

THE
BREATH OF
GOD

A Novel

JEFFREY SMALL

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TO ALISON AND GABRIELLA.
THANK YOU FOR MAKING THIS POSSIBLE. I LOVE YOU BOTH.



AUTHOR'S NOTE

Although this novel is a contemporary work of fiction, I have based it on extensive historical research. The primary settings in India and Bhutan exist, and I have tried to capture them as accurately as possible. Russian journalist Nicholas Notovitch, whose explosive discovery in the Himalayas in 1887 serves as the basis for this story, was a historical figure. He published his findings in 1894 before being publicly condemned and silenced for the heresy he proposed.

PART ONE



THE SPARK

“*In the beginning was the Tao. All things issue from it; all things return to it. Every being in the universe is an expression of the Tao. The Tao gives birth to all beings, nourishes them, maintains them.*”

The Tao Te Ching, 6th century BC

“*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.*”

The Gospel according to John, AD 1st century



CHAPTER 1



PUNAKHA VALLEY, BHUTAN

“THE NEXT ONE WILL BE the most dangerous.”

Most dangerous? Grant Matthews spat out the remnants of the Himalayan river water he’d just inhaled on the last rapid, a Class IV.

“You good?” Dasho, his Bhutanese guide, called to him in accented English.

“Just need to catch my breath.”

The current slowed as the Mo Chhu, the Mother River, widened. Grant balanced his paddle on top of the neoprene spray skirt that kept the icy water from entering his kayak and shook out his arms. He needed to stretch his legs too; the yellow boat barely accommodated his six-foot-two frame.

Dasho approached him with powerful strokes. “Monsoon season just passed. Chhu very fast now.”

Grant pushed his helmet back, brushed his wet hair out of his eyes, and studied the guide’s tanned face, his wide cheekbones. “So, how does a Buddhist monk become a river guide?”

When he arranged his trip to Bhutan, he’d asked his travel agent to find a tour guide familiar with the country’s many monasteries. Grant hoped to find what he’d been searching for hidden in one of them. When the agent told him that Dasho, a former monk, led tours and kayaking expeditions, he knew he’d found a kindred soul.

“Father died two years ago,” Dasho replied. “I was only son with three sisters and a mother. Left the monastery to provide for them.”

So he lost his father around the same age I did, Grant thought, estimating Dasho to be in his early twenties. He then quickly shrugged off the memory of his sophomore year in college: his once invincible father—the great reverend—and his scandalous death. He lifted the paddle off his lap and swept it through the water.

“I’m sorry.”

“No sorry.” Dasho smiled. “I could be farmer.” He pointed with his paddle across the river.

The valley rose gently from the riverbank in tiered fields planted with wheat, peppers, and beans. A lone sun-wrinkled farmer worked the plants with a wooden hoe. On a hill beyond the fields, a strand of Buddhist prayer flags fluttered on forty-foot-high poles. The snowcapped peaks of the Himalayas framed the picture in the distance.

“So you traveled through India before coming to the Land of Thunder Dragon?” Dasho asked, alluding to Druk Yul, the name the Bhutanese used for the tiny Buddhist kingdom nestled in the Himalayas between India and Tibet.

Grant nodded. “Research for my PhD.”

As soon as the words left his mouth, a rush of anxiety flooded his body. *My unfinished dissertation*, he thought. The members of his dissertation committee at Emory University in Atlanta, even his mentor Professor Billingsly, were skeptical when he’d first outlined his research plans five years ago. The story he proposed to track down was only a legend, they’d said, but Grant was determined to unravel the ancient mystery.

He’d just spent a week in the cold, barren moonscape of the northern Indian Himalayas near Kashmir. Several monks at the Himis monastery in Ladakh had become suspicious of his inquiries there. A hundred years earlier, similar questions had brought unwanted attention from the West to their isolated monastery with devastating consequences for the questioner. Grant planned to handle Bhutan differently.

He grinned at Dasho. “I much prefer your milder weather and lush landscapes.”

“We measure progress by gross national happiness instead of gross national product.” Dasho beamed. “And you tackle toughest river?”

“I like the challenge. Learned in college on some big water.”

“You Americans enjoy pushing everything to extreme.” Dasho chuckled.

“Ah, that’s the secret to our progress.”

Progress, he thought with a hollowness in his gut. He wasn’t making much, and he was running out of time. Bhutan had hundreds of Buddhist monasteries, and he could only afford two weeks in the country. The tenuous lead he’d received at Himis from the one monk he’d befriended didn’t specify which monastery in Bhutan might hold the treasure.

“What you are searching for was moved long ago,” the elderly monk had whispered.

“Where?” Grant had asked, glancing down the cloistered hallway to make sure no one approached.

The monk had shrugged. “Certainly to another Buddhist monastery. Probably Bhutan.”

In the two days he’d been in Bhutan, Grant had already visited three major monasteries, one in Paro, the city he’d flown into, and two in Thimpu, the country’s capital. In each he’d approached several monks, but not a flicker of recognition had passed over their faces when he hinted at what he was looking for. Grant shook his head. This kayaking trip was an indulgence he couldn’t afford, even if he’d worked the past month without a day off.

He should have finished his dissertation last year. The extension he’d received on his scholarship would run out in the spring, and he was tapped out. From the moment he’d graduated from high school, he’d been on his own financially. His father had rejected his choice of college and his academic interests. He’d worked to pay his way through undergrad at the University of Virginia and now grad school at Emory with a combination of teaching assistant jobs and late nights waiting tables.

Grant pulled his paddle through the jade water. Sweat began to drip inside his black wet suit. *What if I can’t find it?* The fear nagged at him, but he wouldn’t give in to doubt. He couldn’t let the skeptics in his department at Emory prove him wrong.

He increased the pace of his paddling. The water was getting more tumultuous, and his body responded naturally. His mind, however, was still im-

mersed in his strategy for tracking down what he came for. He stroked the paddle with his whole body, his blood surging through his veins as if powered by the energy of his resolve to return to the search. Tomorrow he would visit the monastery in Punakha, a few miles downriver from where he paddled. Of the monasteries he'd targeted, Punakha's was the largest, but he willed himself not to get his hopes up.

"Whoa," Dasho called from behind. "Who you racing?"

