

PART I

CHAPTER 1

Mexico, 1968

It is late summer when I stand on the crater's edge of a 17,000-foot Mexican volcano, wondering if Quetzalcoatl, my mystical dragon-bird, or Xochil, my Aztec girlfriend standing beside me, would save my young Californian butt if Popocatepetl blew. I look behind me and see no easy escape down the steep, unstable slope that took us hours to climb.

My sandy hair is blown back by a cold wind laced with hot currents of volcanic gas. "What if the volcano erupts?" I say, uncertain of my own courage.

Xochil's dark ponytail waves in the wind as her blouse clings to her breasts. "What did your hero James Dean say about death?"

I stand tall with my lanky frame covered in a poncho and remember my idol. "He said to live as if you'll die today."

"If you live today without caring about tomorrow, there can be no fear."

"James Dean cheated death and lost, and right now I feel like I'm tempting this volcano. What if she really blows?"

"Hasn't Quetzalcoatl helped you conquer your fear?"

“I’m always afraid I’ll get lost or die when I soar on my dragon-bird, but I always manage to find my way back,” I say, uncertain how far I can trust my unpredictable girlfriend.

Xochil takes out a pair of earthenware cups from her shoulder bag and fills them with sour pulque from a leather flask. “Let Quetzalcoatl fly you to Mother Tonantzin. She will teach you how to conquer your fear,” she says.

The brilliant sun calms the goose bumps on my arms as I sip the fermented cactus drink. “I’m too young to die,” I say.

“Who are you really?”

I look at my tawny companion in the eye. “I’m Jude Ryder, and soon I’m going to study filmmaking in Los Angeles.”

“Your ambition to make films over everything – even our love – is madness.”

“We’re in danger of being blown to smithereens by a volcano and you bring up love?”

“Yes, love, that thing you know so little about.”

“Love? What is love?”

“It’s that feeling in our hearts when we’re together, that excitement that should keep you near me, it’s the answer to all questions and the key to the prison of loneliness, it’s the conquest of separateness and the union of the most vital and precious core of our beings, but soon you’ll be gone. My dad won’t let me go to Los Angeles and you won’t stay here, but it’s all right because it’s not the real you who is going.”

“Then, who is the real me?”

“Jude is a mask hiding your real self. Tonantzin will reveal your true self and then you’ll know that even though we’re apart – or get blown up by this volcano – we’ll still be together.”

The volcano hisses and rumbles and I feel anxious with the trembling under my feet.

“Getting snuffed out by a volcano is not the way I want to go.”

“The Aztecs used to sacrifice young warriors to Popo to appease his anger,” Xochil says.

I down my pulque and throw the cup into the crater. “Are you going to try to push me in,” I say, putting my hand around her waist and edging her closer to the crater’s edge, “or shall we both jump? Does Popo receive female warriors?”

“There is no need to jump if this volcano erupts, and we are not yet true warriors.”

Determined to defy my dangerous predicament with some humor, I release my grip on Xochil, pull out my 357 Magnum and point it at my temple. “No need to wait, then. I’ll just blast my brains out. Will that make me a true warrior?”

“Put your gun away. A bullet in your head will only make you a true idiot.”

The rumbling strengthens and the hiss from the cold wind is replaced by a blast of sour gas from the crater, making us back away from the edge. Loose cinders roll into the abyss in front of us.

I return my gun to the holster under my poncho. “Shouldn’t we return? What if this thing really explodes?”

Xochil finishes her pulque, throws her cup into the crater and pushes her body towards mine. “Then death will embrace us both but love can conquer the fear of death.” Winding her arm around my neck, my Aztec maiden pulls my head to hers until our breaths mingle and our lips meet. Our tongues commence a feverish dance and I am torn between frightening jolts of adrenalin and electrifying waves of passion.

The rumbling under our feet strengthens and I force myself apart. “Popo’s going to blow,” I say.

Xochil takes a step back and orders, “Stand your ground, cowboy, and fearlessly find out who you really are. Take your position and call Quetzalcoatl.”

I kneel on one knee and shove my clasped hands into my gut as her father taught me.

“Ride your mystical bird to the sixth realm where you must ask Tonantzin who you truly are.”

Deep inside the crater the lava dome cracks and a geyser of ash and steam spews out as water pours in from an adjoining volcanic lake. More cracks form until the dome collapses with a thundering blast.

“It’s going to blow!” I whimper.

“Call her now!” Xochil’s scream is almost drowned out by the rumbling.

I take a deep breath, pull my diaphragm in, squeeze the muscles of my perineum, reverse my tongue up my gullet and summon Quetzalcoatl. My brain feels like it is about to explode from the breathless tension when the majestic creature glides down from the sky and alights next to me. Her rainbow cloak of feathers shimmers as she twists her neck and hisses menacingly. I crane my neck and stare her down, defying her to rip me to shreds with her beak and claws, and she crouches submissively. I eagerly mount her scaly back, hold onto the roots of her wings, and we take off.

I am exhilarated as we ascend through six gates and set down on the flat sands of the ethereal sixth realm. All is bathed in an unearthly light with a limitless horizon stretching out all around me when I see Tonantzin appear out of the formlessness. She is a towering woman of immense beauty—an amber being clothed in feathers and roses with her waist girdled with snakes. I dismount my feathered serpent and approach this

wondrous goddess, but my awe turns to horror when she transforms into a skeleton, stretches out her bony arms and picks me up.

She cradles me against her ribs like a baby, and resigning myself to certain doom, I gaze into her hollow sockets and make my request: “Before I die, please reveal to me who I truly am.”

Tonantzin’s skeletal form transforms back into tawny flesh, and the shape-shifting Aztec goddess smiles as she sets me down. “Bow your head and look inside, young warrior,” she says, and folds her hands in prayer.

I do as she commands, and I no longer see my body, but observe six glowing geometric figures that pulsate and turn. They are connected by a central current of white lightning which is flanked by two thinner currents, one black and descending, while the other rises in a fiery red jet. I look up to see where this wondrous structure leads to and observe it ascending into an infinite spiral of light-waves. I kneel, and return her sacred gesture by bringing my palms together, and time stands still.

The eternal moment of peace is broken and I glance to my right to see that Quetzacoatl is crouched by my side. I mount her back and we take off, glide down through the six gates, and land at Xochil’s side. I dismount and Quetzalcoatl takes flight with a screech. I am hot, sweaty and somewhat scorched, but alive. Exuberantly alive.

“It was only a small release of steam and ash,” Xochil says. “Did you meet Tonantzin?”

“Hell yeah, and my mind is spinning.”

“What did you see?”

“She showed me who I really am and called me a young warrior.”

“All will become clear with time and experience. Now your training as a mystical warrior can take a new beginning. Let’s go back and see my father, who will explain everything.”

“Your father will have to wait. I have to go to my dad’s place in Mexico City to arrange for my tuition and return to L.A. If it wasn’t for his money, I might as well sell tacos on a street corner. I’m also going to get a fast car and race better than James Dean.”

“Just where did James Dean’s speeding car get him?”

“I don’t intend to crash and die like he did and we can love all we want but we can’t live forever.”

Xochil wipes ash from her face and winds her arms around my neck. “If we can’t destroy the barriers that separate our hearts, at least we can slay the lies that imprison our mortal life. Didn’t your idol say to dream as if you’ll live forever?”

“James Dean said that the only greatness for man is immortality but we’re cursed to die. For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return,” I recite. “We were banished from Eden and cursed to die. It doesn’t matter how much we love or dream, we were tricked with a poisoned apple and we’re all gonna die.”

I bury my face into Xochil’s neck and she whispers into my ear, “My father says that every poison has an antidote.”

I pull my face back and look her in the eye. “Sure, a magic potion that will cure death.”

“The elixir of immortality from the mystical grail,” my wide-eyed companion whispers as she takes out a fresh pair of earthenware cups and refills them with soothing pulque.

“Where is this elixir-stuff, anyway?”

“Dad says that in the beginning, the gods and the demons looped a giant serpent around a mountain called Mandarachala and churned the primordial milky ocean. Elixir was produced,

but the demons flew off with it in a grail, except they dropped some on earth.”

“Where?”

“East of Eden, in India. Some fell into the Ganges River at Haridwar, at the foothills of the Himalayas.”

“It was lost in some river in India?”

“The sacred elixir reappears periodically, but you can’t get it by drinking the polluted waters of the Ganges.”

“Drinking polluted waters is gross. There’s gotta be a better way.”

Xochil finishes her pulque and throws her cup into the crater. “There is, but it’s a closely-guarded secret because it can slay the curse of death and make one immortal.”

I down my drink and throw my cup into the chasm. “How can I find this secret?”

“You have to become a fearless mystical warrior and someday search in India, like my father did when he was a young warrior.”

CHAPTER 2

India, 1973

It is a cool September morning when I arrive in the northwest Indian pilgrim town of Haridwar from Delhi in a train pulled by an aging steam locomotive. I sling my backpack over my shoulder, push my lanky frame through the crowds, and step into the dusty main road thronged with pilgrims, busses, taxis, rickshaws and street vendors.

My sandy hair has become hopelessly tangled and I would blend in perfectly with surfers on a California beach, but even though I must look as out of place as a palm tree in a snow bank, nobody pays me any attention.

My buffalo-hide sandals slap the dusty ground as I follow the directions I had been given by Marygold, my estranged Scottish girlfriend. A kaleidoscope of cooking smells compete with the stench of gasoline, diesel exhaust and burnt oil as I walk past tea stalls, hotels and restaurants.

I buy some almonds from a street vendor and turn west onto a road which runs under a railway embankment. It winds towards some nearby hills thinly carpeted with trees. I follow a wall and arrive at the tall iron gate that Marygold described. Its hinges squeak as I push it open.

The sandy enclosure is thinly populated with tall eucalyptus trees and is surrounded by a high wall. At its center is a whitewashed house and a small hut leans against the far corner next to the railway embankment.

As I walk on a narrow path winding through the trees, a flock of green and yellow Indian Ringneck parrots screech over the treetops and I am startled by the cry of a peacock strutting towards me in slow, deliberate steps. Its long tail feathers tremble as they rise into a magnificent fan. I sidestep the stunning creature and walk towards the open door of the house.

A wiry middle-aged man comes to the doorway, likely alerted to my arrival by the peacock's call.

"Herr Burghardt?" I say.

The thin man clasps his hands together in traditional Hindu greeting.

"Yes," he says, and gives me a robust handshake.

The rising sun makes him squint, and his warm smile disarms the uneasiness I have been feeling.

"I'm Jake Lasser. Marygold sent me," I say, using my false name.

"Ach yes, sweet Marygold. Please come in."

I leave my sandals on the landing, lay my backpack next to the door, and follow Burghardt to a plain wooden table where he seats me, and wait as he prepares tea.

When the tea is ready, Burghardt loads a tray with cups, a bottle of vodka and a pair of shot glasses. After exiting the central house, we pause at a ten-foot-square samadhi grave at the side of the house.

"This is the resting place of our founder," the German says. "An unbroken lineage of disciples is buried here as well, and one day I will join them."

Burghardt leads me to the hut at the corner of the grounds. Its back wall and roof is pierced by a majestic Bodhi tree which rises out of the base of the railway embankment behind it. We leave our sandals outside and sit on mats on the hard clay floor. In front of us lies a perpetually-burning sacred duni fire. Encrusted in the tangled roots of the Bodhi tree is a turmeric-smeared oval stone the size of a football.

“It’s a Shiva Lingham,” he says of the stone. “This is one of the most sacred spots in India and this fire has been burning continuously for millennia, attended to by an unbroken chain of disciples.”

He offers me vodka to accompany the tea but I refuse.

“Disciples of what?” I ask.

“Of a tradition that evokes a true spiritual experience. Every morning before sunrise a group of friends gather here for a special ceremony. I invite you to join us.”

I recall how Marygold had become nervous talking about Burghardt.

“What happened to Marygold?” I ask.

