

Prologue Delhi, India A. D. 1220

Senji entered Delhi, wondering if his toil over the last three years would finally be worth it. His pack of coarsely spun cloth tied together with several knots, dug into his lean, sunburnt shoulder. Unlike Senji's cool and breezy home near the mountains, miles to the North in Kashmir, Delhi was hot and dry because of its proximity to the great *Thar* desert. The sharp stones on the city's streets dug into Senji's feet, and dust hung in the air, for the rains of summer had not yet visited the city. Senji imagined bathing in the Yamuna River as it flowed from the great Ganges, a holy place to bathe.

A moment later, Senji gasped. The *Qutub Minar* rose before him, as tall as twenty-five homes. *Surely it must touch the gods*, he thought.

Senji squinted up at the minaret, tall and thin and bright white in the sun. The tower was banded from top to bottom by rows of intricate Muslim inscriptions in the *Kufi* characters, interrupted four times by protruding balconies the size of a man or more. Sweat dripped into Senji's eyes as he studied the tower's height. He asked a nearby Buddhist monk just how tall it was. "Inside this fortress," the monk said, "four hundred steps lead to the top." As Senji approached the tower, he saw that Hindu inscriptions were mixed with Muslim, a small token permitted by the invaders who had built the structure.

Senji walked to the minaret and climbed a few steps up its sandy red base, to a large, weathered wood door. Today was a special day for Senji, and timidity could not stop him from knocking on the door. He felt sure that he would only need to pull his charm from his pack to make anyone who opposed him stand back in awe. He prayed that the monk he had known several years ago would still be waiting there, as Senji had been told he would be. The large door rattled as Senji banged on it, and in a few moments, it opened.

"What do you want, boy?" a gangly old monk with sparkling eyes and a shaved head asked as he peeked out from the other side of the door. Then he held up an index finger. "Wait. I think I remember you, son. Tell me your name."

"Senji, Teacher," he gasped. "Is it you?" He studied the monk.

"Ah, yes." The monk smiled and nodded. "Yes, my boy. I am me."

Senji sighed. "I have walked many miles. The short monk said I'd find you in this tower. I am surprised the Moslem invaders allowed a Buddhist monk to meditate here."

"It protects an old man from the sun." The monk scrunched the features of his leathery face. "Ah, I remember now. You moved your home to Kashmir. To walk here from there is quite a journey, my boy! You've grown since I last saw you. You must be twenty years by now."

"Nineteen years, Teacher. I have finished the charm you challenged me to make, casting it in bronze, silver, and copper, and inscribing it as you said. I have returned to Delhi to have you bless it."

The monk laughed affectionately. "I did not think you would take my challenge to heart. Such dedication for a young man!"

"I have worked on it for almost three years, Teacher," said Senji excitedly. "It has been a difficult feat to learn to melt the bronze, cast the charm, and inlay the other metals. My uncle helped me put the inscription in Sanskrit since he knows of these things. I have tried to preserve the truth about the Buddha's Second Noble Truth of causation so that it will never be forgotten—no matter how many times our land is invaded." He took a breath and looked at the monk for permission to continue his story.

The old man stood clad only in a loincloth of homespun *khadi*, and his thin ribs stretched his skin taut. His head and body glowed red, baked and blistered by the sun. His stomach caved inward and his knees wobbled. He was tall, spindly, and hunched, and his eyes protruded from their sockets. Wisps of white-gray hair sprung up randomly from his shiny baldness, like weeds on the desert. He had surely lived the life of a wandering holy man. His eyes sparkled. He rubbed his hands together. "Good, good. Let us see it, then."

The boy took the charm from its pack and held it above his bowed head.

"Oh, Senji!" The old monk drew back. "What a magnificent thing!"

"Teacher, you honor me!" Senji presented the bronze rectangle, the size of a large hand, and inlaid with copper and silver. On the front of it, in relief, *Prajnaparamita*, the Goddess of

translucent wisdom, gleamed in the sun. She meditated in lotus position with four arms gracefully waving through the air, a content smile on her mouth and tranquility in her eyes.

"My-oh-my," the old monk said. "For this great feat, you will suffer few lifetimes in this world, my son. This I know."

"Look on the back, Teacher," Senji said. "That is where the inscriptions are."

"Oh, yes, let me see. But why have you inscribed this in the Sanskrit, Senji?"