Grant paused to let his guide catch him. Soon the river picked up speed as the crop fields on each side transitioned into progressively steeper banks. Ten minutes later, the two kayakers were encased inside a gray granite canyon, bumping over the small rapids that occurred with increasing frequency. Only a few trees managed to grow from the sides of the craggy cliffs, their exposed roots clinging to the walls like a rock climber's fingers searching for holds.

Just ahead, Grant saw that the river narrowed again and then dropped out of sight beyond a grouping of boulders. "Follow me, my friend," Dasho said, paddling into an eddy near the right cliff wall. The guide raised his voice over the noise of the falling water ahead of them. "Meet Laughing Buddha."

Grant pointed to the large boulder in the center of the river. "The Buddha's head?" He enjoyed the creative names paddlers used to describe the rapids, falls, and various obstacles in their rivers, like kids finding animals in the shapes of the clouds.

"The water flows on sides of rock are Buddha's upheld arms, and four-meter fall beyond that is Buddha's body." Dasho added with a grin, "And if you hit wrong way, he will laugh as you flip."

"Four meters?"

"Class five. Lots of water this week. Don't take many tourists to Laughing Buddha."

Grant felt a twinge of regret for letting his ego rather than his brain fill out the questionnaire about his kayaking experience. Most of his kayaking had actually been on Class III rapids with the occasional IV thrown in for terrifying effect. Now he faced descending the most difficult navigable rapid; the next highest classification, a VI, was considered too dangerous to run.

He examined the cliff walls at the river's edges—too steep to pull the boats out and walk around. “How do we approach it?”

“See right fork? We take that. At top of fall, paddle hard as you can, and lean back. If you go vertical too soon, you capsize.” Dasho made a flipping gesture with his hands and winked. “No problem for you. Just follow me.”

Dasho spun his kayak, facing the rapid. He yelled over the roar of the falling water, “One more thing: careful when you land. A boulder under high water makes large hole; don't get caught inside.”

Grant paddled two quick strokes next to his guide. For the first time, he could see over the rapid. The smooth sheets of water at the top of the fall churned into a foamy meringue as they spat over the edge of the rocks and then tumbled into a turbulent frenzy at the bottom. Grant wasn't sure what made him more nervous: the twelve-foot fall ahead of him or the swirling whirlpool where the water pounded into the river below.

He'd seen a number of hydraulics over the years, but this one was by far the largest. When water cascaded over a large rapid, it would occasionally strike submerged rocks at the bottom that caused the current to recirculate on itself, creating a whirlpool or a hydraulic, as paddlers called them. Rafters and kayakers stuck in hydraulics often had to be pulled out. Both he and Dasho carried throw bags with thirty feet of rope each. He hoped they wouldn't need them.

“I watch for you at bottom,” Dasho said. Taking long smooth strokes equally on both sides, he guided his kayak through the water straight for the right fork.

Grant caught his young guide's mistake as soon as he made it. Dasho glanced over his shoulder just before reaching the top of the fall to yell his final words of encouragement, “Don't forget to have fun!”

A slight error, really, but as Grant had learned, any misstep under dangerous conditions had a way of compounding itself, like an avalanche picking up power as it gathered snow on its slide down the mountain. The slight twist in Dasho's body caused his kayak to drift off center, just a few inches to the left. The powerful current then exacerbated the problem, pushing him further off his line. Dasho was quick to recover, digging in on the left side of his kayak,

paddling ferociously. The bow of his boat swung to the right just as he crested the fall.

He'd overcorrected and his maneuver to straighten his kayak cost him much of his forward momentum.

Grant held his breath, watching from the upper pool. Dasho hit the churning water below nose-first at a steep angle. Grant flinched as the kayak flipped. His guide's body twisted unnaturally when it slapped the water. A queasy feeling spread through Grant's stomach.

"Roll, Dasho. Damn it, roll!" he shouted, but he knew his voice couldn't be heard over the thundering water.

The pale underside of the blue kayak spun in the whirlpool as water pummeled it from the fall above. Dasho should have either rolled or exited the kayak by now, but Grant saw no sign of him. His guide was either trapped or unconscious. In either case, he needed help.

Grant knew he had to descend the rapid quickly. A checklist of his options flashed through his mind. Landing on top of the other kayak would create a whole new set of problems. A glance to shore confirmed his earlier assessment—no way to go around. His only choice: time his fall just right.

With a firm, two-handed grip, Grant lifted his paddle in the air and let his boat drift forward slowly. *Another few seconds*, he guessed, watching the boat below. His heart pounded as if he'd been paddling hard, although he had yet to move. *Just a second more*. His breathing quickened.

Now.

The moment Dasho's kayak spun to the left, Grant sank his paddle deep into the water. His arms and back burned with his effort. He hit the rapid dead-on. The roar of the water and his own pulse drummed in his ears. Pressing his feet into the kayak's plastic footrests, he leaned his long torso into his last strokes. The drop came so quickly, he didn't even register it until he felt the splash of his impact.

Grant squinted through the cold Himalayan spray.

There!

Dasho's boat bobbed upside down only a few feet away. Four quick strokes and he bumped against it. The turbulent current now rocked his

own kayak; he was caught in the same hydraulic that trapped his guide. Grant fought back the chill of fear that crept up his spine. If they were both to live, he had to focus on the task ahead. He formed his plan. First, he would right Dasho, and then he would worry about getting them out of the swirling hole.

Gripping his paddle in his right hand, Grant grabbed for Dasho's kayak with his left. His fingers slipped on the wet hull. He tried a second and then a third time with the same result. He needed a new plan. Leaning as far to the side as he dared, he searched the frigid water for any hold on the boat's underside. He took rapid, shallow breaths to avoid sucking in the water that splashed around him.

He felt the lip of the kayak's opening. The spray skirt was attached, which meant that Dasho was still inside. He clenched his numb fingers around the narrow lip. Bracing his legs against the walls of his own kayak, Grant jerked his left arm upward while he torqued his body to the right.

Dasho's kayak started to roll. A rush of triumph surged through Grant.

Then a gush of current from the hydraulic hit Grant's kayak on the rear quarter, twisting him unexpectedly. He struggled to compensate for the jarring movement while maintaining his balance and his grip, but the water overpowered him. His hand was ripped from the other boat.

He flipped.

