "Now, what are you going to do? Quit?"

"No. I think I'm going to write a story on the down side of social media," she said.

On the monitor, Nigel rolled his eyes. "Well, that should go over well. Bea, stay focused on your own mission and forget the others. Keep on updating your Navajo Nation pipeline burst story. Be the example, not part of the problem."

"Fine," she said with a hard sigh.

"There's one more thing, " Nigel said. "Bruce Merrick has invited you on a space shuttle ride. He too had taken to heart this tragic story, and his plan is to take those responsible into space. He wants you to go along and report on it."

"No way! I mean, no fucking way!" she yelled to Nigel on the other side of her webcam.

“I’m not sure you understand this, Beatrice, this is a job,” he said.

“You’re sending me into space?” she asked nervously.

“At Bruce Merrick’s request,” he said. “This is a great opportunity for a life changing story. Beatrice, do you know how many people would kill for this opportunity?”

“Look, I don’t want anything to do with Merrick. He used my story and a woman killed herself and innocent animals. I can’t express how much I don’t want anything to do with that man.”

“Beatrice, calm down. Bruce Merrick had nothing to do with the murder, and neither did you. It was a coincidence, which led to this fantastic opportunity. Strange things happen to align people’s fate.”

“Oh Nigel, I don’t want to go on a space shuttle. I want to stay grounded. I’m a grounded girl,” she pleaded.

“You’re an adventurer. You were arrested in the Navajo Nation for filming the pipeline fire.

This is your kind of mission.”

She slumped in her seat. “This is not the dessert. This is space.”

“Think of it as moving up in the world,” Nigel joked.

“Ha, ha,” she responded dully, and turned off her webcam. She dumped her head forward in her hands, wanting desperately to cry, yet no tears came forth, only angst and frustration. “Why do I have to pay the price for moronic behavior?”

She rose from her seat, glancing past the window. She couldn’t even look outside. The knot forming in her stomach wanted nothing more than to shut out the world, and yet here she was, a big part of it. “Damn it!” she screamed.

*

Bruce returned to the Hilton Hotel at the Atlanta airport. He dropped his bag on his bed and reached for his phone in his pocket. He pressed one button on the keypad, waiting for a response.

“Hannah, any update?”

“Beatrice Suffolk confirmed,” she said.

“Great!” Bruce exclaimed. “What did she say?”

“Actually the chief editor of Environmental News confirmed for her. We haven’t heard from her directly,” Hannah replied.

“And Alexei Federov?”

“You honestly think the Russian troll will come?” Hannah asked. “You exposed his anonymity. He could lose his job, if not get into trouble with his superiors. You’re just killing it these days at ruining people’s lives,” she joked.

“Not funny,” he said, suddenly realizing his actions with Alexei may indeed bring him trouble. He didn’t even bother checking the time difference when he called. The phone rang a few times before he finally answered.

Alexei awoke shrouded in darkness and the only light illuminating came from the flashes from his cell phone. He reached out for the phone on his nightstand and checked the number he didn’t

recognize, but did realize it was a caller from the United State. Reluctantly, he grumbled his answer. “Hello.”

“You haven’t sent in your consent forms for the shuttle ride,” Bruce said. When he received silence as a response, he continued. “Beatrice Suffolk will be joining us. She’s a beautiful woman. Space travel, beautiful woman, how could a guy pass that up?”

Alexei glanced at his father’s autographed picture of Yuri Gagarin next to his bed. “I don’t have a passport.”

“I’m sure we could help with that. The American consulate would be happy to help with your paperwork,” Bruce said.

“Why are you so determined I come on this trip?”

“Because you are an important person on this trip.”

“Why am I important? I’m anonymous. I’m nobody,” he said.

“You are Captain Hugh No Knuthing,” Bruce

said. "If you have any troubles arranging your passport, give me a call. I have connections that will help facilitate."

Alexei rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling. "Alright. I'll be there," he said with a tired sigh. Bruce had worn him down, and well, news of Beatrice being on the trip helped. A smile crossed his face, and for the first time in his life he was genuinely excited.

"Great!" Bruce exclaimed. "You won't regret this." He hung up the phone, proud of his accomplishment of rounding up people for his mission. Only two more to go.

*

Marching down Cherokee Street in St. Louis, Melody shouted along with the crowd, "No justice! No peace! No justice! No peace!" Ahead of her was another police barricade. "No justice! No peace!" she screamed, until she was brought to a halt by the barrel of a rifle. "No justice! No

peace!” she yelled in defiance.

Feeling her phone vibrate in her pocket, she muttered, “Shit,” and checked to see who was calling at this inopportune time. It was just her mother. She ignored the call, but as soon as she returned the phone to her pocket, it vibrated again. “Shit!” Fearing it may be bad news about her grandmother, she answered. “Yeah, ma, I’m kinda busy now.”

“You need to come home now,” her mother urged.

“Ma, I’m marching in a protest, unless something happened to Grandma, it can wait.”

“There’s a man here to see you,” her mother said.

Melody hesitated not expected the response. “What? Who?”

“Some author named Bruce Merrick. He said you had commented on one of his posts, and he’s offering a great opportunity for random people participating.” Her mother’s voice raced with excitement. “And you were chosen!”

Melody looked around at her fellow protesters and the police ahead. It was the same old shit. There will always be another chance to raise hell against the man, but now she had one actually waiting for her. “Did he say what the opportunity is?”

“Not until you get home. Now, get your ass home now!” her mother urged.

She turned away from the crowds and couldn't walk fast enough to where her car was parked. Her heart raced, beating against her chest with anticipation. The whole way home her mind spun with what the opportunity could be – working with him on one of his causes, becoming an admin for his social media. A proud smile crossed her face. Finally, she was recognized for her fight against injustice.

When she arrived at her mother's modest row home, she parked behind a sparkling new luxury Buick, and automatically assumed it was Merrick's car. “He better not stay too long. That car won't last long in this neighborhood,” she

mumbled as she walked up the front sidewalk.

Her mother swung open the front door. “What took you so long?”

“So long. It’s record time. I broke every traffic violation on my way home,” Melody said stepping inside and seeing Bruce seated on their couch sipping tea alongside her grandmother.

Bruce set his cup down on the coffee table and stood to shake her hand. “Melody Johnson, I presume.”

“Yes, that’s me,” she said, sitting on a chair across the room.

“I know I have your mother and grandmother overwhelmed with suspense, so I’ll get right to it.” He sat back down and started his speech. “Have you heard of Marsden Travels?”

“No,” Melody replied.

“It’s okay. Not many have. Rick Marsden is a friend of mine. He has a tourist space shuttle service and has taken several flights around the Earth.” He sat forward on the edge of the couch, excited to share his news. “I’m taking several

people who commented on my posts into space.”

“What?!” Melody, her mother and her grandmother exclaimed in unison.

“It’s all perfectly safe. Marsden’s team is the finest aviation experts in the world. He has had several successful endeavors. It is a great opportunity to see the world from space.”

Melody collapsed in her seat, completely stone-shocked into silence, highly unusual for her, since she normally had an answer for everything.

“Why my daughter?” her mother asked.

Bruce was yet to divulge the real reason of bringing together the group that resulted in a young woman’s death. “I get thousands of people responding to my posts daily, all with differing views, perspectives and truths. It’s an opportunity to unite others of difference. I chose Melody, because I have noticed her spirit of justice.”

He sparked her pride. Melody bolted upright in her seat. “What do I need to do?”

Bruce retrieved the envelope from his jacket. “Inside is information on Marsden Travels, consent

forms, and a round trip plane ticket to Bakersfield California. From there we travel as a group to the airfield in the Mojave.

Melody took the envelope and flipped through all the papers. “This is real, isn’t it?”

“As real as real can be,” Bruce said.

Her eyes lit up with excitement. Finally, something to pull her out of the doldrums of her life. “I’m in.”

“That is indeed the spirit,” Bruce replied.

“Wait a minute,” her mother said. “What about your job?”

“I’ll take time off. Ma, this is an opportunity to go into space. There will always be some stupid job.”

“I’d just wish you’d find a nice boy and settle down,” her mother responded.

Melody smiled awkwardly at Bruce. “Not now, ma. Mr. Merrick, I’m in.”

A few moments later, Bruce exited the Johnson home. He checked his watch. It was only a two and a half-hours to Terre Haute and he was

looking forward to the drive. Space exploration was something he always dreamed of, but he had never given much thought to exploring his own country. Today, he got a taste of the Midwest. During the drive, he tried to find inspiration, but it was mainly a flat barren wasteland.

*

Bruce arrived in Terre Haute, and turned on his GPS to find Anna Miller's house. Winding around a country road, he came to a mint green home, with a neatly mowed lawn, and begonia bushes in the front yard. He parked the car alongside the road, walked up the path to the house and knocked on the door.

The door opened. Bruce saw no one until he looked down and saw a snotty-nose boy. "Why hello, and who might you be?" he asked.

"Samuel."

"Sammy, what did I tell you about opening the door to strangers," Anna said, rounding the

corner of the room. She lifted her son in her arms and glared at Bruce. "What can I do for you?"

"Do you mind if I come in?" Bruce asked.

"I do. My husband's not home. I don't allow strange men in my house," she said.

"Very smart. My name is Bruce Merrick. I am an author, self-help...", he started.

"I know who you are. What do you want?"

"I have chosen at random several people who commented on my posts for an opportunity of a life time."

"And what is that?" she asked with heavy dose of skepticism.

"A chance to see the planet from outer space. I have created this deal with Rick Marsden, of Marsden Travels."

She laughed. "Give me a break. I know it's all fake."

"Excuse me?" he asked in disbelief of her remark.

"Space travel. It's fake, propoganda. It's all done to keep people distracted, while the

government gains more control of our lives, poisoning our water and food so we lose the capacity to think clearly.”

Bruce stared at her, and then realized his mouth was gaping open. He stood straight and looked around at the quaint little house, the aroma of fresh bread coming from inside the house. “Well, how about a free trip to California to see the Hollywood stage where this fraud was pulled off.”

“Right,” Anna said. “They’re going to divulge their secret. I’m a lot smarter than I look. I know how you people operate. You’re going to try to alter my mind, but I already see the truth.” She started to close the door.

“Mrs. Miller, at least let me give you this,” he said.

Anna paused and stared at the envelope suspiciously. “There’s not anthrax in there, is there?”

“No. It’s information on Marsden Travels and a consent form.”

“Why do you need a consent form?”

“Well, I plan to write a book, maybe a documentary which you will be a part of. I will need your consent to be a part of the documentary.”

“Will it be on TV?” she asked.

“Possibly. Probably,” he said.

Anna set Samuel down and reached for the envelope. She shuffled through the documents.

“This looks legit.”

“It is,” Bruce said.

“Okay, well I’m going to have my husband look over this,” she said.

“Is he a lawyer?”

“No, a contractor, but he read the Constitution and the Federalist Papers several times. He knows them by heart.”

Bruce nodded. “Right, well, have him look over it. The reservation is in three months. There will be a day of orientation, and the next day we fly. It’s only a three-hour flight.”

“Flight? This is to expose truths about lies the government has been feeding us for decades,”

she said.

Bruce offered her a frozen smile. “Right. By flight I mean, a simulated ride, like at Disney World. We’re going to simulate the lie.” As soon as he said, he hated lying to the poor woman, however, in his zeal for the project he wanted to expose her to the truth...the real truth. By her expression, he believed he was beginning to sell her on the idea. “Talk it over with your husband, but I’d love to have you on our flight, I mean have you a part of the documentary.”

“Why? I’m just a homemaker,” she asked.

“Exactly. Some of the most awakened people are the ones who do their own research online. We need more like you,” he said. “Have a nice day, Anna. I hope to hear from you soon.”

He didn’t have to wait. He strode off knowing she watched from the doorway.

“Mr. Merrick!” she shouted. “I’d love be a part of your documentary to expose the truth.”

Bruce spun around. “Send us your consent form and I’ll see you in May.”

Tickled his new endeavor was coming into fruition, he could hardly wait to get home to San Francisco to start working on the book, arranging camera men and photographers to record the journey.

Chapter 8

Anna pulled her floral brocade carryon luggage through Bakersfield terminal and waited outside on the curb. She wished her husband traveled with her to see her off, but at this time she looked forward to her own personal adventure. It was hard to admit, even to herself, she desired a getaway from her family.

She watched the people coming and going. Some welcomed family and friends, while others heading to the parking area for their own cars. Most everyone seemed to know where they were going, except for a young African American woman, studying the signs and gazing up and down the long line of cars waiting at arrival.

Melody hoisted her backpack on her shoulders, surveying the crowds. She checked her watch expecting to see Bruce at any moment. "Come on, I hate waiting," she muttered softly. She sized-up a pretty blonde woman with a tacky floral suitcase. When she met eye contact with the

blonde-woman, she quickly turned away, noticing a dopey-looking blond-haired man join them in the same vicinity.

Brian checked out the two women – the blonde pretty, but of bland taste, and the cute black chick with gold nail polish and Converse sneakers. *Seems as though that chick is having an identity crisis. Doesn't know who she wants to be*, he thought. He rolled his suitcase up to the edge, looking for his ride.

When the crowd dispersed, it was just them and a young dark-skinned man sitting patiently on the bench. Anna, Melody and Brian viewed him with suspicion, oddly sitting and waiting for apparently no one.

Melody approached one of the baggage handlers, and gestured in the direction of the dark-skinned man. “How long has he been sitting there?”

The baggage handler shrugged. “I dunno, an hour maybe.”

“Isn't that suspicious?” she asked.

Brian overheard the conversation and joined in. “Maybe you should alert security or something. He looks like he’s up to no good.”

“He’s not doing any harm sitting,” the baggage handler said.

“Look, I get this is Liberal Land, California, but we visitors don’t want to be blown to pieces by a terrorist,” Brian said.

Melody glanced at Brian, shocked by his rude remark, but she had to admit, she too didn’t want to get blown to pieces. “Maybe, you need to go talk to him. See who he is. He may be lost.”

Hearing the conversation, Anna made her way over to stand with them. She didn’t say anything, but felt safer being among people who shared her same suspicions.

“What about you three? Why are you just standing around?” the baggage handler asked.

“Waiting for our rides, nosey,” Melody remarked angrily, just as a white van marked with Marsden Travels with blue script font painted on the side pulled up next to the curb.

The door opened and out popped Bruce with a broad grin. He stepped down to greet Melody, Brian and Anna. “Ah, so you all made it. Welcome to beautiful Bakersfield.” He laughed and when no one responded, he continued, “It’s a joke. Bakersfield isn’t known for its beauty. Mountains, of course, are beautiful, but the town is eh.” His attempt at humor bombed. Glancing over Anna’s shoulder, he noticed the dark-skinned man slouching by himself. “Sandeep Swarma! What are you doing sitting over there by yourself? Come join us!”

Sandeep smiled widely and burst from his seat. He rushed over and shook Bruce’s hand, “I’m so excited to be here. I can’t believe I’m actually in America with Americans. It is a dream come true. I am so happy to meet all of you. I’m sure we’ll become great friends.”

Brian, Melody and Anna regarded Sandeep, all sucking in their guilty suspicion. “Nice to meet you. I’m Anna,” she said, shaking his hand.

Sandeep’s eyes went directly to her wedding

ring. His interest dimmed. “Yes, Nice to meet you. I’m Sandeep from Bangalore.” He reached for Brian and Melody’s hand. Melody cordially reciprocated, while Brian hesitated shaking his hand.

“Bangalore?” Brian questioned.

“India, you fool,” Melody answered for Sandeep. “Welcome to America.”

“Same thing,” Brian scoffed.

“Not really,” Melody said under her breath.

“Alright!” Bruce exclaimed breaking the tension. “We have two arriving from New York City. Their plane just landed, and then we will be off to Marsden’s airfield in the Mojave.” He studied the expressions on his passengers’ faces, surprising all, except Sandeep, appeared stunned. “I know Sandeep is excited, what about the rest of you.”

Anna broke the silence. “Nervous.”

“I’d be worried if you weren’t, but I can assure you, you have nothing to worry about.” He glanced up seeing Beatrice approaching through

the terminal. “Ah, it seems the last of our crew is arriving. He broke into a wide smile seeing her exit through the sliding glass doors.

Despite his proclivity for his same gender, he couldn't help admiring Beatrice. Every inch of her appearance was immaculate and her demeanor purposeful, however, Bruce dimmed seeing her discouraged face. “Beatrice Suffolk, I presume,” he said, rushing to help her with her bag.

“Seems the princess has arrived,” Melody muttered. “No one helped with my luggage.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Bruce began proudly. “This is environmental journalist Beatrice Suffolk. She will be joining us on our trip, and doing a special journalistic story of the experience.”

“Fancy,” Melody replied.

“We have one more,” Bruce said, turning to see Alexei exiting the terminal. “Ah, and our last participant. Okay, I will now make the introduction official, as he read off all their names, “Brian Dawson, of Lithonia, Georgia, Melody Johnson of

St. Louis, Missouri, Sandeep Swarma of Bangalore, India, Anna Miller, Terre Haute, Indiana, I have already introduced Beatrice, and lastly, you may know him by Captain Hugh No Knuthing, Fancy Nancy, Crystal Ball, or Randy Rhodes...Alexei Federov of Moscow, Russia.”

All eyes turned incredulously on Alexei, the harshest gaze was from Beatrice. “What?!” she asked with a hard undertone.

Alexei looked over Beatrice, giving her an awkward smile, and finding her even more beautiful than her picture. However, thanks to Bruce, his cover was blown and so were his chances with Beatrice.

Bruce clapped his hands together. “We have a full journey to get to know each other, so now if you’d all like to take a seat on the shuttle, we’ll take you to the shuttle,” he said with a chuckle.

Brian boarded the shuttle first taking a seat in the far back, and Anna taking the seat in front right by the door. Melody didn’t know where to sit, but she certainly wasn’t sitting in the back. No

back of the bus for her, so she sat behind Anna, slumping in her seat. Sandeep took the front seat on the other side of the aisle from Anna.

Beatrice wished she rented a car to drive out to Marsden airbase by herself. Instead she had to sit with those who trashed her story. Sitting behind Sandeep, she quickly took out her iPhone and completely plugged in to tune out to everyone, yet when Alexei stepped inside she made sure to give him a scathing glare, which he caught.

There appeared to be no welcoming seat for him. Everywhere he looked people eyed him with doubt. *I guess there is no warming between our two countries*, he thought slumping in the seat behind Beatrice.

Bruce stood at the front regarding his passengers, a bunch of sour pusses. Not a smile in the bunch, well except for Sandeep, he had no clue what he signed up for. "It's an hour and half ride out to Marsden Airfield. Our anticipated arrival will be around one o'clock. Lunch will be waiting. Afterward, we will have an orientation as to what

to expect tomorrow.” He looked around, no one paid attention, all listening to what’s playing on their headphones, except of course Sandeep. “Any questions?”

“Will we be allowed to take pictures?” Sandeep asked.

“Of course. Plenty of photos will be taken both before we take off and in space,” Bruce said. Discouraged by the lack of excitement, he tapped the driver on the shoulder to proceed and took a seat across the aisle from Alexei. He thought to start a discussion, but it may be best to let everyone absorb what’s going on, and then he too put on his headphones, tuning into Beethoven.

A mirage of ice lay across the slick black road, as they rode through the desert. In the dusty haze three white buildings came into view. When they neared, Marsden’s logo became visible on the flight tower. Everyone in the van turned their attention to their destination. The one thing they had in common, yet no one expressed, was raising

nervous tension. Everything was always good in theory, and the thoughts of adventure, but go through with it was something different entirely. Fear and apprehension crossed everyone's mind.

When the driver pulled in front of one of the smaller buildings. A short, stout man with wild blond hair exited a non-descript white door. He greeted everyone with a toothy smile, as they stepped off the shuttle bus. "Welcome, I'm Rick Marsden," he said, giving everyone a hearty handshake. "Please, come inside."

Rick led them down a narrow hallway, decorated with aerial photographs of space and the desert. At the end, the hallway opened to a small cafeteria with wide-open windows with the view of the desert. A few scattered employees ate their lunch in quiet, but lifted their eyes to take in Marsden's new passengers.

Just as they were about to line up to collect their food at the buffet line, Bruce gestured for others to go ahead. Starving, Brian went first requesting a cheeseburger and fries from the

cafeteria worker.

Sandeep went next, mimicking Brian's order. "Do you have veggie burgers and fries, please?" He leaned forward to address a young female cafeteria attendant. "First time in America. So excited."

"Sure do." She gave him a warm smile and extra pickles. "Where are you from?"

Surprised an American girl actually spoke to him, Sandeep lit up. "Bangalore, India."

"I've always wanted to go to India. I hear cows and elephants roam free. Is that true?"

He smiled at her sweet naivety. "Not everywhere."

"Oh, right. Of course. How silly of me," she muttered shyly, handing him his plate.

"Trust me, there's nothing silly about you," he replied with a wink and looked to follow Brian into the cafeteria.

Next in line, Anna and Melody ordered only a garden salad. Bruce stepped behind Melody, and he too ordered a cheeseburger. "You know you

lose weight in space. You're light as a feather, if there were feathers in space," he joked trying to lessen the tension of the group. All he received was a row of raised eyebrows. *Not a sense of humor in the bunch.* Hopefully, he and Marsden would be able to break through before the flight took off.

Before Alexei could enter the line, Beatrice blocked him. She stood defiantly before him, gazing up into his green eyes. A flutter waved in her chest, and she could feel her mouth gaping open, unable to speak. She had to take a moment to gather herself before letting him have a piece of her mind. "It was you. You started this all. You caused the death of an innocent girl and twelve dogs."

Her face was beautiful, especially with passion burning in her eyes, but he was caught off guard by her accusation. "Come again?"

"Cassandra Lockhart," she said.

"Who?"

"Cassie Heart. You know why we're here?"

The social media exchange on Bruce's post about my Navajo Nation story resulted in a murder/suicide. That's why we're here. All these people responded to your irresponsible comment."

Alexei looked past her at the others standing in line to collect their lunch. "Only proves the point that Americans are gullible beyond reproach. I can play you people like strings on a violin." He pressed the back of his hand on her arm and gently pushed her aside. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I smell French fries, or as you Yanks like to call them, freedom fries."

Beatrice whipped around. "Hey Fancy Nancy!" When he glanced back at her, sporting an annoying smirk, she continued, "Maybe before you criticize others, you learn to be a better human being." Beatrice watched him wave back at her, as he headed toward the lunch line. She wondered if any of them recognized each other's names, or were they all so disengaged from any reality outside their own perspective.

"Interesting, isn't it?" Bruce asked.

Beatrice tossed her head aside to see his smug grin. “Bruce, this isn’t a game. These are people’s lives you’re dealing with. People are not an experiment.”

“I would expect more of you, Beatrice. As a journalist, I’m sure you can appreciate this. Everyone is so caught in their own version of the truth and of each other, all of which will soon become shattered. Imagine the possibilities here.”

Bruce patted her on the shoulder, and walked into the cafeteria, finding his passengers sitting at separate tables, and poor Sandeep still wandering around, trying to find a place where someone would welcome him. Feeling an outcast himself, Alexei invited him to sit at his table.

“Listen up fellow passengers,” Bruce said, gathering everyone’s attention. “Let’s all eat together. Get to know each other.”

Reluctantly, they all came to sit at Alexei’s table, and Beatrice forced herself to sit next to the Russian troll.

“Good. Isn’t this nice?” Bruce said. “We’re

like a family.”

“This doesn’t look like my family,” Melody burst out.

“Nice,” Brian responded sarcastically.

“Alright. This is not social media. Let’s try to be civil,” Bruce said. “Now, we’re going around the table, and I want you all to share your favorite quote. A quote that will tell us a little about yourself.”

Melody raised her hand. “No justice! No peace!”

Brian let a fry go limp in his hand. “Oh for God’s sake, should have known you’re one of those people.”

“One of those people?” Melody challenged.

“People. We are not here to judge, but to learn. Brian, your favorite quote,” Bruce said.

Brian had absolutely no clue. In his mind he searched and searched, but came up with nothing, until something jumped in his mind. “Give me liberty, or give me death. Get it? Don’t fucking tread on me?”

Melody chuckled, nearly choking on a cucumber. “Who would want to tread on you? We may catch something.”

“Okay, let’s behave,” Bruce said. “Anna, how about you?”

She finished chewing her salad, sat up straight and spoke with clarity, “The only people mad at you for speaking the truth are those who are living a lie.”

Beatrice couldn’t help herself. She had to chime in. “whose truth? This guy’s?” she asked pointing to Alexei. “He’s the problem with the world, everyone believes the shit he posts as truth. Here’s my quote, ‘Just because your voice reaches halfway around the world, doesn’t mean you’re wiser than the guy at the end of the bar.’ Do you know who said that?”

Alexei slurped his soda and replied, “Edward R. Murrow.”

Beatrice’s head spun around, staring at him, shocked.

“I did a paper on him in school. I was

fascinated by America's Communist witch hunt," he continued.

"Well, would you look at that," Bruce interjected, "Common ground."

"I have a quote. I have a good one." Sandeep jumped into the conversation, making sure he would not be left out. "You may say, I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one." He looked around at the others with a big smile. "It's John Lennon. He was a Beatle."

Beatrice chuckled ironically. "I wouldn't know."

"Well, you should. He was English too," Sandeep responded innocently.

Beatrice chuckled, shaking her head in disbelief.

"And what about you, Alexei," Bruce asked. He grinned and said with a casual shrug. "Life is like a box of chocolates. Tom Hanks in Fores..."

"Forest Gump," everyone interjected in unison.

“Isn’t that awesome. I guess we can all say we saw Forest Gump. Yes, life is like a box of chocolates,” Bruce said with an encouraging smile, while the rest rolled their eyes in disdain. The space surrounding them all couldn’t be any vaster.

A tall, lanky man, with slicked back hair and wearing blue coveralls neared the table with a tub for collecting trash. Despite his janitorial profession, he spoke with a tone of smooth eloquence. “May I take any of your garbage?”

Barely anyone gave him attention and shrugged him off.

The janitor grinned. “I’ll be back to check on you later.” He walked away without notice.

Chapter 9

After lunch, they all gathered in a small theater adjacent to the cafeteria, once again, all sitting apart from one another. Beatrice removed a notepad from her purse and prepared to take notes of the orientation. Her actions garnered the attention of Melody and Anna.

“Look at Miss Fancy Pants over there, taking notes,” Melody said aside to Anna.

Anna raised her hand. “I didn’t know we had to take notes.”

“You don’t. There will be no test,” he assured her. “Beatrice is here on assignment. She will be reporting back to Environmental News.”

“What’s environmental about going into space?” Brian asked.

Beatrice whipped her head around and shot him a look as if he were the stupidest person on Earth. “It’s where scientists are monitoring weather patterns, you...” she started, stopping

herself before rendering an insult. She had to maintain the higher road.

“Yeah, well, why has it been so cold this winter if the planet is warming? Huh?” Brian asked.

Bruce ignored Brian’s question, and instead made his introduction. “Ladies and gentlemen, I will pass it over to Rick Marsden. The owner of Marsden Travel, who will explain what to expect tomorrow.”

As Bruce took a seat in the front row beside Sandeep, Rick stepped before the sparse, discouraged audience. “Welcome. This will be a first for me and my crew. We will be taking our first Russian into space.” The joke, or what he thought as one, failed. No one laughed.

“Well, a Russian was a first into space. Yuri Gagarin was the first man to travel in the Earth’s orbit. April 12th 1961,” Alexei replied.

“Well, America was the first to walk on the moon,” Brian jumped in, defending America, like a good patriot.

“We were first in space,” Alexei continued to spur on Brian.

“Gentlemen,” Rick said, trying to settle tensions.

“None of it’s true,” Anna added. “It’s all propaganda. I’ve seen it on YouTube. The moon landing is a hoax. Space travel is a hoax.”

The room fell silent after Anna’s remark, no one quite knowing how to respond.

“Oh my dear, it’s very real, and tomorrow you will see for yourself.”

Just as Rick was about to begin, Anna perked up and raised her hand. “But this is just a simulation, right?” She laughed. “We’re not really going into space.” She looked around at the others. “Don’t be so gullible. What they’re feeding is lies to keep us stupid.”

Rick stared briefly at Anna, trying to hold back his incredulous glare and then pressed a button on a small handheld device to start a video. On screen a strange type of plane appeared with two cockpits, joined by a wide wing in the middle.

The plane carried a smaller vehicle with smaller wings. “Let me introduce you to our aircraft. As you will notice, it is not the typical rocket you may suspect. The larger plane, with the two cockpits, I call the Siamese Queen. It is the carrier craft for Angel Wings, the shuttle on the middle wing. This video gives an example of what will happen tomorrow. Siamese Queen will give us lift, and then around 30,000 feet, Angel Wings will rocket into orbit.”

“What if there is an accident?” Melody asked.

“We on ground control and the pilots will do everything in their power to ensure there is no accident. We have the most talented, experienced crew money can buy, more so than any government,” Rick replied.

Brian raised his hand, and asked before given permission, “Will you be screening us before we board?” He eyed Sandeep in the front row.” I want to make sure no one here will plant a bomb on the plane.”

A slew of aghast sighs sounded in the darkness. Everyone seemed to get it, except for Sandeep who shared the same concerns. "I want to know about the bombs. Is someone planning to bomb us?" Sandeep asked innocently, which drew a few smirks and chuckles from the rest.