"My uncle is a very learned man and helped me. He said, since it is the classical language of *Bharat*, it will not soon disappear from our world. I do not understand these things."

The priest nodded. "Your charm will inspire many generations." He smiled as he read the Sanskrit words embedded in the metal. "Your uncle has accurately restated the Buddha's Second Noble Truth."

"But what should I do with the charm now?" Senji asked.

The monk studied it. "Remember, I asked you to engrave on the charm . . . Wait, here, it is. 'Discard this once you understand its message.' Perfect!"

"As you requested, Father." Senji bowed slightly.

"So, as it says, you must throw it away," the monk said peacefully. Confidence radiated from him as if a great truth had possessed him.

"That makes me sad to think that I have worked three years on this and walked so many miles——"

"Then its message will be preserved for all time," the monk said. "Is that not right, Senji? You want this yourself?"

"Yes, but I do not understand how the message will be preserved if I throw the charm away."

The monk nodded knowingly. "You must follow its direction and throw it away."

Senji scratched his temple. "But Teacher, I have worked so hard."

"Think, boy."

"But, Teacher——"

"You agree its power is its message?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well," the monk explained, "each time it is discarded, another person will find it and read it. Once they understand it, as the charm instructs, they will throw it away. So, the chain will continue, on and on, person to person. Your message will spread throughout *Bharat* and beyond its shores—on ships that sail to faraway lands."

"But this is hard to believe," Senji said. "Won't the charm disappear?"

The monk laughed. "Never, Senji, because of its beauty. It will travel to many lands, I promise you."

"Now I see, Teacher . . . I think." He hung his head. "But how far could it travel?"

The monk smiled as he kissed the charm, then blessed it by holding it to the heavens and whispering. Then he spoke: "No telling, my son. It will travel from land-to-land-to-land for all time, explaining the inevitability of karma, causation as determined by our choices. Just like it says. Most people will take it to heart so your charm will pass from person to person—forever. The charm will become a manifestation of the chain of causation, the power of karma—causation we each control. The Buddha's teachings will touch many. Don't you see?"

"But what if a person refuses to believe the truth of karma?" Senji asked. "Someone might mock or misinterpret it?"

The monk shook his head. "We can only pray for those poor souls," he said. He paused and studied the charm. "Ah, it is so beautiful." He gazed at the charm again, and read aloud more of the inscription: " *'Our choices determine what will become of us.'* So simple, but it is the truth in all human endeavor."

"What if those who find the charm are especially evil or even mock its truth? Will they ever understand it?"

"Senji, they will learn the power of karma—a great infinite power—when it becomes obvious that their corrupted lifestreams will never be put in balance in this or any lifetime. Then they will experience the terrifying beauty of the universe. In front of their own eyes, their future essence will cease to exist . . . *for all time.*"

"Is that possible?" Senji asked.

"Once they come face to face with their deeds, it is the worst an evil soul can experience.

Imagine a soul being ripped apart, pulverized for all time. Becoming nothing."

Senji tried to imagine this event, but chilled when he realized how complete such a punishment would be. "I fear for those evil souls, Teacher." He frowned fearfully, then hung his head.

765 years later

PART I - - THE DEEDS

Chapter 1 *Cascade, Wisconsin, USA January, 1985*

Jeremy Lucas felt the blast of cold and spray of snowflakes as he slammed the townhouse door with a muffled thud. "Gosh," he said as he exhaled, his breath steaming. The chill gripped his exposed skin. To protect himself, he quickly buttoned his coat and stuffed his scarf around his neck. He glanced across the crowded parking lot, looking for his car, but the falling snow made visibility difficult.

What a bitch! he thought.

For the first time since he had begun his affair with Lana three years ago, he felt powerless. Tonight, she had threatened to reveal their relationship to his wife Rachel, and even pass a memo around the Archer Company office: *White trash slut!*

As Jeremy walked down the wooden stairs, he displaced fluffy flakes with every step. He glanced back at the peephole on Lana's door. She was probably watching him walk away.

"Fuck you, bitch!" he whispered. She can't see the reality of our situation.

Lana will show soon, he thought. He shuddered to think that, after five months or so, she could spout off about their affair, or maybe even try to accuse him of sexual harassment at work, or blackmail him.

For three years, Jeremy had given Rachel the "client dinner in Milwaukee" excuse on Wednesdays, and instead driven twenty-five miles from his home in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin to visit Lana in Cascade. But tonight she had made her announcement, and now expected him to upend his entire life for her. It wasn't that he was being an asshole, he was just being realistic.