Upside-down and spinning underwater, Grant opened his eyes. He couldn't see through the turbulent green. His lungs ached. And, he realized, he no longer held on to his paddle. The urge to panic threatened to consume him faster than the frigid water enveloping him.

His only hope was to follow his training. As he'd practiced many times, Grant tilted his ear to his right shoulder, bent his torso to the same side, and then swiveled his hips forcefully. Nothing. He attempted his roll again, but the current was too strong.

His vision darkened. Grant knew he only had seconds before he blacked out. He recalled his final option—a wet exit. Reaching both hands to the top of his kayak, he grasped the neoprene loop where his spray skirt attached to the kayak's opening and pulled toward his chest. It released. He gripped the

sides of the opening and pushed himself out of boat. The moment he was clear, his PFD, the personal flotation device, shot him to the surface.

Air.

He gasped deeply, then choked on the spray permeating the air around him. A second later, he caught a clean breath. He was going to be okay.

After a few more cautious breaths, Grant's head cleared. *Dasho*. His guide's kayak still bobbed upside down a few feet away. Grant kicked hard, swimming toward the other boat. Just as he reached his goal, the whirlpool sucked him under.

Instinctively he grabbed his knees, tucked his chin, and curled into a ball. Grant remembered that somewhere underneath the cold water, large rocks created the hydraulic, and colliding into them would worsen his situation. He had no choice but to have faith in his PFD and the circulating current to regurgitate him back up. A few seconds later, he shot to the surface again. Breathing carefully but deeply, he surveyed the standing waves around him. *Dasho's* boat had spun farther away to the other side of the waterfall, and his own kayak was nowhere to be seen.

With a tightness in his chest, Grant realized that he could never swim against the current and reach *Dasho's* kayak. His arms were losing sensation, and his legs were slowing. Adrenaline would keep him going for another minute, but then hypothermia would win. Grant realized that to save himself from drowning, he had to get out of the hydraulic. He'd have to find a way to reach *Dasho* from the other side.

To escape the whirlpool on his own, he would have to execute a technique he'd only read about: the elevator maneuver. He recalled that the hydraulic's current was strongest on the surface; even the best swimmer was no match for its power. Underwater, however, once the initial undertow subsided, an opportunity existed to push through the whirlpool. The key to the maneuver lay in allowing the whirlpool to suck him under, like pressing the down button on an express elevator, and then at the deepest and weakest spot, to swim out of the water column. If successful, he would pop out ten or fifteen meters downstream.

Moments later the whirlpool jerked him under again. Rather than resisting, Grant curled into a fetal position as he shot downward. This time he felt no

fear, his mind strangely clear but for the immediate task before him. The moment he felt his momentum slow, Grant kicked as hard as his numb legs would allow while pulling with his arms. He made progress, but tired quickly. Then, his foot struck something solid—the underwater boulder causing the hydraulic.

A thought occurred. *Why not use the rock to push myself out?*

It was the wrong idea.

Planting his right foot on the rock for leverage, he pushed with the last of his energy, but instead of launching himself downriver, his foot slipped on the polished surface of the rock and wedged itself deep between the boulder and another rock beside it. Grant didn't have time to register what he'd done. A rush of current twisted his body. He couldn't possibly hear the cracking of his shin over the muffled roar of the water in his ears, but he experienced the splitting of his lower leg as a white light that flashed through him, as if he'd been struck by lightning.

Grant realized he was going to drown.

A cold blackness closed in around him. After the initial flash of agony, he no longer felt the pain in his leg, nor did he experience the burning in his lungs. Even the roar of the water faded into the darkness. Grant's body went limp. Enveloped in a cool cocoon, he slipped into peaceful dream. He dreamed of flowing like the river, as if he and the water had become part of the same substance.



CHAPTER 2



BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

A GUITAR RIFF RIPPED THROUGH the bank of speakers suspended over the stage. Each of the five thousand audience members stood, some on their tiptoes for a better view, most with arms in the air, and all bathed in the colorful stage lights that washed over them. Tears rolled out of the closed eyes of more than a few women in the front rows.

Brian Brady grinned at the crowd, enjoying the frenzy he'd created. Sweat ran from his silver-streaked hair down the sides of his tanned face. God, he loved this. Twenty years, and he never tired of the rush of the crowd's adulation.

In synch with the drummer punctuating the end of the song, Brady raised both arms, embracing his people. He called out hoarsely through the wireless microphone attached behind his ear, "Let me hear you one more time!"

In unison the congregation responded, "Praise Jesus!"

"Who's down with JC?"

"We are!" they screamed.

"If you are on the Lord's team, what are you?"

"Saved!"

"If you are out of Christ, what are you?"

"Condemned!"

"We, the Army of the Righteous, shall bring light to the darkness," Reverend Brady proclaimed in his smooth southern baritone, punching his fist in the air to the cheers of the congregation.

He lowered his arms palms down. Then he grinned at the crowd, showcasing his newly bleached teeth. “Can we chat?” He took a folding chair from a techie who rushed from backstage to meet him.

“You go, Reverend,” a voice called out from the middle of the congregation. A chorus of laughter sprinkled through the church.

Brady settled his two-hundred-pound frame into the chair, alone in the center of the stage. He straightened the lapel on his Armani suit, black with a fine blue pinstripe. The band Rapture stood behind him stage right; opposite them the thirty-member choir stood on risers, their crimson robes blowing from the powerful fans hidden offstage. Surveying the audience as they anticipated the topic of this Sunday’s sermon, Reverend Brady spoke in the disarming tone he used to connect with his people, as if he were sharing iced tea with each of them alone in their living rooms.

“I am troubled, my friends. I’m troubled with the corruption of our once great nation.” He paused, allowing the thought to sink in. When he spoke, he did so deliberately, enunciating each syllable so that the echo in the cavernous New Hope Church of God wouldn’t muffle his words.

“Corruption in our country takes many forms: the eradication of religion from our schools, our children’s fascination with the occult in the *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* books, sex and violence in our television shows, politicians who care more about saving their elections than saving their constituents.”

Leaning forward on the edge of his seat, he continued, “But today, we will talk about Satan’s more subtle temptations. My friends, I’m here to warn you that sin targets not just the unfaithful. It targets you as well.”