“She ran away after her last meeting with our group. Where is she now?”

“I met her in Scotland and we split up in Paris. I have no idea where she is. Why did she run away?”

“She failed to withstand the power of an authentic mystical experience. Could you?”

“I’ve also come here for another reason. Marygold told me about a snake charmer in Bombay who can induce a near-death experience.”

“She must mean Amir, a spice dealer in Bombay.”

“Where can I find him?”

Burghardt pulls a dog-eared business card from his shirt pocket, scribbles on its back, and hands it to me.

“Amir can force you through death’s door, but you are left there on your own. Here, the experience is quite different.”

He continues to speak between shots of liquor and sips of tea.

“What do you mean, different?”

“Our ritual is precisely controlled and has been perfected for thousands of years.”

“I have heard that the Kumbha Mela celebrates an ancient eastern grail legend,” I say, recalling what an Aztec girlfriend once told me.

“When the gods and demons churned the primordial milky ocean, soma – the elixir of immortality – was produced, but the demons stole it in a cup. As they flew away with it, they spilled it on four places on earth. One is here in Haridwar, where pilgrims come to bathe in the Ganges, drink its waters and soak up its magic powers. Next January, at a precisely-calculated astronomical event, soma will leak out of the Ganges at this very spot. But India is full of legends. You should stay here and experience ours. Will you come tomorrow morning before the sun rises?”

Unsure of the German, I thank him for his hospitality, gather my backpack, and promise to return the next day before dawn.

A breeze tingles my nose with the pungent scent of eucalyptus as I stop near the peacock, now eating from a plate at the side of the house. I offer it some almonds from my palm. Its curiosity is piqued and it approaches slowly and takes one. I scatter some almonds on the ground and leave the enclosure.

I walk to the base of the railway overpass and scramble up the embankment where I watch an old steam locomotive

departing from the station a couple of hundred yards down the track. It blows its whistle, belches black soot into the air and vents hissing steam as it slowly picks up speed.

Scampering down the other side, I emerge between a tea stall and a cloth merchant and cross the road to enter Haridwar's labyrinth of narrow lanes. They are a mysterious maze that challenges the fast-paced western world, but mystery quickly loses its magic as I run my fingers through my long tangled hair and scratch my cheek, which bristles with itchy stubble.

I walk to the bank of the Ganges, find a barber seated on a wooden platform under a canvas parasol and brave a shave and haircut. I light a cigarette, let it hang from my mouth and look in the mirror. I see James Dean's blue eyes and chiseled eyebrows in my own features as once more I speculate if he was unable to cope with fame and staged his own death. Where would he be now? Could he be here in India, perhaps as a blue-eyed, pale-skinned fake sadhu aesthetic? He dreamed big and lived for today and if nothing else was India not a place where dreams and death are bedfellows?

I purchase a container of camphor tablets and some sandalwood sticks from a ghat merchant and locate a small jewelry shop where I select an amulet. My choice is a delicate, beaded necklace of colorful gemstones that the shopkeeper says will repel the evil effects of the ancient nine Indian planets. I also pick out a gold six-pointed Star of David, which I string onto the necklace.

"It's a Mogan David," I tell him.

The jeweler rebukes me in English. "When the rest of the world was still barbaric," he says, "Indian goddess-worshipping sects used intersecting triangles with a point in their center as the symbol of the female Shakti energy."

I smile condescendingly, pay for my amulets and leave.

Outside, I encounter bustling laneways, crowded promenades and endless stone ghat steps lining the Ganges. Many temples are thronged with worshippers ringing bells, rattling damaru drums and chanting the mantras of their gods. Clusters of ash-smearred sadhu ascetics, saffron-robed monks and disciples parade the stone promenades. Disciples surround their gurus, displaying their holiness, but my mind only registers foolishness. Yet fools occupy a superior niche in India. In the West, a fool is a fool, whereas in the East, it is often the fool who is a saint.

The drums of India beat an uplifting rhythm, and I revel in the exotic arena that surrounds me. I negotiate the crowds of Haridwar's ghats until I breach the iron fence surrounding the perimeter of the Hari-ki-Pouri ghat—the spot where the soma elixir of immortality purportedly fell in ancient times. It is crowded with bathers intent on absorbing the substance which bestows longevity.

This is the upper Ganges, where the water flows fast and has a lower level of filth than further downstream, but I resist the strong temptation to drink its polluted waters.

I buy more almonds and a palm-sized boat shaped out of leaves filled with colorful flowers. Placing some camphor tablets and sandalwood shavings on a small clay dish in its center, I light my miniature pyre and launch my offering to the goddess of H₂O.

After crossing a narrow bridge to an island in the center of the wide river, I walk north until the stone ghats of its western flank give way to a sandy beach bordering a forest with scruffy clumps of vegetation. As I walk further north, I encounter fewer people until I arrive at an isolated end of the forest, where the island narrows to a sandy point. This seems to be the spot that Marygold described.

Sitting on a large oval rock near the shore, I watch the strong waters rushing towards me on either side, imagining the frenzy of bodies that will soon attempt to bathe at the same time and place at the Kumbha Mela's climax in January. I am glad to be in the 'wrong place' where it's quiet, peaceful, and far from my troubles in the West. I was alienated from my Aztec girlfriend, Xochil, by her father, who smothered her with Aztec society, and just like my phantom mentor, James Dean, I had felt displaced from my father in Mexico. After he remarried, his new wife and her four brats sucked his funds dry, and he was unable to pay my tuition at the American Film Institute's Conservatory. I sold my vintage Martin guitar, bought a stash of LSD and flew to Europe, where it was in high demand. I bounced around between London, Paris and Madrid dealing my wares and hooked up with Marygold, a tall, wiry Scottish redhead on a visit to a small cathedral occupied by a clutch of misfits on a Scottish Isle. I pulled her out of that dead end but she left me stranded in Paris after a bad batch of psychedelics I formulated drove the police chief's daughter to madness, and he alerted Interpol. I felt like returning to my mother's place in L.A. and the simple life of a soul surfer, but she had remarried a stuffy UCLA professor and I was afraid of flying to the U.S., assuming flights would be monitored. I might have tried to recover my true identity, Jude Ryder, but decided to retain my false identity of Jake Lasser just in case I was caught. I possess a convincing fake passport as Jake Lasser, which I bought from a forger in Paris, and took Marygold's advice to travel overland to India to hide out until the heat on me subsided. And now that I was in India, a torrent of memories flood my mind from my training to become a mystical warrior by an Aztec wizard and his daughter, who urged me to seek out the elixir of immortality in India.

Basking in an exhilarating freedom from my entanglements, I take my heavy *Encyclopedia of Hinduism* from its protective plastic bag and as I read about the Kumbha Mela festival, two sadhu ascetics walking on the beach approach me. They could be the ones Marygold told me about but I quickly dismiss this because when they come closer, they are even more bizarre than she had described.

I pay no attention to them until they stop in front of me—the obvious Westerner. They probably want baksheesh, the universal beggar’s term for “gimme money,” and I have some coins ready.

“So you have finally returned,” one of them says through his red lipstick.

I laugh at his absurd statement. “Did I ever go away?”

“Your memory is short, saab,” he says.

He’s dressed like a drag queen, wearing a gold-bordered pink silk cloth around his loins like a miniskirt. A yellow shawl is draped around his shoulders, and a wrist-thick clump of rudraksha bead necklaces hang from his neck to his belly. He sports long dreadlocks wound on his head in a spiral and wields an iron trident. By his side stands a shorter, older man with cropped hair, wearing a cotton lungi cloth around his waist. A folded blanket is slung over his shoulders and he stands next to his drag-queen companion, looking like a buffoon.

The clowns reek of cheap mentalist tricks calculated to catch a victim off guard for as much money as they can. They likely covet all my possessions and probably my mind and soul as well.

“My memory’s fine, thanks, and just who am I?” I ask the drag queen.

“You’re the rebel, James Dean,” he answers.

I am floored. Nobody in India knows of my identification with the iconic actor. I confront them. “I am Jake Lasser and not a dead movie actor.”

“We will call you Jake,” the fakir says.

“If you’re so smart, then tell me why I’m here?” I say to the cheap transvestite.

“You run and hide like a dog but you also seek the secret of your soul,” he says.

I’m startled with their reference to James Dean but continue to play their game, ready for anything more exciting than the hokey spiritual ceremony I expect at Burghardt’s tomorrow.

“And just when will I find such a secret?” I say.

The transvestite puts his hand on my shoulder. “Come to the bank of the river and purify yourself in its waters. Only then you will know.”

We walk into the river, and as we wade into the strong current I expect them to shout out some mystical mumjüm designed for tourists, but when we’re waist-deep they grasp my arms above my biceps and push me underwater. I struggle in panic and after what seems like an eternity they pull me out, choking. I gasp for air.

“You bastards!” I sputter, preparing to fight as soon as we’re back on hard sand and I regain my strength.

“What did you feel underwater?” the younger sadhu says.

“You tried to drown me, you fuckers!”

I reach for my switchblade but it is gone, and to my horror, the drag queen waves its blade in my face.

“Answer my question,” he says. “What did you feel?”

“What the fuck do you think I felt?”

The transvestite laughs. “You maybe wanted air, no?”

“Yeah, I wanted fucking air.”

I feel like beating them up but I'm no match for both of them or a stiletto.

"Only when you feel the same desperation in the marrow of your bones that you are drowning in life and cannot live any longer without the fresh air of truth, will you find what you seek," the older sadhu says.

"Truth?" I say. "What the hell is that?"

"Do you know what a lie is?"

I sneer. "Yeah, and I know what a liar smells like."

"Then you know the foul aroma of everyone. Are you any different?" the transvestite says.

"Who are you to preach about truth?" I say.

"I am Gorakshnath," he says, bowing, and returns my switchblade.

His name flashes in my memory from Marygold's description and from my book.

I point my chin to his companion. "And I suppose he's Matsyendryanath?" I say.

"You doubt?" The drag queen taunts.

"How could I?" I laugh, "I'm the Queen of Sheba."

"Jake Lasser is a lie and James Dean is a mask whereas Jude Ryder is the truth," says the drag queen.

Electricity shoots up my spine. Jude Ryder? My resemblance is close enough to James Dean, which they could have noticed because his movies are still being shown, but it is inconceivable that they could know my real name. Nobody in the orient knows I am Jude Ryder because I always used my alias, Jake Lasser, and travel on a forged passport.

"You also live a lie," I say. "You cannot be who you say you are."

"I am a lie, you are a lie, the world is a lie," the transvestite

says. "If you have a craving for truth then you must learn Shiva's ways."

"What does Shiva know?"

"How to destroy lies and conquer death," the transvestite says. "He's the king of mystical warriors."

"Where is this Shiva, then?"

"He lives on mount Meru."

"Which is where, precisely?"

"Going to Meru is not simple. You would need to prepare," Gorakshnath says.

"And I suppose you can prepare me?" I say.

"Return here tomorrow at sunset and your preparation will begin. Now go."

"Where to?"

"Look behind you, sadhu."

I turn around and am stunned to see Marygold walking towards us.

"Marygold!" I squeal.

Marygold's long mauve dress sways enticingly from her tall, slender body as she approaches. I hear anklet bells tinkle with each step as she comes closer.

"Jake, my love," Marygold whispers as we embrace. I turn to see the sadhus' reaction, but they are gone.

"Where did they go?" I say, looking down both sides of the beach and turning around to scan the sparse forest.

"Who?"

"The sadhus. I was just . . ." My mind is unable to accept an adequate explanation of what had just happened and I hyperventilate with emotion.

"There's nobody here now, but if it was that pair I told you about, I hope they stay far away."

I look at my former lover with confusion. “Why have you returned?”

“To conquer my fear. I was frightened out of my wits and fled. Now I have come for some sort of resolution.”

“What happened that made you run away from India?”

“It’s not so simple, Jake. You should go to Burghardt’s and see for yourself.”