"That would be impossible. Tomorrow you will be outfitted in the spacesuits. We will know exactly what you will be carrying. We will allow one personal item, but it can't be an electronic device. We will even be supplying cameras for each of you," Rick said.

Rick turned back toward the video simulation on the screen. "Now as you can see Siamese Queen leveling out, Angel Wings launches at around 3,500 miles per hour. The ride will be very rocky as you enter Earth's atmosphere for about eight and half minutes. Once the shuttle enters orbit, the ship will supply oxygen and you will be able to open the front shade of your helmet and talk to one another." He looked around at his audience. No reaction. "Or you can quietly enjoy

the scenery.”

Sandeep raised his hand. “What about space trash? Will we see any trash? I hear it’s polluted up there.”

Beatrice perked up, hearing the world pollution. She poised her pen to take notes, and glanced up at Rick for a response.

“Yes. There are many out of commission satellites in space, they will not be in our orbit, thousands of miles away.”

“What is done with them?” Beatrice asked.

“They are moved to the graveyard...deeper in space,” Rick replied, and then continued on with his demonstration. “We will be orbiting the earth twice. It takes ninety minutes to travel around the planet. Reentering the atmosphere will be bumpy, but no worries. Angel Wings is built like a badminton birdie. We will always end up nose first, and then she will fly us home, as such,” he said, displaying the simulation playing out on screen. “Any questions before I’d introduce the crew?” he asked, gazing around at the dazed faces.

Anna raised her hand, and Rick reluctantly addressed her. “Yes.”

“This is all part of the documentary, right? I mean those airplanes can’t actually fly. It’s what will be riding in the simulation,” she said.

Rick glanced at Bruce and then nodded as he responded to Anna. “Yes.” He couldn’t help to raise his eyebrows as he carried on with his presentation. “Alright, here is your crew.” Three people entered the theater, a petite Asian woman, a strong, fierce looking African American man, and a rather mild-mannered forty-something man with salt and pepper-colored hair. “Jenny Tran is your ship’s captain, John Tanner,” Rick said, gesturing to the determined black man, “is your pilot and Tim Hammond is your copilot and navigator. I will allow them to tell you a little more about themselves.”

Jenny Tran, Angel Wing captain perched on the edge of a small stage. She looked at her audience, noticing their disbelief that a small Asian woman could lead them into space. She

grinned, deciding to play with them a little. “Hi, I’m Jenny Tran,” she started, “My job is to ensure safety of the crew and shuttle. I started off as a ticket agent at United Airlines, and eventually moved up the ranks to be head stewardess, serving champagne and nuts to first class passengers on Trans Pacific flights.” She laughed at the wide-eyed expressions of her audience. “No. Sorry. Just joking. I graduated with honors at MIT’s School of Engineering with a degree in Aeronautics and Astronautics, receiving a masters and subsequently my doctorate in computer science engineering at Stanford. My practical experience includes working at NASA’s space program for fifteen years, until I received an exceptional opportunity working with Rick’s team.”

Impressed, Beatrice raised her hand, with her pencil pointing toward the ceiling. “How many flights have you taken into space?” she asked. A good question, the rest of her fellow passengers were eager to hear.

“This will be my sixth with Marsden,

commanding Angel Wings. I flew as science engineer on several through NASA. The first on Angel Wings was just a test flight with just me and my crew. Upon our success, Rick and a few of his associates and donors joined us for a breathtaking adventure. On the third, we started taking paid passengers as the flight, believe it or not, became routine.

“Although, there’s nothing routine about going into space,” Rick added.

“But we’re not really going into space,” Anna interjected, but by this time most ignored her.

“Not at all,” Jenny responded, turning toward her pilot. “John, how about you give them some details about yourself.”

Attracted to the handsome black man, Melody perked up in her seat, crossing her legs and pumping out her chest. Behind her, in the back row, Brian whispered to Alexei. “See that action, what is with these chicks?”

Alexei shook his head, checking out Beatrice’s interest. She was far more interested in

her notes, than the men on the stage.

“Hello, I’m John Tanner. I will be piloting Angel Wings into orbit tomorrow. I was a pilot for the Navy, and spent a good deal of my early career on an aircraft carrier in the South Pacific. I developed a talent for landing a plane on the shortest, most harrowing runways. After I left the Navy, I began working with Marsden as a test pilot. I was here day one, as they began to build Angel Wings. I know the ship better than the inner workings of my own body,” he said.

“That’s a body I’d like to get to know,” Melody muttered.

“Sheesh,” Brian grunted.

John dismissed the comments and handed it over to his navigator, the mild-mannered Tim. “Hi I’m Tim, and I got my start as a geologist and climatologist studying environmental shifts across the globe.” Beatrice’s interest perked up, and as soon as she did, so did Alexei’s, watching her intently. “I started out as just an observer on the flights, but then became a permanent member of the

crew, recording pertinent details of the flight.”

“During our flight it will be Tim’s voice who will be guiding your tour across the globe,” Jenny said. “Occasionally, you will hear the boring conversations between myself and John as we discuss the technical details of the flight.” She gazed around at her passengers. “Do you have any questions for me or my crew?”

Brian raised his hand. The rest cringed, fearing what would come from his mouth, instead he asked an intelligent question. “I’m curious as to why the shuttle isn’t taking off like a rocket, and instead ejected from a plane.”

“Good question,” Jenny said. “Normal rocket launches, as many are used to seeing, the ship starts at zero speed. As we eject from the Siamese Queen, we already have velocity and altitude. It’s actually a more efficient way to take off into space.”

“Less government waste and spending. That’s why private business prevails,” he said.

Jenny nodded. “Well there’s positive aspects

to each.”

Melody raised her hand, arching her back to show the curves of her body. “John, what’s the difference between flying a plane from an aircraft carrier and the shuttle?”

He noticed her attempts to garner attraction, and gave her a serious smile, simply answering her question. “Believe it or not, it’s similar. Take offs and landings can be challenging and very rough, and in flight, the craft basically flies itself. The main difference is space flight is a hundred percent,” he paused to reflect on his words, “intense, dramatic and much more inspirational, which you will experience tomorrow.”

Beatrice sat forward in her seat, tempting to ask Tim a question, yet everything that came to her mind she judged as trivial. She decided to work up a list of questions to interview him later for her story.

“Have you all really been in space?” Anna asked.

“Yes,” Jenny said flatly. “Several times.”

“And the world is not flat,” Tim added, gaining a chuckle from Beatrice.

Rick joined his crew by the stage. “Tomorrow breakfast will be at 0900, we will fit you for your gear and take off is scheduled for noon. We expect touch down around three in the afternoon.” He paused, studying the unimpressed faces. “Any questions?” When he received no reaction, he simply said, “We will be serving dinner in about an hour on the patio. Please feel free to settle in, and tour the facility. If you have any questions, Bruce and I will be available.”

The lights illuminated. The group filtered outside, meandering aimlessly, not sure where to go. They all followed Bruce and Rick toward the patio. Sandeep held out a chair for Anna. Brian dared to follow Melody and took a seat alongside her at the table.

Beatrice paused before entering the patio, although she too was a passenger on the shuttle, she wanted to keep herself separated from the rest, as she saw this not as an experience, but a job, a

story, and she needed to be objective. She breathed deeply, gazing up to the sky, and inhaled cigarette smoke. She sighed annoyed. “Do you mind?”

“We’re outside. There aren’t any laws about smoking outside in America.” Alexei gazed up at the sky. ““Orbiting Earth in the spaceship, I saw how beautiful our planet is. People, let us preserve and increase this beauty, not destroy it,”” he said, and then smile down at Beatrice. “It was supposedly a quote by our cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, but that has been disputed. He was a hero of my father, who wanted to fly into space, but sadly could only dream upon it.”

“How does he feel about you going into space?” Beatrice asked.

“He doesn’t. He died when I was fifteen of lung cancer,” he replied with a puff of his cigarette. “Life and dreams changed after the dissolution. Nobody was going anywhere.”

“Communists had dreams?” she asked.

“The government couldn’t supply us toilet paper, but they could send men and women into

space. Imagine that.” He chuckled as he dropped the butt of his cigarette to the ground and put it out with the heel of his Converse sneaker. “I hear they’re serving us steak. A good old-fashioned American barbecue. Yeehaw,” he said in a bad American accent as he walked off.

Beatrice watched him walk away and then gazed down at the ground where the butt remained smoldering. She picked it up. “Pollution!”

“It’s biodegradable!” he yelled back.

“It takes ten years for a cigarette to degrade!” she shouted.

“You’re letting him get to you,” a voice whispered in her ear. “It’s his game and you’re playing right into it.”

She spun around finding Bruce before her. “He is very talented that way, spinning truths. I suspect he would make a good politician.”

“I suspect you have a little crush on our Russian friend,” he said.

Her eyes lingered on Alexei as he walked away then quickly and purposefully shifted her

attention away. “I’m a reporter. It’s information for the story I seek. It’s all purely research,” she replied forcing a convincing tone.

“Purely,” Bruce replied with a laugh. “Come along. You must help me keep them from eating each other alive.”

It had to have been the most awkward meal Beatrice had sat through, though at the same time the most interesting. Every ideology of the spectrum was in attendance – fiery progressive protester, right wing conservative, conspiracy theorist, a young man who agrees with everything so everyone will like him, and the troll who stirs the pot, and here she sat, trying to remain objective.

As soon as Beatrice went to take a bite of corn from the cob, Anna interrupted. “You shouldn’t eat that. GMOs will kill you.”

Brian bit into his cob. “Yum, GMOs are good. Man, is everything a conspiracy with you? Moon landing is a hoax? Wow, that’s a hoot. I bet

you believe the earth is flat,” he said with a hint of whimsy.

“Go ahead, poison your body and your mind. You are ripe for the illuminati to control,” Anna replied.

“The Illuminati?” Beatrice questioned, and then stopped herself to pursue a different direction. “What if all these conspiracies you believe to be true, are the actual conspiracy to induce fear and paranoia?”

“Huh?” Anna responded.

Beatrice dropped her corn cob onto her plate.

“I rest my case.”

“I may not have a fancy education like you, but it doesn’t mean I’m not smart,” Anna replied.

Beatrice bit her lip, knowing she was in danger of slipping into the deep crevice of an unwinnable debate against someone who disregarded facts and reason. Instead she picked up her corn cob and took another huge bite.

“Tomorrow,” Bruce said, calling for everyone’s attention, “We will be high above the

earth. Up there all our beliefs, our ideologies and our truths will be meaningless.” He raised his beer stein. “Let’s all make a pact to leave all our disagreements below.”

Alexei tapped his glass against Bruce’s. “Instead be thankful you can have them at all. Where I come from, disagreements can serve you up a polonium 210 cocktail. You all don’t know lucky you are. You are free to have an opinion no matter how half-baked it is.”

“Well, I’ll drink to that,” Bruce said as he downed his beer.

“So Hugh No Knuthing, Crystal, Randy, what is it that you truly believe in?” Melody asked.

Alexei glanced at Beatrice and said, “Pussy.”

Beatrice coughed on her corncob, which dribbled down her chin.

Brian laughed aloud, as Sandeep clapped his hands, screaming out, “Woohoo!”

“Wow, we got ourselves a Russian misogynist,” Melody said.

“Not true,” Alexei said, “Just an honest man. Look, you all can get off arguing about unproven, non-factual ideologies, and I’ll say what’s most important to me is a few rubles in my pocket and a warm, female body in my bed. What’s more true? Love-making, or lies?”

Bruce rose from his seat. “Now settle down people. I know you are wondering why you were chosen, and I’m afraid it isn’t the best of news, something I even hate bringing up at dinner, but I feel it is the most apropos time. I’m not sure if you recalled each other yet, but you all participated on a post I shared of Ms. Beatrice Suffolk’s Navajo Nation pipeline burst. Your exchange resulted in a mass murder/suicide.”

The group glanced around at each other, none dared to say word.

“I’m not sure if you have heard the story of Cassie Heart. She was the owner of a doggie daycare. She euthanized twelve dogs housed in the kennel, and then herself. Her last words were posted on the thread, ‘People, can we have some

kindness and compassion. If you ask me, you are all the problem with this world. Please, we must pray for all those in the wake of this tragedy,” Bruce said, reading Cassie’s words from his hand-held device.

Melody raised her hand, “All due respect, professor, we are not responsible for someone else’s actions.”

“Really,” Anna injected, “If she couldn’t handle the conversation, she should not have joined. It really is all her fault.”

“Yeah,” Brian said with a strong nod of his head. “We can’t help it if she was weak, and off her rocker. How were we to know? Besides, it’s just dogs. It’s not like she killed people.”

“Dogs are people. They have souls,” Anna said aghast.

“You know what I mean. I mean it’s freaky and sad,” Brian said defensively, “But it’s not like it’s a *real* murder.”

“Wait,” Sandeep joined in, “Was she the cute blonde? How tragic.”

Bruce glanced at Beatrice. Her expression told of her utter disbelief of the conversation. He then turned to Alexei. “And how about you, Captain Hugh No Knuthing. Do you know nothing? Are you free of guilt?” he asked.

Alexei sat upright in his seat, staring across the table at Beatrice’s stern face. “No doubt, words have great power. If they didn’t, I wouldn’t have a job.”

“But it is how we choose to use those words. You chose them to twist people inside out, to distract, to encourage adversity and promote mistruths. Yes, words have consequences, and they can be deadlier than any weapon,” Beatrice replied.

Brian laughed. “Not deadlier than my Bushmaster Carbon 15.”

“Wow, someone’s feeling a teensy bit emasculated,” Melody mumbled quietly.

“I’ve been known to be a Bushmaster in my country,” Sandeep replied with grin.

Alexei chuckled at Sandeep’s remark.

Beatrice glared up at Bruce. “See, this is hopeless.”

“We’re hopeless?” Melody remarked. “Shove it up your ass, princess.”

Bruce sighed, at the moment he was prone to agree with Beatrice, as he invited the most clueless passengers. Fortunately, it was only a three-hour flight. If anything, they would come back to earth with greater awareness. Hopefully.

He lifted his glass as if to toast, but instead he spoke plainly of the day ahead. “Tomorrow morning there will be a small breakfast, you will be fitted for flight suits, and helmets. Our shuttle flight is scheduled to take off at noon sharp, flying twice around the planet, and we will be reentering the Earth’s atmosphere around three. Until then, we have placed your belongings in your rooms. There is a room for the ladies and one for the men. Please try not to kill anyone tonight. Any questions?”

Anna raised her hand and asked, “Where is the theater we will be watching it? Is it underground? I mean, I’ve been on this ride in

Disney World, and usually there is a large theater.”

Melody burst out laughing. “Oh honey.”

Bruce remained calm, pointing to the sky.

“That is your theater.”

“Okay, but we all know this is a hoax,” Anna persisted. “I’m not stupid. You can’t fool me. We’re not *really* going into outer space.”

Beatrice rose from her seat and patted Bruce on the shoulder. “Good luck,” she said and walked away.

Bruce feigned a smile for Anna and the rest of his guests. “Enjoy the rest of your meal. I suggest you get a good night’s sleep,” he said and too left the dinner table.

Anna turned to Alexei. “Are you really from Moscow, or are you just an actor? Say something in Russian.”

Alexei leaned back in his seat and said, “Ty glupaya zhenshchina.” *You stupid woman.*

“Okay. That sounded like gibberish. You’re just making things up,” Anna said.

“Honey, I think you need to stop talking,”

Melody said.

“Ask me to say something in Hindi,” Sandeep joined in. “Aap to bahut sundar hain. It means you are so beautiful.”

Melody rolled her eyes. “I’m out.” She rose from her seat and left the table.

Anna huffed and stood, yet she didn’t know where to go. She figured Beatrice and Melody went back to the room they had to share. At the moment she missed her husband dreadfully. He never made fun of her. He wasn’t mean and rude like these other men. “You guys need to grow up and wake up!”

Sandeep shrugged and looked to Alexei and Brian. “Want did I say?”

Alexei hoisted himself from the table. “You spoke without being spoken to, a deadly sin around high-minded women.”

Brian chuckled. “You said it all right there, comrade.”

Alexei shook his head as strode away from the table. He tried to suppress the guilt that filled

his chest, telling himself it wasn't his fault, but the worst part of the evening, the woman he had grown to admire, couldn't stand him. It was his lowest moment since he learned of his father's passing, helpless and unsure.

After dinner, Beatrice escaped to a private place outside the Mojave compound. Alone, seated in the desert, she looked up at the sky. Tomorrow she would be up there. Hard to believe, and it was something she never planned, nor dreamed.

She positioned her tripod, rested her iPhone on the pedestal and pressed play. She smiled briefly before speaking, and then started. "This is Beatrice Suffolk reporting from somewhere in the Mojave Desert. For all I know, it could be Area 51. I was not afforded a cameraman for this trip, so please excuse the static iPhone. Tomorrow, I will be joining Bruce Merrick, and five others on a trip to outer space. Outer space, it sounds so science fiction, yet this story is non-fiction. It is about five souls from different walks of life, different

experiences and beliefs. What can be gained by taking us all into space?"

"Crazy as we look up at the stars tonight, tomorrow we will be looking down at Earth," he said.

Turning around, she gave him a look, this time not a hard one, but soft, even allowing herself to see him as a person. She begrudgingly turned off her camera. "Why would a smart, educated man chose a life of dissention and nihilism?"

Alexei sat next to her. "Easy. When there is nothing. No hope. No dreams. No connection."

Surprised by his honest, heart-felt answer she studied him closely, a man she could almost see herself with, if he wasn't a troll. "It's the problem with the world today. No hope. No dreams, and mostly no connection. It's why we're here. Dear, sweet Bruce thinks he can create one."

"You don't believe in him?" he asked.

"I believe he is researching a topic for his new book, and we're his lab rats." She chuckled. "Don't get me wrong. I like Bruce. But this is an

experiment in futility.” She rose from the ground and looked down at him. “Enjoy your space.”

When she walked off, Alexei grinned. He gazed up at the stars with hope. All was not lost.

Beatrice returned to her assigned quarters for the night, finding Melody and Anna on their bunks deeply engrossed in their cellular phones. She plopped on her bed wishing she were anywhere else in the world. Trying to turn her attention away from her short-term fate, she flipped through her notes of the day, contemplating a story on space track. *Well, at least this isn't a total loss. I have an idea for a new story.* When she glanced up she caught Melody staring at her. “What?”

“Nothing. Just wondering how you got wrangled into this mess,” she said.

“It’s my job. They’re paying me to be here,” Beatrice answered, her response garnering the attention of Anna.

“Who is they?” Anna asked.

“The Intellectual elite. The ones with degrees from esteemed universities and work at

credible news organizations,” Beatrice replied, only realizing after she said how superior it sounded.

“I knew it,” Anna replied. “You’re one of them.”

Beatrice sighed and collapsed against the wall. “Yes. You figured me out. I am part of the Illuminati.”

Melody sat on her bunk between Beatrice and Anna listening and watching to the conversation going down. She wasn’t quite sure what side to take. To her, Beatrice was the epitome of a self-important diva with her high-minded British accent, and Anna, well Anna wasn’t the sharpest knife in the drawer. Her thoughts turned to the incident with Cassie Heart, still not believing her comments on a social media thread could spark violence.

“Is it true about Cassie Heart?” Melody asked.

“Sadly,” Beatrice replied.

“And you really think we did that to her?”

Melody asked.

Beatrice breathed deeply, sensing the truth deep inside her. “No. I’m sure she had other issues. The ugliness on social media brought out the darkness in her. It brings out the darkness in all of us.”

She pulled back the sheets on her bed, and curled up facing the wall, all she desired was silence and a chance to decompress from the day. Fortunately, Melody and Anna felt the same way. Within a few minutes, the lights went out, and silence overcame the room.

Chapter 10

The fateful morning arrived. Breakfast was taken in nervous silence. The anticipation and anxiety of going into space crowded all their minds. There was no time for dissention nor debate. Once they finished their meal, Rick led them through the compound to the equipment room. They followed as dead men and women walking to their final fate, and it was possible. This could be the last time they existed on Earth.

Rick stopped before a metal door, smiling excitedly. “Alright folks. My team will help you dress into your flight suits. And as mentioned yesterday, you are allowed one personal item to take with you.” He looked at all their tense faces. “I can assure you, it’s all going to be fine. In several hours your lives will be altered completely.” He opened the door for them to enter, none of them proceeded through.

“I don’t want my life altered,” Anna whined.

“I love my life, my husband and children.”

“I don’t want to be altered,” Melody chimed it. “I am perfect the way I am.”

“Yes, I understand. What I mean is, you will see the world differently,” Rick replied.

“I don’t want to see the world differently. It’s right the way I see it,” Brian said.

Rick sighed, and glanced at Bruce for help. Thankfully, it was Alexei who took the first step inside the room to be fitted for his flight suit, with Sandeep following.

“Well, we have two brave souls,” Bruce said.

That was all Beatrice needed to hear. She proceeded in the room finding it sectioned off into seven small cubicles. A middle-aged petite woman with a Beatle haircut gestured for her to approach. When she entered the changing area, the woman closed a curtain. “I am Jeanne,” she said in a French accent. “I will be helping you prepare for flight.”

She handed Beatrice a neoprene onesie.

“This is a specially designed compression suit. Woven inside are small oxygen tubes and wires that will monitor your health. We will be able to tell from Earth how you are doing in space. Now, if you wouldn’t mind disrobing completely.”

Beatrice hesitated getting undressed. “What if something happens to us up there?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that. It really is very safe. Safer in space than driving I10 freeway. I’ve seen more fatal accidents on my way to work, and we haven’t lost anyone in space.” She looked over Beatrice. “Now, get undressed.”

After Beatrice removed all her clothes, Jeanne helped her into the tight neoprene suit. “Do you have your one carryon item?”

“Yes,” Beatrice said, reaching for her jeans. “Actually two.” She handed Jeanne a small pad and pencil. “Is this okay?”

Jeanne smiled. “I’m sure we can work it out. Now for the external flight suit,” she said, pulling out a blue canvas suit with Marsden patches on the wearer’s left chest.

Elsewhere in the cubicles, the rest fitted into their neoprene onesies, each tugged and pulled by their dressing assistant.

“Ouch. You pinched me!” Melody yelled.

“It’s too small,” Anna whined.

Brian twitched. “A little tight in the crotch,” he said, trying to adjust.

“Oh, that tickles,” Sandeep said with a giggle.

Only Bruce and Alexei remained quiet as they bent over to put their head through a metal hoop opening of the flight suit collar, stepping into the pants and shoving their hands through the sleeves. It was a weird get-up. Once inside, their dresser affixed the Velcro seam in back and buckled the straps.

Beatrice waited patiently as Jeanne buckled her up in back. Jeanne patted her on the shoulder and then placed her notepad and pen in a pocket of her flight suit. “I’m not sure how much writing you’ll be doing up there.”

“It’s more symbolic. I am never without my

notepad,” Beatrice said.

One more thing.” Jeanne handed her the helmet. “Let me show you how this works. Inside there is a mic system. You will be able to hear what is going on in the cockpit, and they will be able to hear you. If you need help just speak up. Once the shuttle makes orbit, oxygen will come on in the cabin and you will be able to lift the front shade, and you will be able to speak to others.”

“Thanks,” she said, carrying her helmet under her arm.

She walked to the center of the dressing room where Bruce and Alexei waited for the others. When all were finished dressing, they were escorted out through a tunnel and out onto the tarmac where both videographers and photographers awaited.

“Before you board, we’d like to take a preflight photograph,” Rick said.

With stiff postures and stern faces they stared at the camera as if awaiting a firing squad. The only two smiling for the photo was Bruce and

Sandeep. Anna appeared pale and sick, Melody ready to pick a fight, Brian stupefied and Alexei gazed up at the sky.

The photographers continued snapping photos as they strode toward the shuttle Angel Wings situated on the middle wing of Siamese Queen. As they climbed up the small stairs that led them into their cabin, their crew greeted them, encouraging them a good flight.

Inside the seating was especially tight. A narrow aisle separated the seat on either side, and one additional seat in the back, which Bruce had claimed. He wanted to watch the interactions and the actions of his passengers. Sandeep and Anna took the front seats, Brian and Melody in the middle with Beatrice and Alexei in the last row. Two members of the ground crew entered to buckle them into their seats, and once all were secured, they disembarked the aircraft, and the door, their fate was sealed.

From the window, through the shaded glass of her helmet, Beatrice watched the ground crew

give a thumbs up to the pilots. “Ladies and Gentlemen, this is Jenny from the flight deck. The ground crew and the tower have given us permission to take off. The Siamese Queen advised take off should be uneventful, but we may hit some turbulence when we near the Rocky Mountains. Sit back, take some deep breaths and enjoy the trip.”

Within minutes the wheels of the Siamese Queen rolled down the tarmac, slowly taking off, and then, just as Jenny stated, the plane rolled easily into the sky, leaving the earth behind. From the window, Beatrice could see the devastating effects of the fire still blazing south in Arizona. A smoky haze shrouded the landscape giving it a greyish hue. She looked around the cabin to see the reaction of the others, mostly Alexei. Everyone was silent, watching, and waiting. The turbulent bumps began, each one seemingly more brutal than the last. Beatrice clutched the arms of her seat, and turned, this time meeting Alexei’s shaded glass helmet.

“We are now reaching our destined

altitude...thirty thousand, thirty five thousand, forty thousand feet. We now have permission to be ejected,” Jenny said, her voice coming through the earpiece in each of their helmets. “We go for main engine start. Four. Three. Two. One. Booster ignition. Lift off.”

Angel Wing passengers fell hard against their seats, all clinging to their armrests. A flutter of panic filled Beatrice’s chest. She wanted to get off...and now. This wasn’t fun. She hated roller coasters. Hell, she hated anything fast. Tears fell down her cheeks, as Angel Wings rocketed toward orbit, continuing for what seemed like hours.

Listening intently into her headset, she could hear the gasps and even the cries of her fellow passengers. Anna sobbed uncontrollably. Melody screamed. The men silent, but their bodies rigid in their seats, terrified by the propulsion, and suddenly the craft came into a steady, gentle ride as if floating in soft, warm water.

Beatrice melted into her seat and laughed, feeling the wetness of her cheeks. Looking out the

window, her eyes widened with amazing inspiration. There she was, Mother Earth in all her glory. She was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” Jenny said coming through their headsets. “Welcome to space. We have successfully reached our orbiting altitude. We are currently 200,000 miles above the Earth. You are free to remove your face shields, as oxygen has been restored to the cabin. Relax and enjoy the next three hours.”

Brian lifted his face shield and was the first to speak. “Man, was that some kind of ride!”

Everyone agreed as a round of relieved sighs and laughs filled the cabin, and then silence resounded as everyone turned their attention to the planet below.

“Where are we?” asked Melody.

Alexei pressed his face against the window. “It looks like the Sinai Peninsula.”

“Where?” Anna asked.

“Saudi Arabia,” Beatrice answered, lifting

her gaze upward, viewing the northern hemisphere. “Alexei, looks like we’re traveling over your home.”

Alexei turned his head to see, he could look past her head, but couldn’t see anything. He returned his gaze out his window getting a glimpse of the Arabian Sea.

“The special effects are amazing,” Anna said. “It really looks like the pictures of Earth.”

“It is Earth,” Melody replied, turning to watch as the shuttle flew over the Middle East. “Amazing to think of the war-ravaged towns below when everything up here is so peaceful. Doesn’t seem fair.”

“If they could shoot us down, I’m sure they would,” Brian replied.

Now, no one responded to him, ignoring him to appreciate the beauty of the planet.

“In a few minutes we will be flying directly over India,” Tim said into their headsets. “You can see it out both windows.”

A sense of allegiance feelings filled his

heart, as Sandeep pressed his forehead to the window to see his home. He couldn't believe his luck, feeling as though he won the lottery. He waved his gloved hand as if his mother, or any of his friends, could see him. "Hello family and friends!"

By this time, the anxiety they felt at takeoff resided, and everyone relaxed in their seats to enjoy the ride.

Staring out the window the light stung Alexei's eyes. Pressure increased in his temples. He lowered his helmet to his gloved hands. His breathing grew heavy, as he closed his eyes trying to calm the strange sensation occurring within him. His nerves tingled and his body twitched. Looking around the interior of the shuttle, he tried to get someone's attention to help him, but everyone was too caught up in their gaze out the window. As his body began to convulse, he kicked at Brian's seat in front of him.

From across the aisle, Beatrice heard a soft groan escape Alexei's lips. She turned with a

smile, believing it to be from the beautiful inspiration, but it was something different, much different. He clutched his helmet, trying to take it off.

She reached her arm across the aisle to comfort him. “What’s the matter? Everything okay?”

He shook his head violently, his face strained. “I c...can’t take it,” he muttered.

“Can’t take what?” she asked, and when he started kicking Brian’s seat, she called for help. “John, Jenny, Tim, anyone, do you read? This is Beatrice in the cabin. We have an emergency.”

“Hey, man stop kicking my seat!” Brian yelled.

“Something’s wrong with him!” Beatrice screamed back, and while looking forward she watched as Sandeep convulsed on the front seat. “What’s happening? Something’s happening!”

Next it was Bruce, who lunged forward, grabbing his helmet, and stomping on the floor.

“John, something serious is happening back

here!” Beatrice called into her headset, as she watched helplessly, in the front row she noticed Sandeep’s legs weightless and flailing. He too, seemingly unconscious. A sense of urgency filled the shuttle, as the rest looked around to see what was happening, until the intense energy affected them as well.