Murmurs spread through the congregation. Brady immediately noticed the man in the front row who sat ramrod straight, perched on his seat like a cobra waiting to strike. His crew cut was sprinkled with signs of premature gray, the deep crease between his eyes adding to the illusion of age beyond his years. The stage lights brought out the worst of the man’s eczema: the top layer of skin on his face was flaking away, exposing the red flesh underneath. Brady paused to give thanks to the Lord for his own flawless complexion.

“Now, I don’t wish to cast stones at anyone . . .”

Brady rose from his chair, descended the marble steps to the front row, and placed a hand on the shoulder of a midthirties blonde in a pastel cotton dress that complemented her athletic physique. Brady scanned the aisle to see where his camera guy was kneeling and turned his body to block any shot of the eczema man sitting two seats away. He was always conscious of who was being projected onto the giant screen suspended over the stage.

“But last Thursday evening, when I was picking up some groceries, I noticed Barbara Howell here coming out of the yoga studio in the shopping center off Montevallo Road.”

Barbara gazed up at the reverend as a child might look at a parent, knowing she was in trouble but unsure of the nature of her infraction. Brady smiled at her indulgently. “First Corinthians instructs us that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. By exercising, we honor God, who created us in his image. Now, I know Barbara strives to live according to the ways of our Savior, but”—he paused, holding his index finger in the air—“even well-intentioned activities can be fraught with sinfulness, if we are not vigilant.”

At the word *sinfulness* Barbara’s expression grew more concerned. The entire congregation watched her, as Brady knew they would. “You may think that yoga, with its stretching and breathing techniques, is a peaceful way to exercise and relax after a hard day’s work. But don’t be fooled. Yoga is not Christian. Yoga is Hindu in origin and practice. Of course, these teachers won’t portray it as religious at first, but one day you’re touching your toes, and then before you know it, you’re chanting in Sanskrit, trying to find God within yourself.”

Reverend Brady’s grip tightened on Barbara’s shoulder. He looked from her to the vaulted ceiling forty feet above them, increasing the volume of his voice. “God, our Father almighty, creator of the universe, and judge over all mankind: these so-called yogis would have you believe that the supreme being is located in a breath or in a flower.” He shook his head in disgust. “But we know better, don’t we?”

“We do,” the congregation replied in unison.

“You tell me, what is the one and only path to God?” he shouted.

“Through our Lord Jesus Christ,” they responded.

Brady lowered his voice again. “If it were possible to reach God through self-discovery, then why would he have sent Jesus to us?”

The reverend looked into Barbara’s reddened eyes and brushed her tear-streaked cheek. “I don’t fault you, dear. The devil comes in many disguises. In Second Corinthians, chapter eleven, verse fourteen, Paul writes, ‘Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.’” Brady prided himself on his facility with the holy scripture and his ability to come up with a verse to fit any occasion.

“From the beginning of time, Satan has targeted the fairer gender. Just as Eve succumbed to the temptation of eating the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge, women today flock to these yoga centers, seeking to find themselves through meditation and other Eastern practices that promote self-knowledge. But hasn’t that fruit been tasted before? These practices will not lead you to God; they will not erase your sins. They will only open your hearts and your minds to dark influences. Our apostle John says in chapter one, verse ten, ‘If they come any to you and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house.’ Whose house do you want to be in, Barbara?”

In a whisper she replied, “God’s house.”

Pulling her out of her chair and to her feet, he asked, “Are you ready today, Barbara, to reaffirm your belief in Jesus as the only way to everlasting life?”

“I am.”

Brady raised his hands in the air palms up, and Barbara mimicked him. “In the name of our Savior Jesus Christ, you are forgiven, Barbara Howell. Follow in the Lord’s path, and you shall receive his grace.” Relieved and drained, she collapsed back into her seat as a runner might fall to the curb in exhaustion after crossing the finish line of a race.

Climbing back onstage, the reverend addressed the whole congregation. “Today we have witnessed the courage of one woman. Do you also have the courage to accept Jesus?”

“We do!” they shouted.

“These are precisely the dangers I discuss in my humble little book.” Brady glanced at the giant screen above the stage that displayed a ten-foot-tall projection of the cover of his recently published book, *Why Is God So Angry?* Under the bold lettering of the title, and the even larger type of his name, was

a picture of Brady gazing upward at a wooden cross suspended in a dark, foreboding sky. “Thanks to your support, we now have over three hundred thousand copies of the book in print.” The crowd erupted in cheers. “And that’s only four months after being published!”

Brady paused to allow the applause to die down. Then he began to quote from the first chapter of his book: “The calamities our country has faced in recent times—the hurricanes along our coast, terrorism on our soil, the collapse of our economy—are punishments directed at our *formerly Christian* nation, which, like the Jewish people in the Old Testament, has lost its way from God. The evils of our permissive society have turned us into a modern-day Sodom and Gomorrah: drugs, abortion, promiscuity, and”—he raised his voice—“our so-called tolerance of other religions that encourage the worship of false idols that have polluted the minds of our citizens.” Brady lowered the pitch of his voice but increased the volume even more. “We have forgotten the warning of First Timothy, chapter two, verse five: ‘For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.’”

The screen above Brady flashed from his book cover to a three-dimensional computer rendering of a town square centered around a huge church. “This lesson today underscores the importance of the greatest undertaking this church has ever attempted. Of course, I’m referring to the ongoing construction of the New Hope Community. Just twelve miles from here and twenty-four months from completion, our new church is truly evidence that the Lord is smiling down on us. Our community will be a place where you and your children can live and grow in God’s image, a sanctuary of hope away from the evil influences of other religions. Our new gym will offer Christian stretching classes,” he said, winking at Barbara, who smiled up at him, “set to the sounds of our own gospel choir. Your kids can learn martial arts, but they will bow before the Ten Commandments posted on the walls, not some self-proclaimed sensei spouting confusing Zen statements.”

He softened his voice. “I feel so humble to be in the presence of each of you. For you are the ones making God’s plan for our community a reality. Your generous contributions to the Lord have made this dream possible. And we are so close. We are so close, but we are not there yet. I must ask each of you

to look deep inside yourselves and ask whether you can give just a little more. We don't want to shortchange God's vision. I hope that when you get a phone call next week from our volunteers, you will do what you can."