“I am going tomorrow morning. You can sleep in my tent tonight, and if you have returned to try to solve your problem, will you come with me to Burghardt’s in the morning?”

“Yes,” Marygold replies nervously, “but I’m not camping out here with snakes and scorpions and tigers.”

“There are no tigers on this island,” I say.

“Tigers are good swimmers. Pack your things, Jake,” Marygold says as she pats my butt. “I’ve got a hotel room in town with a big soft bed.”

The afternoon sun hangs low over the hazy hills behind town, and we remain silent as we walk along the sandy beach until we reach the island ghats.

As we cross the narrow bridge to town, she leans her head against my shoulder, and I grasp her hand tightly.

“Did the sadhus tried to drown you like they did with me?” I ask.

“They tried to drown me, all right,” Marygold says. “Then they said they would fly me to Meru and gave me a vision of some impossible creatures. I was frightened silly and ran away.”

“They’re fakes, not immortal yogis,” I say, as we walk along the river.

“They know about physical immortality, Jake.”

“They’re a couple of clowns.”

“Shh. Here’s my hotel.”

We climb the stairs to Marygold's room, close the curtains to the patio doors overlooking the ghat, and she lights a pair of candles.

"Marygold," I start to say, as I sit on the edge of her bed, but she hushes me with a finger over her lips, lights sandalwood incense and sits next to me. Her slim body beckons.

"We can talk later, love," she says.

Marygold repositions her body and lets her loose peasant dress slide to one side, revealing her long slim legs. I slide my hand under her loose garments and explore her supple body. We intertwine our tongues, our breathing deepens and her hand releases my belt. Maggie pushes me onto my back and gazes at me with the fires of passion.

I look back into her aroused eyes pull her to me until her warmth melts with mine. We reach the brink and Maggie shrieks with ecstasy as pulses of pleasure ripple from my toes to the crown of my head.

Our passion released, we wash up and Marygold orders a simple vegetarian meal from the hotel's restaurant. We eat in silence and sleep peacefully.

We awake well before dawn, shower and walk down the maze of winding streets towards Burghardt's.

CHAPTER 3

It is dark and still when we enter Burghardt's silent grounds an hour before sunrise.

The German is dressed in freshly-pressed clothes and expects me, but is surprised to see Marygold.

"I am happy to see you again, Marygold. We were speaking of you only yesterday," he says, as he embraces her and leads us to the hut.

The peacock is now roosting on a low branch of the Bodhi tree with its head buried in its feathers. Outside the hut, four sets of sandals are neatly lined up. We leave ours next to them and follow Burghardt inside where four monks in robes ranging from saffron to orange sit on mats around the duni fire.

I am startled as I recognize them as Hindu abbots from posters I have seen all over Haridwar. They are the spiritual leaders of important local ashrams with large followings. What are they doing here?

Marygold and I seat ourselves and exchange greetings with the group.

Burghardt leaves the hut and returns shortly with a brass plate holding a clay chillum pipe and other implements for hashish smoking. It seems the abbots are going to return to their ashrams stoned. I'm about to leave when Burghardt whispers in my ear, "It's Yarkand hashish."

I know about Yarkand cannabis from the hashish dealers of London and Paris. It comes from a high, secluded valley beyond the Karakoram Himalayas and is prepared in a special ceremony. It is reputed to produce a true spiritual experience.

Burghardt grasps a piece of it with brass pincers and brings it close to the embers of the duni fire pit. When it softens, he crumbles it in his palm and places it on top of raw tobacco inside the pipe. Pieces of glowing mango wood charcoal are carefully placed on the hashish with the pincers. A cotton cloth is dipped in fresh water, wrung out, and wrapped around the base of the pipe.

Burghardt raises the pipe to his forehead and invokes invisible forces, “Shiv-Shiv-Shiv-Shmbhoo, bam-bam-bam-Bholenaath,” and draws the first toke.

Marygold watches with apprehension as Burghardt passes the pipe to the abbots, who call out their invocations before inhaling deep tokes. I almost pass out from mine when a deep clarity fills me.

I pass the pipe to Marygold, who takes her turn before handing the pipe to Burghardt. The pipe slowly makes its way around the group in the form of a six-star mandala until it is finished. Then the chanting begins.

As the mantric rhythm gathers force, the local environment undergoes a remarkable transformation. It fades slowly into a haze until it completely disappears. The hut no longer surrounds us; we now sit on flat desert sands that seem to stretch to infinity.

I observe that we are bathed in a subdued, diffuse light when all of a sudden the sky is rent open, releasing an angelic chorus. Mystical organs sound a deep chord with a soothing

intensity that silences my mind. It's a fine vision induced by a superior drug, and although I feel elated, I brush it off as a benign hallucination.

"It's simply a subtle illusion," I say to Marygold.

Marygold remains quiet and gazes into my eyes with a reassured look.

As the music fades, the hut re-materializes and I am relieved. When I ask the abbots whether they can invoke spirituality without using drugs, one of them says, "Do you wish to receive our initiation?"

Our initiation? Aren't they gurus of different traditions?

"Why not?" I answer, prepared for more meaningless induced illusion. "You game, Marygold?" I ask, but only receive an empty expression for an answer.

I sit cross-legged next to Marygold while Burghardt and the abbots stand around us in a semicircle and begin a new chant. One abbot touches various locations along my spine while another does the same to Marygold, and their fingers press firmly on our closed eyes.

Heat rises up my spinal column until it reaches the back of my head when the pressure on my eyes is suddenly released. I am startled by the scene before and above me. The hut, the duni fire, the peacock, and the tree have disappeared into a mist that disperses to reveal the steep track embankment with a steam locomotive slowly approaching, hissing and chugging until it stops directly above us.

The locomotive belches black smoke and spews ominous jets of steam and the dark face of the engineer is illuminated by fires of the open furnace. He sounds a shrill whistle and steam continues to hiss menacingly as, almost imperceptibly, the massive locomotive begins to sway from side-to-side.

At first I think it's a tremor.

I look at Burghardt and the abbots, whose faces appear to have acquired red splotches with black borders until they look as if they're covered in burns. Marygold's eyes are frozen with panic as she observes the wounds on the hands, arms and faces of our companions and she covers her face.

"What now?" I ask Burghardt in a disembodied voice.

"I don't know, Jake, we've never been this far," comes his maddening reply.

The locomotive continues to rock back and forth precariously until it tips at a dangerous angle, loses its equilibrium, and slowly begins to fall towards us.

Marygold jumps to her feet, bolts frantically towards the gate of the grounds, pushes it open and runs up the road towards the nearby hills. I follow, running after her and as I sprint up the road I hear a thundering explosion behind me but I continue after her, losing sight of her at fork in the road.

I ask some boys playing on the road if they have seen her.

They point to a path between two hills. "There are man-eating tigers in those hills," one of the boys says.

I follow the path into a gorge until I reach a stream that merges with a steep slope covered in bushy outgrowths. I climb the hill and eventually reach the summit.

I can see the train station in the distance, but not Burghardt's grounds. I only see black smoke billowing up from its general direction. Marygold is seated whimpering amongst some bushes with her head between her knees.

"Snap out of it, Marygold! It was an elaborate illusion," I say, touching her shoulder. "If you stand your ground, it will dissolve."

Marygold lifts her head. “Look at the smoke. Is that an illusion?”

“It’s all part of their ploy. They’re probably burning oil-soaked rags and tires. We’ve been set up.”

“What about the falling train and the explosion?”

“The autumn festival season will soon begin and they’re selling fireworks everywhere.”

“Were their wounds fake?”

“They probably put on makeup when our eyes were closed. Come on, let’s go back and you’ll see. We’ve been duped by clever theatrics.”

We hear a rustling in the bushes below.

“A tiger,” Marygold cries.

I hush her and whisper, “Let’s get out of here.”

“Not back to Burghardt’s. I’d rather be eaten alive by a tiger,” she says, and covers her face again.

The rustling becomes louder until it’s in the bushes directly in front of us. Then, I see what it is.

“It’s only a peacock, Marygold.”

I take some almonds from my pocket and offer it some. The peacock approaches with curiosity and pecks them from my palm. Marygold stays back, leery of its beak and claws.

“Gotta go, pal,” I say, and leave the rest on the ground.

The smoke continues to billow up from the direction of Burghardt’s grounds, but Marygold is finally calm as we descend the hill and head towards Burghardt’s. She’s fine until we reach the gate.

“I can’t go in,” she says.

I try to reason with her. “Do you see any train wreck?”

Black smoke billows from the direction of the hut, and the smell is like burnt rubber.

Marygold pleads. “You don’t understand.”

“Come on,” I say, tugging at her sleeve, “it’s probably nothing,” but she breaks away.

“It’s not just fear,” she says.

“What is it, then?”

“Men don’t understand anything. Your James Dean wasn’t shackled by rules and would have understood. I need a woman, Jake.” Marygold says, and runs off towards the town.

I enter the grounds and find everything as it was. There is no sign of an accident, and as I suspected, some tires are burning behind the back wall.

The grounds are completely abandoned, and inside the hut, the smoking paraphernalia is scattered across the floor, including a nice chunk of Yarkand hashish, which I pocket.

When I return to the hotel, I discover that Marygold has paid the bill and checked out, leaving my backpack behind the concierge’s counter. I leave, make my way across the bridge and return to the tip of the island where I met the weird ascetics. They’re sitting in a grove of trees near the Ganges, watching me as I approach.

“You have returned at an auspicious moment, Jake,” says the drag queen, his grinning companion sitting cross-legged by his side.

CHAPTER 4

I greet the pair of sadhus with a bow and touch their feet. Respect goes a long way in the orient and I am slowly picking up the local etiquette. For lack of a better plan, and with an urge to get as far away from Burghardt's place as possible, I play along with them after they offer to show me the way to Meru—the mythical mountain abode of Shiva, whom they called “The King of Mystical Warriors,” evoking an old quest from my youth.

“How do we get there without the proper equipment?” I ask, leery of being guided into high mountains by a pair of half-naked men in bare feet. “Do we just walk into the Himalayas and stumble on Meru?”

I mock, because Meru is a mythical, not physical mountain.

“We will mount our swans, and fly to Meru,” says the sadhu who calls himself Gorakshnath.

“I don't see any swans,” I reply, recalling my flights on my dragon-bird, Quetzalcoatl.

“If you really want to go to Meru,” Gorakshnath says through smiling lips, “you must learn Shiva's ways.”

We sit around a fire in their makeshift shelter while the Matsyendryanath impersonator prepares food.

“What do you know about Shiva?” I ask.

“To know Shiva you must connect to his powers,” answers Gorakshnath.

I play along with their charade. “Can you connect me?”

Gorakshnath is quick-tempered: “If you want to reach the summit of Meru, you must first learn to crawl,” he snaps.

“How can you show me Shiva if you don’t know him?”

“You Westerners are too impatient. Shiva’s way is not like racing cars like your idol James Dean,” the Matsyendryanath poser says. “Where did that get him?”

I remain silent as his transvestite companion uncoils the dreadlocks on his head and lets them fall over his belly. He pulls out a chillum pipe from his small shoulder bag and fills it with tobacco and dark brown hashish.

I snatch the pipe from his hand and throw it into the fire. “Hashish Shiva is a phony Shiva. You’re not yogis, you’re a couple of fakes. James Dean was the real thing. He played for keeps.”

Gorakshnath picks up an ember-tipped branch from the fire, stands up and thrusts it in my face. I react by springing to my feet and flicking out my switchblade but suddenly I can’t move, paralyzed by his penetrating gaze.

Gorakshnath brings the glowing branch closer to my face.

“Let him go,” snaps Matsyendryanath and Gorakshnath looks away, releasing me from his psychic control.

Matsyendryanath stands up, grabs Gorakshnath by his dreadlocks and me by my collar. “If you fight like dogs, you are dogs,” he says. “Put down the stick, Goraksha. Put away your knife, Jake.”

We sit around the fire once more and tempers calm. I observe the men carefully, remembering how they lashed out at me in the river.