It started in Beatrice’s heart, feeling an expansiveness to the point she couldn’t contain it, becoming larger than herself. Like an electrical circuit buzzing, it spread into her solar plexus and throat, then into her belly and temple, pulsating as if her brain would spill out of her head. She screamed silently, no one to help her, all suffering the similar plight.

Gazing out the window, she witnessed a blinding bright light. Her body seized, as the shuttle maintained smooth flying, as it entered the glowing abyss. A few tears strayed down her cheeks. This was their shared fate. They were all going to die together, she had only wished she took the time to say goodbye to her parents, tell them

how much she loved them, and express to all the gratitude she had for her life. It was too late. She was forever float through space as a corpse.

Chapter 11

She breathed in deeply. The sweet smell of dewy grass after a rainfall filled her senses. She recalled it perfectly, when her nanny hung her bed linens outside to dry. It was this scent she tried to hold onto her entire life, but as she grew, moved onward into cities only acidic pollution filled her nostrils. This continued to be her determination, and her own private joke – to bring back the Earth’s natural odor.

Rolling over the softness of the blankets warmed her and the mattress offered the perfect contour for her body. “How are you feeling?” she heard him whisper in a Russian accent.

Sensing the hardness of his body pressed against her, her lips curled into a smile. “Never felt better,” Beatrice said with a soft moan.

He rolled closer, and then lay on top of her, kissing her cheek, and then her lips, parting them with his tongue. As his kiss deepened, her body

came alive – her heart, her belly, her sex, and even her mind. She was not dead. She was still among the living and it was because of him.

Under the sheets, she ran her hand over his bare hips and lower back, feeling him as he thrust inside her. Upon orgasmic exhale, she opened her eyes, seeing the glint of metal, and when she opened her eyes wider, she was alone in bed. She bolted upright.

Widening her eyes, she found herself in an oval metal room filled with beds such as hers, and her fellow passengers resting peacefully. At the opposite end sat a round table with seven seats. They all survived and were housed in an infirmary of some kind, most likely back in the Mojave compound. *Maybe Anna was right, it was all a façade, and we never even left the earth. It all did seem real though.*

Situated beside her bed was a night table, and on the table, was her small notepad and pen. Curiously, she flipped it open finding her last entry to the night before the trip, and notes from Rick

Marsden's orientation. Nothing to give clues as to where they were now.

Beatrice climbed out of bed and inspected the others in bed – Melody, Brian, Anna, Bruce, Sandeep, and across from her was Alexei. She tiptoed across the room to his bedside and pressed her hand on his chest, feeling his heartbeat. Resting her own hand across her heart, she felt the relief.

“I would have never thought you cared,” he whispered.

The softness resounding in her heart space created an easy smile on her face. “I would have never thought so myself. You are the last person, I could see myself with,” she said and turned sharply, seeing him standing behind her. She jerked her head back, noticing him still in bed. When she turned to look over her shoulder again, he was gone. “Alexei, don't fool with me.”

“Fools fool when they are in love,” she heard him murmur.

“Stop it,” she scolded, and then asked softly, “you're in love?”

“Of course. The first time I saw the video of you, especially when I get the volume down. Your soul is beautiful.”

She removed her hand from his resting body. “Alright asshole. I get it. You’re playing me.”

On his bedside table, she noticed a small, leather bound journal. She flipped it open, the paper was of the organic, natural kind, and the pages unlined, yet he wrote neat and precisely in Russian. Under the front cover was a black and white photo of a happy young boy and an older, attractive man with a sweet, humble smile. The back of the photo gave an easy interpretation: Yuri Gagarin 1970.

Beatrice turned to the last written entry, this one in English, and what she read made her heart flutter:

*How does a man know when he's in love?
When he comes across a woman who makes
him realize
His whole life was a lie, and he has finally*

found the truth.

Looking down at him in his peaceful slumber, she didn't know what to think. Was this about me? Do I want it to be? She wondered.

She set the journal back down on the table and walked away from his bed, inspecting the room. Odd, the room had no door, no seams at the floor, or at the ceiling. It was if they were in a tin capsule. If there's no way out, how did they get in?

Melody slowly sat up, seeing Beatrice pace around the room. "Where are we?" she asked with a yawn.

"I don't know. There's no exit," Beatrice responded pressing her fingers against the wall, and feeling nothing...no sensation. "It's weird. It's like the wall is here. I can see it, but I can't feel it."

"There has to be an exit somewhere. How could we get in if there wasn't?" Melody jumped out of her bed to help Beatrice. She too pushing at the wall, and even punching it, yet feeling no pain

to her knuckles. “Help! Help! Someone help us!” she shouted, yet no one came and others didn’t wake. “We’re trapped. Captured, like lab rats.”

“No. We’re free,” Alexei whispered in Beatrice’s ear.

She turned abruptly to see him still asleep. “Did you see him?”

“Who?” Melody asked.

“Alexei.”

“I think you’re going mad, Beatrice. He’s passed out on the bed.” Melody stalked around the room. “How the hell do we get out of the place?” She stepped between Bruce’s and Anna’s bed, pounding on the wall. “Help! Get us out of here! Help!”

Bruce and Anna open their eyes, both staring up at her. Bruce sat upright and looked around. “What happened? Where are we?”

“Trapped is what we are! Where we are, I have no fucking clue!” Melody yelled.

“Calm down,” Bruce said, as he rose from the bed.

“Calm down? You got us in this mess. Is this some kind of game you’re playing? Cuz, this is not funny, man,” Melody said.

“No,” Bruce replied quietly, surveying the circular room. “This isn’t a game.” Looking around he found Alexei and Sandeep still unconscious. “Is everyone alright?”

Beatrice’s gaze landed on Alexei, laying still. “Yes,” she replied with a ring of uncertainty.

“Did we die?” Anna asked curled up on her bed.

“Purgatory, I read about it,” Brian injected with a yawn.

Silence overcame the metal room, as they gazed at each other, wondering if they were dead or alive.

“I can feel my heart, and my blood rushing through my veins. I’m alive,” Beatrice said, her voice cracking. “They,” she continued, nodding toward Alexei and Sandeep, “have pulses. We’re alive.”

“Then where the hell are we, and how the

hell do we get out of here?" Melody asked.

Bruce headed toward the front of the room to a table with seven seats. "Let's all have a seat and figure this out together." He clenched the soft, white leather of one of the chairs. "It doesn't seem we are in imminent danger."

Anna rose from her bed and stepped toward the table, taking a seat beside Bruce. "I read about this from the Illuminati videos on YouTube. The Rothchilds are said to have secret space stations where they control the weather. Maybe they captured us. Maybe we're part of their experiment." She looked at him suspiciously. "You're not..."

"No, I'm not the Illuminati nor connected to the Rothchilds in any way," Bruce said.

Melody approached the table standing opposite Bruce and Anna. "Honey, do you even hear yourself speak? You sound crazy as shit."

"Not crazy. I'm enlightened. I read. I research. I know what's going on. Besides, prove me wrong. You don't believe me, look at Bruce,

here. Paying for us all to take this space odyssey. You don't think the elite of the world have special powers over us."

"This is not my odyssey," Bruce replied.

Melody pulled out her chair. "My guess is we are in a Hollywood movie set." She studied the room. "Cameras on us, right? Beatrice, what about you? What crazy conspiracy do you believe?"

"Me," she turned back to once again see Alexei hadn't moved from his bed. "I'm going with madness. Something happened to us when we crashed. It was inexplicable what it did to my mind."

A sharp light penetrated the metal wall, and as a laser, it cut through an opening. They all turned, shading their eyes from the piercing glare. A handsome, blond-haired man with a coifed hairstyle appeared, wearing a white intarsia turtleneck sweater and black corduroys, pushing a cart filled with covered plates. "Hello, my name is Lars. How many to be dining tonight?" He surveyed the table. "Seven, correct?" he asked

with a sunny demeanor. He grinned at the gaping expressions. “I know. Hard to believe dinnertime already. You’ve all slept for so long.” He set a covered plate before Bruce and lifted the cover. “Mussels smothered in garlic sauce. I believe it is your favorite. Can’t beat the fresh garlic from Gilroy, right?”

Bruce stared at Lars and then at the food, the aroma was the heaven from home, a home he had long since visited. “Yes. What is this pla...?”

“And for you, darling, lentil soup, completely organic and vegan. Absolutely no toxic additives to interfere with your penal gland,” Lars said to Anna as he served her a dish, ignoring Bruce’s question. “And for Melody, the songstress of justice, slow smoked ribs just like your Uncle Robert used to make, and for you Brian, a manly T-bone, grilled to American perfection, and lastly, Beatrice, your childhood favorite, fish and chips with extra vinegar. A little tart for such a sweet girl. Isn’t that what your grandfather always to say?”

Beatrice raised her head and muttered, “Yes.”

“Well bon appetite. I’ll just leave the plates for the others when they awake,” Lars said with flair and kissing the tips of his fingers. By the time anyone could speak, he had backed the cart through the bright light in the metal door. It solidified, leaving them once gain in a tin capsule.

“What the hell was that?” Melody cried out. “Lars? I mean seriously.”

“That’s it. We’ve died and we’re in some kind of purgatory,” Brian said.

“I think I remember that guy from a cough drop commercial. Ricola! Good actor, cute too,” Anna replied, dipping her spoon into her soup.

The sound of slurping interrupted their bewilderment. They all turned toward the sound, finding Alexei slurping up a saucy noodle from his stroganoff, gravy dripping down his chin, yet his body still rested in the bed.

Beatrice poked him on the arm.

“What was that for?” he asked.

“You’re here, but you are there sleeping,” she said.

Alexei turned his head toward his resting body. “What? I’m hungry and tired at the same time.” He grinned. “I’m multi-tasking.”

“I know we’re all hungry, but let’s all give gratitude for this meal,” Sandeep said from the other side of the table, yet his body too lay in his bed.

“What the hell is going on?” Melody asked.

“Grace,” Sandeep replied. He closed his eyes. “Om Yantu Nadyo Varshantu Parjnyah Supipala Aoadhyao Bhavantu AnnVata ModanVata MaMikshvataam! eshaam Raja Bhuyasam Odanmudbruvate parmesthi va esah yadodanah Parma maivainam Sryam Gamyati!” *May the rivers flow and the flowers give rain. May the plants yield good harvest. May I become the king of all those having plenty of food, boiled rice, curd and milk. Food is praiseworthy. This food is verily Brahma the creator. This will lead to the greatest prosperity in the form of health*

and wealth.

“The tongue of the devil,” Brian retorted.

“It’s the tongue of the hungry,” Sandeep replied with a grin. “It’s a mantra blessing the bounty of food before us.”

Brian turned his attention to Bruce. “Now what, boss?”

Bruce lifted one of the mussels off the plate in front of him. “We eat.”

“Eat?” Melody picked at her food. “Are you sure it’s safe?”

“Yes, it could be laced with mind-altering drugs. They want us unconscious as they do their experiments,” Anna replied.

Beatrice picked up a chip and bit, experiencing the perfection of crispiness. The saltiness tantalized her tongue, and the softness of potato melted in her mouth. “Wow!” she exclaimed in a food orgasm, bringing everyone’s attention to her. She laughed. “That was a good chip.” Immediately she pressed her fork into the beer-battered cod, the silver prongs flaking the white

fish. It's freshness permeating her nostrils, stimulating her appetite further. "I never tasted food like this."

With that, Melody, Anna, and Brian joined her in luxuriating over their meals. Moans and groans erupted with every bite in an orgy of food. Minutes after doubting their imprisonment and their meals, they were raptured in them. When they cleaned their plates, they relaxed back in their seat breathing deeply, and spent.

Lars reappeared from a blazing white light and set a tray with a silver carafe and seven cups. "Here you are, a never-ending pot of hot spicy cacao."

"Hot chocolate?" Melody question. "What kind of place serves hot chocolate for an after-dinner drink?"

"Cacao," Lars corrected. "It's the elixir of the Gods. It removes toxins and helps in opening up the heart and mind. You will need it. Enjoy." He smiled and once again, backed the cart through the blinding white light.

Brian stood up and poured himself a cup. “The elixir of the Gods,” he said in tone mocking Lars.

“The meal was great, but did anyone think they’re trying to poison us so they can mess with our minds?” Anna asked.

Melody stared at Anna, and then poured herself a cup. “Bruce’s mind maybe, possible even Beatrice’s, the rest of us...no. No offense, sweetie, our minds aren’t worth much.”

“Why must you constantly make fun of me? You’re not any smarter,” Anna argued.

Bruce reclined casually, patting his full belly. “Look at it this way, Anna. We only know what we know at this minute, and what I know is we were served a delicious meal. We have comfortable beds to rest. This is what we know. We are only as smart based on the knowledge we have now. I say we take this time to rest and reflect.”

“What I don’t understand is Alexei and Sandeep,” Beatrice said, noticing their bowls and

their seats empty. It was as if a part of them rose only to indulge in dinner, and then rejoined their slumbering body. “Can you explain that, Bruce?”

Bruce arched his chair back and looked back at the beds where Alexei and Sandeep slept. “No. That is a mystery.”

“Well this is great,” Melody replied. “We just sit here like lab animals, waiting to be poked and prodded.”

“That’s right. Maybe it’s an alien abduction. We were pulled from space into a flying saucer. It’s gotta be.” Brian rose from his chair and surveyed the seamless walls. “We don’t have this technology on earth.”

“But what’s with Lars? He looks like a reject from an Alpine ski catalogue,” Melody said.

Brian stepped abruptly to the table, resting his palms the edge. He loomed down over Melody. “Don’t you see? They’re alien shape-shifters, shifting into images we feel comfortable with.”

“And you think Lars is what makes me feel comfortable,” Melody chuckled sarcastically.

“That dude shows up in my neighborhood, we know there’s something amiss. We have to figure out who they are, so we can learn to defeat them.”

“What’s your suggestion? Where are you going to go? Unless you’ve figured out how to open the wall with a laser light show, you’re stuck here,” Bruce said.

Melody collapsed in her chair and folded her arms defiantly. “I don’t like this. I don’t like being at the mercy of aliens.” She glanced up at Brian. “And you and your kind are worried about Mexicans. We got the real shit right here.”

“Got any better theories?” When Melody didn’t respond, Brian continued, “Yeah, didn’t think so.” He sipped from a cup of hot cacao. “This drink is amazing.”

Beatrice rose from her chair and walked to the beds, studying Alexei and Sandeep, and again noticing the trinkets resting on all their bedside tables – her notepad, Alexei’s journal, a gold cross on Melody’s, photo sleeve of Anna’s children, a small American flag on Brian’s, a small voice

recording device on Bruce's, and a pocket copy of the *Bhava Ghita* on Sandeep's. "What do you think this means? We're all left our personal items."

"Did anyone ask why we're no longer in spacesuits, and why we are dressed in our clothes?" Melody asked. "Who changed us? What if they inspected our private parts? What if we've been mated? Aren't there laws against that?"

Beatrice recalled her fantasy about Alexei. "I don't want to think about that."

"That would depend on where we are," Bruce responded.

"Yeah, I don't think we're on Earth," Brian said.

"But the special effects, Lars," Anna whined. "It's all a show. It'll be over soon. It's like we're on some reality show, like "Space House," or something. Right Bruce?"

"Anna, describe Alexei and Sandeep. How could they be in two places at one?" Beatrice asked.

Anna shrugged her shoulders. "Easy. Extras.

Special effects. It was a hologram. They're in on it. Don't you see? They're foreigners. They're part of the gag. Alexei's a troll. Who can trust him?"

Melody grasped for the carafe of cacao. "Give me some of this stuff. Hopefully, it's drugged and I don't have to listen to any more of her delusions." She raised her cup. "If I'm going to be mated with y'all, I want to be unconscious. Cheers!"

"Pour me a cup," Beatrice demanded. She waited impatiently for Melody to pour her cup. The heat of the cup calmed her spirit, easing her anxieties of the situation. As soon as the hot chocolate liquid hit her tongue, she moaned. It was a pure chocolate orgasm. Her mind and body melted into the taste.

Bruce was right, there was nothing for them to do. She walked back to her bed and sat. Reaching for her notepad she started writing. The words came out not in well-organized sentences, or thoughts, but in a crazy slur of emotionally gut-wrenching phrases, before she realized it, she had

written six pages of undecipherable verbal vomit. *What is happening to me? I'm usually much more focused.*

She looked up from her pad and watched the others. Anna rested on her back, studying the pictures of her children, Brian mindlessly waving his flag, and Melody twisting the gold chain of her cross in her fingers, hearing her silently chant the Lord's Prayer. Bruce paced at the front of the room by the table, citing a description on their circumstances into their recorder. There was nothing more to do, but to lay her head back down on the pillow. Feeling sleepiness overcome her, she wondered if she would ever open her eyes again.

Chapter 12

Her eyes opened to a glint, shining on the metal ceiling. She had survived the night, or what she thought was night, and awoke to a brand new day. Sitting upright in bed, Beatrice noticed nothing much had changed – everyone resting in their beds with their keepsakes by the bedside. This morning, however, Alexei and Sandeep were gone, even their beds.

She jumped out of the bed, sliding her notepad and pen in her back pocket. “What the hell is going on?” she asked herself, as she walked up to the table, where now set a perfectly placed setting of tea, and lemon-blueberry scones. She picked up a note resting by the teapot and read: Dear Beatrice, this morning greets you with sunshine and blessings.

She stared at the note, surprised by its personal nature and the corny tone, reminding her of a recent stay at a meditation retreat. *What the*

hell? Surveying the tea set, decided to pour herself a cup of tea. The sweetest waft of chamomile nearly dropped her to her knees. She took a sip and sighed, best she ever tasted. “This place must be heaven.”

“Anything new this morning?” Bruce asked.

“Alexei and Sandeep are gone,” she said.

He looked back to find them missing, as if they never existed. Many disturbing thoughts crossed his mind – they died, or they removed to be inspected or tortured. He had no words for Beatrice. “I don’t know,” he muttered.

Melody, Brian, and Anna stirred in their beds. One by one, they sat up, readjusting to their surroundings. “Damn, still here,” Melody said.

“Bruce, how long does this show last? You said it was only going to be three hours?” Anna asked.

A sharp light cut through the metal wall, and an opening appeared to another room. They looked at one another, not sure what to do. Bruce summoned up his courage and stepped through,

with Beatrice and Melody at his heels. Tentatively, Brian and Anna followed.

“Welcome. Welcome. Please come join us,” a man greeted with an undetectable accent, wearing a Nordic ski sweater. He had dark hair, greying at his temples and greasily slicked back. “How do you all do?” He pressed a hand to his heart and gave a slight bow. “My name is George. I hope you had a pleasant rest.”

“Yes. Fine,” Bruce replied. “We’re much more curious as to where we are.”

“Ah Yes. I know your kind. Questions, questions, questions. Can’t keep from questioning everything,” George replied. “You and your friends are in Godorah.”

“Godorah,” Bruce repeated.

“No. GodoRAH. There is emphasis on the RAH! We have a lot of RAH around here,” George replied with enthusiasm.

“Rah, rah, rah,” Brian muttered.

“Exactly Brian! Rah! Rah! Rah!” George exclaimed, slapping him on the back.

As Brian glanced around curious as to how the stranger knew his name, Beatrice posed the next question. “I never heard of Godo-RAH.”

George pressed his fingers together and provided a devilish simper. “I believe the translation is the state of God, or God State.”

“The God State?” Melody questioned.

“Yes, yes. It’s about the size of Lichtenstein.” George rubbed his chin. “Or Luxembourg. I get the two confused.” He wrapped his arm around Beatrice’s shoulder. “We’re a small state. We don’t need to be large. Our population flows in and out as the tide.”

“So we died then?” Brian asked.

George paused. “Died. Die. Such a funny word. So many ways to die. So many are dead and don’t even know it. Let me ask you, why do you feel you have died?”

Brian studied George, his sly grin and greasy hair. “Oh, I don’t know. The shuttle crash, this strange place. This place is purgatory, the place where we are judged to go to heaven or hell.”

George smiled broadly. "Alright. If that's what you want to believe. Hungry? Please, come with me." He guided Beatrice and the others into another round room, this one a large globe window with the view of white clouds. Seated at a table was Alexei and Sandeep fully engaged in their breakfasts.

Beatrice rushed inside and stood before Alexei. She gasped not knowing what to say, only noticed the blintz he was shoving in his mouth and the powdered sugar surrounding his lips.

"Pull up a seat, sweetheart. Blintzes are getting cold," he said with a wink.

"George, I think you owe us more of an explanation," Bruce said for them all.

"I understand your confusion. The energy here can be quite intense. Visitors often need a transition period to adapt to our conditions."

"What do mean by transition? What conditions?" Brian asked.

"More so, why were they released, and we weren't?" Melody asked, gesturing to Alexei and

Sandeep.

“It’s kind of like a fish bowl. When you buy new fish, you leave them in the bag for a while so they adjust to their new environment. Some need a bigger adjustment than others,” George explained, and stepped closer to Beatrice, very close, too close for her comfort. She backed away feeling his breath on her face. “The more ardent search for the truth, the more fervent the believer, the harder the adaptation. My suggestion is relaxation. Enjoy your breakfast.” He turned toward the others. “I will let you to become familiar with your new surroundings, and then later you may feel free to explore Godorah!” he said and walked through a blinding white light, which this time stayed open, a gesture they were allowed to leave at any time.

Melody circled the new room, looking out the window. “I feel like I’m in a snow globe. Of course. It all makes sense now! Heaven is a Switzerland ski getaway, and God is a pasty white guy who wears ugly ski sweaters. Heaven for y’all, but for me, this has got to be hell.”

Deflated, she walked to the table where the others gathered with a grand breakfast before them. She sat down and watched Sandeep and Alexei eat. “I don’t understand any of this. We need to figure this out. I think we need to do a little exploring, find the shuttle, Jenny, John and Tim, and get out of here. Who’s with me?”

“You and me, sister,” Brian said immediately.

“Did you just call me sister?” Melody cracked a grin. “Who would have thought, I’d be partnering with a right-wing troll,” she said quietly, nudging Beatrice. “What about you, inquisitive journalist? Are you with us?”

Beatrice’s eyes lingered on Alexei. “I don’t know. I’m not sure that’s the answer.”

“Fine. Sleep with the enemy. I’m getting out of this madness. I’ll take Billie Joe Rebel with me,” Melody grabbed Brian by the arm and pulled him toward the bright white light, and disappeared, leaving the others to wonder if they would ever see them again.

Chapter 13

Stepping through the white light, Melody and Brian found a stone trail, leading down the hill to a main pathway lined with carpet coral flowers and high mountains on either side. Everywhere there were globe-like pods, glimmering in the sunshine, similar to the one they just left. It wasn't just a magical realm they arrived, but seemingly a peaceful spa resort.

Brian inhaled deeply and choked, coughing to the point he could no longer stand. His knees buckling, he faltered to the ground. Melody leaned forward to help, but she too was caught by a coughing spell.

A passing couple looked up at them from the main pathway. "Just breathe!" the man called out to them.

Melody glared at the man. *Asshole. I'm dying here.* Choking on quick gasps of air didn't help. She slowed her breath, and breathed in fresh,

clean, uncontaminated air, which made her dizzy. Clutching the ground, her body slowly acclimated to the environment, until her breathing evened out. On her knees, she lifted her head to the clear blue sky and inhaled deeply. Hard to believe, she had died, when she felt so alive, her body tingling with life.

Resting her hand on Brian's shoulder, she said, "Relax. Breathe."

On his hands and knees, he inhaled and exhaled deeply. "What's happening?"

Melody stood. "Clean air. Apparently, we're not used to it. And I guess George didn't think to mention it."

"Wasn't that supposed to be part of our acclimation transition? The asswipe could've warned us."

"You'd think." Melody studied their surroundings. "Where do you think they'd hide a space shuttle?"

"Probably a secret cave in the mountains," Brian said.

“I wonder what they did with Jenny, John and Tim?” she asked, and hustled down the trail to the main path with determination.

Brian rushed to keep up. “So where are we going to find a secret cave? We don’t even know where the hell we are. We can’t just go up and ask people where they keep stolen shuttles.”

Melody plowed forward, unsure where she was going, all she knew is she had to keep moving so her mind could work. “I’m not sure. Standing still isn’t the answer.”

As they strode down the path, Melody made no eye contact with people who passed, and Brian too concerned to match her speed, didn’t even notice the others. Ahead she spied a dark opening.

“Look, seems there’s a cave up there,” Melody said, picking up speed.

“Do you think walking in dark caves is a good idea? We don’t even know where we are?” Brian asked.

“What do we have to lose?”

“Our heads. I mean, we don’t know if there

are wild animals here.”

Melody stopped. “You’re right,” she said, looking off to the cave. “Should we just ignore it? What if our shuttle is there? What if John is in there?”

“What’s your obsession with John?”

“Nothing. I’m just worried about him.”

“You just think he’s hot just because he’s black,” Brian said.

Melody widened her eyes with wild accusation. “Even dead, you’re a racist. Purgatory, remember, the decision hasn’t been made yet whether you are going to heaven or hell.”

“We’re dead and you’re looking for our shuttle to go home. Seems like one of us is in denial,” Brian replied.

“Don’t you want to know what happened? Figures you’d just accept the status quo,” she said, mustering her purpose.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked trailing behind.

“It means you conservatives never think

beyond your own limitations. You just always accept what everyone tells you.”

That was all Brian had to hear. He forged ahead of her and into the cave opening. Surprisingly, nothing seemed alien, but earthly as he felt the solid rock wall on either side. His eyes just about acclimated to the darkness when he smelled smoke. “Do you smell that?”

“Is that marijuana?” she asked.

“Seriously, do you think people of Godorah are getting high?”

“I have no idea what to think,” she replied.

As they traveled deeper into the tunnel, the smoke thickened. They felt their way through the sweet-smelling fog to a wider opening where several people sat in a circle. In the center was George, but now wearing an intarsia sweater with an eagle motif.

George raised his hands holding a smoking sage stick. “Our souls connect to you winds of the east. Our souls connect to you winds of the south. Our souls connect to you winds of the west. Our

souls connect to you winds of the north. As individual roots, our souls come together and connect like the trunk of a tree, unifying and separating into branches, giving ourselves back to the winds.” He glanced down, noticing Melody and Brian. “Welcome newbies, please have a seat. I’m about to smudge everyone,” he said to Melody and Brian.

“Isn’t that stuff illegal?” Melody asked.

“If not, it should be,” Brian muttered.

“Not at all. We smudge to cleanse our souls of negative energy so we connect at a more intimate level.” George said, while the others gazed at Melody and Brian with curiosity.

Melody caught the expressions of the group and tried not to appear offended. “We’re just looking for our ship, Angel Wings, and its crew.”

“Angel Wings? The only wings I know of are those of the soul, and no one can fly when their energy is so low. Please, have a seat,” he said, gesturing for them to have a seat.

Feeling the pressure from everyone, Melody

tugged Brian to the ground next to her. They watched while George walk around the room waving the smoke around the head of each person. Some breathed deeply, others fanned the smoke toward their face.

When it was Melody's and Brian's turn, the dried sage combusted into flames, smoldered to ashes, and fluttered to the floor. Melody and Brian sat with blackened faces.

"I take it that wasn't supposed to happen," Brian said.

"No. It's not. Your combined energy matches the fiery pits of hell," George replied.

Melody grabbed Brian by the sleeve. "Maybe we should go."

They headed out, through the smoky tunnel to the opening on the pathway. "Well that was great," Brian started, noting Melody's ash-blackened face. He tried to wipe her cheek with his thumb, but she brushed him away. "Any other bright ideas?"

Melody studied his blue eyes shining against his ash-covered faced. "You look ridiculous." She

smiled. “Downright offensive.” She grabbed his hand. “Let’s find our way back to the others.”

He laughed. “And you don’t? You should see yourself.”

She huffed. “I know. Probably ridiculous. Come on. Let’s go.”

They followed along the path coming to a cobblestone street, the storefronts on either side were quaint, yet non-descript. It was hard to tell whether they were in Europe or a small mid-western town. However, as they encountered people, they witnessed the judgment and hostility on their faces.

A Godorah woman looked over at Melody with disdain, pulled her child away, and walked off.

“What a bitch,” she muttered. “You try to be nice to people and what do you get?”

“Forget it. Let’s keep walking,” Brian said.

A tall, lanky man brushed by Brian, looking down at him. “Moron,” he said.

“What the fuck?” Brian responded. “What

kind of nasty piece of shit place is this? God State, my ass.”

“I know right,” Melody said. “There’s got to be some decent people here. Let’s keep walking.”

Without thought, Brian wrapped his arm around her waist and guided her through the crowd. A teenaged girl confronted them, and spat in Melody’s face.

“Hey! What was that for?” Brian scolded, defending Melody.

Near tears, Melody breathed deeply, squaring her shoulders. “It’s fine.”

“Fine! The bitch spit in your face!” Brian could see the tears forming in her eyes.

“Look, it’s nothing I don’t see all the time anyway. People here are, well, a little more in your face.” She grinned and said with a soft laugh, “At least I wasn’t called a moron.”

“I’m kinda used to that. Reminds me of my father. He used to call me stupid all the time, and well, didn’t you call me a moron. Still, what’s the point? We all move on.” He glanced cross the

street. “There’s a little park over there. Let’s go sit for a few minutes and figure out what to do here in Nastyville.”