Reverend Brady moved to the altar in the center of the stage. "Please take a moment with me to pray silently as we ask for God's guidance with this holy project."

Brady knelt at the altar, turning his back on the congregation, who dutifully bowed their heads. A stillness fell over the sanctuary. After three minutes of silence, interrupted only by a few muffled coughs, Brady rose just before the audience grew restless and turned to face his people. His eyes remained closed. Tears streamed down his face. He opened his arms wide, palms upwards. "Can you feel it?" he cried. "The power of our prayer. Can you feel it? The presence of God is here, today, right now. Can you feel it?"

An elderly man in a wheelchair at the back of the church proclaimed in a voice that seemed too strong for his frail body, "God is with us! Hallelujah!" A number of people joined the reverend in his tears.

"Something special is happening here today," Brady cried out. "We are witnessing something sacred and holy. Come to us, Lord Christ!"

With his last exclamation, the people erupted into a chorus of *amens* and *praise Gods*. Brady opened his eyes and surveyed the upturned faces in their ecstasy. The man in the front row had cinched his eyes closed, while his chapped lips mouthed a silent prayer. Leaning on the altar railing, Brady bent over and removed his black Ferragamo loafers. He presented his shoes to the crowd. "We are on sacred ground here today. Let us not soil it with our dirty shoes." As the five thousand rustled to remove their shoes as well, Brady knelt again in prayer, but this time he faced the audience. His shoes lay on the ground in front of him.

After the rustling quieted, Brady opened his eyes and said, "Praise Jesus." Without waiting for a response, he picked up his shoes, stood, and walked past the band off the stage.

Once he disappeared through the side curtains, the stunned congregation erupted into the loudest cheers Brady had ever heard. The band and choir took their cue and launched into "Cruising with Jesus," one of their popular

rock-inspired songs. Backstage, Brady strode past the lighting and sound technicians who hovered over their control boards. He stopped by a bank of video monitors overseen by a thin, balding man in a charcoal suit. Brady took the towel the man offered and wiped his face.

“I was really good today, William, wasn’t I?” Brady said more as a statement of fact than as a question needing an answer.

“It was one of your best. You owned them,” replied William Jennings, director of operations of New Hope.

Brady smiled at his number two as he tossed the damp towel, stained with tears, sweat, and smudges of bronze foundation, back to him and continued walking down the corridor.



CHAPTER 3



PUNAKHA, BHUTAN

IN THE DARKNESS, GRANT COULD HEAR soft voices speaking in a language he didn't understand. He became conscious of an unfamiliar smell: some sort of incense infused in a musty atmosphere. He shifted his weight; his arms felt heavy, as did his head. Gradually, the light returned, as if someone had slowly turned up a dimmer switch on his temple. He lay on a lumpy cot in a small room with a stone floor and sand-colored plaster walls. A pair of candles burned on a simple wooden desk by a narrow window. A second smaller table by his bed contained a carved wooden bowl and a hand-hammered tin cup.

Three men stood by the door, whose heavy timbers, painted a kaleidoscope of reds, yellows, and blues, provided the only color in the drab room. The men stopped speaking and turned their heads toward him.

"Where am I?" Grant croaked. His swollen tongue filled his dry mouth. He tried unsuccessfully to raise himself on his elbows. "What happened?"

The men approached his bed. Grant recognized two as monks because of their robes, sandals, and shaved heads, but the third was dressed in a *gho*—a plaid, knee-length woolen robe whose sleeves were rolled into cuffs exposing a hint of a white shirt worn underneath. On his feet the man wore leather shoes and argyle socks. Grant had first encountered the traditional Bhutanese garb on his arrival at the Paro airport. How many days ago, he was no longer sure.

The man in the *gho* responded in heavily accented English, "Don't try to move." In answer to the confused look on Grant's face, he said, "My name's

Karma. I am the Punakha *drungtsho*—the town’s doctor. You suffered a complete fracture of your right tibia. Worst I’ve seen.”

For the first time, Grant became aware of his right leg, elevated on a folded blanket. He touched the rough plaster cast that ran from his hip to his toes. Then he glanced at his watch, a digital sports model with a waterproof band of rubber. The push of a button gave him the barometric pressure, altitude, and temperature—all for under a hundred dollars. Grant’s favorite feature, though, was the tiny radio receiver that kept the time and date precisely set to the second. He was never late to an appointment.

When his eyes focused on the date, he shouted, “Four days!”

Grant turned to catch a better look at them. The older one was dressed in a neatly wrapped orange robe that fell to his ankles. Judging from the salt-and-pepper stubble sprinkled across his shaved head, the monk was in his late fifties. His face was angular, with prominent cheek and jaw bones that joined to a point at his chin. The monk studied Grant with black eyes that were Asian in character but wide in shape, and placed close together. His unblinking gaze should have been disconcerting, but for a reason Grant couldn’t explain, he found it comforting. His younger companion, who couldn’t have been much over twenty, had a rounder face with a mixture of Tibetan and Chinese features. Several inches shorter than the older monk, and wearing crimson rather than orange robes, he was skinny in a still-filling-out sort of way.

“Thank you,” Grant said to all three men, his fingers tapping his cast. “But what . . .” As if a projector in his head had suddenly come to life, the recent events replayed for him: the river, the rush of the cold water, grasping for his guide’s kayak, the panic of being trapped underwater. From the corner of his eye he spotted his PFD on the floor by the table. Instinctually, he touched the wool blanket covering his chest. He guessed what had happened. When he blacked out from the breaking of his leg and lack of oxygen, the current must have pulled him free of the boulder. The flotation device would have shot him to the surface.

“My guide, Dasho?” he asked, dreading the answer he already knew.

The older monk approached the bed and rested a warm hand on Grant’s shoulder. He answered in precise English with an unexpectedly clear British

accent. “I am sad to report that our brothers found his body downriver from the *dzong*. He was upside down, still in his kayak.”

Grant swallowed back the acidic taste of bile that rose to the back of his throat. If he hadn’t requested to go on the most challenging section of the river, Dasho would still be alive. *Maybe if I’d tried harder in the hydraulic?* The friendly guide had been supporting his family.

As if reading Grant’s thoughts, the monk added, “You couldn’t have saved him. His neck was broken.”