“Jake,” Matsyendryanath says, “Do you still want to see Shiva?”

“Yeah, the real Shiva, not a hashish bum.”

“For that you must make peace and learn the old ways. Do you dare to tread the path of the mystical warrior?”

I put my hand out to them as if to shake their hands but they clasp their hands together and bow down in the traditional humble posture of peace. I return the gesture.

“Yeah, I dare.”

When my training begins, the sadhus want to cut the frenum tissue, which attaches the underside of my tongue to the tissue on the bottom of my jaw. They say that it is a lock which keeps people away from spirituality, but they discover that not only has it already been cut, but that my tongue has been stretched as well. This was done long ago in Mexico under the guidance of my Aztec girlfriend’s dad. They explain that when you press the third eye from the inside with a stretched tongue you can also access the true soma. They also teach me a complex breathing pattern, which in conjunction with snaking my tongue up the sinus cavity at the rear of my gullet, suspends breath. They call it, khechari, and they say it is used for flying.

My present teachers are delighted to learn that I’ve been taught a similar process when I was a teenager, and when I tell them that I used to fly on the back of the dragon-bird, Quetzalcoatl, they say that soon I will know more about flying.

My previous experience allows me to learn the sadhus’ complex neuro-psychic techniques in weeks instead of months or years. They call the raising of my vital energy “raising the prana,” which pierces and breaks the six knots that Xochil’s

father had called gates. The sadhus say these locked gates keep humanity grounded in a lie, and I am beginning to understand that a “lie” is their definition for illusion. I also learn that prana energizes the other-world domains they call chakras, specific locations on the spinal column which Xochil’s dad had referred to as realms. They also say that the prana-energy develops the spiritual body, which I will have to occupy after death.

“What about Meru?” I ask again. “Aren’t we going there?”

Gorakshnath spreads his arms, sweeps them back and grins. “Now that you can crawl, Jake, we will fly to Meru on the backs of swans.”

The night is cool when the sadhus and I pack our belongings and walk to the secluded beach at the river’s edge. A brilliant moon illuminates the water with the bustle of Haridwar far behind us.

Gorakshnath breaks the silence. “Now we must call the swans.”

I am anxious. “Are you going to try and drown me again?” I say.

“With khechari you can breathe spiritual air,” he says, and directs me to cover my shoulders with my woolen shawl and to put on my small backpack. “Now raise your prana, engage khechari, and leave fear behind.”

Leave fear behind? I reverse my tongue, raise my prana along with my breath and my final inhalation is slow and synchronized with my pranic energy, which I elevate up my spinal column. When I focus my awareness between my eyes and simultaneously press my tongue between my eyes from the inside, my outer breathing stops.

Gorakshnath raises his hand and points to the sky.

I discern three fast-moving shapes that blank out the stars as they descend. They circle the river, skim its surface and glide directly towards us, splashing down softly at the edge of the beach.

Three giant swans leave the water and approach us. They are the size of ponies and sit in formation on the sands in front of us.

My companions' eyes are blank, and I notice our collective breathing is not so much suspended, but transformed into a new mode, with my breath silently and effortlessly flowing in and out of my nostrils while my lungs and my diaphragm remain still.

My companions mount their swans like a horse, push their hands into the feathers and grip the base of their wings. Gorakshnath motions me to do the same. I climb onto my swan, and it twists its head and looks at me with dark eyes. I scratch the side of her face, christening my swan with an arbitrary gender.

The trio of swans spread their wings in unison and run towards the river, skimming the waters and rise, with the moon illuminating the landscape below. We gain altitude and follow the Ganges up the valley veering to the right. Some sort of force-field protects me from the bitterly cold winds as we negotiate high passes and deep valleys and rise even higher. Finally, we fly over a mountain pass between the towering peaks of the central Himalayas and descend into a glide. We level off over a high plateau. Hours have passed and moon is low over the western horizon.

I spot two lakes and immediately recognize the iconic mountain in front of us. The lakes are Manasarovar, the Sun

Lake, and Rakshastal, the Moon Lake, which means that we face the majestic Tibetan Mount Kailash, the physical counterpart of Mount Meru.

As we approach the enormous cone of Kailash's snowy peak, we gain altitude, and close in half-way up its face. The swans begin to tilt their wings and drastically slow their descent.

I spot a wide ledge with a flat surface where the birds land gracefully and take up sitting positions.

"Spit out your tongue and breathe, Jake," Gorakshnath says as he and his companion dismount.

I expel my tongue from my gullet, take deep breaths of cold mountain air, and caress my swan's neck before I dismount. She turns her head and shakes it back and forth. I dismount my majestic bird and approach my fakir guides.

"Are we on Kailash or is this a dream?" I ask my guides.

"Do you doubt?" Gorakshnath says.

I keep silent.

"Let us move back and let the swans go," Matsyendryanath says.

I watch the majestic creatures push off and glide away embracing the air with their wide wings until they have disappeared into the jagged horizon.

The fakirs hold my hands as we stand at the edge of the sheer precipice in front of us while the steep rock wall of the mountain behind us opens to the entrance a cave.

"Is that really Lake Manasarovar?"

Matsyendryanath smiles. "It is the lake of the swans."

"Is that where our swans came from?" I ask. "Are they some sort of prehistoric relic?"

"The swan represents the upward-flowing prana,"

Gorakshnath says. “Just like your swan has carried you to Kailash, your upward-turned prana will carry you to Meru.

Soon we are warming up sitting on thick mats in front of a blazing fire-pit inside the cave. Gorakshnath retreats to a dark corner of the cave and returns dressed in a plain lungi cloth wrapped around his loins and a woolen shawl draped over his shoulders. His makeup has been removed.

“Why did you wear that ridiculous costume?” I ask.

“Nobody bothers us if we look like clowns, Jake. Let the properly dressed monks and gurus in their saffron robes lap up praise like proud asses. We prefer to repel the masses and keep our reality hidden. Our privacy is our freedom which keeps our enemies at bay because we trick them with our disguises. That way we win not only the battle, but the war.”

“What war?”

Gorakshnath sits cross-legged in front of the fire pit and warms his hands. “Not a physical war like the one in the Middle East, but the war against our demon nature.”

“War in the Middle East?” I ask, puzzled at his absurd statement.

“Egypt and Syria have attacked Israel and war has broken out,” Matsyendryanath says.

“What are you talking about? It’s Yom Kippur and Ramadan, and nobody would wage war during those holiest of seasons.”

Gorakshnath slashes the air with an imaginary sword. “An enemy waits for one’s weakest moment to attack most effectively.”

I look around for a transistor radio but the cave is deep

and dark and only shadows flicker on distant walls. “How do you know of a war in the Middle East?”

“When the barriers of ignorance have been removed, there is no longer any separation of distance,” Gorashnath says, spreading out his hands. “At this moment, a real physical war has broken out—only it is a false war.”

“If it were not for false war you might well be goose-stepping up and down Chandi Chawk,” I say.

“Every physical war is false. You must become a mystical warrior and learn to fight true war,” Matsyendryanath says, opening his eyes wide.

I laugh, knowing the tragedy of war intimately and at the same time I am stunned by the return of my old quest to the forefront of my being. “My parents lost their country because of war. Was that false war? Were they false warriors?”

Gorakshnath stands up and paces back and forth in front of the fire. “The warriors of both sides will eventually end up in similar graves. Ideology, religion, sect, territory, anger, revenge, greed, they are all false excuses to wage war. The real enemies of true war are not the Jews or Muslims or Christians or Buddhists or Hindus or Communists or Capitalists or anyone.”

I hold up my palms and say, “Then, who are the real enemies?”

“The masks of the ego,” Matsyendryanath says.

I am stunned and remain silent thinking, thinking about the horrors of war. At the same time I am intrigued at the unexpected return of my old quest of becoming a mystical warrior.

Gorakshnath continues. “When you recognize the disguises of your ego and defeat them, your soul will become free of its evil entrapment and will awake from its age-long sleep. It will transform into an immortal body of light, locked in the

sweet, eternal embrace of your true love, and you will achieve the supreme sweetness of union.”

“If love is one of the spoils of true war, it’s my kind of war,” I say. “When will I get such a body of light?”

“After practicing a long time,” Gorakshnath says.

“How long?” I ask.

“Many lifetimes.”

I extend my hand with my index finger raised. “I’ve only got this one to work with.”

Gorakshnath crosses his arms and leans forward over the fire. “Then you must live longer,” he says.

“Sure, I’ll just drink some soma and live forever. What about you guys? How long have you been around?” I ask.

The pair look at each other as if asking for permission to speak and Gorakshnath sits down.

“Since the time of Gautamnath,” Matsyendryanath says.

I gasp. “Gautam, the *Buddha*?”

“Gautam started out as a Natha yogi,” Gorakshnath says.

I am blown away by the impossible idea. “You actually met the Buddha?”

“His followers called him ‘the Buddha’ later,” Matsyendryanath says. “He used our pan-opan-satyopan technique, endlessly under his tree, until crowds of spectators gathered around him. It went to his head and he became unhinged.”

“You mean enlightened.”

Matsyendryanath laughs. “What do you mean by enlightened?” he asks, swaying rhythmically, smiling like a Buddha himself.

“I . . . I’m not sure,” I say. “It’s something like being engulfed or possessed by some universal light of knowledge or wisdom?”

Gorakshnath laughs. “A gigantic light bulb that is turned on in the brain?”

“I don’t know. What happened to Gautam?”

“He failed to complete his practices and documented nothing,” Matsyendryanath explains. “His talks were shoddily recorded and improperly disseminated by his followers just like those of your western religions. Look at Gautam’s followers now, in their distinctive orange robes, worshiping in elaborate temples, performing rituals of many schools and sects and engaging in much squabbling. Where did all this leave him?”

“I don’t know? Where?”

Matsyendryanath points up. “On a high mountain looking down on the sufferings of humanity, puzzled with his immortality while leaving his brothers and sisters behind.”

“Is immortality an option?” I ask.

“With vajroli,” Gorakshnath says, “it’s a deliberate choice.”

“Vajroli? Great. When do I start?”

And so, in a high Himalayan cave I learn vajroli—a strange yogic technique practiced by sucking up liquid from a container through your penis, retaining it and letting it out again. I follow their instructions until a thought dawns that they might be simply playing with me. I also wonder where they get their supplies like milk and flour but think that if they can fly here on swans, they must have some sort of supply-chain figured out. And so I practice with milk and perfect the technique.

“What has Vajroli have to do with longevity?” I ask.

“Vajroli is used with a woman,” Gorakshnath explains.

“Vajroli is used for sex?”

“Vajroli is used after the male discharges his semen into the woman’s yoni matrix to fertilize her eggs. He then withdraws it, mixed with the female fluids, and redirects it up his inner mystical prana conduit and purifies it in six inner cauldrons. The mystical fire burns off the dross and transforms it into soma, the elixir which counters death.”

“You harvest female energy like a vampire?”

“You must be careful from whom you take this energy,” Matsyendryanath warns. “It is best taken from a divine apsara nymph with much strong Shakti-energy to offer. If you use it on a weak woman you can kill her.”

“Is that what you do? Get it from divine hookers?” I say.

Matsyendryanath looks guiltily at Gorakshnath.

“We take turns revitalizing ourselves with apsaras,” Matsyendryanath says. “One of us brings the other back when we become lost in the delusion. The problem is the power of vega – the orgasm – which is always part of the process. It is the great intoxicating force that if unchecked, will eventually kill you.”

“A deadly orgasm?”

“When properly done, vajroli will shelter you from death and cause you to live longer but you must be very careful not to become obsessed by the orgasm.”

“Where can I find an apsara-nymph?”

“They live with Gandharvas, where they dance for them,” Gorakshnath says.

“Gan-who?”

“Divine musicians in Indra’s realm. You raise your prana up to the fourth level and penetrate its black sphere of entry with your body of light. You will find yourself in Mahendraloka where you have to attract an apsara with music. Try to find

Rambha, the queen of apsaras and take the jewel from her lotus, only beware.”