Flower carpet coral sounded the round perimeter of the park. There were no park benches, just freshly mowed grass. In the center a towering statue rose from a patch of flower carpet coral. The gender of the statue was non-specific – the body tall and slender, the face soft, yet strong and the hands clasped by the heart.

Looking up at the statue, Melody started to cry, reminding her of her mother’s support when she was bullied at school. “Never let them get you down,” Her mother always used to say. “Stand strong, Mel. Show’em what you’re made of.” Melody took her mother’s words to heart. She stood strong against all adversity, even when adversity slapped her across the face. She kept going back for more, finally, here in this strange place she felt her strength slipping away. She sat down next to the statue and ran her fingers through the cool grass.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay,” Brian said, taking a seat next to her. He gazed upward at the stern face staring down at him.

“Hey stupid! Stop lighting firecrackers. You can burn down the house. Do you know how dangerous it is? Do you have any sense at all?” Brian heard his father scold him.

He lowered his head, ashamed, and as he rested his hand on the ground, the blades of grass curled around his fingers. When he tried to move, the blade cut tighter to his skin. “Ouch, let go!”

Melody looked aside at Brian’s hand. “What the...” Just as she spoke, the flower carpet coral wrapped around her sneakers, and wrists, holding her to the ground. “I can’t move. Shit. How do you get it off?”

“Ouch! It’s wrapping tighter!” Brian yelled as the carpet coral hugged his waist and thighs.

The statue came alive, unclasping its stone hands and pressing a finger to its lips. “Shush.”

“Shush? These flowers are trying to kill us!” Melody screamed squirming against the flowers.

“At least it doesn’t feel like sharp blades,” Brian cried out trying to remove his fingers from the grass. “This place is evil, demented.”

“Oh God forgive me,” Melody cried out, as the flowers curled around her legs and up her torso. “Our father, who art in heaven,” she chanted, but it didn’t work and the vine wrapped around her neck. “We’re going to die here, killed by pretty flowers.”

“Not if we’re already dead and this is some kind of test,” Brian said, and repeated, “test.” He closed his eyes and let go of his struggling, rested his hand on the grass, and allowed his body to relax. As soon as he did so, the carpet coral loosened, gently tickling his body. “Let go, Mel.”

“What? No,” she cried. “I can’t.”

The statue loomed toward Melody and in deep, booming voice yelled. “Let go!”

Terrified, she released her grip, weeping. The vines relaxed, resting lightly on her body. “I’m so tired of fighting, so tired of being angry. I just want to be at peace, happy.” She stretched out her

legs and laid down. The flower carpet coral gently curled around her limbs, torso and even created a crown at her head. “I don’t care if I die here anymore. I’m so tired.”

Brian glanced down at her, her mocha-colored skin shining against the pink colored flowers. Her face was beautiful, full, yet pouty lips, soft, rounded cheeks. His heart warmed, seeing her at peace. He curled up next to her, wrapping his body around her waist. “You’re not alone,” he whispered. “I feel you.”

She shifted her head to look at him, and laughed. “That’s probably the smartest thing I have ever heard.”

“It’s the first time someone ever called me smart,” he said with a chuckle.

Placing her hand on his, she said, “Let’s just rest here for eternity and forget about the whole universe.”

Chapter 15

Sandeep stepped outside the wall of white light to the land of Godorah. He took one deep breath and passed out unconscious on the dirt pathway. Bruce knelt to his aid, shaking his shoulder. “Sandeep. Sandeep. Are you okay? Wake up?”

Anna gazed down perplexed. “What happened?” She spun in circles, the beauty of Godorah a blur. She breathed in and grimaced. “What’s that smell?”

“Smell?” Bruce questioned rising to his feet. He sniffed, not being able to sense an odor.

“It’s not normal,” Anna replied with panic growing in her voice. “We’re being poisoned. They’re messing with our minds.” Panicking she began to hyperventilate. She too passed out cold, falling to the ground.

Staring at them both, worry frantically raced through Bruce’s mind. He was responsible for their

well-being, yet he knew no one to call. Well, George, but he had no clue where to find George. Seeing Godorah residents stroll on the path below he waved his arms. “Help! Help! My friends need help!”

The Godorah residents shrugged their shoulders and kept walking.

“Wait! Who can I call for help!” he yelled, but they didn’t respond.

He paused, staring down at their lifeless bodies. Daring to face Anna’s concern of them being poisoned, he breathed deeply. Nothing offensive struck him, in fact the oxygen sparked his brain cells, causing greater alertness. He laughed. “Oh for Godsake, or for Godorah’s sake.”

Leaning over, he tapped Sandeep and Anna on the cheek. “Wake up! Wake up!”

Sandeep came to consciousness first. Realizing he was flat down on the ground, he clenched the dirt. “What happened?”

“The air is pure.” Bruce lent him a hand to help him up. “My guess is you’re used to the

Bangalore air. Fresh air knocked you on your backside.”

Sandeep brushed dirt from his bum. “Cool.” He took another deep breath. “Smells like one of those pine air sanitizers my mother buys.”

“Yet here it is real.” Bruce knelt beside Anna, gently tapping her face.

Her eyes widened. “What are you doing? Why are you touching me?” She swiped his hands away. “I’m married.”

“You passed out,” Bruce said, giving her a lift up.

“Why? How? Poison?” she asked.

“Self-induced panic attack,” he said. “Try to relax.”

She stood up, her body erect. “I’m perfectly okay.”

“Great, then let’s go explore Godorah,” Bruce said, leading Anna and Sandeep down a winding pathway, despite having no idea where they were, or what to look for. He took them on a different path than Melody and Brian, deeper into

the woods toward the mountain. Birds chirped, fluttering between the branches, singing the sweetest song. The sunshine showered through the branches, illuminating their steps forward as if it was their destiny.

“What are we looking for?” asked Sandeep.

“The exit,” Anna replied.

Sandeep dug his hands in his pockets and gazed around the high mountain ridge and the globe abodes glistening in the sun. “Where?”

As they meandered forward, the trees grew denser and the path darkened. “My grandfather used to read us fairytales similar to this. If we see a girl in a red cape, or a big bad wolf, I’m out of here,” Anna said.

“I don’t know, I’d be happy to meet a big bad wolf,” Bruce joked.

“Is that some sort of gay humor?” Anna asked.

“Sort of, I guess,” he replied.

Soon, they came to a blue metal door embedded in the rock. For a moment, they stood

before the door marked: Exit. Bruce scratched his chin. This couldn't be so easy. There had to be a catch.

“See. I bet the parking lot is on the other side,” Anna said.

“Or monsters. Exit out of heaven, entrance to hell,” Sandeep replied.

“How about we knock and see if anyone answers,” Bruce said, rapping on the door.

The three stood before the exit door, waiting for someone to answer, and when no one did, Anna opened the door and shouted inside. “Hello! Is anyone home?” No answer, only resounding silence came from the darkness. “Hello!” she called, stepping inside.

“I don't think that's smart,” Sandeep said.

“What? Do you think I'm stupid?” she questioned.

“Anna, come back,” Bruce pleaded, and when she didn't listen he followed her inside.

“Hello!” she shouted, her voice echoed against metal walls.

“Shush,” a voice called out from the darkness. A flashlight shined on his face. “We are just about to start taping.”

“Lars?” Bruce said, recognizing his face.

Lars smiled and swung his arms open to give Bruce a hug. “Mr. Bruce, Ms. Anna and Mr. Sandeep, it’s you. Yes, you’re just in time.”

“What’s going on here?” Bruce asked.

“*This is Infinity!* Godorah’s favorite game show!” Lars exclaimed gleefully, and you three are our next competitors.”

“I think there is some mistake,” Anna said, “We’re just looking for the exit.”

“Brilliant! Great answer. I know you’ll be great. Follow me,” Lars said, escorting them down an aisle with the audience of darkened, blank faces seated on either side, up the steps to a stage with three sets of podiums, and in the front was a big black screen. “Now just stand here behind these three podiums,” he said, gesturing to the stands on the left.

“Really, we are not prepared to play a game.

We just arrived,” Bruce said.

“You arrived! Good one. I know you’re going to do great.”

Bruce stood at his podium and looked across the stage at a man and two women, all wearing motif sweaters, and glowing, inspired expressions.

“What are we doing?” Anna asked, whispering aside to Bruce.

“Apparently, they want us to play a game,” he replied.

Sandeep stood at the last podium next to Bruce and Anna eager to play. “I love games!” He waved to the audience. “This should be fun.”

A laser cut a bright light through the back of the stage. George emerged wearing a star motif sweater, and a microphone in his hand. “Hello, and welcome to *This is Infinity!*” he yelled into the mic, as the enthusiastic audience chanted in unison. “Let me introduce our Godorah family, the Schmitt’s: Edgar, Delores, and Mitsi.” The crowd applauded. “And on our left, new to Godorah our friends: Bruce, Anna, and Sandeep!” Another

round of cheers from the audience. He walked toward Bruce's podium. "Let's meet our guests." He glanced at an index card. "Bruce, it says here, you are a self-help author and speaker. So tell the audience, how you help the self."

"No," Bruce said, "I'm a self-help expert. I teach others to help themselves."

"About the self?" George asked.

"Maybe. Sometimes. I help others get in touch with themselves," Bruce muttered.

"How do you do that?"

Bruce tapped his fingers on the podium. "I don't really know."

George positioned the microphone before Bruce's lips. "And you make a good living doing what you don't know what you're doing?"

"Ah yes," Bruce uttered.

"Fantastic!" George exclaimed, striding toward Anna's podium. "You are a homemaker, correct?" When she nodded he continued, "How exactly do you make homes? Are you a carpenter like Jesus?"

She laughed. “No. I’m a mother. I take care of the home, cook and clean.”

“So you’re not actually making anything then?” he asked.

Anna glared at him. “I am raising two boys!”

“Excellent,” George replied, stepping to Sandeep. “You work for a computer help desk. How do you help desks?”

Sandeep chuckled. “I don’t actually help desks.”

“Pity,” George said, “I know plenty of desks that can use help.” The audience laughed.

Sandeep exchanged glances with Bruce and Anna, as if George was completely whacked.

George walked away from their platforms to the large screen. He swung his arm dramatically to the screen, which lit up as he spoke, “And now, it’s time to look at our categories - Collected Consciousness, I Am, Beyond Belief, Space Odyssey, and the last category, Juice.” He turned toward Bruce. “We’ll start with our new visitors. You can choose the first category.”

Bruce felt his pride surge. He had been studying philosophy his entire life, this is a game he felt sure he could succeed at. "I'll take Collected Consciousness for two hundred."

George read aloud the question from the card, "A phenomenon that occurs when particles interact in ways where each particle cannot be described independently, but must be described as a whole."

With his hand on the buzzer, Bruce paused, giving time for his competitor to buzz in.

Edgar from the opposite podium rang his buzzer. "What is the quantum theory of entanglement?"

"That is correct!" George exclaimed. "You get to pick the next category."

"I'll take Beyond Belief for two hundred!" Edgar replied.

"Okay, and the next question is, what is the universal language?" George asked.

Anna rang in quickly. "What is French?"

"Ooh, I'm sorry that is incorrect," George

responded.

“No, it’s right. French is the universal language,” Anna asserted. “I answered correctly.”

“Very sorry, you are wrong,” George said.

Anna placed her hands on her hips. “No, I’m right.”

Delores, from the other team buzzed in. “I believe the correct answer is frequency.”

“That is correct! The universal language is frequency! Well done, Delores,” George said, “The next question is yours.”

“I think this game is rigged!” Anna declared.

“Shush,” Bruce said softly.

“But I’m right, Bruce. This game is fixed for the Godorah team to win,” Anna protested.

George ignored Anna’s griping. “Delores, please pick the next question.”

“I Am for two hundred, George,” Delores responded.

“Alright and here’s the question, an apprehension of lying tacitly in the back of our minds, which we cannot easily admit, even to

ourselves. The Germans call this?” George asked.

Mitsi jumped up and down and squealed in a little girl voice, “Hintergedanke!” The audience erupted in a rousing cheer.

“Hintergedanke! That is correct!” George exclaimed, as Bruce and Anna rolled their eyes.

“Game is fixed. They made that up. There is no such word,” Anna muttered.

“Mitsi, you get to choose the next category,” George said.

Mitsi bounced on her toes and she nervously looked over the categories. “George, I’ll take Juice for two hundred.”

I like juice, Sandeep thought, as he placed his hand just above the buzzer.

George read the question, “This juice refers to the divine seer of universal truth.”

Sandeep pounded the buzzer. “Soma juice!” he yelled out and then breathlessly repeated, “The answer is soma juice.”

“That is correct! Two hundred points for our new visitors!” George yelled.

Bruce and Anna watched as Sandeep raised his hands in victory with the bright lights shining on him, and when the drama was over, and the game ended, the three were shown the back door, where Anna hoped was the exit to the parking lot, but just led to yet another path.

“Shit,” she sighed disappointed. “That was the most bogus game show I have ever seen. Those questions didn’t even make any sense.” She looked around finding yet another path. “Oh for God’s sake, where the hell is the end of this road?”

Bruce stumbled along, usually assured of himself and his thoughts, only to find himself outwitted. “Maybe we should just find the others,” he said.

“I want to leave,” Anna said.

“I’m thirsty for juice,” Sandeep said.

“Oh, be quiet. Just because you got one question right,” Anna replied.

Their path widened to a stone walkway. They joined others walking in the same direction, toward a large outdoor amphitheater. “What’s

going on?” Bruce asked one of the people passing by.

“School’s in,” an aged man said.

“School?” Bruce asked.

“Yes, Socrates is giving a lecture up the road,” the man replied.

A smile crept across Bruce’s face. “Come on,” he said to Anna and Sandeep. “Let’s do some learnin’. After the game show, I think we need it.”

“But I’m already learned,” Anna said. “I know things.”

“Of course you do,” Bruce said encouragingly, “but think of this as a way of learning more things.”

He led them to a seat, and felt disappointed when he saw George, wearing another intarsia sweater with an ancient Greek motif, pacing around the center of the amphitheater. *This is not Socrates. This is bullshit.* He sat forward in his seat, with his palm on his chin like the famous statue of the Thinker.

“How was George at the game show, and

now he shows up here?” Sandeep asked.

Anna sighed. “Body doubles. I mean clearly it’s not the same man. This man is thinner. I can tell and his hair is greyer.”

Her answer wasn’t good enough for Sandeep. “Bruce?”

Bruce shook his head. “I don’t know, Sandeep,” he said, watching George pacing the center of the theater.

“When we’re speaking of knowing, what is it that we really know?” George asked. “It is this knowing, which gives us all such pride, and enhances our egos, but where is it derived? Knowing is nothing of the intellectual sense, but of the emotional sense. We feel, we sense, and therefore we think we know.”

“I sense George is full of shit,” Anna mumbled.

Bruce sunk in his seat, feeling the air pressure released from the bubble of his ego.

“What we think we know,” George said, pausing for a moment to reflect, “Is based on a

lifetime of reflections and deflections, and the soul's prior consciousness, which brings us to the conversation, what does the soul really know? It knows the preconception of lives past, but does it still contain any truth?"

George stood before Sandeep, gazed down at his earnest dark eyes. "Tell me, lad, what do you know? What is your truth?"

Sandeep looked to Bruce for help to answer the question, but his blank expression gave him nothing. He then looked around at the myriad of strange faces, whom appear to be daring him to answer. Turning back to George, Sandeep released an uneasy smile. "I know I am here listening to you," he replied, believing he may have out-smarted the question.

"Are you?" George asked, "Or are you dreaming of what it would be like to make love to this beautiful blonde seated next to you?"

Sandeep blushed, lowering his head.

Anna shifted away from Sandeep. "Ick. Like if. I'm married." She fell back in her seat, folding

her arms defiantly.

“Here’s the point,” George continued, “To know is a falsehood. We don’t know anything. We can’t even be sure about our own existence, so how can we make assertions about anything else.”

Anna dared to raise her hand. “But there are facts, and proof, videos on YouTube.”

“Are there?” George asked. “Facts are deduced by imperfect people with all kinds of biases. Facts are manufactured as a material item – a piece of clothing, shoes or a pipe. They come from the imaginations of humanity.” He looked down at Bruce. “And what about you?”

He lifted his eyes and glimpsed at George. “Mind blown.”

George slapped Bruce on the shoulder. “Great! Now is the time to put together those pieces.”

“Right,” Bruce said quietly, wishing the same as Anna, they would find the exit soon.

Chapter 16

Beatrice waited outside. In one deep breath she was reminded of home – fresh grass, the dirt after a rainfall and clean sheets dried by the breeze. She closed her mind, bringing her to thoughts of Alexei. She opened them immediately, not to let her thoughts dwell. “Ready?” she requested in an urgent tone as he exited their abode.

He smiled down at her. His attention lost in her eyes, too much so to care for the fresh air. “Yes.”

“Great. Let’s go,” she commanded, taking the lead, and him allowing her to, mostly so he could watch her walk.

They walked beside each other, close enough to touch, but neither did. They didn’t need to. They felt each other in a way they hadn’t experienced before with anyone else. They sensed one another with pure present energy. Few lovers reach the state of sensation without a touch. She wondered if

he knew, and if he could read her thoughts. Did he know he was invading her dreams and fantasies? She wondered.

Beatrice glance up at him, his slender chin, the curve of his lips and the slant of his nose, her gaze turned upward at the high mountains lifting into the clouds, beyond the clouds as they shifted were twinkling stars. “It is a beautiful place, wherever we are.” She breathed in the clean air and sighed. “And so great they don’t do to their world, like we’re doing to ours.”

“Yes,” he responded. Words didn’t come to him easily today. He took her hand as they walked down narrow, steep steps. Below them was a circle of meditators with the leader, George, seated in the middle, wearing a grey intarsia sweater. Surrounding him was a huge group of people – all ages and all races, yet all bore the same vacant, meditative expressions.

“Great, a meditation. Exactly what I need,” Beatrice said, pulling Alexei down to a seat in the back row. She folded her legs into half lotus and

closed her eyes.

Alexei imitated her movements, yet couldn't get his legs into a lotus position, straining to get into a comfortable seated position. He had never meditated before, so awkwardly he went along, and pretended to do what everyone else was doing.

George rose to his feet. "Excuse me. You in the back row."

Everyone opened their eyes and turned their attention on Beatrice and Alexei. "You're going to have to leave."

"I'm sorry," Alexei said, "I've never done this before."

"Not you. Her," George said pointing to Beatrice.

"Me?" she questioned.

"Yes, you. You're lowering the vibration of the entire group. We're going to need to ask you to leave," George replied, and then he changed his tone to a softer, fatherly one. "I suggest the watchtower."

Beatrice gasped. "The watchtower?"

He pointed upward into the sky. Both Beatrice and Alexei strained their necks to see the tip of a stone tower extending above the clouds. “You need to raise your vibration. I suggest you start there.”

“Fine,” Beatrice said with a huff, and stepped up the stairs, followed by Alexei who couldn’t help wipe the smile from his face. “I can’t believe I got kicked out of a meditation,” she muttered.

“It’s no big deal. It’s just your vibration,” Alexei said, holding back a laugh.

“There is nothing wrong with my vibration. I vibrate just fine.”

“Hmm, maybe a vibrator will help,” Alexei joked.

Beatrice halted and spun around to face him. “You know, these cliffs are quite steep. It wouldn’t be at all shocking if you were to slip.”

“Come now. Let’s go to the watchtower.” He gazed up at the Godorah sky. “Kind of a large phallic, don’t you think? I can’t imagine why

they'd send you there.”

“I think you need to shut it,” she said.

They wound along a wooded path, birds chirping and the sun shining through waving branches. Finally, they came to the stone archway entrance of the tower. Alexei glanced at the dark stairwell. “What do you think the chances are they have an elevator?”

“I’m going to say zilch,” Beatrice responded, taking the first step.

“You’re really going to go up there?” he asked.

“Why not?”

“You do what everyone tells you to do? Who is this George anyway? You’re going to take his criticism so personally. I think your vibration is just fine.”

Beatrice hesitated, gazing into his earnest eyes. “You’re right. Still, aren’t you curious what’s up there?”

“A look out to all of Godorah,” he responded.

“Exactly. Pretty spectacular site I would guess,” she said, starting the long climb upward. “Besides, what else are we going to do?”

“I can think of a hundred other things,” he muttered, trailing behind.

Scaling the tower steps, their legs grew heavy with each step, and their lungs felt as though they were breathing rocks. As they rounded the stairwell, they found George again behind a refreshment stand, wearing another motif ski sweater. “Why hello again,” he said, “Can I interest you in some juice? We have fantastic fig or potent pomegranate.”

Alexei leaned on the counter. “How much further to the top?”

“Have some fig juice,” George replied, handing him a cup. “Almost there.” He grinned at Beatrice. “I can see your vibration is rising, my dear. Here’s some pomegranate juice. It will get you just to the edge where you need to be.”

Beatrice drank and felt the tartness sting her body, bringing back alertness. “Thank you. You say

we're almost there."

"Oh yes, and it will be well worth the trek. Onward soldiers," George said.

Alexei downed his fig juice and shook off the abrupt sweetness. "Ugh," he grunted and trailed after Beatrice who was determined to make it to the top.

Finally they arrived, and when they stepped inside, they found a circular room with no windows, just a stone interior. Several others stared at the walls.

"What do we do?" Alexei whispered.

"I think we sit and stare at a wall," Beatrice responded quietly.

"I haven't had to do this since I was a young boy in school," he said.

"I never had to do this," Beatrice replied, but she complied and took a seat facing the wall. It took a while for her legs to relax from the long journey up the stairs. *This is nutty*, and turned to see what everyone else was doing, and then Alexei faced the wall like a misbehaved child.

Alexei closed his eyes for a second, and opened them seeing the gray wall. As he stared at the wall, it became fluid like grey clouds floating across the sky. When the cloudy image parted, he saw himself reach upward, and pull himself up onto the roof alongside his father. His father poured them both a shot of vodka. “Don’t tell your mother about this, and whatever you do, don’t fall off. Your mother will kill me,” he said as he lit a cigarette.

“No problem, pop,” Alexei said and toasted his father’s glass. “Zazdaróvye. Cheers.” He admired his father, a strong, sturdy man, with distant eyes always dreaming of far-fetched possibilities.

“Do me one favor, son,” his father said, “Study hard, learn everything from anyone who is willing to teach you, and even from those who don’t. One day, you will see beyond this land, put your feet in the warm waters of the Caribbean, hike tall mountains,” he winked, “Bed beautiful women. Take it all in, drink it all in.”

Young Alexei took a sip of his vodka. “And when I do, you will come with me. We can travel together, father and son. I’ll take you wherever I go.”

His father pat him on the back. “Wherever you go, I will always be there. You are my boy.”

Alexei studied the skyline of Moscow, the Kremlin in the near distance, the cold, Soviet style buildings, including the one where he and his family resided. Despite the dissolution, there still seemed to be a wall around the city, one that seemed difficult to penetrate. He knew his hard-working father never made it out, but he did dream big enough for his son. “I won’t let you down, pop,” he said, and lifted his chin to feel the cool, overcast air.

The grey clouds hardened back to stone. Alexei bit his lip to keep the emotions from erupting. It was only a year later when his father was diagnosed with lung cancer, and never to see his son graduate high school and onto Moscow Academy of Science, where he poured his heart

into studying language and literature, the place he learned how to dream through the words and imaginations of great writers. His goal, wherever he went, he wanted to speak the language of the people, never intending to be employed to twist people's words into hate.

Alongside him Beatrice sat, still trying to find her peace within the place where she could see herself. Why was it so hard? She wondered. She closed her eyes.

"Sweetheart, I just don't think you tried hard enough," she heard her mother say.

"Mom, it's a B+. Half the class failed," teenage Beatrice protested.

Her mother gently placed her hands on her daughter's shoulders. "Honey, it's not the grade. It's you. You simply can't settle and make rationalizations. How do you think you'll ever succeed?" She gave her daughter an encouraging smile. "I see how hard you are trying, and the difference you want to make in this world, and in doing so, you can never give up, never quit. You

must keep pushing yourself to new heights.”

Beatrice nodded tearfully. “I know, mom, but I really did try.”

“I know.” Her mother wiped her tears and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “Don’t cry, just buck up and do better next time. That’s all you have is the next time.”

Beatrice opened her eyes, staring at a blank wall, and feeling the tears streaming down the sides of her face. Glancing sideways, she saw Alexei with his forehead pressed against the wall. She reached for his hand. “Let’s get out of here.”

He nodded, a bit reluctantly, wanting to stay in the place of remembrance, but too, guilt tugged at his heart. Did he turn out to be the man who would make his father proud? He wasn’t so sure.

The trip downward seemed much easier and even quicker. There was a lightness of their feet, which sped their journey. Perhaps when they raised their vibrations, they lifted off some dead weight, still it was a lot to carry.

“Greetings,” George said, now wearing a

red reindeer motif sweater. “How did you enjoy your visit to our watch tower?”

“Illuminating,” Alexei replied.

“Interesting choice of word,” George said and handed them both a brochure. “May I suggest to you both the Wailing Wall? It seems you both may need it.”

Beatrice fumbled with the paper. “You have a brochure for the God State?”

“Yes,” he said with an eager grin. “Our motto is ‘Tune Out, to Tune In.’ Catchy, isn’t it? Wailing Wall, just over beyond those rocks,” he said.

Alexei placed his hand on Beatrice’s back. “Come on. Let’s check out this Wailing Wall. I wonder if it is at all like the one in Jerusalem.”

As they rounded the rocks, a large stone wall appeared in the mountain. It didn’t appear to be carved out by man, but a naturally, perfectly slick stone surface a hundred feet in both directions. Before the wall, many people kneeled, crying, sobbing and some even shrieking.

“What the...?” Alexei started, but the closer he stepped, he felt his emotions bubble upward. He choked up a cry and a few tears rolled down his eyes. “I just can’t.”

Beatrice knew what she had to do. She plowed ahead to the front row, kneeling down and resting her head on the ground. She balled, and heaved letting out every negative emotion she ever had. She couldn’t control herself, it all just came up, like a sickness purging itself from deep inside. Once, she felt it all leaving, she laughed uncontrollably. She sat back on her heels, looking upward. Her tear-soaked face, saw a bright sun radiating down on her.

When she rose to her feet, behind her she saw Alexei, his face still buried in the grass before the wall. His body shook, and she knew he too was releasing all his pains and sorrows. She knelt before him, placing her hand on his shoulder. Then just as she, he started to laugh.

He lifted his teary face and stared into her eyes. They couldn’t help themselves. Both leaned

in for a kiss. She hugged tightly around his shoulders, as he clenched her hips.

“Uh huh, excuse me,” George said. “Once you find release, it is customary to move along for the next wailers.”

“Right,” Beatrice said, bouncing to her feet.

“George, how often to people come to wail?” Alexei asked.

“Good question. You see, the burden your souls carry never really leaves; you just learn to lighten the load. Some come here daily, others once a week. It really depends on what you need,” George said. “You two look as though you had quite the day. I suggest you head back to your quarters. Dinner will be waiting.”

Chapter 17

Everyone returned outside their abode around the same time, Melody and Brian covered in sage soot and dirt, Bruce, Anna and Sandeep mentally exhausted, and Beatrice and Alexei with tear-stained cheeks. They looked at each other and laughed aloud, and suddenly the drama of their day eased.

The door to their globe abode opened with a laser beam. Inside Lars awaited with dinner on the table. “Welcome back friends. I hope you enjoyed your journey through Godorah. George would have liked to be here himself, but much to do in the God State. Please enjoy dinner.”

Brian stepped up to the table. “Starving,” he said, finding a covered plate with his name on it. He lifted the cover and found a tiny steak with two small carrots. “What is this? This isn’t dinner? This is anorexic model food.”

“I suggest to eat slowly. Savor,” Lars said.

Melody checked out her meal. “Hungarian goulash? Do I look Hungarian?”

Bruce sat at the table before his meal. “I think there is a point to this meal. Try something new, something different. He lifted the lid and found a pork snout. He lowered the lid. “Wasn’t that hungry anyway.”

“Ah, come on, Brucey Baby. This is your show, right?” Beatrice tempted. Curiously she removed the cover of her dinner, finding beef stroganoff. Flutters filled her stomach and her heart beat. She glanced at Alexei. “I think there is a mistake.”

“Nope,” Alexei replied. “I think Russian saucy meat is what you really want.” Everyone at the table laughed. He uncovered his meal finding flaky cod filet and salted chips.

Brian roared of laughter. “Sour, salty, British fishiness. That’s about right.”

“Excuse me! Excuse me!” Lars shouted to get everyone’s attention. “I want to let you know, there are new sleeping arrangements tonight. Lads to the

right, Ladies to the left. Enjoy, your evening.”

“Well that’s a bummer,” Alexei said.

“That’s about right,” Melody said, taking her bowl of goulash into the ladies’ room. “I need some decompression time.”

Beatrice followed her with her plate of stroganoff. Anna finally lifted the lid of her plate to see what cuisine fate awaited her. It was a brownish blob. “I don’t even know what that is.”

“Aloo Gobi. Potatoes and cauliflower. Very delicious,” Sandeep replied. “You can have some of my...my, I don’t know what this is.”

“It’s an enchilada,” she said in a mocking tone.

“Well, whatever it is, it looks very good,” he said and took a huge bite, too big for his mouth.

“I’m going into the other room and taking my A-lob Goo-bi-doo, whatever, with me,” she said.

“Is it something I said?” Sandeep asked unsure to Brian and Alexei.