Grant broke eye contact. He didn’t find comfort in the information. To distract his thoughts, he glanced around at his spartan surroundings.

“Is this some kind of hospital?”

“My apprentice and I found you lying on the riverbank about a mile from here,” the elder monk replied. “We carried you to the closest building where we could provide help—to the Punakha Dzong.”

The leftover haze vanished from Grant’s mind. The Punakha Dzong was his next stop. He remembered driving past the imposing five-hundred-year-old fortress rising from the peninsula where the Mo Chhu and the Pho Chhu joined. Constructed in traditional Bhutanese style, its massive inward-sloping walls of whitewashed stone starkly contrasted with the intricately carved and painted wood molding around the windows and doors—in the same style as the painted door to his room, he realized. A colorful cornice anchored the pagoda-style roof.

He recalled Dasho’s explanation that although the dzongs were originally forts built to protect the country from invaders who crossed the imposing Himalayan range and attacked from neighboring Tibet or India, today they served a dual purpose: to house both the local government offices and the country’s Buddhist monasteries. Evaluating the furnishings in his room, Grant guessed that he must be in the living quarters of the monastery.

The monk who spoke English so well held out his hand. “I am Kinley Goenpo, the senior monk here during the summer season, and this is my student, Jigme.” Jigme bowed from the waist but remained silent.

“Grant Matthews. Thanks so much for rescuing me, but . . .” Grant struggled for the right way to express his concern. “Shouldn’t I go to a hospital—

have a surgeon x-ray my leg?” He again drummed his fingers on the gray plaster.

The doctor shook his head. “Kinley and I debated the idea of moving you, but the nearest hospital is in our capital city, Thimpu, a three-hour drive over the mountains. My little office in town wouldn’t provide you any more help than I can offer you in this room. Fortunately, your leg sustained a clean break, though a severe one. If you stay off it for the next six weeks, it should heal nicely. You’ll go home with just a scar as a souvenir of your adventure.”

“Six weeks?” Grant felt the blood drain from his already pallid face. He still had many monasteries to investigate, and then he had to be back at school in ten days. His palms began to sweat.

Karma shook his head. “Any movement before your leg stabilizes risks permanent disability.”

“I shouldn’t have even gone kayaking,” Grant mumbled, feeling sorry for himself and guilty for his role in Dasho’s death. Grant glared at his cast as if the sheer force of his gaze would fuse his bones together. His original plan had been to spend just an hour or so in this monastery, to let his guide ask the monks some questions, and then move on if the legend about a boy named Issa didn’t ring any bells.

Kinley lowered himself to the edge of Grant’s bed. “I understand your frustration. We will work with you to make your stay as comfortable as possible.”

Grant craned his neck to search the room. “Did you find my stuff? I had a dry bag in my kayak—my credit cards and cell phone.”

“My brothers who found your guide’s body also found your kayak,” Kinley replied. “It was empty.”

Even though the room was cool from the September breeze flowing through the open window, Grant felt flushed with heat. He pushed the quilted blanket covering his torso to his waist so that he could breathe more easily. He looked down to find that he was wearing an off-white cotton shirt; the monks must have dressed him. The material was coarse, and Grant felt it start to scratch his skin.

“Can you lend me a phone? I need to call my professor and let him know what’s happened.” He owed his mentor so much. Grant refused to worry,

much less disappoint him. Billingsly had gone to bat for him with the Emory admissions committee. He still recalled his professor's words verbatim from seven years ago: "Grant has one of the best analytical minds I've seen. Harvard was foolish to reject him because of that incident."

The elder monk shook his head. "Oh, there are no cell phones in the *goemba*, the monastery, but if you give the number to Karma, he can call anyone you wish when he returns to town."

Grant flopped his head on the thin pillow. "I suppose email is out of the question too?"

Kinley shook his head. Grant thought he detected something in the monk's eyes. *Is this amusing to him?* Grant stared at the fine lines crisscrossing the beige ceiling. Bedridden in a jail cell of a room in a remote monastery with some monks who were enjoying his predicament. For the first time since he'd woken, Grant became aware of the throbbing pain in his leg. He also realized that his left shoulder was bruised, and he had a pounding headache behind his temples.

"What about the bathroom?" he asked, not sure he wanted to know the answer.

The doctor chuckled and bent over to retrieve a battered metal bedpan from the floor beside the bed. "I brought this from town."

Grant wiped his palms off on the sheets. Accepting this situation for six weeks was out of the question. He needed to devise a plan.

"Pen and paper?" he asked the men.

"That we can do," Kinley said, nodding to the doctor. Karma reached into his black bag—the kind of doctor's bag that Grant had seen in old TV shows but didn't think were used anymore—and produced a ballpoint pen and a blank prescription pad.

Grant wrote Harold Billingsly's office number at Emory and the name of his hotel in town, the Zangdho Pelri, and handed it to the doctor. "Room one-oh-eight. If you don't mind, I have a backpack with my clothes, and my laptop is on the desk."

Before Karma could respond, the door to the room opened. A third monk, a boy no older than ten or eleven with a perfectly round bald head, dressed

like Kinley's apprentice Jigme in a crimson robe, entered carrying a steaming cup centered on a tray.

Kinley took the cup from the boy and patted his shoulder in a fatherly way. "Thank you, Ummon."

After the boy bowed to the older monk and left the room, the doctor emptied the contents of a small envelope into the cup. "Drink this," he said. "It will ease your discomfort."

Grant sniffed the cup, wondering what sort of herbal concoction he was about to consume. He took a sip. *Just a little bitter*. He hoped the effects would kick in quickly. After Grant finished the tea, the doctor left, but the two monks remained, watching him silently.

"I appreciate your help, but really you don't need to stay." Grant focused on the notepad on his lap. He drew a line down the center of the page and wrote at the top of the left column "Options." At the top of the right he wrote "Plan of Attack."

Kinley sat on the edge of the bed, his hands folded in his lap.

"Grant, you are experiencing the *dukkha* of life."

Without looking up from his notepad, he responded, "Suffering." He resisted the temptation to glance at the monk to gauge his surprise at Grant's knowledge of the Pali word: it was the language of the ancient Buddhist canon. Grant enjoyed near-photographic recall of the texts he'd studied. His comparative religions class had been six years earlier, but he still remembered the basic tenets of Buddhism as if he'd read them yesterday.