Jewel from her lotus? Vajroli is certainly a mad idea, and these two certainly seem like mad men, but what is there to fear?

“Is Rambha dangerous?”

“Not Rambha, but vega, the orgasm. You must not get lost in vega, which will eventually kill you, not give you long life. The border between vajroli and common sex is like walking a tightrope over a deep ravine. However, Shiva’s way will keep you balanced.”

“That’s if I want to walk a sexual tightrope to stick around longer than my time. I wouldn’t mind finding my true love, though,” I say.

“Before you can unite with your true love, you must defeat the enemy blocking your path and for that, you must become a true warrior,” Gorakshnath says.

“Was Buddha a false warrior?” I ask.

“He tried to win the Big War, but he lacked the proper weapon – the brahmastra – and lost.”

Matsyendryanath puts out his arm in protest. “Silence, Goraksha, that weapon is sacred!”

“Where can I get a brahmastra?” I ask, suddenly intrigued.

“Gayatri, the mother of mystical knowledge, can tell you where,” Gorakshnath says.

“Great,” I say. “I might as well go to her temple and ask her.”

“There is no need for that. You can summon her from a panchamundi seat,” Gorakshnatha says, patting the hard rock surrounding his mat.

“A what?”

“It’s a special seat placed on five skulls used either to increase your power or to attract a highly spiritual being. Ravana used one to receive power from Shiva.”

“Ravana was one nasty demon,” I say, recalling reading about him in my book.

“His panchamundi seat is hidden in a cave in Bihar, near Mandarachala hill.”

“I’ve heard of that hill,” I say, recalling Xochil’s and Brughardt’s description of how the gods and demons churned that particular rock to produce the elixir of immortality.

“Inside Mandarachala is hidden another secret of longevity. You must visit it and see for yourself, but now that you know about true war and have advanced far on the path of a true mystical warrior, you must return,” Gorakshnath says.

“How do I get back?”

Gorakshnath and Matsyendryanath get up, then stand me up by grabbing my biceps and pulling me up. They walk me to the edge of the cliff. “You can call your swan, or would you rather flap your arms?”

I keep silent in a cold wind, gripped by fear, thinking that they may throw me off.

“Are you afraid?” Gorakshnath sneers.

They tip me towards the edge of the precipice. “Yes,” I say, deathly afraid. “Marygold could not conquer her fear. Did you ever meet her?”

“Marygold is two-faced and dangerous,” Gorakshnath warns. “Beware of her.”

“If I only knew where she is. I’m through with that crazy woman,” I protest.

“She is with a woman named Karla, in an ashram near Mehrauli, south of Delhi.”

“I don’t know anybody named Karla,” I say.

“She’s Burghardt’s daughter. Now go,” Gorakshnath says.

“I don’t know where to go. Maybe I’ll summon my swan and try to find Eden. I’d kind of like that,” I say.

“Not Eden but Benares, Shiva’s abode.”

“Doesn’t he live on Meru?”

“He plays on Meru but lives in Benares.”

We step back from the brink and I breathe a sigh of relief. “Before I go, how did you paralyze me?” I ask Gorakshnath

“You must raise your prana swiftly and shoot it out like an arrow from your third eye, directing it into your victim’s eyes. This opens channels to the higher functions of the mind, which it will freeze without damaging life.”

“Is there any defense?”

“Dark glasses impede penetration. Mirrored glasses are best. Once established, the freeze lasts a day and night. This takes about minute, but you can also withdraw it. Now you must go.”

It is nightfall when I perform the khechari ritual and my outer breathing stops.

The desperation for breath is soon transformed into my new mode of breathing with air flowing in and out without any movement of my lungs. I silently call for my swan and watch the distant horizon. A speck appears and grows until my swan lands at my feet.

I turn to clasp my hands to the fakirs in farewell. They return the gesture with a bow.

I climb onto my feathery mount like a cowboy. My swan approaches the ledge and leaps off and we fall until her wings

bite into the air and we soar high above the Tibetan plain and its sacred lakes. I feel like a mystical warrior soaring high on my magical swan.

After several hours of negotiating several high passes and descending into deep Himalayan valleys, we return to the island where I originally met the sadhus. My awesome swan lands on the waters and swims to the same beach from where we originally took off. I spit my tongue from my gullet, breathe in fresh air and dismount on hard sand.

I bid my swan farewell by exchanging the gesture of shaking our heads and after she takes flight I curl up in my shawl and using my backpack as a pillow, fall into a deep, dreamless sleep.

I awake and walk back to Haridwar and am amazed to discover that the New Year has passed. Three months had mysteriously passed as if they were three weeks. There are thick crowds everywhere with the Kumbha Mela in full swing. I maneuver through the pushy throngs, weaving amongst holy men and women of all descriptions, each beating the drum of their god or goddess, proclaiming their eminence. Soon the soma will leak out of the Ganges and they will drink the filthy waters more poisonous than the elixir of immortality.

I take an overnight train to Delhi, bribing my way onto the first class coach for a berth of my own. When I arrive I load up on newspapers and magazines at a stand and discover stories of the aftermath of the Yom Kippur war. It had started and ended in October during the holiest Jewish and Muslim holidays. I order a meal, take out my book, and locate the puzzling terms which have been stuck in my brain.

Brahmastra. Brahma's weapon. A powerful weapon capable of completely destroying its target. It is said to lay waste large tracts of land for many years. It causes women in the vicinity to become infertile."

Vega. An orgasm.

Land barren for years? Sounds like radiation. Infertile? That's genetic damage. Oh . . . my . . . God! It's got to be a nuclear bomb. Yes! The most powerful weapon for a mystical warrior. I've got to get me one of those. But why is an orgasm deadly?

CHAPTER 5

I arrive in Old Delhi and stay at an inexpensive hotel at the foot of Chandi Chawk. The sadhus had told me that Marygold was in nearby Mehrauli with a woman named Karla, but at the moment, I am in no mood to interrupt her quest for satisfaction with a woman. As I have little money left, instead of going to Benares, I decide to put together a drug deal.

I travel to Pakistan and buy a stash of Peshewar tabs of pure morphine sulfate then return to my hotel room in Delhi. After grinding the tablets into a fine powder with a mortar and pestle I carefully pack and seal the powder in flat poly bags, tape them onto carefully folded thick letters, seal them in envelopes and send them from different post offices to my Swiss contacts.

After one month, four packages arrive, each containing a small bible with hundred-dollar bills hidden in its covers. Five thousand dollars in total, most of which I hide inside the thick covers of my book on Hinduism.

I cash some money on the black market and give away the bibles to beggars. Each bible is presented with a hundred-rupee note as a bookmark.

But Benares can wait because I have a gnawing urge to solve a mystery. A week later I buy an airplane ticket to Bombay, and with my boarding pass in hand, a Sikh police officer confronts me in the passenger lounge.

He grabs me by the arm. "Interpol will be happy to see you, Mr. Jake Lasser, drug smuggler."

I am handcuffed, frisked and whisked off in a caged car to an ancient police station in Old Delhi manned by a single guard. Today the spring Holi festival is celebrated and most of the police have been assigned to patrol the streets which are busy with revelers throwing balloons full of colored water.

The Sikh captain pushes me into a windowless room where I am ordered to sit at a long wooden table. He opens my backpack and spills its contents onto the table. He ignores my book and clothes but pockets the rupees and flicks open my switchblade. He points its blade in my face.

"Mr. Lasser," he says, "you will write your confession now."

"What are you talking about?"

He waves my piece of plastic-wrapped Yarkand hashish in front of my face. "What is this?"

"You tell me, mister expert."

The captain pulls a riding crop from his utility belt and whacks it across my face.

"Do not play with me, you piece of shit."

I clench my teeth and do not cry out.

"After you confess I will turn you over to Interpol who will send you back to France. I warn you not to waste my time. Write your confession now."

He drives my switchblade into the table top and produces a twin-pronged taser which he thrusts into my chest, causing excruciating jolts of pain to ripple through my body.

"Write!"

"I can't write with handcuffs on."

The captain unhooks a ring of keys from his belt and approaches me. I look him straight in the eye, raise my prana and shoot it into his eyes, freezing him in an icy lobotomy.

Maintaining my hold on him, I pry the key ring from his fingers and unlock my handcuffs. I pull his revolver from its holster, and unsure of how long my psychic grip on him will last, hit him sharply on his temple with its butt, and he falls unconscious.

I crumple the sheet of paper on the table into a ball, stuff it in the captain's mouth, tie the makeshift gag with the cloth of his turban and handcuff his hands to the door latch. I retrieve my rupees from his pocket, put my stuff back into my backpack, shove his gun under my belt and bolt down the hall past some cells. A woman's desperate voice issues from one of them.

"Help me, please," she wails.

I see a young, attractive Western woman crouched pitifully on a cot.

"Help! Please help me!" she calls again, and I return to fetch the captain's ring of keys and unlock the woman's cell. Shushing her, I motion for her to follow me.

The lone guard at the gate is distracted and I whisper my plan to the woman.

"I'm going to get as close to the gate as I can. When I'm there, attract the guard's attention."

When I'm in position, she unbuttons her blouse and shouts to the guard, and after he steps into the courtyard I knock him out with the gun, drag him inside, and use his turban to gag and tie him.

I tell the shapely woman to button her blouse, grab her hand, and pull her onto the street. We dodge the water-filled festival balloons and I flag down a three-wheeled scooter and tell the driver to take us to the train station in New Delhi.

The Bombay Express is ready to depart, so I shove my way through the crowd surrounding the conductor and bribe our way onto a second-class air-conditioned car.

We locate our berths and I close the curtains and pull down the window shutters as the train pulls out.

“You got a name?” I ask.

“S-Suzy,” the hazel-eyed woman replies.

Suzy’s olive-tinted skin covers a trim body. Her straight brown hair drapes loosely over her back and her expression relaxes as she savors freedom.

“What were you doing in that jail?” I ask.

“I was caught smuggling,” she replies, her voice now calm.

“Drugs?”

“Antiques. How about you?”

“I’m Jake. The cops were holding me for drug smuggling.”

“Great. Saved by a friggin’ drug dealer.”

I touch her arm. “All I wanted was to finance my studies. They had no right to . . .” I stop mid-sentence as my recent troubles in Europe resurface.

“You could have worked.”

“I worked in L.A. as a fucking cab driver trying to scrape together enough money for tuition while you smuggled national treasures that will end up in some stinking rich pig’s hands?”

She assesses me with narrowed eyes. “I assure you that any art I acquire falls into very appreciative hands.”

“Maybe some appreciative drug trafficker’s hands?”

“Art is art and I don’t judge a person’s profession.”

“Like you just judged mine? I bet you’d smuggle the Rosetta Stone if you could get away with it and have it lounging on the trinket shelf of some murderous dictator.”

“I . . .”

She stops talking and we remain silent for a few moments with downcast eyes until I break the silence.

“Let’s cool it, shall we?” I say. “I’m no Saint Francis and you’re no Joan of Arc, but surely we can cooperate to get out of this mess.”

“How? Our description will be everywhere now.”

“For now, the best thing we can do is eat and rest.”

Suzy touches my hand. “You’re right. I forgot to thank you. Where are you from?”

“L.A.,” I say, as I fondle Burghardt’s dog-eaten card with Amir’s address. “And you?”

“New York.”

I order a couple of vegetarian dinners and some beer, and after eating in silence, Suzy takes the top berth and we sleep as the train rattles south.

Early next morning we disembark before reaching Bombay’s main station and hire a cab to take us to Amir, whose stall is in a large Bombay marketplace.

We find Amir easily. “We’ve been sent by Burghardt,” I explain to him. “He said that you can give a person a temporary experience of death safely.”

“Burghardt? There are better medicines than alcohol, Yarkand hashish and fancy chants, my friends. My snakes do the work much better.”

I spot a snake charmer’s round basket at the side of his stall. “Are you a snake charmer?”