Brian fingered his two tiny carrots. “Women, they’re coo-coo-for-coco puffs.”

“I just think they’re looking for someone with bigger meat,” Alexei said, nodding toward Brian’s plate.

“My meat is big enough,” Brian said.

“Big enough isn’t really a bragging point.” Alexei chuckled and carried his plate in the lads’ room.

“Wait for me!” Sandeep called out, following Alexei.

Brian glanced at Bruce for a reaction, and when he only received a smirk, he downed his steak in one bite and headed off to their bedroom. Bruce passed on his pig snout, joining the others in the room.

In the ladies’ room, where Beatrice, Melody and Anna settled onto their bed eating their specially prepared meals, careful not to show how much they were enjoying them, Lars appeared through the bright light with his hand over his eyes. “Ladies, decent I hope.”

Melody glanced at her companions, Beatrice and Anna. “Nothing indecent about this company.”

“Good.” Lars uncovered his eyes. “We have a serving of golden milk to help you relax and sleep.”

“Wonderful,” Beatrice said, “they served this at the meditation retreat I attended in Nepal a few years ago.”

“Tune out, to tune in,” Lars replied, handing her a cup, and giving one to Anna. “Completely vegan and organic. Contains no ounce of animal soul.” He smiled as he gave a cup to Melody, admiring the flowers in her hair and dirt on her face. “Grounded, I see. Good for you. The drink contains turmeric which has amazing detoxing properties.” He gestured to a white light opening in the wall. “Through there is a bathing room with a shower. You can wash off the day. Don’t let the bed bugs bite. Oh! What am I saying, we have no bed bugs,” he said and backed out into the main dining room. The tin wall secured them inside, just as the night before.

“What an interesting place,” Anna said and sipped her drink. “Delicious.”

Melody stretched out her legs in bed. “I’m going to have to give Bruce some credit. He really played us all well. I’m actually beginning to like rebel boy.”

“Do you really think this is all Bruce’s game?” Beatrice asked.

“Oh, come on Miss I’ve-been-to-meditation-retreats-in-Nepal, you’re a part of it, aren’t you?” Melody sat up in bed.

Beatrice laughed. “This morning you thought we were in hell. This morning you thought we died.” She yawned. “Whatever. I’m going to take a shower.”

She walked through the bright light, which dimmed back to a solid metal wall. Inside was a toilet and sink. “Shit,” she muttered, trapped in the bathroom. She figured at least she could have a nice hot shower. She undressed and stepped inside the metal stall. She didn’t need to fumble with a faucet. The water fell from the ceiling, showering her skin at just the right temperature. Closing her eyes, she let out a soft moan and when she opened

her eyes, she was stark naked, staring out at the universe. The metal walls had transformed to glass.

“Oh my God! Lars! Shit,” she said, covering her nudity. Looking down at her feet, she saw nothing but a starry, dark void. “Oh shit!” Quickly, she showered, and punched at the glass for someone to open the door, any door. “Lars! Melody! Anna!” No one heard her shouts in the glass bubble. “Ah shit,” she sighed, running her finger softly on the wall.

A bright light shined through and opened into the smaller room with toilet and sink. She laughed, stepping forward, pulling on a provided grey frock. She took a deep breath and lightly touched the wall, and once again, voila, the wall opened in a bright light.

Melody turned sharply. “How’d you do that?”

Beatrice shrugged. “I touched it. Just lightly.” She joined them before the glass window of the bedroom, which looked out at the starry

universe. “Beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Sure,” Melody replied. “You can get us out of here.”

“Maybe, but why? Where will we go?” Beatrice asked.

“We find the shuttle, the pilots, anyone who can help us get out of here.” Melody nodded toward Anna. “She wants to get home to her babies. We find that George dude, and convince him to help us get home.”

“I don’t know. I think we should just stay...” Beatrice started.

“Melody is right. You are in on it,” Anna said in an accusatory tone.

“No. I just think...” Beatrice tried to speak again.

“Think you’re being too practical,” Melody finished for her.

Beatrice shrugged her shoulders. “Alright. Should we wake the men?”

“Look, I know you’re digging on the Russian, but let’s rely on girl power,” Melody said.

Beatrice nodded. She dressed back into her clothes, and stepped toward the wall where Lars exited. She pressed her fingers lightly against it, and once again the white light pierced through, opening a doorway for them into the larger dining room. She surveyed the round metal walls, attempting to remember where she entered a few hours ago. She took her best guess and opened a white light, which led to a steep stairway.

Melody was the first to step out. “We’re free.”

“What if we get in trouble?” Anna asked.

Beatrice gazed down at the dark, canyon below. “What if we die?”

“We’re most likely already dead and most likely we’ll get in trouble,” Melody said. “Come on, ladies, don’t puss out on me.” She gave Beatrice a hard look. “I’m surprised with you. Aren’t you supposed to be a daring, risk-taking, investigative journalist? Now you’re too timid to seek out a new land.”

Beatrice bit her lip. Melody was right; she

was timid. Today, however, shook her core. She was turned away at a meditation group, faced her demons at the Watchtower, and ended with a finale by sobbing at the Wailing Wall. If anything, she was feeling vulnerable. She not only wanted to curl up in bed, she wanted to hide underneath it. “Sure okay. Let’s just feel around, see what we come up with.”

“I want to see my family again, but I don’t want any trouble,” Anna said.

“Scared. Boo. You speak of knowing such truths, the Illuminati and shit. Well, this shit is real,” Melody said, “at least I think so. Maybe it’s all in our heads.”

Taking a careful step down, Beatrice held onto a rock alongside the path. “I think that’s it. It’s all in our heads.”

“Well great. Let’s just tap our ruby shoes together and we’ll all be home,” Melody replied stepping down the steep step. “There’s no place like home. There’s no place like home. Nope, still here. I know there is no Oz.”

Anna side-stepped down the steps. “I don’t like this.”

“You’re halfway down,” Melody griped.

When Beatrice reached the flat landing, a street lamp illuminated, exposing their surroundings – conifer trees, flower carpet coral lined the edge of the cobble stone path, the mountains and deep canyons. A light breeze brought a chill, which stirred her mind. “Let’s head this way,” she said with more purpose.

“Alright boss,” Melody said, as Anna quietly shuffled behind.

As they strode down the path, street lamps lit up as they neared, and darkened as they passed, seemingly knowing their journey before they did. Soon, a high-pitched whine lofted.

Anna cowered close to Beatrice. “What’s that?”

Beatrice lifted her ear to the sound. “Sounds like crystal bowls.”

“Who is Crystal Ball?” Anna asked.

“She’s one of Alexei’s personalities,”

Melody snipped.

“No,” Beatrice stated stronger than she intended, “crystal bowls, people play them.”

“As music?” Melody questioned with a laugh. “Sounds like nails on a chalkboard. Ella Fitzgerald is music. This is noise.”

Beatrice shook them both off, more determined to find the noise. She walked off in the direction of the sound until she came to a sign, which read: Sound Bath ahead. She picked up her step. “Let’s check it out.”

“I’d rather look for the shuttle home,” Melody replied.

“You really think we’re going to find it. If it still exists,” Beatrice responded.

Melody smirked. “I’d be happy to find John the pilot.”

Ahead, standing at a booth George greeted them, wearing another sweater. “Ladies,” he said with a smile. “I didn’t know you had a reservation for tonight’s sound bath.”

Beatrice offered an innocent shrug. “We

didn't know. It's kind of a spur of the moment thing."

"I don't do nudity in public baths, only in private in front of my husband," Anna said.

George cocked his head and grinned at Anna. "My dear, nudity is not required at a sound bath. It is only optional." He clapped his hands together. "Alright. I believe I have a space in front of the gongs. Wait there. Let me see if I can find you a place," he said and walked off.

"I don't want to take a sound bath," Melody said, "I'd rather take a hot bubble bath. Look at me, I'm still covered in this soot shit."

"You're the one who wanted to explore. This is exploring," Beatrice stated firmly.

"Somehow, I don't think we'll find the shuttle by the gongs, and I'm not really interested unless we're talking John the pilot's gong," Melody responded.

George returned with his usual slick grin. "It seems we have some space for you. Please come this way."

“You know, we’d really like if you can show us to our shuttle,” Melody said, as she side-stepped bodies lying on mats, listening to the sound of bells and chimes. Her comment went on George’s deaf ears as he continued along, around the maze of people.

“You’re going to love this,” Beatrice said as she stepped over a woman’s head. “The frequency of the instruments is said to change you at a cellular level.”

“Shush,” the woman, lying on the ground scolded.

“But I don’t want to change,” Anna whined. “How would my husband and boys recognize me?”

Beatrice rolled her eyes. “You’re not going to transform into a different person. It helps heal diseases, anxieties, makes you more mindful and focused,” she said as she tripped over a man.

“Ouch! Watch it!” the man yelled.

Melody laughed. “Right. It makes me wonder why someone so seemingly perfect as you would want to change. All I can say is I am perfect as I

am. I don't need to change.”

Beatrice spun around. “No one is perfect. We all have room to improve,” she said, backing into another man's body and falling with the sound of the gong.

“Ladies, I'm going to have to ask you lower your voices, and raise your vibrations,” George said in a pleasant manner. He reached a place in the back where three mats rested side by side. “You can take your place here. Enjoy the bath. Luxuriate in it.”

“George, how do I raise my vibration?” Anna asked.

Melody pulled her down to a mat next to her. “Honey, never ask a man that.”

“Rest. Relax, and by all means, please try to behave,” George said with a tender, fatherly voice.

Beatrice had herself already sprawled out on the mat. Before closing her eyes, she stared up at the sky, the starry universe bright and vivid. With the sound of jingling bells, she shut her eyes and let the sound take her away, yet it didn't. She struggled

letting go, more concerned about Melody and Anna, what they were thinking and feeling. She took several deep breaths, to release any anxiety she was holding onto, until finally she relaxed.

Lying alongside Beatrice, Melody tensed her fists, as she rested rigidly. Despite the afternoon nap in the park with Brian, she refused to give into this crazy Godorah world. It wasn't going to defeat her, and she wasn't going to become victim to it, yet the thunder of drums rumbled through her belly in such an intense way she couldn't help but giggle; it tickled her inner little girl, and she recalled times as a youngster playing hopscotch chalked on her mother's driveway, and she was a good hopper. She never hit any of the lines. Her memory took a sour turn, when a car drove passed. The older kids inside laughed at her, called her ugly, and other such mean names. It not only broke her pride; it broke her spirit. Young Melody never hopscotched again.

Tears surfaced. She had the mind to give Beatrice a talking to after this event, but all

thoughts faded when the sensations in her belly filled further. She was taken away, to a place where she felt empowered. Her fists relaxed, and her body softened. She extended her hand slightly, feeling Anna's wrist beside her.

The whine of the singing bowls rang in Anna's temples to the point of pain. Tensing and contorting on the muscles in her face, she swore she was on the verge of a migraine. Fears and anxiety rose as she truly believed she would exit a different person. *Would her husband still love her? Would her boys recognize her?* She resisted until it was too much to think about. The sound took over her mind, and it felt as if a hole was being bored through the crown of her head. This was to be an existential lobotomy, and she was helpless to do anything about it.

Noticing Melody's hand next to hers, she dared to grasp it, and hold on tightly. To her surprise, Melody reciprocated in kind, and reached out for Beatrice's on the other side. Having Melody's hand in hers, gave Beatrice the

opportunity she needed to let go. She couldn't believe that she needed the acceptance others, before she could accept herself.

They held onto each other's hands until the sound subsided to silence, and they heard the rustle of bodies moving. Sitting upright, each stared at the other without a word, and then all three broke out in laughter.

Wandering back on the dimly lit path, they relished their personal experience. They headed up the steep stairs to their abode. Upon reaching the top, Beatrice delicately swiped the metal wall with her finger, opening the wall in a bright light, and to their shock and bewilderment they saw a strange, naked couple twisted in a Kama Sutra sex position.

Just as they backed away from the door the man appeared stark naked with a stiff erection pointing at them. "Ladies, may I ask what you're doing?"

The three silently gawked at the man. Finally, it was Anna who muttered, "We are just

visitors.”

“Traveler of both time and space, to be where I have been,” Beatrice mumbled numbly, not able to look away at the man’s phallus pointing at her. She sighed, finally able to turn away. “Oh my God, I’m quoting Led Zeppelin.”

Melody arched her head over Beatrice’s shoulder, awed by the sight.

“It happens quite frequently,” the naked man replied unapologetically. “Your pod is three doors down,” he said, disappearing behind the white light, until the metal wall reappeared.

“Well shit, you don’t see that every day,” Melody finally said.

“Two doors down,” Beatrice sputtered.

“Three,” Anna replied, her eyes still bulging.

“Right, three,” Beatrice sighed.

“We’re not moving,” Melody remarked as they all stood still outside the man’s home.

Anna was the first to take a step down, followed by Melody and Beatrice.

“That sure added another notch to the

adventure. I could sure use a drink. Think George has our place stacked?” Melody asked.

“Doubtful. This doesn’t seem to be the kind of place where people get smashed out of their gourd,” Beatrice replied.

Upon finding their way down again to the main pathway, Anna glanced around at her surroundings. “It’s so hard to see in the dark. How do we count three doors down?”

“We count stairs. The homes seem to be at the top of stairs,” Beatrice said.

As they walked, just as before, a street lamp illuminated and dimmed. Each counting aloud as they pass a set of stairways. “One, two, tree,” they said in unison as they began to climb the next steep steps.

This time, Beatrice hesitated before opening. “You know, you’d think they worry about people breaking and entering. Anyone can walk into someone’s abode.”

“Guess, they’ve never been to St. Louis,” Melody replied.

“It seems like people trust each other here,” Anna said innocently.

“You don’t say,” Melody snipped.

Beatrice swiped her finger along the metal exterior, and once again the white light erupted. Inside, they found an aged man in lotus position, levitating three feet off the ground. “You passed it. Next door,” an echo sounded, but the man did not flinch or open his mouth, and the metal zipped shut.

“Okay, now I really need a drink,” Melody said.

“Let’s just get back,” Beatrice replied.

She followed Anna and Melody back down the steps, a short journey up the path from where they came, and took the next stairwell.

“This doesn’t seem familiar,” Melody said “Are you sure this right?”

“I’m not sure of anything at the moment, but the levitating man said this was our place,” Beatrice said, and sighed heavily before she tried to open. She closed her eyes and brushed her finger against the door.

A bright light radiated and inside they saw George standing in their dining room. “Ladies, what have you been up to,” He said in a disappointed fatherly tone.

Melody barged passed Beatrice and entered the room. “You really should invest in locks. It would keep strangers from invading other’s privacy.”

“My dear, it’s the cluttered mind that sets one into other’s private spaces,” George replied with a knowing smile. “Now, I hope you ladies had your fun.” He headed toward the metal wall. “Oh, and there is peach schnapps on the table. Good night.” And he disappeared through a wall of light.

“Peach schnapps, my favorite,” Anna squealed.

“Why doesn’t that surprise me,” Melody mumbled.

“I’m tired. I’m going to bed,” Beatrice said, swiping open the wall to their sleeping quarters. Inside, she found Alexei lying in her bed. “What are you doing here?”

Melody walked in and saw nobody in her bed. “Who are you talking to?”

“Alexei.” Beatrice attempted to point out the obvious man in her bed.

“Hon, your fantasies are on overdrive,” Melody said as she plopped on her bed.

Beatrice glanced down, seeing his grinning face, and inviting her into bed. “Get out!” she scolded.

Melody laughed watching Beatrice scold an empty bed.

“What’s going on?” Anna asked, carrying the bottle of schnapps into the room.

“Seems Alexei is haunting Beatrice’s bed again,” Melody roared.

Anna took a swig from the bottle. “Could be worse. Could be George.”

“Oh God! Oh God!” Melody screamed out, laughing.

Beatrice stood beside her bed with her arms folded. She shook her head. “Fine. Have your laughs.” When she went to climb in bed, the vision

of Alexei was gone, and Beatrice silently admitted her disappointment. As she rested in bed, she imagined introducing Alexei to her folks, or worse yet, Nigel her editor. *What will people think of her dating a troll?* “I’m glad he’s gone,” she muttered trying to convince herself.

She lay alone, finally resting in a bed that curved to her every contour, she lifted her eyes upward to see the vivid stars twinkling through the window. Her mind flitted through her day and she wondered would she ever see home again. As much as her heart ached for her mother’s voice, her father’s loving embrace, and the companionship of her friends and colleagues, she realized she could like this new world, and especially the people she shared her new journey with.

A deep silence of tranquility filled the room, but within it, she could hear the same aches and pains of Anna and Melody. They two, in their own private mind’s world, was sharing the exact same experience.

Chapter 18

Just as Sandeep sucked up his enchilada and Alexei picked at his last chip, Lars entered the men's room, carrying a tray of cups with a steaming hot liquid. "Golden milk it's good for the..." he set a cup on a small table besides Bruce, "mind," on the table beside Sandeep, "soul," beside Brian, "heart," looming above Alexei and looked down with a grin, "and body." He pointed to the metal wall across the room, and magically a glowing door of white light appeared. "If any of you lads would like a wash, there is a shower. Easy resting," he said exiting through the wall from which he came.

Sandeep sat upright in his bed and sipped from his steaming cup of golden milk. "Turmeric is supposed to have healing properties."

"Doesn't help much now that we're most likely dead," Brian quipped.

"I feel alive," Sandeep replied, "more alive

than ever.”

“What’s with the dirt and the flowers in your hair?” Alexei asked.

“None of your business. Besides, at least I wasn’t crying like a girl.” Brian rose from his bed and walked toward the white light, which opened into a small bathroom. He didn’t notice the metal meld into a solid wall behind him. His thoughts engaged his focus. He undressed and stepped under the showerhead. Searching the wall, he found no knobs to turn it on. “What the fuck?” he muttered, and then the water rained on him, warm like a late spring shower in his home of Lithonia. It felt so good.

Upon closing his eyes, he sensed a slap across his head. An angry male voice, slurred, “What the hell is the matter with you? Why are you such a fuck up? You’re a damn disappointment, boy!” He had nothing to say, and he didn’t let any tears fall. It had come to the point of tolerance, and eventually he grew to accept it. In fact, he didn’t feel normal, if he wasn’t beat down the moment he

walked through the door.

All that changed the moment he entered through another door. Years later, before Bruce Merrick's post, as an EMT technician, he leaped out of the ambulance, rushed up the cracked cement sidewalk to a rugged porch where a black teenage girl sobbed. He was struck by her beautiful face, drenched in tears, yet she looked at him with hope.

"Please," she said, "save my father."

There was a soft, loveliness about her urgent plea, and Brian lost all resistance. "I will do my best," he replied, and he meant it.

Entering the living room, he found a black, middle-aged man lying on the floor, and his wife kneeling over his lifeless body. "He just stood up! He just stood up and fell over!" his wife cried.

While he and his fellow technicians worked on the man, trying to get the man's heart beating, Brian sensed the man's life leave his body. Starting with a flutter in his stomach, he intuited the prejudice the man endured throughout his life, he felt the anguish, and yet despite it all, he felt an

expansive love for his family. Within a second, the man was gone away in the light breeze blowing the screen door. Despite the mourning of his family, the man left freely, leaving behind a legacy of love. It was at this moment, Brian realized his own pain he carried within him, and no matter his blustering talk, and he would never be truly free. He would always be imprisoned by the abuse of his father.

As the shower rained down on him, he came to recognize Melody was his escape. The fiery, Black Lives Matter protester who sang out injustices was his path to freedom. He opened his eyes, welling with tears. No matter how hard he tried to control himself, the cries still came. "You're not some little girl, Dawson," he berated aloud to himself. "You're a man. Get a hold of yourself."

Through the blurred vision of tears, he looked out over an expansive universe of stars. The metal walls changed to glass. Engrossed with the site, he forgot the shower until his skin pruned, and he cared little for his nakedness. He exposed

himself to the entire universe. A peace came over him, one he had never known, and never knew possible. With his fingers pressed against the glass dome of the shower, he smiled.

When the moment subsided, he stepped out of the shower, toweled himself dry, dressed into the given grey scrubs as pajamas and mindlessly walked through the metal wall to the main room where Bruce, Alexei and Sandeep wondered on the stars. Their attention turned abruptly to Brian stepping through the metal. “How’d you do that?” Alexei asked.

“Do what?” Brian muttered, gazing through the clear glass that displayed the universe before him.

“You walked through a metal wall,” Alexei said.

Brian glanced over his shoulder at the metal wall, separating the bedroom from bathroom. “I did. Huh. Cool. I wasn’t even thinking.”

Alexei lost interest in the stars, as he attempted to walk through the wall. With one step,

the metal melted into a molten liquid to the shape of his body. On the other side, he found the bathroom, glinting of metal toilet and sink. He laughed in amazement, and walked back through the metal to the main room. "That's awesome! I can walk through walls."

"I did first," Brian responded.

"If I took a shower first, I would have been the first," Alexei said, spurring him on.

"But you didn't," Brian retorted.

"Boys," Bruce interjected, as Sandeep walked back and forth through the wall with the joy of a child. "We can all walk through walls."

This time Bruce tried it, and ran into a solid wall.

Brian and Alexei laughed. "Try again, professor."

Too embarrassed to show his incapability of walking through the metal, Bruce shrugged.

"Tomorrow. I'd rather enjoy the view," he said, turning his attention to the stars.

Brian stood beside Bruce. "I've never seen

the sky like this before.”

“Because it’s not our sky. It’s Godorah’s sky,” Alexei replied.

“It’s God’s sky,” Sandeep said.

As inspired as they all were, an angst filled their chests, still having no clue of their fate.

Chapter 19

A soft shade of pink reflected on the side of Melody's face. She smiled as she rolled over onto her back and opened her eyes to see dawn's light through the dome glass. She had never slept so well and never awoke so rested, surprising after last night's chaotic adventure. Lifting her torso, she noticed Beatrice and Anna still fast asleep.

She rose from her bed and quickly dressed. Stepping before the metal wall to the main room, she paused before attempting Beatrice's trick of opening. "If she can do it, I surely can."

Pressing her finger lightly against the metal, she closed her eyes and swiped downward. Behind her eyelids, she saw the glare of bright light. Success. She opened her eyes and walked through. What she saw before her startled her. She screamed.

Seated at the table, Bruce, Alexei, Sandeep and Brian all wore intarsia ski sweaters and

corduroy pants, all looking like some half-baked version of George. Brian stood at the table, pouring dark liquid from a pitcher into mugs. “Come, have some hot cocoa with us.”

“What the hell happened to you guys? You look like a demented ski team,” Melody said.

Beatrice and Anna appeared through the white light from their sleeping quarters. Both struck by their ski sweaters. “Where’d you get the sweaters?” Beatrice asked.

“George left us these clothes last night,” Alexei said, displaying his motif sweater. “Mine has little bears on it.”

“I see that,” Melody replied and looked around the table at their sweaters – Brian’s had a duck motif, Sandeep’s had two hearts and Bruce’s had two snowmen holding hands. “They are all perfect for you.”

“But why? Why *you* guys?” Beatrice asked.

“It’s a welcome gift to Godo-RAH,” Brian said.

“We hear you ladies got alcohol, peach

schnapps, right?” Alexei asked. “How enlightening.”

“I like peach schnapps. It’s my favorite,” Anna replied.

“Hot cocoa,” Brian offered, handing Anna a cup.

Anna handled the cup on in her palm and took a sip.

Bruce waved the Godorah tourist brochure. “We’re thinking about heading out to Echo Canyon, then the Water Walk and finish up the day at the Cementing Stone. Do you ladies want to join us?”

Melody threw her hands up in the air. “Sure, why not. It’s not like we have anything better to do. Besides, we may just find a way out.”

After finishing their breakfast, Beatrice headed to the metal wall first. “Can any of you guys do this?” She swiped her finger against the wall, exposing a door of white light, which Melody and Anna walked through. Her proud grin dimmed when the men didn’t appear impressed.

“Check this out,” Brian said, and walked

through the metal, disappearing to the other side.

Sandeep smiled at Beatrice as he passed on through, and even Bruce by this time was able to pass through the wall.

“Cool,” Alexei said, as he walked directly through the metal door, disappearing to the other side. He peaked his head back into the room, smiling at Beatrice. “How’s that?”

Beatrice froze, shocked and befuddled.

Alexei put his arm through the door to give Beatrice a hand. “Come on. I’ll show you.” He took her hand and tugged.

She smashed into the wall. “This isn’t funny.”

Alexei reappeared fully inside the room. “Okay, do it your way.”

Swiping her finger against, the wall she tried to open it again, but nothing. The door of white light didn’t open. Beatrice tried not to show her embarrassment. She was supposed to be more enlightened than the Russian troll. *What was happening?*

“Don’t think about it,” Alexei whispered in her ear. “Our thoughts are our limitations.”

Beatrice refused to look at him, but she knew his words were truth. She tried to extinguish all negative thought. She took a step forward, once gain hitting the wall. “Damn it!”

“You’re trying too hard. Don’t try,” he said.

“I know!” she snapped.

“Hostility doesn’t help,” he said with a grin.

She backed away. “Go on. Go on without me.”

Quickly, he grabbed her arm and pulled her through the door without a pause and without a thought. Before she knew it, she was outside in the God State, the others watching bemused. Below on the path, the people of Godorah strolled contently. The sun radiated in a soft, yellow hue illuminating the towering mountains and canyon in a blanket of rays. It was...heaven.

Alexei escorted Beatrice down the high steep steps to the main path, following the others.

“Is that how you have been getting into my

bed?” she said.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said.

“Oh, come on. You were there in my bed last night when we got back. Is this how you’re doing it?”

He laughed. “Oh Beatrice, I had no idea you thought of me like that.”

“I don’t. It’s just..,” she said and then stopped, wondering if it was all in her head.

They walked along the path, engaging with the Godorah locals. Beatrice noticed how they looked at her with distrust and disapproval, and Alexei, Brian and Sandeep were greeted with smiles. It didn’t make sense. They were trolls, bullies and womanizers. She was a trusted, educated, respected journalist.

Ahead on the path, the towering fern trees grew sparse, until only naked land was visible on either side of the deep canyon, and where the bottom was not visible. It wasn’t a spectacular view like Grand Canyon, in fact it was bleak,

barren and truly uninspiring.

“This is what we came to see?” Melody asked. “There’s nothing here.”

Bruce checked the God State tourist brochure. A red dot illuminated on the page, and then the words “You are here,” spelled out, and as soon as he read it the words disappeared. “This is it,” he said, folding the brochure and putting it in his pocket. He stepped in circles, studying the tan-colored rocks, and high cliff. *Better say something quick, or the others will think you don’t know anything*, he thought the words echoing in his ear. “We’re definitely here,” he said.

This guy is full of shit, Melody thought of Bruce. *We should be demanding to be taken to the shuttle. I know that George guy is hiding something from us. He’s holding back the truth.*

I don’t understand any of this, Anna thought. She looked at the others and smiled. “Not very picturesque. This place is boring.”

“Nothing is boring, only boring people,” Brian said and thoughts suddenly filled his head,

Can't I ever be nice?

“And I suppose you consider yourself interesting,” Melody sniped. *God, what a bitch I am.* She snapped her head to the sound of the thoughts ringing in her ear.

Beatrice stepped to the edge and gazed over the precipice seeing nothing but darkness below. She felt a hollow in her heart and it hurt. *Just don't say anything. Everyone is so judgmental, and they'll judge me, just like they judge the others.* She glanced at Alexei. *I wonder what he's thinking. Is he attracted to me or not? Damn it, why can't I stop thinking of him? What's the matter with me?*

Alexei smiled unsure at Beatrice. *What's her deal? She's fucking Beatrice Suffolk, a famous journalist, and I'm just an anonymous troll, well, three, no four anonymous trolls.* He reached for her arm and pulled her back from the edge. He wanted to say something, but the words didn't come forth, only the thoughts of insecurity bouncing around in his mind.

Sandeep walked off by himself, feeling separated from the group, and he couldn't understand why. *I'm a nice guy, friendly. Why won't any girl love me? Why is love so untrue? Pretty girls are always taken with men who treat them badly.* He looked at Alexei and Brian who appeared to have secured attention from women. *I treat woman nice, but they never like me. What's wrong with me?*

Anna clenched her heart. *I miss my babies, my husband. Why did I take this stupid trip?* She looked around. *There's got to be a door out of this studio.* She traced her hands along the side of the cliff, feeling the dusty rock. "I bet there's a trapped door in this cliff that leads to the studio parking lot."

God that girl is dim. Don't be a bitch, Mel. God, you're always so mean. It's your nastiness that got you in this mess. You made that poor girl kill herself and those dogs. Shit. God, Melody thought, covering her ears with her palms and falling to her knees.

“Melody, are you alright? What’s the matter?” Brian said, rushing to her side. *What the fuck am I doing? I’m such a dumb ass? Why would she want my help after I called her nasty names? I’m such an asshole.* He sat down beside her, burying his face in his hands.

“What’s going on here? Why is everyone sitting down? I’m sure there’s a place out of here? It’s all a hoax,” Anna said, her voice straining with anxiety. *Why doesn’t anyone ever listen to me? I’m smart. I really am. Sure I don’t have a fancy education like Beatrice or Bruce. But I know things. I know when we’re being fooled. I miss my husband. He understands.*

“Anna, sweetheart, this is no hoax. This isn’t a Hollywood studio,” Bruce said. *Damn, that girl is stupid. This is my fault. My pompous experiment at the expense of these poor kids. I killed these young people with my pride and my ego.*

An aging Godorah couple walked up to greet them. A long-haired, bearded man wearing an

intarsia sweater, strolled along with the aid of a wooden cane in one hand and his wife's hand in the other. "Good day," he said to the group. "Enjoying Echo Canyon?"