"Yes, that's the common translation, but not entirely accurate," Kinley said without missing a beat. "Actually, *dukkha* means *out of balance*, like a cart with a broken wheel."

"So you're saying that my life is out of whack right now." Grant put his pen down and looked Kinley in the eye. "I could have told you that."

"Indulge me in a story," Kinley began, as if he were telling a fable to a group of children gathered at his feet. "A farmer in the foothills of the mountains had a beautiful horse that ran away. The farmer's neighbor stopped by to console him on losing such a magnificent animal, but the farmer surprised his neighbor by saying, 'Who am I to judge what is an unlucky event or a fortunate

one?’ The next day his horse returned, bringing with it a herd of similarly beautiful wild horses. The neighbor returned and said, ‘You were right yesterday not to wallow in your loss. Look how fortunate you are now with all these horses.’ But the farmer surprised him again by repeating his comment from the previous day, ‘Who am I to judge what is an unlucky event or a fortunate one?’ A few weeks later the farmer’s son fractured his leg while trying to break in one of the new horses. Of course, the neighbor returns to offer his condolences again, certain that the farmer cannot be unaffected by his son’s injury.”

“Let me guess,” Grant intervened, resisting the urge to roll his eyes. “Even with his son lying in bed, his leg in a splint, the farmer repeats his previous response, ‘Who am I to judge what is an unlucky event or a fortunate one?’”

Kinley grinned and rested a hand on Grant’s cast. “The following week the army came through the farmer’s village, drafting men to go to war, but they passed over the farmer’s son because of the broken leg.”

“Well, I’ll be safe then, if the Bhutanese army comes looking for soldiers,” Grant said. He added a smile so the monk who had just saved his life wouldn’t think him rude. *But really*, he thought, *I need time alone to work through my predicament.*

“You are a student?” Kinley asked.

“Grad school. I’m ABD, sorry, all but—”

“Dissertation,” Kinley added. “I spent some time in a Western university.”

Grant raised his eyebrows. “Well, that explains the accent. Which one?”

“When I was a young monk, I often asked questions my elders felt were out of place. Spent quite a few hours in extra cleanup duty. The senior monk suggested to my parents that my taking a break from the monastery would be better for everyone. Fortunately, I earned the highest marks in my class and was given the rare opportunity to attend Oxford on scholarship.”

“Oxford? Impressive.” This gentle monk who had saved his life was also a scholar?

Kinley shrugged. “Once I finished, I returned to Bhutan and to monastic life. And you? You didn’t travel to the East on a spiritual quest?”

Grant shook his head. “My PhD is in religious studies, but my interests are

strictly academic—historical.” *Unlike my father’s*, he thought. Grant’s sole regret concerning his father’s death was that he hadn’t had the opportunity to prove to him the many ways in which the preacher was wrong where religion was concerned.

“You believe that the nature of religion lies in history?”

Grant’s eyelids were becoming heavy from the effects of the doctor’s tea, but he willed them open. His body wanted nothing more than to go back to sleep, but this Oxford-educated monk intrigued him. “I’m interested in the early development of Christianity during the first century, and”—he hesitated for a moment as he pondered how to phrase the next part—“how contact with other cultures may have influenced this development.”

“What kind of influence?”

“I’ve been tracking several apocryphal stories.” Grant remembered his promise to himself not to reveal too much. In spite of Kinley’s Western education, Grant knew that the culture of these monasteries was insular and cautious of outside disruptions. Finding what he was seeking would certainly cause a disruption. He decided to use an example from his first trip to India, rather than his most recent. “For example, some evidence suggests that in fifty-two AD, twenty years after the death of Jesus, the apostle Thomas sailed to India. A small Christian community on the coast in Kerala traces its founding to Thomas and the several churches he established before he was martyred.”

“Have you found what you came for?”

Grant shook his head. “I’m still missing a key piece of my research, which is why I’m ABD.” He closed his eyes, giving in to the weight of his eyelids.

Kinley rose from the bed. “Sometimes we find not what we are looking for, but what we should be looking for.”

Through closed eyes Grant noted that the pain was fading from his body. Whatever was in the tea was working. He heard Kinley’s voice as if from a distance. “And I wish you good fortune on your search for the story of Issa.”

Grant’s eyes snapped open.

The monk responded to the look of shock that Grant knew was plastered over his face. “You spoke aloud at night during your period of unconsciousness. Gave us quite a fright at times.”

Grant's pulse quickened. *How much did I say?* He'd planned to reveal that name carefully, especially after the monks at Himis clammed up at the mere mention of the Indian saint.

"Ah, yes," Kinley continued, "the legend of a boy on a journey through India seeking answers to his questions, much like you."

Grant forced his face to relax. "You know the story of Issa?"

"Rest now. Karma's medicine will help you sleep until tomorrow." Kinley bowed from his waist and left the room in a flurry of orange robes. His apprentice, who had been standing so quietly in the center of the room that Grant had forgotten he was still there, followed him out.

Grant wanted to call after Kinley. Did the monk know the importance of the Issa story, that it could answer one of Christianity's great mysteries? *A mystery that would challenge everyone's assumptions of how the religion came to be.* Could it be possible that the evidence he'd been searching for—the evidence that his colleagues at Emory didn't believe existed—was here in this very monastery? Despite the flurry of questions swirling in his mind, the narcotic effects of the tea finally won the battle, and Grant slipped into unconsciousness.



CHAPTER 4



GATEWAY BUSINESS PARK BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

Tim Huntley’s fingers stabbed at the keyboard. He used only the first three digits of each hand, but he entered code so quickly that the lines scrolled down the twenty-inch monitor as fast as he could read them. For the past three hours he’d sat military straight, immobile from the wrists up. He’d found the glitch in the program at five AM. Now it was just a matter of working around it. His coworkers had spent most of the past week searching for the bug. That was when his boss called him onto the project. Only he was smart enough to fix the issues the rest of them couldn’t understand.

He heard their voices as they filed into the cubicles, laughing and recounting their Saturday night activities. Tim always arrived first to the single-story, red brick building. He slept four hours a night. Only weak-minded people needed more than that, he knew.