“I can charm the soul from your flesh and return it with the help of my snakes,” he replies.

“Cobras?” I say.

“King cobras.”

He unties the basket lid and two large cobras writhe from their coils and rise up.

“Here, snakie-snakie,” Suzy says, seeming to be comfortable enough to tease them.

“Their sacks of venom are intact,” Amir says.

As I approach closer, the cobras become alert and widen their hoods. Suzy backs off.

“These two are friendly but don’t make any sudden movements or they might strike,” Amir says.

I have always been fascinated with snakes. The snake charmers who hang out behind the ancient Jantar Mantar astronomical observatory behind Connaught Place in New Delhi let me examine their serpents up close when I had wandered the streets waiting for my money to arrive.

I had been shown how to handle them and that a closed fist makes snakes nervous. I found cobras sensitive and playful when they weren’t being charmed, and I even tried to kiss one on its lipless mouth.

The serpent had touched my lips with its black, forked tongue and I smelled its warm, acrid breath. One of the snake charmers had been versed in Indian astrology and after asking the date of my birth and checking his tables, he told me that I was born under the sidereal sign of Ashlesha, the snake.

“Can I pick one up?” I ask.

“Yes, but be careful,” Amir says as he eyes me apprehensively. These specimens are larger than any I have seen before and I feel an adrenalin rush.

I drape one snake over my shoulders and it coils around my neck. The hypnotic-eyed serpent responds affectionately to

my petting while a fascinated Suzy reaches to touch the snake's skin. It seems to like our attentions.

"Do you wish to taste its medicine?" Amir offers.

"What does it cure?"

"The fear of death," Amir replies.

"What happens and how much does it cost?"

Amir describes the elaborate process and gives me the price. "My snakes will take you beyond death and I will bring you safely back. It's a package deal," he says, as if describing a guided tour. "For three days I will guard you. If you were to be discovered alone in your state you might be mistaken for dead."

"I'm not going to get bitten by no snake and I don't want to experience death, thanks," Suzy protests.

"That's okay," I say. "Nobody will force you to do anything."

Amir continues, "I will take care of you while you experience false death."

A near-death experience on a plate.

"Can you give us shelter?" I ask.

"That will cost extra," Amir says.

"No problem."

"Let's go to my place," Amir says, and he gives his stall assistant some instructions.

"Let's go, Suzy, we appear to have digs," I say.

"You seem to have a plan and I like it. Sorry for having given you such a hard time."

"It's okay, nobody's perfect."

Amir takes us to a two-story house nearby where we are given a room on the second floor with a veranda overlooking the courtyard. It has a large bed, an attached bathroom, and a kerosene

stove. I begin a twenty-four-hour fast in preparation for Amir's return the next evening.

"Aren't you hungry, Jake?" Suzy asks as she wolfs down one samosa after another chased with cold beer. Since my fast is from solids only, I join her with a beer.

"Yes, but we must play his game while we rest up. Let's bathe and wash our clothes."

Suzy doesn't seem to fully appreciate what is about to occur.

I shower and sit cross-legged on the bed with a lungi cloth around my waist, and watch as Suzy emerges from her cold shower with her lungi wrapped around her breasts. She sits on the edge of the bed and brushes her damp hair.

"How do you know you can trust me?" Suzy asks.

"I don't have a choice and we need each other to get away," I say.

Suzy shuffles closer to me and the cloth over her breasts loosens.

"Look, Jake, we're both in a fix. They hate foreign smugglers here and what else are we?"

I am about to protest but Suzy shushes me, touches my arm and her lungi slips down. She places her head on my lap and curls up in fetal position. We are both starved for passion and our lungies easily slip off as our eager bodies intertwine. We slip into rhythmic thrusts like two runaway locomotives until our universe climactically explodes, then slip into a deep sleep.

The next evening, Amir leads us downstairs where he has everything prepared. I pay him in advance and give my watch, switchblade and my backpack to Suzy for safekeeping.

“What now?” I ask Amir.

“She must leave, he says. “Tell her to come back in three days.”

I had anticipated this and had prepared her, but Suzy protests. “You said I could stay.”

“You won’t understand and perhaps do something foolish,” Amir says.

“He’s right. You got another place, Amir?”

“Take a taxi to Ganeshpuri and come back in three days. They don’t ask for passports at the ashram there if you look sufficiently glassy-eyed. Just don’t get sucked into its abbot’s organization.”

Suzy takes my backpack for safekeeping and leaves reluctantly. I am eager to taste fake death and Amir opens up the basket and frees the cobras. They slither onto my lap in playful anticipation, as if knowing what is about to happen.

“Let’s get on with it,” I say.

Amir weighs me on bathroom scales and wraps a strand of thick copper wire around my wrist. He tightens it with pliers to stop my circulation. “When the proper dose has been administered go upstairs, lie on the bed, and cut the wire off,” he says, handing me a small pair of wire cutters. “I will see that you are undisturbed for three days, after which, you will recover. Are you ready?”

“Shoot me up.”

The captain of my soul lights an opium pipe, takes a deep drag and passes it to me. “This will numb your physical pain. You have fasted so your stomach will not protest.”

I draw hard and long on the pipe, and as the alkaloid hits my neurons, a warm pulsation ripples through my body. The second drag numbs me out completely.

The snake is alert and as Amir grasps it behind its head to open its mouth, it extends a pair of translucent milky fangs. He presses tightly against the venom ducts, positions the fangs above the back of my hand and makes one pierce my vein.

Amir releases his grip on the venom duct and counts while the poison flows. He presses on the duct once more and quickly retracts the fang. I make a mental calculation of how long he kept the venom duct unblocked.

“The venom must not get into the broken skin or muscle but flow directly into the vein or a serious topical injury will occur,” he explains like a mad doctor.

After the initial warm sensation, my hand becomes very hot and throbs dully, numbed by the wire and deadened by the opium. Amir wipes off the blood and swabs the puncture with alcohol-soaked cotton.

“When the venom hits, don’t be alarmed. When you cut the wire you will be convinced that you have taken too much venom but you will slip into death’s realm safely, which you can explore for three Earth days.”

“What if I don’t recover in three days?”

“The entrance into your physical body becomes sealed after four days. Trust me, I know what I am doing.”

Trust me. These words instinctively make me distrustful, but it’s too late to turn back.

Amir opens a small basket on the coffee table containing partridge eggs.

“The cobra offered you its medicine, now you must reward it.”

I take an egg and hold it high between my thumb the middle finger of my unwired hand. The serpent positions itself under the egg, opens its mouth wide and takes it whole. The egg collapses and the liquid flows into its gullet. The other snake approaches for its treat and I oblige.

“It is time. Go upstairs and good luck.”

Good luck? Wasn't this supposed to be precisely calculated? What if I have too much venom in my system? I feel very nervous yet keep from panicking. I stumble upstairs, trapped between the brink of delirium and the border of madness, and fall on the bed.

I have no choice but to proceed. Carefully, I cut the wire. My hand tingles as its grip releases the flow of blood and a pulsating, burning sensation travels from the back of my hand up my arm in rhythmic slow motion. When it reaches my armpit, it stabs painfully. I can feel the poison making its way to my diaphragm where it will paralyze the muscles that control my breathing and cause me to choke to death.

I sit up but a powerful blow to my chest knocks me flat on my back. My body becomes frozen in the grip of the powerful venom. A desperate last thought flashes through my brain as paralysis sets in and I lay choking—I have been given too much venom and I don't want to die. I try to scream but my vocal cords are frozen.

My mind shuts down and everything becomes profoundly quiet as I die.

CHAPTER 6

My body lies lifeless on its deathbed as a dark shape with red eyes approaches. Death has come for my soul.

One of Death's hands grips an open noose while the other restrains a pair of fierce dogs with drooling fangs. The ominous figure loops the noose tightly around my neck and with one decisive motion, pulls the soul from my body.

I am pulled towards a black hole in a corner of the ceiling with the frightening canines at my heels. We are sucked into a dark funnel but once inside, I can perceive a distant point of light like a lone star. As we drift towards the light I struggle against the tug on my neck, but I am like a hapless dog pulling against its leash.

I can see that my soul has a human shape with hands and legs that are able to move and it definitely has a mind which can reason. I flail my new hands wildly, desperately trying to push Death away, but they only pass through the creature.

“Where you are taking me?”

The figure turns. “Do not disturb me.”

That is not good enough and I gather my wits hoping to reason with this entity.

I try to sound in control. “I chose to be here and I demand a fucking answer.”

“Death is not your choice, even if it is by your own hand. On this side, your fate is mine to administer. Now keep still.”

“Who the fuck are you?” I ask again.

“I am Yama. Now keep quiet or I’ll tighten my noose so tight that you will not be able to speak.”

So I am held by Yama, the oriental Grim Reaper, yet I wonder why he told me to keep still? Was my struggling having an effect? Recalling what the Himalayan sadhus taught me, I focus my attention on my prana and observe it lying low at the base of my spine, coiled like a snake. With great effort I uncurl it, channel it upwards and direct it into a clenched fist. I punch the creature in the jaw and it is sent reeling, causing it to release its grip on the noose.

Seeing their master in trouble, the dogs lunge at me but their fangs pass harmlessly through my ethereal flesh. It seems the growls of these beasts gnash deeper than their teeth, and it is the same with the ghoulish creature. It is the noose that grips me, not the phantom hands that wield it.

Temporarily free from the creature, I empower my hands with prana and pull the noose over my neck, but Yama has recovered from my blow and has returned.

Yama lets out a shriek that reverberates down the black tunnel. “Give me my noose!”

“And what do I get in return?” I sneer, aware that my prana-raising technique gives me control in the after-death state. I also realize that Yama understands this.

“You have no choice in my realm. Return my noose immediately or you will suffer the consequences.”

“No choice? Here boys, fetch,” I shout, as I fling the noose through the inky membrane surrounding us. It disappears.

“What have you done?” gasps Yama and as he dives through the membrane and into the void. His hounds follow at his heels, and I am left alone.

I race back down the tunnel and float into the room where my physical body lies only to see Amir, accompanied by two other men, rifling through my pockets, unaware of my presence. I shout, but my voice doesn't penetrate the boundary separating life and death, and my hands are not able to grasp the thieves. I may have some control in the after-death realm but the physical realm is beyond my grasp. They finish their looting and leave the room.

I float to the bed next to my body, convinced that I am truly dead, but at least I am free from Yama's clutches. Unsure of what to do or the true nature of my predicament, I re-enter the tunnel and examine its membrane. My hand disappears when I thrust it in and is intact when I withdraw it. I plunge my head in to look inside and experience the most profound blackness imaginable. The void tries to suck me in, but I resist, and propel myself towards the distant speck of light.

As I approach, it grows wider and becomes more brilliant until it becomes a vast space of diffuse light.

I exit the tunnel and float in a space which feels like the inside of a limitless frosted light bulb. There are no distinguishable forms anywhere and I pause to look back at the exit of the tunnel which is an inky blob hovering in space.

As my awareness adapts to the new light, I see wispy shapes emerge from the formless light surrounding me. Subtle shapes materialize until it's clear that I am not alone. They become more distinct as they approach, until I can make out a host of winged beings with robes and halos. In their midst floats a majestic, bearded man crowned with golden rays. They

gather under a lustrous gilded arch. The bearded man fixes his gaze upon me and announces in a deep, reverberating voice:

“Welcome home, Jude Ryder!”

My real name, chanted in the voice of a deep, heavenly baritone. But, home? What the hell’s going on here? Home is Earth, where my physical body lies. I have simply died in an experiment gone horribly wrong and am now trapped in some afterlife realm that I neither fully understand nor like.

Another bearded man stands to the side, opens a large golden book, and chants:

“Brother-in-light Jude,
receive your golden key.
Your room is waiting
in your Father’s mansion.”

He offers me a golden key as if it were an Oscar. Are they God the Father and Saint Peter?