"It's lovely," Beatrice lied.

"It's a great place to get in touch with yourself," the aged woman in a red ski sweater said. She gave her husband a loving gaze. "And each other."

The elder man saluted them as they passed. "Well enjoy, and don't throw yourself into the canyon. We've had several people do so, but not in a long time."

"What happens if you do?" Beatrice asked.

The older woman shook her head. "My dear, the echoes never die. They just get louder."

"I see." Beatrice replied. "I see. How long does it take?"

The aged man gave her a kind smile. "A lifetime."

They all watched the elderly couple pass and stroll onward, disappearing around the corner of a

large rock.

“Man, this is harsh,” Melody said rising to her feet. “I can’t stand my own thoughts.”

“You’re not alone,” Brian replied, standing alongside her.

“None of us are alone,” Bruce said. He opened his arms to gather his group and encourage them to follow. “Let’s move on. The Water Walkway should be just up the path.”

They moved quietly along the path, each trying to silence the negativity, which filled their mind, ashamed to share what they really thought about themselves. Ahead, they heard a commotion of laughter and happy chatter. It was the Water Walkway, Godorah locals happily strolling across on top of the water.

“Is this some sort of trick?” Anna asked.

Bruce checked the tourist map. “We have to cross to get to the Cementing Stone.”

“We have to walk on water?” Beatrice asked in disbelief.

“Only Jesus can walk on water,” Brian said.

“And yet, all the people here in Godorah are doing so,” Bruce replied.

“Who’d thought we could walk through metal,” Alexei said. “It’s mind over matter.” He slipped off his shoes, walked to the edge of the canyon and stepped onto the water. He rested his weight on his left foot. He didn’t sink. So carefully he took his next step, successfully staying above the water. He glanced over his shoulder at the others. “Well, as with anything, if you want to believe you can find reasons to.’ Tom Hanks, ‘Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close.’” He continued to walk carefully across the water, greeting the people of Godorah with a smile.

If the Russian can do it, certainly I can, Brian thought. He rushed to slip off his sneakers, and rushed to the water’s edge, as if he was a child, running to the beach. As soon as he reached the water, he sank up to his neck. His legs floundered under water, as he strained to make his way to the other side.

Melody laughed. “This puts belief and faith

into question. The Russian atheist strolls skimming the surface and the dogged red-neck Christian neck deep. Interesting.”

“You’re so smart!” Brian gargled. “You try it.”

Accepting the dare, Melody took off her shoes and slowly stepped on the water. Clutching her grandmother’s cross, she walked slowly as if skating on thin ice, outstretching her arms to keep her balance. For a few steps she was successful, until she noticed the Godorah residents glaring at her with suspicion. Suddenly, she was knee deep in the water. Slowly, she slogged forward.

Reaching the other side of the canyon, Alexei turned around and laughed at Brian and Melody. He waved to Beatrice. “Come on. You can do it.”

Beatrice reluctantly removed her shoes, knowing she would be judged by all those around her. Since she arrived here, all her imperfections, everything she hid from others, was exposed. There was no hope, all she had to do was move forward.

Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and stepped on to the water. It tickled the bottom of her feet and she laughed. Alexei's words came to her mind, we're all nothing, made of nothing, so nothing can stop us – metal, and now water. When she stepped onto the water, she remained on top. Once she realized she was actually walking on water, she sank to her ankles. "I'm nothing," she chanted as she continued, passing Melody and Brian.

Anna gazed unsure to Bruce, and he looked down at her. "You, me and Sandeep, we go together," he said. They took off their shoes and Bruce held their hands.

"It's physically impossible to walk across water," Anna replied.

"But see, Alexei was successful," Bruce replied.

"It's part of the show. Don't you get it? Alexei is a part of the con," Anna asserted.

Of the three, she was the first to take a step, sinking completely, and pulling Bruce and Sandeep

down with her. Under the water, the current sucked Bruce, Anna and Sandeep away, disappearing in the dark abyss.

On the opposite side of the canyon, Alexei reached out his hand to Beatrice as she made it across. She gazed back to offer Melody and Brian encouragement. “Come on guys, you can do it!”

Melody plodded through the water, finally reaching the opposite side, soaked from the knees down. When she looked back, Brian was about a quarter of the way there, and Bruce, Sandeep, and Anna nowhere to be seen. “What happened to them?”

Beatrice bravely beckoned the attention of a Godorah woman. “Excuse me. We lost our friends. They disappeared under the water.”

“Oh dear darling. Seems their burden was too heavy to bear. I’m sorry.”

“We have to help them. They could drown,” Melody said.

“No one dies here in Godorah. People just get wet. You can find your friends at the Cementing

Stone,” the woman called back casually strolling across the water.

They waited until Brian finally made it across. Alexei, Beatrice and Melody helped him out of the water, weighed down by his soggy sweater and corduroys. “How did you guys do it?” he asked ringing out his clothes.

Beatrice smiled up at Alexei. “It was nothing.”

“Nothing you say. I suppose you think you’re some sort of saint,” Brian snapped at Alexei. “Personally, I think demonic.”

Melody smacked Brian on the back of the head. “Don’t be jealous, rebel boy. The troll’s just lighter on his feet. It’s like the woman said, he has no burden,” she glared at Alexei, “No guilt whatsoever.”

“Maybe it’s because he doesn’t judge other people,” Beatrice replied, coming to Alexei’s defense. She glanced around, noticing the Godorah residents reacting to their dispute. “Come on, we better hurry and find Bruce, Anna and Sandeep.”

After putting back on their shoes, they headed toward the Cementing Stone, hoping to find Bruce and Anna, but instead they found a long line of people waiting. They stopped just before the line to see what was going on. It seemed as if the Godorah people were lining up to step on one innocuous stone.

“What the hell do you think this thing does?” Brian said, squeezing water from his sweater.

“I don’t know,” Beatrice said, straining her neck to get a better look.

“Well, who’s game?” Alexei said, stepping up to the line.

“We should look for Bruce, Sandeep, and Anna first,” Melody said.

“You heard what the woman said. They’ll just get wet. I say we get onto this stone thing, and then go find them,” Alexei replied.

“Fine, be selfish, and free of any burden to your fellow man. Come on, Brian, let’s go find the others,” Melody said, grabbing his soggy sleeve.

Brian smiled, allowing Melody to pull him

away. “Sure. You guys can cement yourself. Hope you don’t sink in cement,” he said with a laugh.

Beatrice stepped beside Alexei. “We should go with them.”

“You heard what the woman said, no one dies in Godorah. They’ll be fine,” Alexei said.

“How can you be so sure?”

He grinned and quoted Tom Hanks in “Forrest Gump,” “Life is like a box of chocolate.”

“Yeah, I’m not seeing how that applies,” Beatrice said.

“Each has a different flavor, and a different experience. We’re all eating a different piece, and having different experiences,” Alexei replied. His time came to step on the Cementing Stone arrived. He placed his feet on the stone and closed his eyes. All thoughts and all emotions drained through his feet, until he felt light-headed, and sure-footed. He stepped off the stone feeling free, relaxed and calm, not a care in Godorah, which really was not unusual for him, but he did have a wider smile and felt lighter in his steps.

Beatrice watched his reaction to the stone. She hesitated stepping up. After arriving here in Godorah, nothing worked out well for her, only offering challenge after challenge. She took a deep breath, stepped up onto the stone, and closed her eyes. Her self-judgments and constant questioning evaporated, and her anxieties expelled until she felt utterly placid.

She left the Cementing Stone and neared Alexei, noticing an emptiness in his eyes. She laughed, and he laughed. There was nothing weighing in their hearts and their minds.

“Wow!” Beatrice finally exclaimed. “Kind of scary not having any thoughts, and not feeling anything.”

He grinned. “It’s a normal state for me.”

“Not having thoughts and feelings is normal?” Beatrice asked.

Alexei took her hand. “I have thoughts and feelings when it matters.” He kissed her wrist. “The rest I let go with the wind.”

“That seems to be the answer here, huh?”

Don't take yourself, or life, so seriously. It's my biggest downfall," Beatrice paused to contemplate. "It's just crazy to think that a man whose employment is to stir up trouble could be so enlightened."

"I ever admitted to being enlightened. I never admitted to be anything, really. I've really just seemed to exist with no real purpose, not like you anyway. It's noble to seek the truth, I sometimes think its fleeting. You're never going to find it. The only truth that exists is the one that is right in front of you."

She squeezed his hand, glancing up at him. "Now what?"

Alexei looked ahead of the path that continued to wind around the mountain on his left and the canyon on the right. "We move forward."

Chapter 20

Melody stomped forward, brusquely passing by Godorah residents. She was on a self-gratifying mission of finding Bruce and Anna, and didn't even notice the angry, disturbed faces of the people. "Can you believe Alexei that fucking selfish Russian? And where the hell are Bruce, Anna and Sandeep? We passed the Cementing Stone."

Bogged down with his wet clothes, Brian tried to keep up. "You heard what the woman said. No one here dies."

She swung around to face Brian. "Yeah, I get it, because we're already dead. This is some fucked up purgatory."

Brian grabbed her arm. "Melody," he said in a calming voice. "There's no injustice here. Nothing to fight for. That woman said they'd be found at the Cementing Stone. We just passed there, so they have to be around here somewhere."

She offered a brief smile and sighed. “You know, you’re right. Sometimes I just get carried away.”

“I know, and you know what? I kind of like it. I like your fire. I never met a girl like you, so passionate about what she believes in.”

“Oh my God, we could almost become friends,” she said.

“Well, it’s a whole new world, why not?” He daringly placed his hand on her back, guiding her along. “Let’s go find our friends.”

Bruce held onto Sandeep and Anna’s hands as the funnel of water swept them away, pulling them through a circling tunnel. Anna gripped Sandeep’s shirt, trying to remind herself it’s just part of the waterpark ride, and they would at some point come to an end.

They surfaced in wavy white froth. Bruce treaded the water, coughing and choking for a few seconds until he realized he could touch a soft, sandy bottom. “It’s alright. We’re safe.”

Anna and Sandeep touched their toes to the bottom and slowly made themselves to a pristine beach, where they fell onto the warm sand. Anna rolled onto her back. The warm sun beamed down on her face, as she looked up at the towering mountain. “I did not like that crazy ride.”

Sandeep sat up, and leaned back on his hands. “Why do you think we got pulled under?”

“Maybe we should have gone individually. Our combined weight must have pulled us under,” Bruce suggested.

George appeared wearing another sweater, khakis and Birkenstock sandals. He handed them each a towel. “Welcome to Breakpoint Beach.”

Bruce wiped his face dry. “What happened?”

“You sank,” George stated the obvious. “To walk on water you have to have a lightness of being. You’re too heavy.”

“That’s not at all polite to comment on another’s weight,” Anna said.

“Hon,” Bruce started and stopped himself. “These are all some sort of test, aren’t they?”

George chuckled lightly. “No tests. There are no tests, just expectations you have placed on yourself and the event.” He looked over his shoulder, noticing Melody and Brian approach. “Ah, I see your friends have arrived. You passed on the Cementing Stone?”

“Our friends were in jeopardy,” Melody replied.

“Yet they are safe,” George said, looking at Bruce, Anna and Sandeep, “and soggy. Well, enjoy the rest of the day. If you’d like to catch up with the other two, you can meet them at the Garden of Eden for refreshments.”

“Yeah, no thanks. I read the Bible. I’m not eating any poisonous apples,” Brian said.

“Oh, alright. Well, it’s on the way to the lift that will take you back to your abode. Have a good day,” he said with a salute, and walked onward, passing out towels to others who washed up on the beach.

Bruce rose to his feet, brushing sand from the backside of his drenched corduroys. “This is more

than the adventure I anticipated.”

“I’m still trying to understand this place,” Brian said. “How were Alexei and Beatrice able to walk on water? They’re hardly saviors. Why’d Melody sink to her knees, me to my neck and you three washed away?”

“Because we keep asking questions, and demanding answers,” Bruce admitted. “I wrote books on this subject, and you’d think I’d get it, but I keep trying to rationalize it all.”

“You mean don’t think, don’t question? That’s the reason people are oppressed, because they don’t question authority,” Melody said.

“Yes, question everything,” Anna said, drying her hair with the towel.

“And where did it get us all...all wet and washed up.” Bruce put his arm on Sandeep’s shoulder. “Come on, let’s find Alexei and Beatrice.”

Alexei and Beatrice quietly walked with the people of Godorah. Ahead on the path was large,

neatly groomed bushes. As they grew closer, a sign became visible, which read: Garden of Eden. From the outside they heard laughter and music, welcoming them inside.

They passed through an archway of greenery to find an orchard with every kind of fruit imaginable. The people of Godorah mingled between the trees plucking their pleasure from trees – naked.

Hesitating at the entrance, Alexei and Beatrice watched others disrobing, leaving their clothing with an attendant. “May I have your attire,” the attendant said pleasantly.

Alexei didn’t hesitate. He ripped off his sweater and handed it to the man.

“What are you doing?” Beatrice asked.

“I’m going to taste the fruit,” he said, unzipping his pants.

She covered her eyes, and then quickly peeked at him as he slipped out of his underwear. “You’re seriously doing this? Look how easily you are tempted.”

He handed the attendant his underwear and stood naked before her. “When in Godorah...”

“Oh my God,” she said with a sigh.

“It’s only natural. Come on,” he urged. “Get naked and let’s get some fruit.”

Reluctantly, Beatrice removed her top and pants and handed them to the attendant. She paused before removing her bra and panties. “Oh, what the hell, When in Godorah.” She undressed fully handing over her underwear.

“That’s the spirit,” Alexei said taking her hand.

Once in the midst of the naked people of Godorah – young, old, and different races – it wasn’t so bad, in fact, it was quite freeing. Beatrice wandered between the trees plucking a fig from one and a pomegranate from another. She bit into the fig and her senses exploded with delightful sweetness, which almost threw her into orgasm. “Oh my god!”

“That’s the Godorah Fig. It’s a local favorite,” an older, naked gent said.

Beatrice gazed down at his sagging belly and shriveled loins, and beside him was an equally plump and droopy naked elderly woman, sweet in their nude purity. “It is delicious,” she said and noticed the woman carrying a basket full of fruit. “Where do I get a basket?”

“Here and there. You come across one laying underneath a tree,” the woman said.

Beatrice squeezed her pomegranate in her palm. “Thank you. I’ll keep an eye out. Nice meeting you.” She grazed between the trunks and branches, finding a basket below a peach tree. She bee-lined to pick it up, and when she did, she glanced around to see if there were any spying, judgmental eyes. There were none.

With a sense of ease and peace, she meandered around the orchard, picking her pleasures – cherries, guava, mangos, and fruits she never heard of like rambutans, lychee, and jamubticaba, which grows on the trunk of the tree.

Alexei peeked around the tree. “Hey, where’d you get the basket?” he asked with an

armful of various fruits.

“This naked old couple told me about it,” she said, offering him space in her basket.

“Thanks,” he unloaded his armful and took the basket from her. “I’ll carry it.”

“Seems a bit forbidden, doesn’t it?” she asked. “We’re taking fruit without paying, without giving anything in return.”

Alexei crunched into an apple. “The irony is these people would feel selling fruit for profit should be forbidden.”

“Look at this,” Beatrice said with a dramatic sway of her arm, “Naked and free. Can’t get this at home, but if I find a snake, we’re out of here,” she said.

Holding the basket in one hand, he took her gently by the arm with the other. They walked through the maze of trees tasting many different varieties. Occasionally, they interacted with naked Godorah natives, exchanging fruits and conversation.

When their basket was full, they made their

way to the exit, finding Bruce and the others waiting. Their mouths gaped open finding Alexei and Beatrice naked. “So this is what you two do when your friends are in danger?” Melody asked.

Alexei offered her fruit. “Wanna piece?”

“Dude, I don’t want anything from you,” she exclaimed, spun around and stormed away.

“What’s her problem?” Alexei shrugged indifferent as the attendant handed him back his clothing.

“Dude, try putting on some pants,” Brian said and abruptly followed after Melody.

Soaked in their clothes, Bruce, Anna and Sandeep stared at Alexei and Beatrice, unable to take their eyes off their nakedness and the fruit. “Ah, the fruits of temptation,” Bruce said with a smirk. “We’ll meet you to at the lift back home.”

Chapter 21

The line for the lift back to their globe abode extended beyond their visibility. Despite the length, the line moved quickly, and within minutes they had arrived at the platform, however, instead of seeing what they expected to be a gondola, individuals boarded a six-foot by four-foot glass pane, which carried them off over the canyon.

“What a minute,” Melody asked, “Is this how we get back? No way. I’m walking.”

“That means returning over the Water Walkway and Echo Canyon,” Bruce said. “This is it.”

“No way am I getting myself on a glass magic carpet, or whatever the hell it is,” Melody replied.

Beatrice peered over the edge of the steep canyon. “Yeah, I’m with Mel. What if the glass breaks?”

“Don’t be such pussies,” Brian said, the first

brave soul to board the glass pane, sweeping him off over the canyon. At first, even he had to admit he was terrified, seeing the rocky edges of the mountains and canyons below, however, soon he calmed, allowing himself to be swept away.

With the Godorah wind blowing through his hair, he laughed, stretched his legs out and leaned back on his hands. It was simple and easy floating with the breeze. *Who needs all this deep, spiritual bullshit*, he thought, *I'm just enjoying the ride.*

Back at the lift, Alexei was the next to take flight on his glass pane, a bit worried the Eden's fruit would weigh him down. Growing up in Russian, it was a constant worry to have too much. *Am I worthy of the bounty in my arms?* he wondered unsure. But as the pane carried him over the canyon, staying afloat, he came to realize that yes, he could have it all. He could have the life he dreamed, and possibly more. Why, with no thought, no action required, he secured the attention, and company, of the most amazing woman he could imagine – Beatrice. His heart beat against his chest

and his mind meandered through all the possibilities. It was enough to give up smoking entirely and a reason for living. He glanced over his shoulder, and saw her next, daring to board. “Don’t worry!” he called to her. “It’s very liberating!”

Beatrice heard Alexei’s encouragement as a hushed whisper in the wind. His voice was all she needed to spark her courage as she stepped gingerly on the next glass pane. Seated Indian style, she clutched the edge of the pane with her fingers. As soon as her pane floated away from the lift, terror waved through her body. She hated heights, having the strange sense to throw herself overboard. That was her nature, always ready to sacrifice herself for someone, or something else – her parents, her editor, or even a story. *Funny, she thought, I throw away so much of myself, when all I want is security. What’s the point of getting arrested for a story? What am I trying to prove and to whom? Sacrifice is for suckers.* Her grasp eased, and curiously she watched Brian and Alexei

ahead, Brian soaring his head above the clouds and Alexei below. As her confidence grew, so did her lift.

“I’m not getting on that thing!” Melody yelled from the platform, creating a scene. Gazing around at the crowd, their expressions spoke volumes. *They think I’m a bitch.* “Damn it! I’ll walk back over the water, through Echo Canyon if I have to.

In order to appease the lift attendant and the growing annoyed crowd, Sandeep jumped on the board next. “Just like Ganesh, the friend to all, breaking through all barriers!” he yelled happily, as the pane swiftly lifted him high and into the clouds. Good natured Sandeep soared high, adrift on the tips of the white mist, with minimal visibility below. It suited him perfectly, as he rarely paid any attention to the negativity, which weighed others down.

As he breezed onward, he looked down and waved to Alexei and Beatrice. “Hello friends!” Alexei nodded and waved, while Beatrice dared to

remove her grasp off the edge and return the gesture.

“Hey Brian!” Sandeep called out. “Coming up behind!”

Brian lifted his gaze backward and upward, seeing Sandeep buzzing past. His initial reaction was a scornful, competitive response, but he knew it would be lost on Sandeep. The man repelled negativity like Superman taking bullets to the chest. Instead, he saluted his high-flying friend. “Carry on, mate. See you back home!” he called out, surprised with his own congenial tone.

“Thanks Bri!” Sandeep yelled, and flew away deep into the white abyss of the clouds.

The next glass pane arrived at the platform. Bruce offered it to either Melody or Anna. Watching the others float off she threw her arms in the air. “I guess I don't have a choice. Do what the man tells me to do,” Melody replied. She sat down with her arms defiantly folded over her chest. The pane moved slowly from the lift, hovering just at the canyon edge. She watched a few people

recovering on Breakaway Beach, standing in line at the Cementing Stone, walking across a placid stream of water, and finally strolling through Echo Canyon. *It all seemed so easy for other people, why so hard for me,* she thought. Her defiance settled into a state of self-reflection, a place she rarely gave herself the opportunity to explore.

While she watched the others soaring above her, she thought over her predicament - fight for truth and justice, or accept her current state of being, and what she discovered was it was easier to fight and harder to let things be. *Letting things be is for weaklings, but how far has fighting got me?* As she gave into her circumstances, her glass pane flew higher and she was able to gain a larger perspective of Godorah below. It all seemed so small and insignificant, and that she came to realize was her truth. She looked back, watching Bruce and Anna waiting for their panes of glass to take them home.

“I want to go with him,” Anna said.

“No,” the attendant asserted, “One glass pane per person.”

“But I don’t want to go alone,” she whined.

The attendant sighed and looked to Bruce for help.

“Anna, they don’t fit two people. You have to go it alone,” Bruce said.

She gingerly stepped on the next platform, and took a seat. It moved away low and slow, so low, in fact, she was looking up at the people of Godorah on the path, and they down at her below the edge of canyon. *If I wanted people to look down at me, I could have stayed at home.* She lowered her head, just trying to survive the ordeal – don’t think, don’t look around – she just closed her eyes, waiting until she arrived back at their dome abode. However, the not knowing drove her crazy. She opened her eyes gazing up at Godorah, the people wandering on the coral flowers-lined paths, the beautiful mountain-scape, and the deep blue sky. Even from her perspective, it was beautiful. She didn’t need to be high above to appreciate her experience, just from her own perspective. A relaxed smile crossed her face, as she glanced back at Bruce, who trailed behind and above her

on his glass pane. She waved.

Bruce gave her a hearty salute, sailing happily on his glass plane, admiring Godorah life in all directions, and from every perspective. This is what he longed for, more than traveling around the planet, but to see life through a bird's eye view. Ahead, he saw his group floating in different spaces, the one right for them at the moment.

Upon passing Echo Canyon below, he noticed the path back to their glass dome abode, and Melody and Anna joining the others inside. His pane lowered to the ground, and he stepped off, stepping into their shared home, finding the bedrooms having switched again, this time there were three bedrooms, one for Alexei and Beatrice to share, Anna and Melody remain in the one for the ladies, and Bruce, Brian and Sandeep for the men.

“We should have guessed, you two wanted your privacy after getting naked in the Garden of Eden,” Brian said.

“Uh no,” Beatrice protested.

Alexei handed her an apple from their

gathering of fruit. She bit into it without thought.

Melody laughed. “And I thought Eve tempted Adam.”

“Ugh, it’s not like that,” Beatrice replied, and looked to change the topic. “Where is Lars with our dinner? Shouldn’t it be here now?”

“Maybe Lars knows what’s on your menu,” Melody joked.

“Jealous,” Beatrice said with a hoity-toity scoff, walking toward the bedroom and through the metal wall without conscious thought.

Alexei joined her, yet didn’t say a word, waiting for her to respond to the situation.

Beatrice walked to the window and watched as the sun set over the mountain ridge in a streak of fiery red. It was the sign of passion, yet her heart contained more passivity. She sensed his presence, this time not in her dreams, but for real. “It really is a beautiful sight.”

He studied the back of her slender neck. Gently he stroked her hair and placed his hands on her shoulders. “Yes, she is.”

She laughed. "What a cornball line."

"She is," he said nodding to the universe outside the window and then glancing down at her. "You are."

She turned to face him. "Funny how enemies can make the best bedfellows."

"Perhaps, they weren't really enemies after all. They were just two souls who strayed off path, looking for someone to guide them back. Sometimes, only a perceived enemy can help you see your truth," he said.

Wrapping her arms around his waist, she rested her face on his chest. There was no more need for words, just being with him and most importantly being with herself. A light radiated for the door. Beatrice raised her head to see Lars enter.

"Oh, so sorry. I didn't mean to disturb," Lars said.

"Not disturbing," she said.

"I thought you'd like to have your dinner in private," he said, wheeling in a cart with one large

bowl of spaghetti and meatballs and an ice bucket with a bottle of champagne. “Nothing better for watching the stars than a romantic dinner. You will notice something special about our spaghetti here in Godorah it is one long noodle. The challenge for you budding love birds to partake without breaking the string.”

Alexei rubbed his belly. “Sounds like a tasty challenge.”

The sights, the food, the love, Beatrice never wanted to leave. Sure, this God state was challenging, yet the more she allowed herself to experience, the more open she was. This was a place she wanted to stay forever.

Chapter 22

Beatrice opened her eyes to the soft light dawn. As the haze of sleep cleared, she admired the dawn sky through the glass dome window. Stars sparkled like rhinestones on pastel satin. She sighed peacefully, waking to a new day had never been so inspiring.

Rolling onto her side, she felt his shoulder. He was real and present, unlike her fantasies, which used to fill her mind. She nestled against him, cozy under the covers until she heard an unusual sound – dogs barking.

Curiously she sat up. On the table alongside her bed, she found a perfectly folded sage-colored Fair Isle sweater with a golden star motif. A note placed alongside the sweater welcomed her to Godorah. She had finally arrived. She dressed quickly, leaving Alexei to continue his peaceful slumber.

Closing her eyes, and emptying her mind of

thoughts, she stepped through the metal wall, which separated her bedroom to the main room. When she opened her eyes, her heart sank to the pit of her stomach and her jaw gaped open.

“Oh my God! You must be Beatrice Suffolk,” she squealed with an exuberant tone, rushing up to give her a hug. “You are even more beautiful in person. I always loved your work.”

Beatrice’s eyes widened, as she stammered, “C-assie Lockhart.”

“You know who I am!” Cassie exclaimed. “Wow! I feel so special.”

“Wh-what are you doing here?” Beatrice asked.

Cassie scratched the ears of a golden retriever, and shrugged her shoulder. Her gaze shifted sideways as she searched for a deep thought. “I dunno really. I just found myself here.” She hugged the dog’s neck. “With all my friends, of course.”

Soon the others appeared from their rooms. First, Melody and Anna, and then Bruce, Brian and

Sandeep, and finally Alexei, all now wearing motif sweaters.

“What’s with all the dogs?” Brian asked.

“Everyone, this is Cassie Heart,” Beatrice introduced.

Silence shrouded the room, until a Yorkie yapped.

“Wow, this is amazing,” Cassie said, turning toward Bruce. “You’re Bruce Merrick. I have always been such a fan. I read all your books. You’re such an inspiration to me. You really changed my life.”

Bruce nodded numbly. “You don’t say, Miss Lockhart.”

“Call me Cassie.” She studied the rest of the group. “Mel J. is that you? I recognize you from your profile picture. Gosh, you are so strong, so witty. I wished I could be as strong as you. You always know what to say when people are being mean. I never could speak back to people like you can.”

Melody pressed her hand over her chest, but

only felt a whole where her heart should be. “Cassie, we’re so sorry.”

“For what, silly?” Cassie kissed the head of the retriever. “It’s all good. I’m here surrounded by my friends.” She furrowed her brow trying to make out the identity of everyone else. “Anna Miller, is that you? You are so smart. You know everything. No one can fool you. Sandeep, your profile picture was so handsome. I’m surprised you don’t have girls crawling all over you.” She paused at Brian. “Brian Dawson, right? You are such a patriot, always fighting for the USA. Oh, you’re all so familiar to me, like we’ve known each other forever.”

They all stared at her, trying to wipe the guilt from their faces.

Cassie gazed at Alexei curiously. “I don’t believe I know you.”

“Captain Hugh No Knuthing, Fancy Nancy, Crystal Ball and Randy Rhoads,” Beatrice answered for him.

Cassie burst out laughing. “Oh that is funny.

You sure had me. Gosh, it's so hard to have one personality, imagine having four. Wow, you must be really smart." She sighed. "It's so nice to meet you all."

"When did you get here?" Brian asked.

"I don't know. The days melded together. Spent so much time at the Wailing Wall, just crying and crying and crying. Even the dogs howled. We were kicked out twice. Apparently, there's a limit to wailing. I didn't know, but eventually I stopped and it's all good now."

"Good," Bruce replied meekly. "What are you doing here?"

"Well, I heard from George you were here, and I wanted to meet my friends," Cassie said.

"Friends," Melody questioned, "after the way we treated you?"

"Of course. We're bound together. It's fate," Cassie replied.

"I don't understand," Anna said, nearing tears. "How can you be here? You killed yourself. You're dead."

“No, not really,” Cassie responded with a light-hearted chuckle. “No one really dies. We just reach another state.” She rose to her feet. “What are we all going to do today? Have you been to Echo Canyon? I hear it’s a hoot.”

“We did that yesterday,” Brian replied.

“Cassie, are there others here like you?” Alexei asked.

“What do you mean like me?”

He paused to find his words. “Passed to another state.”