“Yo, Tim. Bring the pics?” Johnny Meckle poked his fleshy pink face over the front of Tim’s cubicle. Johnny regularly complained to Tim about his difficulty in meeting the “hot babes,” as he put it. Tim tried to explain that if he washed his hair, lost some weight, and stopped talking about his programming prowess, he might have better luck. Johnny was two years older than Tim, but he followed his younger colleague around like a groupie. He hadn’t changed at all since grade school. The two had been friends when they were kids, until Tim was forced to move away during his sophomore year of high school—after the trial that changed everything.

“Check your email,” Tim replied.

“That’s what I’m talking about! Hey, y’all, come look at this.”

The other six staff members of Information Systems Group gathered around Johnny’s cubicle.

“Ewww!” drawled Elizabeth, a twenty-six-year-old data clerk who stood a full head taller than Tim and wore oversized glasses that made her look like a giant bug from a sci-fi movie. “What *is* that? A pig?”

“A wild boar. Tim shot it when we were hunting yesterday.” Johnny’s face, illuminated by the monitor’s blue hue, was giddy with excitement. “Just look at those tusks.” Johnny gesticulated with both hands. “Must be six inches. He could have killed us, if he’d charged. Right, Tim?”

“Sure.” Tim returned to his work, but he had difficulty concentrating with the stares of his coworkers. The hair on the back of his neck stood on edge.

“Tim was in the Special Forces, you know.”

“So we’ve heard.” Elizabeth flipped her dirty blond hair and proceeded to her cubicle.

“Yeah, Afghanistan, Iraq, places like that,” Johnny told the remaining five.

Tim tried to look busy, wishing his officemate would shut up. He was starting to question whether reconnecting with him had been a mistake. Tim had moved back to Birmingham two years ago. Two decades had passed since they’d seen each other, but Johnny was easy to track down. He was living in the same neighborhood they grew up in and saw his parents every Sunday night. The only good part about the reunion was that Johnny had turned Tim on to the New Hope Church. Tim hadn’t missed one Sunday since moving back to Birmingham. He sat in the front row every week. Now, however, he regretted having told Johnny about his military experience. Most of what he’d done was classified, but he had a few spectacular stories of mayhem from the front lines to share. But Johnny had been a loser when they were kids, and he was an even bigger loser now. Unfortunately, Johnny was the only one who’d hunt with Tim. At least hunting and blowing up homemade pipe bombs in the woods made time with Johnny tolerable.

Tim opened the metal drawer under his desk and removed a tube of Chapstick from the five he kept handy. His lips were cracking again. Even though he’d applied lotion to his face and arms before he left the house, the itching began to crawl across his skin. His fucking eczema.

“Tim can’t talk much about it, though. Top secret stuff and all,” Johnny continued. “He was showing me some of the techniques they used to take down the terrorists. Our hunt was just like a real military op, right, Tim?”

The sides of Tim’s neck flushed. Without looking at the others, he knew they were watching him with skeptical expressions. Judging him.

“Yeah, something like that,” Tim said. He began typing again.

Why did Johnny have to broadcast everything told to him? Tim began to have reservations about including Johnny in the plan he’d been hatching. Johnny was a true believer, but he was dumb. Yet Tim couldn’t accomplish the plan on his own. Tim had been taking precautions, playing down his military experience, for example. He’d even kept a lid on his political and religious ideas around the office—ideas that had gotten him fired from his last job in Little Rock.

Tim had never been at home in the business world. The military should have been his career. And it had been, until a misunderstanding with his sergeant. The accusations. The bullshit. The early discharge handled quietly so that the Army would avoid embarrassment with one of its elite spec ops intelligence operatives. Having to return home to live in the apartment above his mom’s garage had been the ultimate insult. He knew in his bones that God had greater plans for him. Now he was stuck in a glorified warehouse in the dark with these other losers, working in the back office for a medical data processing company. He could do his job in his sleep, but the pay was good, and he needed the money for his plans.

“Hey, Tim, buddy,” a voice from behind him said.

Johnny ducked into his cubicle, while the others hurried to their stations.

Tim swiveled his chair to face Duncan Summers, vice president of ISG, his boss. Duncan towered over Tim, who remained seated. Even if he’d stood, at five foot six and a half, Tim would only have reached Duncan’s goatee. Tim’s relative height disadvantage to his boss didn’t bother him, though. He knew that his muscular build was far superior to the taller man’s. He’d snapped the necks of men taller than Duncan.

“Just reviewed your code on the new financial modeling package. Nice work solving the compatibility problems with our reports. We’ll implement it

in November—two months earlier than planned.” The slap on Tim’s shoulder radiated a heat that rose to his face. “Great job, big guy!”

“No problem,” he replied.

Tim swung around to his desk. He removed the cap to a ballpoint pen. While he used one hand to scroll through the window of code on his screen, he used the other to scrape the edge of the cap across his forehead where the tingling was quickly developing into an itch. He worked the pen cap along the permanent crease between his brows. His mother had offered to pay for Botox during his last trip to the dermatologist for his eczema. She’d said he was “too young for such worry lines,” but the last thing he wanted was to look like his frozen-faced slut of a mother. Though she’d never remarried after his father’s death, she’d always brought home plenty of men. Anyway, he thought, his face gave him a serious look, and that’s what he was: a serious man.

“So, how’s the project going?” Duncan was still there, leaning down, his cheery voice now inches from the back of Tim’s head. Tim could feel the humid breath on his neck.

“Fine.”

“Great. Just great. Keep it up, buddy.”

Tim paused the scratching of his forehead. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught Elizabeth peeking around the edge of her cubicle, her nose wrinkled in disgust. He opened the metal drawer an inch and dropped the pen cap inside. For some reason, Duncan still hovered over his shoulder. His boss seemed suspicious checking on him.

Then a delicious thought sprang to his mind. A thought that caused him to lick his chapped lips, tasting the waxy strawberry flavor. A thought that caused him to forget his itchy skin.

Duncan was close enough to stick with the eight-inch commando knife Tim kept in the back of his desk drawer, behind his Chapstick. In seconds he could gut his boss, just like he’d done with the hog after he’d shot it. *Would Duncan’s innards stink as bad as the boar’s had?*

But then, Tim knew that killing his boss wasn’t part of God’s plan for him. No, God had something much bigger in mind. After three months of preparations, all the pieces were finally in place.