Frankincense and myrrh perfume the celestial air and joy emanates from the beatific figures. Their love tugs at my heart as the heavenly hosts float in hushed anticipation, but the only emotion I feel is confusion.

As they await my response, a crack appears in the distant light, revealing a darkness that struggles for dominion, polluting the heavenly light. The beings of light retreat as screams and wails emanate from the darkness and foul, sulfurous stench overwhelm the fragrance of divine incense. Sparks and flames surge from a ghastly inferno from which emerges a monstrous cloven-hoofed, beast with horns wielding a barbed

trident. Waves of threatening clouds attempt to engulf the light and I find myself standing face-to-face with Satan himself, who shatters the silence.

“Jude Ryder, foul sinner!
Enter the bottomless pit.
Its cleansing fires will erase your guilt.
Take shelter in Hades and weep.
Embrace you punishment until the end of time.”

The filthy beast holds out a scaly claw covered in soot and beckons with hypnotic eyes, but a plea issues from the light:

“Reject the darkness, Jude, and come into the light.
You have atoned for your sins and are forgiven.
Rejoice, as God welcomes you to heaven.”

God is offering atonement and an eternal home in heaven while Satan orders me to enter hell. Satan lunges at me but he flies right through my body.

“Jude is mine,” God thunders.

“Jude belongs in hell,” Satan roars, and launches his trident at God.

God sends out a bolt of lightning, shattering the trident and making Satan keel over, but he recovers and throws a fiery orb at God, which hits his breast and knocks him back. I am awestruck as God and his angels become locked in battle with Satan and his demons.

While the hosts of angels and legions of demons continue in combat, I fail to notice that I am drifting closer to the foray. Satan lunges at me but I stand my ground and he flies through

my body as if it were a mirage. He turns to face me and I concentrate my pranic energy to my fist and smash it on Satan's jaw with all my might, stunning him. An angel rushes over to help me and we hold stunned Satan's limbs and fling him into the pit of hell. The legions of foul creatures follow their master inside as the air slowly clears.

The angel meets my eyes and raises his palm in peace.

"Who are you?" I ask.

The angel spreads his saffron wings and shakes out sparkling points of light. His shape shifts as I move my eyes and it is as if I am looking at many heavenly beings wrapped in one. "I am Gabriel," he replies in a voice that is like a chorus.

"Blessed Gabriel," I gasp, searching my mind for reason. "How can there be war in heaven?" I say.

"As below, so above," Gabriel says, when Yama appears with his hounds.

"Where is my noose?" Yama snaps.

"It is lost in the void," I reply.

"You have disrupted the order of the celestial and demonic spheres," Yama says. "The dead cannot enter paradise or damnation without my assistance and without my deliverance of souls to their destiny, a crisis will befall the spiritual domains. Without my noose, the human realms will suffer a critical stage of soul population and chaos will reign. You must find it."

"And what do I get in return?" I say.

"I will release you from death, for you were not yet called, but you must hurry or you will not be able to return to life."

"It's a deal." I raise my palm in peace.

Looking back, I see a cluster of angels watching us.

I turn to Gabriel and bow before him on one knee. "Will you help me, Gabriel?"

God approaches and motions to Gabriel with his chin.

Gabriel understands and asks me, "How can I help?"

"Holy Gabriel, illuminate the black void where Yama lost his noose," I say, glancing at Yama, who frowns.

I gently grasp Gabriel by a saffron wing, drag him to the hovering black blob and we enter the black tunnel. Yama moves away with his cowering hounds.

Gabriel understands my intentions.

"Climb on my back between my wings," he says. "Grasp Yama's noose as I fly through the void and illuminate the darkness."

I position myself on his soft, feathery back and hold tightly to the roots of his wings, and it reminds me of when I used to hold onto Quetzalcoatl's back and soar the spiritual sky into the realms, as well as flying on my giant swan. The divine angel flies into the black membrane and shines his angelic light which penetrates the inky expanse like the cone of a torch. We fly in spirals, scanning the void until I spot a tumbling object in the distance and guide him towards it.

"There it is," I say, and Gabriel maneuvers his trajectory until we are flying next to it.

I direct my pranic energy to my hand and grab Yama's noose.

"We have it," Gabriel exclaims as we begin our return. "Now the balance of flesh-bound souls to immortal souls will be conserved, but there is still chaos on earth."

"Is there any solution, Gabriel?"

"I may have to go down to try and straighten things out once more. God is pleased at the bountiful harvest of souls during my last adventures on Earth but the torrent has become a trickle and is drying up in favor of the forces of darkness."

“You must do something before things get completely out of hand.”

“I will negotiate with God, who must approve, but now we have arrived in the tunnel and you must give Yama his noose.

We exit the darkness and once more are bathed in diffuse light. I see the gates of heaven ahead, as well as the hole to hell in another direction. I dismount and clasp my hands in respect.

“Until we meet again, Jude.”

“I hope so, blessed Gabriel.”

Gabriel turns and flutters past Yama, shouting, “Now get back to work!”

Yama says to me, “My noose, Jude, my noose,” and holds out a hand.

I look at Yama distrustfully, and firmly gripping my bargaining chip, I dodge him and retreat down the tunnel. Yama and his dogs follow but I have the edge of surprise and quickly reach the room where my body lies. I float next to it as Amir enters. He is accompanied by Suzy with her hands tied, and two other men. They seem to be arguing, but I can't understand what they're saying.

They wrap my body in a sheet and begin to leave. I follow them in distress.

Yama arrives as they throw my body into the trunk of an old car. He gestures a sign of peace and reaches for his noose. I reluctantly give it up and he motions for me to enter the trunk. He slips in next to me.

We float with the motion of the car as it speeds off into the night.

When we stop, Yama and I emerge from the trunk in a moonlit field near the ocean. Suzy is pushed out onto a sandbank, her hands tied behind her. The trio lays my body on the

ground. They collect wood from a nearby hut and pile it into a funeral pyre.

Yama loops his noose around my neck and pushes my spirit into my body's head through its crown.

Death has given me back life.

I open my physical eyes and gasp. Stiff-limbed and shivering, I quietly free myself from the sheet and sit up, choking on the fresh air. My eyes water and I regain some warmth by rubbing my body. Yama is now invisible but I thank him, sensing his presence.

"Farewell, Angel of Death," I whisper.

Silently, I creep to the car. The windows are open and I see the keys in the ignition. I sneak up behind Suzy and clasp a hand over her mouth.

"Shhh," I whisper. "It's Jake. Get in the car."

I untie her hands and push Suzy through the window and climb into the driver's seat. Three figures in the distance are piling wood. I orient myself with the controls on the wrong side, turn on the ignition and the engine starts.

The men run toward us shouting as I rev the engine, get a feel for the clutch, and inch forward. As they close in, I pop the clutch and leave them eating the loose sand kicked up from the spinning wheels as we speed down the dark road.

"What the fuck happened, Suzy?" I say, as we race away.

"I thought you were dead."

"How could you be sure I was dead?"

"You didn't breathe and they said you were dead."

"Was I cold and stiff?"

"I didn't check."

“Did I stink?”

“I . . .”

“You never checked. Quit your goddamn lying, Suzy.”

“I’m not lying. I was afraid of Amir.”

“You actually want to get out of here?”

Suzy kisses my upper arm. “I’m sorry, I was also arranging . . .”

“To jet out of this hellhole and leave me behind?”

“No, Jake. I arranged for our stuff before I found you. I came back to get you, but Amir caught me.”

“Right now we’ve got a stolen car and no hotel. Let’s dump it and find a cab. Do you have any money with you?”

“Amir took the money I had in my pockets. Look, there’s a gas station. Drive past it and ditch the car.”

We leave the car on the side of the road and walk back to the gas station. We receive strange looks but get the ride we need. Suzy shushes me and gives the cabbie directions.

We arrive at Suzy’s hotel around midnight—a middle-class hotel, mostly for natives. The desk clerk confronts Suzy when she asks for her key.

“We don’t allow visitors after ten.”

“He’s my husband. He just flew in from the Ajanta tour. His passport is upstairs and I have to get some money for the cab outside.”

“All right.”

Suzy takes the elevator and quickly returns, pays the cabbie, and satisfies the desk clerk’s concerns.

“I’m impressed, Suzy,” I say, as we enter the spacious suite.

“We need to sleep, Jude.”

We lie down on the soft bed and black out.

Daylight. Passionate encounter with Suzy under a cool shower with hot sweat mingling with a refreshing sprinkle of water. We towel off and she hands me an odd set of clothes from the closet. The short pants feel awful but the western sandals fit well enough. I don a light shirt and examine two suitcases full of wrinkled clothes, maps, a camera and other tourist junk.

“Here’s your passport,” she says. “Our flight leaves tomorrow at eight p.m. In the meantime,” she says, looking innocently into my eyes, “we have work to do.”

I have yet to learn all her wiles.

“I’m a smuggler, remember? I’ve been to Bombay a dozen times. My contacts fixed me up with the passports. Cost a penny—your pennies—but you had a lot of money hidden in the covers of your book,” Suzy says. “You want to go to New York? Well, just follow Suzy, I mean Janet Crawford, Robert. Hi Robert—nice vacation, wasn’t it? Did you enjoy the Everest trek? Here, take your book, you still have almost three thousand dollars left in the covers.”

Suzy throws me my heavy book and my stiletto. I put the book away in my pack, having both underestimated and overestimated her.

The fake passport pictures are a close match and I shave while Suzy bleaches her hair platinum blonde. Suzy alters our appearances with a make-up kit and by the time she’s finished, we look reasonably close to our fake I.D’s. It takes a couple hours of practice to perfect our new signatures.

“I just want you to cooperate with me. Look at these and tell me what you see,” she says.

She pulls out a couple of bronze statues. One is Nataraj, the dancing Shiva with a circle of fire around him and the other is a well-endowed goddess.

“Cheap brass Indian replicas,” I say.

“That’s what U.S. customs must see. The guys here are already paid-off,” Suzy says.

“I’m not going with you, Suzy.”

“But I’ve made all arrangements.”

“Thanks for the passport and getup, but I’m too high profile to return. Let’s keep in touch.”

“Where do you receive mail?”

“In the New Delhi post office as Jake Lasser, but I can’t use that name anymore.”

“I’ll write when I get back. What will your name be then?”

“Jude Ryder. It’s my real name. Give me your address in New York. As soon as I get my passport I’ll write you the details.”

After a passionate farewell Suzy takes a taxi to the airport and I flag down a scooter to the train station.

I buy a ticket on the first train going towards Benares, where the sadhu ascetics had told me to go. Benares sounds like a likely place—far away from Amir and his cronies, as well as Interpol. I buy *The Hindustani Daily Times* and read that the National Museum was robbed. Two priceless, fifteen-century bronze statues have been stolen.

CHAPTER 7

Kashi, the oldest city in the world according to local tradition, harbors more than stale legends. Called Benares by locals, it's a rat's maze of small streets crisscrossed with busy avenues. Not only is it one of the major pilgrim cities in India, but it's an important commercial center of the cloth trade.

It is also seeped in the mystery of death. Many pilgrims go to Benares as a direct ticket to salvation because Vishvanatha, its tutelary Lord of the Universe deity, is a form of Shiva who supposedly whispers the soul-saving taraka mantra into one's ear upon death.

I rent a room with a bathroom and shower overlooking the neglected Man Mandir Ghat near the central Dasashwamedh Ghat, the horse-sacrifice ghat, one of the endless rows of ghats lining the crescent bank of the Ganges, and join the local scene of sadhu ascetics who gather in small groups to smoke ganja and hashish in the maze of markets. I am accepted into their circles not only because of the high quality ganja that I always carry, but because I am a soft touch for a few rounds of tea and snacks. Sadhu ascetics may seem beyond the mundane give-and-take of the world, but they certainly are susceptible to the munchies.

I relish my unstructured freedom, especially the relationship I form with the old woman called Mataji.