“Yes, you can find them if you know where to look,” she said. “So, who wants to go to Godorah Park with me? The dogs love it.”

They glanced at each other unsure of spending the day with the woman whom they believe they’d contributed to her death. Melody was the first to speak up. She didn’t know why, her heart just cried out for Cassie. “I’d love to.”

“Great.” Cassie gathered the leashes of her dogs. The dogs tugged her to the metal wall, running straight through. Cassie, however,

slammed against the wall, not able to go through. She laughed aloud. "I'm still trying to get the hang of this place." She pulled back on the leashes. "Settle down fellows. Mama needs a little more time." She took a deep breath and stepped through to the other side.

"Are we really going to hang out with the chick we killed?" Brian asked.

"We didn't kill her. She killed herself," Anna whispered.

"Whatever, wherever we are, she needs us or else she wouldn't have come looking," Melody said. "I'm going with her."

"I'm game. The dead girl's cute, and she liked my profile picture," Sandeep said and quickly followed after Cassie.

Just as Beatrice was ready to follow the others, she noticed Alexei wasn't moving. "Are you joining us?"

"No. You go ahead," he replied in a much more somber tone than usual.

"What is it?"

“Nothing. Just go on with the others,” he said.

“You and I have been at each other’s side even before we got here. I won’t leave you, even my guilt for what happened to Cassie won’t tear me away from you.” Beatrice reached out and touched his knee. “Now tell me, what is it?”

“I need to go to another level. The highest level,” he said to her.

She nodded. “Alright. I will go with you.”

The dogs tugged Cassie down the path. She stumbled to keep up, while the others lingered behind, still in shock of her sudden appearance. Melody picked up her steps to stay on pace with the dogs. “Cassie, do you feel guilty for what you did to the dogs?”

“Heck no,” Cassie chirped happily. “I saw how their owners treated them, same as they treated me, so mean and controlling. I could relate to them, and I know they needed their freedom from being owned.”

“Owned?” Melody asked.

“I’m sure you could understand. We’re all owned by someone – our bosses, government, family, for me my customers at my doggie day care. They all wanted a piece of me, or to give me a piece of their mind.” She turned and smiled at Melody. “It’s like the social media post, we were all trying to get a piece of the other’s peace of mind. We are, well were, all trapped. Now we are free. I’d probably do it again if I could go back. It just seemed to be the right thing at the time.” She shook her head and shrugged. “Live and learn, I guess.”

“But you’re de...” Anna stopped herself short.

Cassie tugged on the dogs’ leashes, and laughed. “Never too late to start learning.”

A large golden gate awaited them ahead on the path. The arches reached so high, the top disappeared in the clouds. A huge sign hung on the gate, which read: Godorah Memorial Park. The doors opened automatically as the group neared.

“I come here all the time,” Cassie said, and upon entering, she unhooked the leads from the dogs’ collars and allowed them to run free. The dogs barked excitedly and ran off in different directions. Cassie sighed relaxed. “They really love it here.”

“They all ran off,” Melody said, “Aren’t you worried you won’t be able to find them again?”

“I’ll find them. I don’t need leashes. They are tied to me. They always come back,” she said in a chillingly perky tone.

Melody glanced back at the others, looking for an intelligent response from Bruce, or even an off-the-cuff remark from Brian. Nothing. They wandered into the park with a spacious grass lawn that appeared to go on forever in every direction. Children and dogs frolicked. People meandered casually along winding paths. It was a place where all cares ceased, given all who entered the opportunity to be happy in the moment.

“I hated the cages we kept the dogs in at my day care,” Cassie said. “They never could run and

play like this.” She swung around with a flutter of her long blonde hair. “I’m going to play with the dogs. Anyone care to join me?” She smiled bashfully. “Sandeep?”

A broad smile crossed his face. Finally, someone chose him, too bad it was the dead murderer, but heck, she was cute. “Sure,” he replied.

While Sandeep joined Cassie, running and tumbling in the grass with the dogs. Bruce, Anna, Melody and Brian sat on the park bench and observed the people, as if studying the behavior of another species.

“This is all really whacked,” Brian said.

“This is Godorah,” Melody replied. “I’m getting the impression different rules apply here.”

Bruce, normally one with the words struggled to find an iota of wisdom. This place simply defied logic. He kicked back and rested on the bench, watching the people of the park, wondering if one day he would fully understand.

Next to him on the bench, Anna sat. Her heart

grew heavy with mourning, missing those she cared most about. She lifted her head, and seeing a little boy near here. She sat up right, suddenly fully alert.

“Mommy,” a little boy said.

“Samuel? Is that you?” she asked, reaching forward to hug him. “Where’s Joshua and daddy?”

The little boy laughed and ran away. Anna bolted from her seat and sprinted after the boy. “Samuel! Come back! Samuel!” In the middle of Godorah Memorial Park, she lost him, as if he vanished like an apparition. She looked around the people passing, and the large trunks of trees. “Samuel!” she cried out. When he didn’t heed her calls, she broke down and sobbed.

Bruce ran up to her, wrapping his arms around her. “It’s okay. It’s okay.”

“My boy! I lost my boy!” she cried.

Melody sought help from the Godorah residents, asking anyone she came across if they’d seen Anna’s son. She was greeted with scowls and avoidance. “What is with you people? My friend

lost her son! Don't you have any soul? Are you completely devoid of all heart?" Her knees buckled, noticing an elderly black woman approaching. "Grandma? Is that you?"

"Tsk, tsk Melody, have you not yet learned?" her grandmother scolded.

Melody felt her mouth gape open, and through it, her entire spirit escape. "What are you talking about? What happened to you? Did you die too?"

"Always worrying about other people, what they're thinking and doing?" Her grandmother rested her hand on Melody's shoulder. "What about *you*?"

Melody stepped back aghast by her grandmother's question. "Wha-?"

"Honey, maybe it's you. Maybe you just need to chill out, and just be instead of forcing other people to follow your strong will."

"Are you serious, Grandma?"

Her Grandmother leaned in for a hug. "Nice seeing you, sweetheart, but I have a bible study to

attend to. Have a nice eternal life.” She teetered away, along the path, disappearing with the residents of Godorah.

“Grandma!” Melody yelled, but she was gone, and like Anna, she cried. When no one seemed to care, Brian came to her side.

“What happened?” he asked.

“My grandmother just ditched me...for eternity.” She rested her head on Brian’s shoulder. “Am I that bad? Am I a horrible person?”

He hugged his arms around her waist. “Look who you’re talking to.”

Taking her hand, he guided her back onto the path. This time, instead of being met with scowls, the people of Godorah greeted tearful Melody with warm, empathetic smiles. Some even stopped to give her a hug and pat her shoulder with encouragement. She had spent her life battling for respect, and oddly all she needed to do was show her vulnerability.

As she strode along, holding hands with Brian, her heart warmed, imagining her

grandmother at her bible study group. It was her grandmother's journey, but not hers. The realization came to her, it was alright to proceed on different missions. She just wished at some point, she would truly discover her calling.

“What happened?” Bruce asked, noticing Melody's teary eyes.

She breathed heavily. “I think Godorah Memorial Park puts the emphasis on memorial.”

Chapter 23

“Can you tell me where we’re going?” Beatrice asked, trying to keep up with Alexei.

“You should have gone with everyone else and that dead girl,” he said, thoughtlessly.

“I want to come with you,” she said. “Alexei, what is it you’re doing?”

He fumbled with the Godorah brochure. “Trying to find the highest lookout.” Ahead he saw a glass elevator scaling the rocky cliff into the clouds. “There it is.”

As he stepped confidently in line, Beatrice raised her head to the sky. The height unnerved her. She didn’t want to go up, but she didn’t want to leave him alone. Summoning her courage, she stepped on the elevator with Alexei and a few Godorah residents squished inside.

Everyone smiled pleasantly, as it lifted off the ground. Beatrice, on the other hand clung to Alexei’s shirt as if he could save her if they

plummeted to the ground. As the elevator rose higher, she saw Godorah in all its splendor – rugged mountains, deep blue waters in the canyons, flowering carpet coral winded along the pathways, and all the glass dome abodes sparkling in the soft daylight. It was a paradise of consciousness for those who could master it, yet she still struggled.

High clouds drifted past, and she lost her view of Godorah below. When the elevator lifted into the white fogginess, there was nothing but a darkened starry sky above, and soon their ride came to a stop.

The doors opened onto a grass platform. Around the lookout, people wandered, some aimlessly, mulling over silent thoughts, others rested on the grass and gazed at the universe above. Alexei walked with purpose, and when Beatrice couldn't keep up with him, she waited and watched at a distance.

Just as he expected, he saw him seated at the edge of the lookout, alongside a familiar-looking man. Alexei smiled, as his heart warmed. His

father found a friend, the man he admired most of his life.

“Pop,” he said quietly to get his attention, but not disturb.

Alexei’s father turned around. Upon seeing his son, he jumped to his feet in exaltation. “I felt you may be here.”

“Yes. We were on a shuttle ride, but I guess there must have been some malfunction,” Alexei replied. “But I saw space, Pop. I saw the Earth from space.”

“Then you will have something in common with this man,” his father said, making the introduction. “You recognize him, Yuri Gagarin.”

Alexei reached out to shake the hand of his father’s hero, but instead he received a mighty hug. “So how is the Earth these days? Is she still as beautiful?”

He saw it with his own eyes, the destruction of man, since Yuri had taken flight. What do you say to the man who once quoted ‘Orbiting Earth in the spaceship, I saw how beautiful our planet is.

People, let us preserve and increase this beauty, not destroy it,' he wondered. "It has changed some," Alexei responded, and Yuri knew exactly what he meant.

"Well, hopefully people will one day realize and continue to beautify their home," Yuri said.

He nodded lightly. To Alexei, it didn't matter anymore. He shared the same fate of his father and Yuri. He was to become a resident of the state of Godorah, or whatever this place was.

"It's your duty," his father said to him.

"What do you mean?" Alexei questioned.

"It's not your time yet. You have a true honest duty to others, you always have. People respond to you," his father said, and then nodded in the direction of Beatrice, "but you need to find a better role model. You need to find an inspiration for your talents."

He knew what his father was saying, and it was something he denied himself while living in the economically-challenged Russia, where dreaming for a better life was more a fantasy, than

a legitimate reality. He knew strange twists of fates could change a man's trajectory.

Gazing into his father's somber eyes, he could see his familiar soul, something he proudly displayed on earth. "What do you mean, it's not my time?"

His father grinned. "You will soon discover purpose is often hidden in our perspective." He glanced toward the beautiful universe of stars and galaxies before him. "But first you must clear the clouds." He gave his son one more hug, kissed his cheek, and patted him on the shoulder. "Until we meet again on another starry lookout."

Alexei had a hard time controlling his emotion. The person he loved the most was turning him away, and turning him back to a world where he felt at odds.

When the tears streamed down Alexei's face, his father wiped them away. "There is nothing to mourn, only for your heart to expand in many new directions. Go. Go to her," he urged.

Wiping the tears from his face, Alexei made

out Beatrice through the blur of wetness, which covered his eyes. He said nothing to her, only encouraged her to follow him back to the elevator.

One again, the pleasant people of Godorah smiled, while Alexei attempted to hide his tears. If the others didn't notice, Beatrice did. She remained silent, waiting for him to open up about the experience until the elevator reached the main path below.

When the door opened, Alexei stepped out with the residents. Beatrice lagged behind. "Alexei!" she called, "that was your father, right?"

He nodded and walked toward her. "He told me it's not my time."

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know. I guess we're not really dead," he said with a shrug and started walking the direction of their abode.

"Then what are we?" she asked, and then responded to her own question, "Travelers in both time and space."

"To be where I have been, right," he

continued the lyric.

“Led Zeppelin,” Beatrice.

“Yeah, but I don’t think this is Kashmir.”

“If it’s not our time, if we’re not really dead.

How do we get back?” Beatrice asked.

“I don’t know, but I have a feeling trying to think up a way out, is not the answer. We’re just supposed to go with it, and one day we’ll wake up and we’ll be home.”

Beatrice nodded. She heard the phrase, “wake up” before and she knew it was often referenced as an insult from many who thought they had superior knowledge to an undetermined truth, yet here they all are, plodding through Godorah with no idea what they’re doing. “That could take years,” she said with a laugh.

Chapter 24

Upon returning to their abode, they sat around an empty table. Anna rested her forehead on the edge, continuing to sob over her missing son. Melody mourned her grandmother. Brian wrapped his arm around Melody's shoulder, holding her close to him.

Bruce noticed the emptiness, not just at the table, but in all their hearts. "I know this may not sound encouraging, but this loss is here to teach us about perceptions and about what we hold the dearest. There is no doubt today, we have all learned where our hearts truly lie, and we can thank Cassie Lockhart for that."

He stopped talking when a laser light beam cut through the metal wall and in walked Alexei and Beatrice. From the look on their faces', especially Alexei's expression, he knew their experiences were similar. Beatrice took a seat at the table, while Alexei remained standing. After

his meeting with his father, he wasn't sure where he belonged – to the permanence of the God State, or was this just a transition for him, for any of them.

“Glad you two returned, because I wanted to say this to all of you,” Bruce said. “We all may be mourning someone, or something in our own way, but I do believe we have found our family, our extended family, our soul family. Regardless of what happens from here on out, we have each other. We're not just passengers on a space shuttle ride, but a ride through life. We belong to one another.”

Beatrice nodded tearfully, and reached over to hug Bruce. “I believe so too.”

“What are we supposed to do? Let go of those we lost and loved?” Anna cried. “I'm not ready for that.”

“Who is? My father passed over ten years ago, and I still miss him. I will always miss him, even if he turns me away.” Alexei responded.

Melody lifted her tear-stained face. “Turned

you away?”

Alexei dug his hands into the pockets of his corduroy pants. “Yes.” He glanced around the table. “He told me it’s not my time. I have more work to do.”

“What does that mean?” Melody questioned, turning to Bruce for answer.

“Who knows anything in this place,” Bruce replied and reached out to take Beatrice and Sandeep’s hands, who in turn reached out for another’s hand until they sat in a circle holding each other’s hand. “All I know is this journey, we are destined to take together.”

Anna was the first to break the bonding of held hands. She rose from her seat, pressing her hand to her heart. “I think I need some time to myself,” she said and walked toward the metal wall. With a quick swipe of her finger, she found herself in a single room, with one bed and nightstand, where a tea setting awaited for her alone.

She poured herself a cup of tea. An exotic

smell of jasmine filled the room. Sitting on the bed, she stared at the stars through the dome window. Tears streamed down her cheeks, but this time they were not of mourning, but of love and oneness.

This was the first time in her entire life, not sure if dead, she had time to herself, to be by herself and most importantly, be herself. She lived for others, her parents, her husband and her sons. She believed as they did, never giving herself the time to think for herself.

“Man, have I been stupid,” she said with a laugh and wiped away the wetness on her face with the sleeve of her intarsia sweater. Resting back against the wall, her pillow offering soft support for her lower back, she admired the starry sky, as if twinkling just for her. She could feel the magic.

In the room he shared with Beatrice, Alexei stared out through the glass dome, seeing the entire universe expand before him.

“That could be yours,” she said from the

bed.

Lowering his head, Alexei tried to choke back the emotions surfacing. He turned around, finding Beatrice, a beautiful woman in a bed they shared. “Can that be mine?” he asked with a widening smile.

“It already is,” she said, patting a space on the bed beside her.

He rested alongside her, yet continued to study the sky. “I’ve read the universe keeps expanding, the distance between planets and stars growing further apart, leaving nothing but empty space between. Sometimes, I feel it is the same with humanity. We are expanding and the space between us growing. If so, what does that say for us?”

Beatrice folded her legs in front of her, leaning forward. She had spent so much time consumed with herself and her career, she now realized she was a part of the division of souls. A sudden giggle escaped her lips. “Funny, you and I both spend our days, participants in the separation

of society. Me, always pushing the truth, and you falsehoods. Together, we are partners in the confusion.” She reached out for his hand. “We can be partners in unity.”

“Why did she keep on walking? Why didn’t she want to walk with me?” Melody asked.

Brian knelt on the edge of the bed in the room they now shared. He shrugged. He was never good at these conversations, perhaps the reason why he never had a meaningful relationship with a woman, but there was something about Melody that made him want to try. He admired her so much – her feistiness, her spirit, and her passion. Now he was in the position to pull her up.

“Maybe she was taking a different path,” he said without much thought, but it seemed to do the trick when he saw her eyes light up.

“Yes. Yes. I believe you’re right,” she said.

“I am?” Brian questioned unsure.

She stood from the bed and circled the room, stopping by the dome window, looking out into

space. "Isn't that what we've all be doing since we arrived here?"

Brian nodded. "Sure. I guess."

"Oh, it all makes sense now," she said, covering her hands over her heart. "Me and you, our journey together."

"We make sense?" he asked hopefully.

She laughed. "I know right. Sounds crazy. But in a weird way, we're meant for each other." She paused, admiring him on the bed. He had the brightest blue eyes, yet deep and somber, which melted her heart. "I mean, like we were meant to have this experience together."

"Yeah, yeah. I know what you mean," he said, careful not to have any hint of romance into his voice. "Like friends."

Joining him on the bed, she smiled. "Like friends."

He relaxed back on the bed and watched a shooting star cross the sky. "I guess friends for eternity."

She kissed him on the cheek and cuddled

close. “Nice, huh?”

“Real nice,” he said, wrapping his arm around her shoulder.

Sandeep circled the room he shared with Bruce, with a sense he was missing out. He didn’t score with any of the woman, and none of his past relatives met with him in the park. It was as if he was there, but not really. It’s the same at home, in chaotic India – he’s just filler in the mass population.

“What’s the matter?” Bruce asked from his twin bed.

“Nothing,” Sandeep muttered.

Bruce rolled on his side, propping himself on his elbow. “You’re wondering why you ended up with me?”

“Well yes. It’s the same wherever I go. I end up surrounded by people, but totally alone,” he said standing at the window gazing upon the universe. “No one sees me. No one thinks I’m special. I’m just a gnat in any conversation others

are trying to swat away.”

A light shined through their wall. Lars appeared with the cart. “Hello boys,” he said with a gleeful smile.

Bruce sat upright. “Tell us about your life here in Godorah, Lars. You always seem so happy.”

Lars placed a bowl of steaming seafood stew on Bruce’s bedside table. He gleamed. “I serve others.”

Sandeep turned around from the window. “Don’t you feel used and under-appreciated?”

“Under-appreciated? Oh no. Service is not out there,” he said, patting his chest, “It’s in here. I never feel nothing but joyful.” He rested a bowl of chicken masala on Sandeep’s bedside table. “Enjoy.” He bowed slightly and exited through the wall.

“Do you feel under-appreciated?” Bruce asked of Sandeep.

He sat on his bed, and stirred his masala with a spoon. “I work for a help desk. I help, serve

dozens of people every day. I am friendly, nice to everyone, and the majority of them are rude.”

“Most people are dealing with a frustration, and they take it out on the person trying to help them,” Bruce replied.

“Well, that’s just great for me. Alexei and I share a similar path. Both anonymous, he stirs up trouble, I try to help people. He gets attention from the girls, I get ignored.”

Bruce took a whiff of his stew. It smelled glorious. With all the water pollution and toxic seafood at home, he rarely allowed himself to enjoy one of his favorite dishes, except those occasions when he felt especially rebellious against the world. To be honest, he understood Sandeep, and perhaps that’s why he was stuck with him. *Stuck with him. Yes, that’s the problem*, he thought. *No person should be thought of as being ‘stuck with them.’* “I think that’s why we are here together,” Bruce said.

Sandeep glanced up. “Why?”

“I have spent most of my time alone. First,

when I realized my sexual orientation. I was different and ashamed. Occasionally, when I dared to open up to others, I faced bitter rejection. Then, I grew to love my time alone too much. I was even going to fly into space myself. Distanced from my family, a few lovers who come and go, but no real intimate partner.”

“I don’t understand. I’m not gay,” Sandeep replied.

“You’re not. But you’re lonely, looking for a true mission in life,” Bruce said.

“I don’t want a mission, I want to do the missionary position with a beautiful woman,” Sandeep said.

Bruce laughed. “Well, then see. Perhaps love is your mission.”

“Then how come I cannot find love?”

Resting back on his bed, Bruce studied the universe’s much closer view than what he had through his telescope at home. He sensed an expanding sensation in his chest, which traveled to his mind and core. He hadn’t felt this way since an

eager, young man in search of himself. Once he believed he found himself, was the moment he realized he went on the path, as he decided to tell others to find themselves. The truth is, no one ever really finds themselves. It takes a lifetime.

Sandeep's question was a hard one to answer, since he too never really found love, but what he witnessed with the others, was true love had to do with opening up vulnerability, something he to this date failed to do. "I'd say let it go. Let love go. It will always be there."

"I see what you're saying. Let it go and love will find you." Sandeep sighed. He dipped his spoon into his masala. "I just get tired of waiting."

"Well, stop waiting and start living," Bruce said and then took a sip of his stew. Fresh and delicious. "I sense another book."

Chapter 25

By now, Godorah felt like home, and those they believed were their enemy, were now friends, family or even lovers. It was hard to believe that a peaceful existence descended upon them, and the next morning at breakfast, they shared their own favorite meals with each other – family style. Blintzes, Eggs Benedict, biscuits and gravy, homemade banana pancakes, waffles, huevos rancheros and Indian umpa, each having a taste of what the other enjoys.

When they finished eating the topic of discussion was what to do with the day. After so many challenging episodes, the popular choice was relaxation, not intent on enjoying the sights of Godorah, but to enjoy each other. Alexei was the first to rise from the table. He kissed Beatrice on the top of the head, and casually walked through the metal door.

“You two aren’t going to be attached at the

hip this morning?” Brian asked.

Beatrice finished the last bit of umpa on her plate, and wiped her lips with the napkin. “No. We all need our space.”

“Space, ironic concept isn’t it?” Bruce said. “Here we are, somewhere in space, needing space from one another.”

She sipped her tea. “Not from one another, for ourselves.”

Melody glanced over her shoulder at the metal wall where Alexei exited. She rose from her chair and followed him.

“Now where are you going?” Brian asked.

“Space,” she said with a smile, and as soon as she exited, Anna pursued behind. “Wait for me!”

Outside their globe abode, Anna hurried up the pathway, deeper into the forest. This time she was unafraid. She had no agenda and nothing to prove, she only needed a bit of camaraderie from those who shared her experience of seeing a loved one.

Climbing up high on stone steps, she saw

Alexei and Melody seated on a ledge, looking over the edge at Godorah's mountain-scape. "Can I sit with you two?" she asked.

"Of course, hon," Melody said, patting the ground alongside her.

Anna sat down and looked across the canyon at the ridge to the other side with towering conifer trees, and the globe domes sparkling in the morning light. "It really is a beautiful place."

"Much nicer than St. Louis," Melody remarked.

"Do you miss it?" Anna asked.

"It's home. The streets raised me." Melody rested back on her hands. "I remember as a child, we'd play stick ball in the street and on very hot days, the firemen opened the hydrants. I would come home dirty, soaking wet, and exuberant. My grandmother had a pan of fried chicken on the stove and apple cake in the oven. I'll tell you, I don't think I could imagine a better childhood. Me, my grandmother and mother, we didn't have much, but we had each other, we had it all." She laughed

lightly. “Isn’t it funny, the life we complain about as adults, is something we cherished as child. How about you, Alexei?”

A cool breeze wisped through the trees. A chill ran down his spine, providing him his favorite childhood memory. “In kindergarten, the teachers would have us put on swimsuits and take us out to play in the snow.”

“That’s horrible. Why would they torture you like that? Aren’t there laws for making children take off their clothes and in the freezing cold, no less?” Anna asked.

Alexei grinned. “One child’s torture is another child’s fun. We all looked forward to it. They’d exercised us in the hot saunas, sent us outside in freezing weather, dump cold water on us and head back in for a cup of tea. Good times!”

Both Melody and Anna gave him an incredulous stare.

“It increased our ability to ward off viruses, and strengthened our resistance to the elements. Why do you think we Russians are so tough?”

“And you didn’t catch a cold?” Anna asked.

“I rarely catch colds,” he said. “It’s not the weather that makes us sick, it’s how we resist it.”

Anna faced forward, reflecting on her mothering. “I try very hard, but my son, Samuel always gets sick. I make homemade organic meals for my children, and they’re always sicker than the children who eat the crap from grocery stores. I don’t understand. If I wasn’t such a failure, my son wouldn’t be lost here in Godorah.”

Melody placed her arm around Anna’s shoulder. “Honey, something tells me you are an exceptional mother, we just can’t control the fate of others. Even as a girl, I worried about losing my grandmother. She was the one who raised me when my mother was busy working two jobs to support us. After the shooting at Charleston church, I worried someone would murder her at her bible study. There were times I’d go there just to stand guard. I sometimes wonder what I’d do without her. Now, here she doesn’t want to be with me, as if we didn’t even know each other.

“It’s not that,” Alexei said, “our time has just passed with them.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Melody asked.

“My father told me it’s not my time.” He glanced upward at the sunny Godorah sky. “I guess we all have different timelines, not my time to be with my father just yet.”

“So that’s it?” Melody asked. “We’re all just crossing each other at different times. Huh.”

“I just wish I had more time,” Anna said, reflecting.

“Don’t we all,” Alexei replied.

Melody laughed. “You’re pretty wise for a troll.”

“Even us underworld dwellers see the light at times,” Alexei joked.

“So what’s it you see in the princess?” Melody asked.

Alexei sat back and reflected. “My truth.”

Melody nodded, thinking of Brian. “Yeah, I hear you. Rebel boy sparks my passion, yet at the

same time tames me. I kinda love that.” She smiled. “Don’t tell him I said that.”

“If you keep my secret about Beatrice being my truth,” Alexei teased.

Melody extended her hand to Alexei to shake on their solidarity. “Deal.”

Beatrice stood to clear the table, and at the moment, she loved Godorah. All she had to do was touch the plate and it vanished. Cleaning had never been so easy. If only she had this skill as a bachelorette journalist in Manhattan. *Maybe I would have had more dinner parties.*

“Do you think a woman like Melody could truly love a man like me?” Brian asked.

“What makes you think she doesn’t. She has been with you this whole time,” she responded, running her hand over the table, making crumbs disappear. “This is wonderful. I love this place.”

“But I mean she’s here with me in Godorah, what if we were back on Earth?” he continued his questioning. “You’re a woman. Why Alexei?”

Would you be with him back home?”

Beatrice stood erect, and paused to give Brian a thoughtful response. “I would have never thought so, but that’s love, it comes as a surprise. You go along doing and being everything that people expect of you, and as soon as you let go, you find what you truly need.”

“When did you realize you needed him?”

She smiled, knowing the answer immediately. “The moment I saw him. I mean, it wasn’t love at first sight, but I knew the way he confronted me, challenged me without being rude or offensive he was what I needed. He challenged me with his own perspective, one I could see, but so often denied.”

Brian slumped in his seat. “Well then I’m screwed. I was nothing but rude and offensive to Melody.”

“And if I recall the thread, she gave it right back to you. If you ask me, you two deserve each other. You were what each other needed,” Beatrice replied.

Sandeep appeared through the metal wall, which separated the main room he shared with Bruce. “What are we doing today?”

Beatrice regarded Brian and Sandeep, two people she wouldn't have thought of spending time with, however, today it seemed only fitting. “I don't know. Let's check out the Godorah brochure.”

“No more water walks, or echoing canyons, or memorial parks,” Brian said.

“How about we walk down into the town,” Beatrice suggested.

“I don't know. Last time Mel and I did people were rude,” Brian said.

“That was a few days ago. Things have changed. We have changed.” She glanced at Sandeep in his sunny intarsia sweater. “And this time we have Sandeep. Everyone loves him.”

“Sure, then how come I can't get a girl?” he asked, as Beatrice guided him toward the metal wall.

“We'll work on that,” she said, pushing him

through. “You next, Brian.” When he walked through, she turned to see Bruce exiting the bedroom. “What about you? Do you want to come with us?”

Bruce pointed to his head. “No, today I think I’m going to do some soul-wondering.”

“Have a blast.” She strode through the metal wall, meeting Sandeep and Brian outside. She hooked her arms around theirs and strolled down the path. Soon they came into contact with fellow Godorah residents, who greeted them with hellos and smiles.

The jingling of wind chimes welcomed them as they strolled down the main street. Here, there were no globe domes, but earthly buildings of brick and wood with front porches. On one of the porches an old-timey fellow rocking in a chair, while others sat around his feet, listening to his stories, Beatrice, Brian and Sandeep stood in the middle of the road, as people meandered by.

“It’s like straight off a postcard,” Brian said. He looked over at the old-timey fellow. “And he

looks like Colonel Sanders.”

“Or Mark Twain. Yes, and I never quite trusted perfection. As much as I tried, there was always something wrong,” Beatrice said.

“What are you two worried about?” Sandeep asked. “Where I come from, you’re lucky to make it home alive without being overrun by people.” He gestured to the porch with the old-timey man. “Want to check him out?”

Hesitantly, Beatrice and Brian followed Sandeep. As they approached the steps, a few Godorah residents made room for them to sit. When Beatrice sat down, a young boy jumped in her lap. The boy gazed up at her eyes, and she saw Alexei’s expression. She thought to push the boy away, but instead held him lovingly in her arms, as a mother would a son, wondering if this was a Godorah premonition.