Mataji is a sadhvi—an old female sadhu ascetic with dreadlocks coiled on her head like tangled garter snakes. Her thin body is always wrapped in a faded orange cotton sari and her leathery brown skin hangs from her bones. She lives in an ancient, broken-down house on a narrow lane between the gilded Golden Temple of Vishvanatha, and the Ganges.

I bury the episodes with Burghardt; my ill-fated romance with Marygold; my flight into the high Himalayas on a swan's back with a pair of weird fakirs; my narrow brush with the law which led me to Suzy; an almost-fatal cobra poisoning that catapulted me into the ethereal realms of Yama, God and Satan, and my deeper problem of being a hunted fugitive. Slowly, I descend into amnesia.

I also find some curious night haunts in which to spend moments of my newly-discovered peace. One is the decrepit and neglected ancient Jai Singh astronomical observatory high above the Ganges. Another is an abandoned palace overlooking the Ganges near the Bengali Tola neighborhood. I pay its guardian to allow me the freedom to wander its huge empty rooms high over the river whenever I want and sometimes sleep in the abandoned Kali temple on its roof in the cool night air. In the morning, he brings tea and bhang, the ubiquitous green paste of marijuana, the fuel on which most of Benares runs, and we enjoy the exhilarating sight of the sun rising over the Ganges.

But my special hangout is Mataji's house. The door in the outer brick wall of her home leads to a courtyard with a two-story house of mostly empty rooms. Those surrounding the balcony of the second floor are missing their front walls and the one over the entrance is also missing its ceiling. Mataji occupies a lower room with Laxmi, a tiny orphan girl about three

years old and Devi (Debby to me) a ravishing twenty-year-old orphan lives in the room above.

The room over the entrance is my favorite. I often climb there at night, scaling the front wall after one of my insomnia-driven late night walks along the endless rows of mystical ghats of Benares. Whenever Mataji hears me scale her fortress late at night, she joins me in the ceilingless room to smoke cigarettes and ganja by candlelight and teaches me Hindi. She brings me blankets and wakes me in the predawn darkness for tea and a smoke, but makes me leave before Debby gets up to bathe.

Occasionally, I manage to slip in undetected, curling up in my shawl in a corner of the ceilingless room and setting my mental alarm for predawn. Because the reason of my midnight visits is for more than chitchat with an old woman. From a crack between two loose bricks I am able to spy on Debby's nakedness as she bathes under the balcony water tap.

I am not aware that she used to be a *dasi*—a temple hooker who gathers divine donations with her flesh. Neither am I aware that she knows I'm watching her and that the gyrations of her dark, supple body are deliberately calculated to arouse me.

I visit often not only because of Mataji and the occasional strip show, but also because of little Laxmi. The diminutive child has emaciated legs that betray a crippling condition and she evokes new paternal feelings in me. She can neither walk nor talk clearly, but to me, she is magical.

I often carry Laxmi on my hip on rambles down Benares' maze of lanes and we often get puzzled stares. When we sit together at Mataji's, Laxmi talks to—or is it with—sparrows as she feeds them breakfast crumbs. I invoke the Himalayan sadhu ascetics' technique for silencing the mind which somehow

cracks her cryptic language and we converse in the sounds of mutual understanding.

“You can actually talk to Laxmi and she understands you?” Mataji asks me in my newly-understood Hindi. I tell her that Laxmi speaks a language only birds understand. “Yes, Jake-saab,” Mataji says, and looks at me with a puzzled look on her face because she can’t grasp how anyone can understand Laxmi’s speech. I am one of the few people who can communicate with Laxmi. But it is not so much that no one else can but that no one has cared enough to try, because orphan girls are not prized in India.

Perhaps this is why Mataji becomes such a close friend and why she often takes me to a tavern to drink *tari*, a fermented coconut milk drink, and to eat fried fish. On special occasions she takes me to drink and smoke stronger substances at the palace of the so-called King of the Burning Ghat—the wealthy patriarch of the tax-collecting caste of Benares’ main crematorium. It is also why she tolerates the lusty exchanges between Debby and I.

As I soak up Indian values like a sponge, I discover that beneath the rigid surface of India’s moral and religious façade flow the hidden undercurrents not only of exotic mystery, but of deadly danger. The proverbial, oriental illusion remains alive in India. On its surface curls a benign rope, which when aroused, can transform into a deadly snake, and I am slowly being lured into a serpent’s lair.

It is by accident, chance, fate, and destiny that I stumble into the deadly world of the black goddess, Kali. Early one morning, as I sit in a teashop drinking coffee, a balding, plainly-dressed

middle-aged man sits down beside me and without introduction, offers to read my palm.

Ack! He wants to cold-read me and deprive me of my money. When I refuse, the man grabs my arm saying it is free. I feel trapped, so I reluctantly listen to the odd man's words. His reading cuts deep and slices open my past with surgical precision: my early initiation into Aztec mystical arts, my drug-dealing entanglements, my estrangement from my family, my obsession with James Dean, the harrowing plunges into pits of mystical terror, the Himalayan flight with the two yogis and my secret curiosity about death.

"How do you know so much about me?" I ask.

"The secrets of soothsaying are not for the uninitiated."

I refuse to be sucked into some scam. "I'll bet. How much do you charge?"

"Knowledge of hidden things cannot be purchased with money."

"If you're smart enough to read the past, can you also read the future?"

The man laughs. "The future is an open book if you have spiritual eyes and ears."

"Talk's cheap, my friend," I say, and get ready to leave.

He opens his eyes wide and grabs my bicep, hard. "Talk, my friend? Would you like some action?"

"No corpse, no crime. No smoke, no fire," I say, and push away the man's clammy hand.

"If you want blood then return here in one week, after the smiling Buddha shakes the earth," he says, as he gets up and leaves.

Smiling Buddha? What a jerk. A curious, but obviously mad man. I quickly dismiss the incident.

A week later I read the headline in the Hindustani Times: “INDIA DETONATES NUCLEAR BOMB. India dramatically entered the Nuclear Club yesterday when it surprised the world by successfully detonating a nuclear device code-named Smiling Buddha.”

I return to the teashop and find the soothsayer waiting for me.

“How did you know?” I ask.

“Kali told me,” he says slowly, with a smirk.

“Why didn’t you warn someone?”

“Who would have believed me?”

“Can Kali tell me where I can get a brahmastra?” I ask, feeling guilty about using a monstrous political event for my own devices.

“If you want to know about a mystical nuclear bomb,” he says, widening his eyes, “then you will have to meet Kali.”

I half-expect him to sprout claws and to morph into a ghoulish, ripping me to shreds, but I keep my cool and ask, “Where and when, mister . . . ?”

“Chandra,” he bows, “at Kali’s service. And you are . . . ?”

“Jake.”

Chandra. Mister Moon. He would have sounded like a lunatic if it were not for his chilling prediction of the nuclear test. It is irresistible bait and I bite without realizing how sharp and deadly its hidden hook is.

I vow to be objective, like in my encounters with mystical terrorism, but cool-headedness is the first victim as I am slowly sucked in. Through the hot and rainy monsoon season I am

sweetened by the Kali group's tales of knowledge and power, and their magic tricks which I am sure are slights of hand and cheap illusions.

Summer passes and in early fall, I am taken to an ancient temple inside a Benarsi enclosure that is part of a web of Kali temples. The group calls me Jake of Nine Stones, probably because I continue to wear the amulet – which Amir had strangely not stolen – around my neck. My name had been submitted to the high priest in their Calcutta temple then a sign had come from Kali to receive me into their group. Their spell has ensnared me and I am initiated into the harrowing worship of Kali on the new moon night that marks the beginning of the Navaratri goddess festival.

For nine nights I am bathed ceremonially in a pond in the center of the enclosure then led into the inner sanctuary thick with incense smoke. I offer the black-skinned, crimson-tongued idol of Kali, draped in red silk and garlanded with wreaths of flowers, singed meat and fiery liquor mixed with my own blood. Bells, trumpets, incense and hypnotic damaru-drums call for the goddess to receive me.

On the tenth day, Mataji takes me to the palace of the King of the Burning Ghat to drink liquor and smoke charas. Later, he and his entire retinue vacate his palace to parade their elaborately decorated and painted paper maché and plaster image of the goddess Durga, mounted on a tiger slaying the buffalo-demon Mahishasur with her spear, and dunk it in the Ganges. The retinue plays drums and its members turn in gyrating dance, holding cups belching incense in front of the large image balanced on a platform supported by poles carried on the shoulders of burly worshippers. The parade ends with the dunking of the image into the river after which the retinue

goes to an enclosure where the Kali worshippers of the king's group gather to drink, smoke and dance all night.

It is late in the evening when I leave the retinue and join my group at their temple. On this tenth night, called the Dushera, at the ceremony's crescendo, the group stops abruptly and leaves. My cortex hisses with white noise as a new clamor arises in the distance. The call has been answered and I am left to face my destiny alone.

The incense smoke in the dim inner sanctum clears to reveal a patina of patterns on a red-black background that morphs into a vast, corpse-strewn, blood-splattered, field. But this is no simple illusion, when in the distance a rhythmic thumping announces the imminent approach of something ominous.

There's no place to run or hide—the entire temple has been replaced by the vision. I stand my ground sweating profusely when out of the mist, Kali appears. The enormous naked figure stomps the ground in a gyrating dance of death as garlands of severed heads hanging from her waist and neck flail wildly. Kali dances mad circles, drawing nearer, and her movements shake the ground. One of her four hands holds a noose; another grasps a severed head by its hair; a third hand twists and turns into complex mudras; her fourth wields a blood-smeared, hooked sword. Intoxicated from drinking the blood of a demon called Raktabija, she dances in a frenzy until she spots me, and stops.

Kali's three red eyes burn into mine like lasers. Her monstrous body sways from side to side, assessing my presence on her hallowed ground. Frowning horribly, Kali lifts her sword high, and howling like a thundering bank of jet engines, she charges.

Unconsciousness hits me, but fumes of ammonia cut through my state of inertia. Chandra is at my side, holding a vial to my nose and supporting my weight, half in the hazy temple and half in Kali's domain.

"W-what now?" I say.

Chandra whispers in my ear: "To avoid Kali's wrath, you must appease her hunger. You have to offer Kali your blood and human flesh."

Once again I hear the terrifying sound of Kali approaching.

The instruments of offering are placed on a low altar in front of me. A silver goblet is filled with liquor and a plate of singed human meat that God knows where they got is placed in front of an empty picture-frame. Its wide borders are polished to a mirror-sheen and reflect my scruffy hair and a desperate face far from the cocky self-confidence of James Dean.

"Offer Kali your blood," Chandra demands.

Using the blade of my stiletto, I cut into my forearm until blood flows and mixes with the liquor. When the group retreats, Kali returns.

Fierce eyes burn into mine as once more Kali shrieks and charges. My eyes freeze in terror as I expect my head to roll, but this time Kali stops directly in front of me and stares curiously at my offerings.

She drinks the contents of the goblet, licking up every last drop then she pierces a piece of meat on her sword and devours it with a growl.

I spear the other piece with the tip of my bloodied blade, chew the chunk of human meat and swallow. I replenish the goblet with more liquor and blood and take a large swig.

Kali has received my offerings and I have shared her grisly sacrament. She has become a calm, purring monster and begins

to shrink. When she is the size of a small girl she steps onto the altar and when she is the size of my palm, she steps into the picture frame and becomes a holographic image demanding more blood. I coax my clotted wound open and let more blood flow into the goblet and add liquor. I stir the cocktail with my knife and raise the goblet in a toast: “Cheers, Kali, here’s to your hell!”

To keep Kali from beheading me, I’m told I must perform this ceremony every midnight without fail, but in reverse. After I eat goat’s meat and drink liquor, I must offer blood, but from my fingertips, pierced with needles and not my knife. And twice a year, on the tenth day of the Nine Goddess Festival, I must offer human meat when Kali appears in person to receive her offering.

From now on, this midnight ceremony dominates my life and snuffs out my past. I have become hooked on—no, intoxicated with—black Kali.