A woman, wearing an intarsia sweater, and dowdy long skirt exited through a wooden screen door with a tray of glasses filled with lemonade. No matter how many people arrived, she never ran

out of refreshments.

Brian sipped from his glass, and immediately sensed a swelling of love and affection, what was lacking his entire life, and what his parents failed to give him. He watched Beatrice with the young boy and imagined what a son with Melody may look like.

Next to Brian, Sandeep perched forward, taking a drink of lemonade. To his astonishment, a pretty young Godorah woman, dressed in a pink intarsia sweater, rested her head on his shoulder. He smiled, putting his hand around her waist, and the girl didn't flinch from his touch.

"Welcome friends," the old-timey man said. "I see many of you are new to our quaint home and so many looking for love and friendship." Butterflies of all species fluttered around their heads. "Let me tell you a story of the butterflies. They start off as creepy crawlers. Surely, they can be cute and fuzzy, but they inch along living a lonely life, careful not to be bird bait. They munch on leaves, occasionally meeting up with another

creepy crawler. It's a precarious, precious, yet solitary existence. Eventually they spin themselves up in a cocoon. Alone they transform. There is no one inside telling them how, or what they should change into, they simply allow the process to occur, and then one day, they emerge into a butterfly, and they join their fellow butterflies, migrating to exotic locales. You understand, the change you must go through, is yours alone, and once you do you will be united with your like kind. It's only natural, and it's the only way."

From the expression on the people's face, they all received the message and well-understood. Everyone here had their own personal journey to Godorah, and now they all lived together as one. It's only those who don't follow their own path, who remain on the side of dissension.

Brian was the first to stand, and Beatrice wasn't sure of his reaction by his expression. She tenderly pushed the young boy from her lap, yet gave him a goodbye hug. Sandeep, however, needed to be pried from the young woman.

“Sandeep, we’re leaving,” Beatrice said.

“You two go ahead,” he replied.

Beatrice gave him a stern motherly look. He politely said goodbye to the woman he offered solace with his shoulder. “I finally have a pretty girl by my side and you want to drag me away,” he said.

“Where there’s one, there are others,” Beatrice said.

“What if there’s not. You two found love. What if I’m supposed to spend eternity without?” he asked.

“I highly doubt that. Be a butterfly. The transformation is yours, and when you emerge all the beautiful butterflies will surround you.” She looked ahead and saw a painted wooden sign, which read: Tarot and Tea. “Let’s check it out.”

“Yeah, I don’t know if I want my tarot cards read,” Brian said.

“Well heck, it’s not like you’ll get the death card,” she replied with a chuckle, and stepped up onto the porch of the Tarot and Tea shop.

The porch was decorated with ferns and potted flowers, a sweet welcome to all visitors, however, upon opening the door, with a lace curtain hanging in the window, a bell chimed. They entered a dark room, which foretold of unsavory events.

Just as they were about to step back outside, a wicked looking woman emerged from the back room. “My lovelies, allow me to show you to a table.”

Brian gazed around the interior – cobwebs, dusty jars with petrified toads and bugs. “I’ll wait outside.”

The wicked woman grinned, exposing crooked, grey teeth. “Oh heavens no. In the back, you can feel the warmth of the ovens.”

Sandeep turned back to leave, but the door was locked.

“Please,” the wicked woman pleaded, “come join your friends. They are getting toasty.”

“Toasty, you don’t mean?” Beatrice questioned.

“They’re cooking up some sweet goodness.” She reached out her wart-covered fingers. “Come.”

Concerned about Alexei, Beatrice dared to follow the woman.

“Where are you going?” Brian whispered to Beatrice.

“To meet Alexei and the others,” Beatrice responded through her teeth.

Brian and Sandeep lagged behind. As they went deeper into the house, a putrid smell filled their nostrils. It must have been bodies roasting in the ovens. Death, they were sure of it.

The woman pulled back a tattered curtain and gestured them into another room. Beatrice glanced back and Brian and Sandeep were both shaking their heads no. The woman tugged at Beatrice’s sleeve and pulled her inside. She closed her eyes, fearing the worst possible fate. When she finally opened them, shock fell over her face.

“Yes, we too had the same fear,” Alexei said, seated at a table with Melody and Anna. “Tea

is quite good, and the powdered cookies, to die for.”

Before her, Beatrice saw her friends seated by a sunny window, creating halos around their heads. The ovens of which the wicked woman spoke did offer warmth, as well as the delightful smell of baking ginger cookies.

“Please,” the wicked woman said, pushing Beatrice toward the table.

Beatrice took a seat at the table alongside Alexei. Soon Brian and Sandeep dared to join. They too were gratefully surprised they were not walking into a torturous fate.

“Where’d you guys come from?” Brian asked, taking a seat alongside Melody.

“Quiet reflection on the ridge,” she said with a smile, “Getting to know each other, getting to know ourselves.” She poured Brian and Sandeep tea. “What about you?”

“We listened to a story of the butterflies,” Sandeep said.

“And it seems one fluttered to him,” Beatrice

replied.

Alexei raised his teacup to Sandeep. “Where there is one, there are others.”

“Interesting, that is what Beatrice said,” Brian responded. “Beatrice, tell Alexei about the little boy who crawled on your lap.” He winked. “Seems she has the motherly instinct after all.”

Beatrice sipped her tea and kicked Brian under the table.

“Oh, I miss my little boy. I hope I find him soon,” Anna said, resting her head on Sandeep’s shoulder.

“Hey man, you’re a babe magnet today,” Melody said with a laugh.

The woman returned to their table. “Now, would you like to read your tarot cards?”

Beatrice waved her hand. “No thank you. I think we all know our fate.”

“Do you?” the wicked woman asked, handing Beatrice a blank card.

As soon as she touched it, she read the word: Judgment. Her heart sank, as she had been trying to

escape it her entire life.

The woman placed her bony hand on Beatrice's shoulder. "You are entering a new phase in life, a phase of personal insight." She rested her palm on Beatrice's head. "I sense you're curious as to your partner's fate. She handed Alexei a blank card.

He gasped seeing the picture of a fool emerge on the card. Of course, he had to be a fool for believing he could have a life with Beatrice.

"You can look forward to a new beginning filled with trust and optimism," the wicked-woman said with a wrinkled smile. Next, she handed one to Brian.

Shocked, he could barely speak when the picture appeared. "The hanged man? Seriously?"

"You are surrendering yourself to a new perspective, one in which you can see through the eyes of this lovely woman," she said, gesturing to Melody, and handing her a card.

Carefully, Melody handled, unsure of her fate. When the words appeared, she read,

“Temperance?”

“Sensibility and balance,” the wicked woman said, handing Anna and Sandeep their cards.

Anna watched as a picture of a tower appeared. She looked to the woman with curiosity.

“Honey, your walls are coming down and offering you a wider perception.”

A huge smile crossed Sandeep’s face as the picture of the lovers appeared. “Yes. I knew it! I am a lover.”

“You always have been,” the woman said. “Now, if you don’t mind, I need to remove the gingerbread men from the oven. I can hear their snapping.”

As the woman teetered off to tend to her cookies, they all pondered over their fates, nothing none would have guessed, but true.

“What happened to our fearless leader?” Melody asked.

“He wanted to be alone. I fear our fearless leader is growing tired of us,” Beatrice said.

“Us?” Brian questioned. “The fool, the hanged man, lover, how could he ever bore of us?”

Alexei raised his teacup to Brian, and the others followed. “Cheers,” they all said in unison.

Chapter 26

Bruce paced their globe dome. It had been a while since he had been alone. He was comfortable with his own company above all others. At times he saw it as a curse, often wishing it wasn't the case, and sometimes envious of those who ran with the crowds, but what he realized those he chose to travel on this adventure with him were souls like him, all individuals searching for their own place.

The social media post where they all came into contact was a place of self-expression, hoping another would see them, hear them, and respond to them. No one was truly looking for a fight. They were looking for friends with wounded hearts, and fractured minds.

He paused gazing through the dome window. Before him was the mountain ridge on the other side of the canyon, and the sun shining its light, lighting all Godorah's dome homes up like light

bulbs. He laughed at the perception, each Godorah resident illuminated by their own insights and inspiration, as they too have been doing since they arrived here.

Bruce switched on his voice recorder and spoke into it. “Ah ha. Eureka!” he exclaimed as if he made a great discovery. “The same source gives us light, but it is for us to turn it on, and to know how to use it. Some people’s light shines so bright, they dim others around him.” He paused, turning off his recorder. *Is that me? Do I give others the opportunity to shine? He wasn’t so sure, thinking of all those he dismissed and worse corrected. Who am I to dictate how another lives and correct their foibles? Who am I to determine another’s path?*

He clicked on his recorder to continue. “Each has their own wisdom. We’re all born with it. It doesn’t matter what religion we follow, or what books we read, the path of the soul is always unique. Sometimes we’re lucky to find those who cross our paths as guides and teachers, or to help

us through a particularly thorny passage.” He turned the recorder off, realizing he the self-help expert, was being schooled by his passengers. This was not a lesson for them, but for him. He had watched them see past their differences, and expand their perceptions. He wondered what was his lesson, what was he to learn, and then it came to him; he didn’t know everything. He was flawed and imperfect.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, his ego wounded, he thought of what do next. *How to I interact with those I tried to teach, but are now my teachers?*

He didn’t have to wonder too long. Sandeep burst through the metal door and immediately gazed down at Bruce sensing something wrong. “I’m sorry. Did I disturb you?”

“Never,” Bruce said, he rose and gave him a big hug. “This place can challenge the mind.”

“Tell me about it, tell us all about it,” he said, encouraging Bruce to join them in the main room.

He walked through the metal door, watching all those who were once at each other's throat, talking and laughing. "I guess you all had a good day," he said.

"I'm sure we can all safely say we survived Godorah today with no mental or emotional stress," Brian said.

Bruce clasped his fingers together. "Perhaps we can find something to do together this evening?"

"Sure, whatever you want, Bruce baby," Melody said, chilling in her seat.

Bruce flipped through Godorah's brochure. A grin crossed his face. "It says here they have an outdoor theater. How about we take in a movie?" he asked.

"Depends on the movie," Brian said.

Bruce read aloud the choices, "Danger at Echo Canyon,"

"Ah no," Melody replied. "I had a enough of Echo Canyon."

He continued to read the movies, "You Had

Me at the Garden of Eden.””

Alexei smirked and Beatrice let out a loud sigh. ““No.””

“The Water Walk Way Between Us,” Bruce read.

“Isn’t there anything less challenging?” Anna asked. “We’ve been through it all.”

“Okay,” Bruce started, “How about ‘The Story of Us?’”

“Could be interesting,” Beatrice remarked. “Maybe we can learn more about the people of Godorah.”

Everyone nodded their agreement, a simple, easy-going movie they can all relax at was what was on the Godorah menu.

The sun set over the Godorah ridge in spectacular fashion, as they exited their globe abode. They walked together in silence, simply waiting for the opportunity to arise, and like many times, George appeared to offer them direction.

Standing at a cross roads, with two wooden

arrows pointed in various directions, he asked, “What can I do for you folks?”

“We’re looking for Godorah’s outdoor theater. We’re going to see ‘The Story of Us,’” Brian said.

George grinned, wringing his hands. “Excellent.” He pointed toward the path on the right. “All you have to do is keep walking, and you won’t miss it.”

The path they walked narrowed, making it navigable one person at a time. It was follow the leader, and in this particular case it was Beatrice in the lead. Doubt surfaced in her mind when she recalled how she was kicked out of her first Godorah meditation. Hopefully her vibration had improved since she first arrived. They continued winding around deeper into the woods. The sun now completely set and only the stars offered light as a guide.

“You don’t think George would steer us wrong?” Melody asked.

“I have no idea what George’s intentions

are,” Alexei said.

“Who does?” Anna replied.

Ahead they saw a bright light shining above the trees, and they knew they were drawing closer. When Beatrice came to the end of the path, she witnessed a large amphitheater, with several groups of people seated facing a large screen.

Brian led them down an empty row followed by Melody and Alexei with Sandeep and Bruce seated at the far end. Seated together, waiting for the movie to start, Lars appeared with a box tray slung around his neck. “Greetings friends,” he said in his usual chipper tone. “Snacks? Carbonated beverage?”

“Of course,” Brian said. “Who wants to watch a movie without snacks?”

“Yes indeedie,” Lars chirped and handed him a large box of Goobers. “You can share with your lovely lady,” he said nodding toward Melody.

“My favorite,” Melody replied.

Brian’s eyes widened as if their shared love of Goobers was a sign their relationship was fated.

“Mine too.”

“And for you pretty woman,” Lars said, resting his hand on a large box of plain organic popcorn. He refrained, put it back and pulled out another box. “Wait. No. I think this is better suited for you, caramel for you.”

Anna reached for the box. “Just like the Indiana State Fair. I always loved it as a child.”

“Memories are so sweet.” From his box tray, Lars lifted a candy box and handed to Bruce, “Mike and Ike’s.”

Bruce laughed. “Why of course. Nothing better than Mike and Ike.”

“What about me?” Sandeep spoke up.

“Can’t forget about you. Here is a box of candy hearts,” Lars said, turning his attention to Beatrice. “Sweet, luscious licorice for you and for your friend.” He glanced at Alexei. “How about a soft pretzel for a big softy.”

Alexei took the pretzel presented to him. “Big, but not soft.”

Beatrice choked up a laugh. “Please. Just eat

your pretzel.”

Just as Lars walked on to serve another Godorah group, the lights dimmed around them and a bright light shined on the screen and the title, “The Story of Us,” appeared on the screen. They sat back happily munching on their chosen snack until the film showed them caught in the tin capsule room when they first awoke in Godorah. Awkwardly, they watched themselves fighting, bickering, blaming each other and trying to escape their imprisonment.

“What is going on here?” Melody asked as others in the Godorah audience laughed. “Are we supposed to be some sort of joke?”

Brian sat forward trying to see the movie through the perspective of another resident, but all he saw was blackness on the screen.

“Do you mind? We’re trying to watch our movie,” the Godorah resident said, scolding Brian.

He sat back, watching himself and Melody smudged with sage. Everyone laughed. “This is bullshit.”

The movie cut to him and Melody laying in the grass holding hands. “Awe,” the group sighed at the sweet sight, while Brian and Melody sunk bashfully in their seat.

Next the movie flashed to scenes of the game show with Bruce, Anna and Sandeep, and then to Beatrice being kicked out of a meditation. “Maybe what you need is a vibrator,” they listened to Alexei repeat on screen. Everyone roared with laughter.

“Hey, that was private,” Beatrice whined.

Throughout the theater Godorah residents laughed and cried as if watching a different movie, and they were. Each was watching their own story unfold before them. For Bruce and his group, they watched themselves bicker with one another, then battle demons within themselves. They witnessed the blooming of friendships and love relationships.

Beatrice squeezed Alexei’s hand and wrapped her other arm around Anna’s shoulder. Feeling the warmth of friendship, Anna reached for Sandeep’s hand and sensing the bonds, he held

onto Bruce's hand. Alongside Beatrice, Alexei turned and smiled at Melody as he took her hand and she hugged Brian's shoulder with her other arm. Together they became one as their story came to close and the film ended in a bright white light.

Chapter 27

A bright light shined in Beatrice's eyes as if someone was shining a flashlight directly at her. Unnerved, she opened her eyes and witnessed the glowing halo surrounding the soft curve of Earth below. The sight was magnificent. She placed her gloved hand to the shuttle window as if trying to attempt to touch the glow. Tears welled in her eyes and flooded her face. Yet a lump of disappointment filled her chest, realizing their time in Godorah had passed and they were back floating above the Earth. Within a couple hours she would be back on ground, and within a day back in New York to her lonely apartment. She had come to love her life, her friends and the crazy times they shared. Hard to believe the period they shared together was little more than a blip of time. *Was it real, or was it a dream? Did I fall asleep on the ride? What happened?*

Turning inside the shuttle, she saw Alexei offer her the sweetest smile. She reached across

the aisle. He was it; he was her change, and her occupation. Yes, she made her determination several miles above the Earth. Love of career wouldn't be all that fulfill her, there were lovers and friends she needed to include in her life.

Alexei squeezed Beatrice's hand, never wanting to let go. He had her in Godorah, will he have her back home? He wondered. *No. I'm not going to let her slip away.* First thing he decided to do when they landed would be to talk to her about possible job leads. Surely, with all they experienced, the very least he could do was help her start a new life in America.

He glanced forward making eye contact with Melody. Both shared the same strained smile. *Crazy how life turns out.* Melody thought as her attention turned to Brian. *All the men I've met during the protests, who do I fall for? Johnny F'ing Rebel?* She admired him, studying him as he watched the Earth pass below. He had such a casual nature about him, which soothed her fiery spirit. She laughed realizing she needed him.

Hearing her chuckle through his earpiece, he

turned and gave her a “What?” look. From the light in her eyes, he knew it was love, something he never found in Lithonia, Georgia, but found in a spirited woman from St. Louis. *Life has strange paths, he thought, mine had to go through Godorah to find my way to St. Louis.*

Soaring above the Earth, Anna felt her confidence surge. She had survived on her own without her family and husband. She congratulated herself silently and knew upon landing what she learned and how she felt would only make herself a better mother and wife. She turned and offered Sandeep a huge grin.

Ahead in the front seat, with his heart full of love for his new friends Sandeep glanced back at the rest with a huge smile and a thumbs up. Through their headsets in their helmets they all heard each other’s light-hearted chuckles and sighs of relief. They had made it together.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain, Jenny, speaking. We will soon be entering the Earth’s atmosphere. Please pull the shade of your helmets back into the lock position and be

prepared for a very bumpy few minutes,” she spoke, coming through in the earpieces in their helmets.

Jenny wasn't lying. The shuttle shook violently. This time, instead of grasping for the armrests, everyone reached across the aisle for the others' hand - Melody for Brian's, Anna for Sandeep, and both Alexei and Beatrice reached backwards to hold onto Bruce's hands.

As they launched into space enemies, they returned as friends and lovers. No matter how strong the ship swayed, there was no fear; they had each other. The clouds faded, bright blue seas became visible below and the shuttle came to an easy glide.

“Welcome home,” Jenny's voice echoed in their ears. “Below is the great Pacific Ocean, and in a few moments you will see the Hawaiian Islands come into view. You are now free to remove your helmets, and gloves, but please stay buckled in. We have another four hours until we land. “

Slowly, all removed their helmets, their tears

glistening on their cheeks.

“Whew!” Brain exclaimed. “That was some ride!”

All laughed, but none dared to speak of their true experience of Godorah. Was it real? Was it a figment of their individual imaginations? No one was ready to speak of what truly brought them together.

“Aloha!” Bruce called out as Hawaii came into view.

“Aloha!” they recited in unison.

Chapter 28

The descent was slow, starting as soon as they passed over Los Angeles, and the Mojave desert came into view. As the shuttle flew closer to the landing strip below throngs of people and reporters waited. From above in the sky, the faces of the people could not be recognized. In fact, Bruce and his group were surprised they were receiving such a reception.

When Angel Wings touched down on the runway, Jenny radioed back to the cabin. “This is Captain Jenny Tran, welcome home. We hope you all had the experience of a lifetime.” She then radioed to the tower. “Marsden tower, this is Captain Jenny Tran signing off from Angel Wings with another successful flight.”

At that moment, not a dry face was to be seen in Angel Wing’s passenger cabin, all heavy with emotion. The weight of the Earth felt good, yet all silently questioned their experience in the God State. They had shared so much, felt so much, only

to realize it was merely a moment in time. *What happened?* was their collective thought.

As John taxied Angel Wings across the tarmac toward the hanger, from the windows they watched their families waving, welcoming them home. When the shuttle finally came to a stop, the door opened and they were escorted off, carrying their helmets and gloves.

Sandeep was the first to exit and step down on the ground, but as soon as Anna appeared in the door, a young boy burst through the crowd and ran across the tarmac. “Mommy!” he yelled, running into her arms.

Anna rushed across the tarmac and lifted Samuel, hugging him tightly, and kissing his cheek. “My sweet little boy! I love you so much!”

Melody was next to take a step down from the shuttle. In the crowds she saw her mother and grandmother waving. Her mother raised a sign, which read: Melody, our super star. She sprinted to meet with her family, finding her grandmother very much alive. She hugged them in her arms. “I am so glad to see you! You can’t believe the adventure

we all had.”

Seeing the absolute joy in her granddaughter’s face, a look she had never seen before, her grandmother said, “Must have been a splendid sight, too bad I wasn’t there to see it with you.”

Pressing her hand to her chest, Melody responded. “You were. You are always with me.” She glanced over her shoulder, and beckoned Brian over. “I want to introduce you to my good friend.”

Brian approached Melody’s mother and grandmother with apprehension. *Will they approve of me?* He silently questioned, graciously shaking both their hands. “It’s a pleasure to meet you both.”

“What a handsome young man, and so well mannered,” her grandmother said.

Melody laughed. “I’ll agree with handsome. He is an EMT in Atlanta,” she mentioned proudly.

“What a noble profession,” Melody’s mother said with a wink. “It’s about time you found a good man.”

“Mother!” Melody protested.

Her mother smiled at Brian. "I'm just saying you deserve a good man."

Brian pressed his hand to his heart. "Your daughter inspired the best in me."

Melody blushed. Her mother and grandmother reacted in a boisterous yelp, both hugging Brian tightly. Perhaps after an entire life of dissension from his parents, he'd found a loving family.

Elsewhere, Sandeep's mother emerged from the crowd, traveling all the way from India to see her son land safely. She gave him a sloppy kiss on the cheek. "I am glad to see you home safely!"

"Mom," Sandeep replied sheepishly. "People are watching."

"Honey, people should watch you. You need to be seen," she replied, squeezing his cheek. "Especially by all the young ladies."

"Alexei! Alexei!" his mother shouted.

Alexei couldn't believe it. His mother and his sister were waiting for him. Of course, he knew they cared, but to travel from Russia to watch him arrive was something unexpected. "Your father

would have been so proud of you,” his mother said in Russian.

As he hugged both his mother and sister, another woman yelled his name. This time, it was the woman whom had stolen his heart. Beatrice neared Alexei and his family with Nigel.

“Alexei, this is Nigel, my editor. I was telling him about your talent for spinning stories,” she said with a wink.

Nigel reached out to shake Alexei’s hand. “If you’re interested, you’re welcome to submit a few columns for consideration. If they work out, I may have a position for you at Environmental News.”

“It’s an opportunity to spin truths instead of falsehoods,” Beatrice said.

“I would love that, sir,” Alexei said.

“Angels Wings passengers, can I have everyone’s attention?” Bruce yelled, waving his hands. When everyone turned toward him, he said, “I’d like a group picture!”

This time, instead of standing rigid and separate from one another, they pulled each other close wrapping their arms around each other’s

shoulders, smiling tearfully. They had made it. Not only did they survive the journey, all felt even more alive.

The photographer snapped several shots, while a videographer documented the occasion on film. Angel Wings crew, Jenny, John, and Tim joined them and then it was time for the ground crew and families.

Afterward everyone gathered around a long picnic table on a patio. The Mojave Desert sprawled to distant mountains on the horizon. The afternoon sun started its descent cooling the ground as the late afternoon waned into evening.

While they waited patiently for their food, keeping the conversation strictly on their trip around the planet with no mention of Godorah, a man with greying, slicked-back hair neared their table. "Greetings all," he stated above the chatter. The families turned to the man and smiled, while the passengers of Angel Wings glanced upward with mouths gaping and eyes widened. "My name is George and I work as Marsden's facility

director. I hope you all enjoyed your experience.”

Muttered appreciations came from the families, but the passengers remained stunned into silence. Melody was the first to break the quiet with a stuttered, “G...george?”

He offered her a knowing smile. “Yes, Miss Johnson, songstress of justice. That is indeed my name.”

She looked around at her fellow passengers, noticing the same questions in their exasperated expressions. *What happened? It was all so real, and the time? They seemingly were gone for a couple days, but it was only minutes in the shuttle?* So many questions came to mind. Her eyes landed on Anna. *Could it be she was right all along and it was just some show? All just some trick played on them?*

“B...but you live up there in the sky,” Anna said pointing upward and assuring Melody and the others they were not alone in their confusion.

“Yes,” George replied. “I live everywhere. Here, there,” he pointed to the sky, “up there.”

“So you really are G-,” Brian started but

couldn't bring himself to finish.

George chuckled. "G- it's the spot with us all, often we're just not aware." He glanced at Beatrice. "Isn't that right? Oh Yes! Oh Yes! Am I right?"

She blushed and mumbled her response. "I wouldn't know."

"Of course, you do," he said, gesturing toward Alexei. "We all feel it – joy." He surveyed the table. "Isn't that right?" He pressed his hand to his heart. "It's what we all long for no matter where we exist – here, there, everywhere. We long for joy in the sadness. It's like a ray of sunshine breaking through on a cloudy day. It's always there even if we can't feel it."

"You speak the truth, George," Anna's husband spoke up, unaware of his wife's experiences. He wrapped his arm around her and pulled her close. "It's what I wish most for my family – joy."

"Joy!" George exclaimed and glazed over the bewildered looks of the group and the curious glances of family members. "I hope you en-JOY

your meal. We've prepared something special for you all to share."

Lars appeared in blue Marsden Travels coveralls. "We got something to tempt every taste bud. He placed before the passengers and their families barbecue ribs, burgers, hotdogs, grilled salmon, kabobs with meats and vegetables, and salads from around the globe.

They partook of the meal, recalling the orgasmic deliciousness of the food of Godorah now here on Earth.

"These kabobs are heaven on Earth," Beatrice said with a slight moan.

Alexei offered her his plate. "You should try the ribs."

"And then there was woman," Melody joked.

Easily tempted, Beatrice snatched a rib from Alexei's plate. "We are all one, aren't we?" she said with a wink.

"Don't be jealous, Mel. You can have my wiener," Brian teased, gesturing to one of his hotdogs.

"This conversation suddenly sunk to new

levels of the moronic. Glad to see the menfolk haven't changed." Melody slunk in her seat. She broke into a wide smile and when she couldn't contain herself any more, she burst out into a loud laugh. This group of misfits she once felt at complete odds with were now her kin, and there were no boundaries to define them, not race, nor religion, or any ideology. They were in fact one. "I love you guys! Don't ever change!" she declared.

"And we love you, Mel," they all chanted back at her.

Soon their families picked up on a joke they must have been missing out on. "What happened up there?" Melody's mother asked.

The group was now forced to face their strange and unified experience. *What did happen? Did anything happen at all? Was it simply the euphoria of space and the sight of the planet? Were they drugged into having illusions? Was it all part of a master plan by Bruce, Rick Marsden and the George guy?* They sat stumped not quite sure how to answer the question.

Beatrice reflected and said the first thing that

came to mind. She came to realize it didn't much matter what happened, what anyone supposedly did, only that something did change in them. "Simple, we fell in love up in space," she replied.

"In three hours? How can anyone fall in love in three hours?" Sandeep's mother questioned.

Sandeep hugged his mother's shoulder. "You can't question what is already there, only just below the surface. Once it's ready to emerge, it will. It's unstoppable."

Alexei's mother sliced into her cheeseburger as if eating a steak. "And how is your father?" she asked matter-of-factly.

The group turned to Alexei curious to his response.

Alexei stared at her stunned. *How did she know? Did she know or just testing him?*

"He's up there," she continued. "I know. I talk to him every day in my prayers."

"Ma! That's so sweet," Alexei's sister responded, resting her head on her mother's shoulder.

Alexei sat uneasy, afraid to speak of it and

he didn't know why. "Yes. He's fine. In fact, he's good, very good, looking out for us from above."

His mother snapped her finger. "I knew it."

Gazing about the table, Beatrice noticed there was one important passenger missing. Sadly, no one welcomed him home from the trip. She rose from the table and walked away. She found him standing a few yards from the patio, staring at the sky. Approaching him from behind, she said. "I'm sorry to see you all alone. You should come join us."

He turned, offering an inspired smile. "You don't understand. I will never be alone again, none of us will."

Sensing someone behind her, she turned to see Alexei. He smiled down at her, and then turned his gaze to the sky. The others, Melody, Brian, Anna and Sandeep all circled around Bruce, arm in arm and hand in hand, together they stood.

"Seriously," Melody spoke up. "What happened up there?"

Beatrice turned around to face her. "Does it matter? All that matters is that it did. All that

matters, is we are forever connected.”

As everyone packed their bags and said their final goodbyes, Beatrice carried her tripod out to the desert, where she sat yesterday, before the flight took off. She focused her camera phone with the backdrop of a fiery sunset. Seeing herself in the camera, her image appeared dark and shadowy, and she liked it like that way.

Turning on the camera, she sat back and smiled. “Here I am, Beatrice Suffolk returning from space.” She sighed. “And boy, who would have thought it would be such an experience, like a dream I will now live out on Earth.”

She glanced upward. “I, like my fellow passengers, took off full of self-doubt for each other, and so full of our own personal ideologies. It really makes one realize it doesn’t make a difference what we think, only what we feel for one another and ourselves. It made me realize that the truth I seek as a journalist doesn’t have the same value as my truth within myself, and often that is the hardest to confront.”

Pausing she reflect, she took a deep breath. “And so that is why, this will be my last broadcast for Environmental News. There will always be another to carry on the mission, but for me personally, my new mission is life and living it with love. So, take care world, Mother Nature is in good hands who is ever up to the task, and in the meantime, be good to one another. This is Beatrice Suffolk signing off.” She leaned forward and switched off the camera.

The end.