He should have expected this, though, the way she always talked about marriage. He'd always thought she was being facetious when she'd say that being his wife would improve her social standing, but she was dead serious——social climbing was her way.

Since Jeremy had always let his penis sway his decisions about relationships, he had refused to give up their cozy arrangement, despite Lana's periodic bridal obsession. Now that their relationship was over, he'd have to keep his wits about him, and reconstruct a life without her.

He unlocked his Volvo, climbed in, and started the forty-five minute drive home. He knew the trip would take longer tonight due to snow, but he figured that he could cut through the Kettle Moraine National Forest and shave a few minutes off his time—as long as the snow didn't get too bad. The trek would have been a cakewalk had he remembered to bring along chains. He pulled out of the complex parking lot and headed into Cascade.

As he drove down Parnell Street, he thought once again of his relationship with Lana, and began to feel more and more betrayed. After all, every Wednesday night, she had showered him with the kind of benefits he might have expected of a lover: great dinners, sexy outfits, smooth wine, sultry dance steps, whiffs of lilac—all the hot buttons. While she had brought up the "leaving Rachel" business frequently, she had never spoke quite as emphatically as she had tonight, punctuating the issue by making her announcement.

Jeremy turned right onto Scenic Drive. *Snow looks really bad*, he thought.

Earlier that evening, Lana had been picking at the sides of her perfectly manicured fingernails, creating tiny bits of hanging skin.

"What is it?" he asked. "Something bugging you?"

"Jer, I have an announcement."

Oh, shit. The way she had said those words sounded ominous. She stood, clasped her hands together, and hung her head. She looked silly, standing there in a teddy and wobbly heels, slouched like a sad, out-of-work clown.

Jeremy took a sip of wine and sat back on the couch, thinking Lana was just pouting again.

"Are you going to explain the lack of nooky tonight? You owe me that, girl."

"I'm feeling a little sick, Jer," she barked. "That okay?"

"You don't have to get hostile!" Jeremy said. "What are you," he asked jokingly, "pregnant?"

She looked up suddenly. "Well, now that you mention it——"

"What?" He sat up, dripping wine on the carpet. "What about it?"

She folded her arms. "I am . . . *pregnant.*"

"You're kidding, right?"

"Actually, no," she mumbled and looked at the floor.

"What?! Man-oh-man."

"You're pissed," she said.

"What do you expect? A leap for joy?"

"Up yours, Jeremy. I thought now we could finally be together. You could leave Rachel like we've been talking about." Lana kicked off her heels and immediately lost four inches from her height.

"The midget cleaning lady appears," he snickered. "You mean like *you've* been saying, don't you?"

"Jer, we've both talked about it," she whined. "Come on . . ."

"What? Do you expect me to drop everything and run to Lana because she blew it with the birth control? No, wait, you probably planned this, is that it?"

"Up yours, Jeremy." She paced back and forth with fists clenched. "I knew you'd wimp out on me if this ever happened. You think 'cause you're the big corporate honcho with the studly face, superior intelligence, great sense of humor, and smooth talk, you can get away with anything!"

"Well——" He pushed back his neck-length brown hair. "At least you appreciate me for the guy I am. You can't prove the kid's mine anyway."

She stopped and glared at him. "I can prove it, all right! Who else? Just think who I could tell!"

Jeremy slammed his glass down on the table. "You wouldn't have the nerve."

"It's not like I have all these lovers. It has to be yours!"

Jeremy stood. "Yeah, right. Say, sorry about the wine spill. I'm gonna head out." He looked at his watch. "Getting late anyway and with the goddamned snow . . ."

"Jeremy," Lana moaned, "is that the end of us, then? Am I on my own here?" She tossed back her ash-blonde hair.

"Don't I help you with the apartment? Buy you things? I've done the best I can. This kid bit is over the top. It had to come to an end some time——this has to be it. I'm sorry."

"You always make it about money," she said. "Jeez!"

"Impresses the hell out of you, too." He laughed. "Just get an abortion? It's the only thing that makes sense."

"Jeremy!" Her eyes filled with tears. "You don't give a damn, do you? We're talking about my real baby here. Now you're talking about killing it!"

He walked to the door. "Well, you really think I'm going to drop everything and destroy my life?"

"Your perfect yuppie life with ass-kisser Rachel who'll do anything for you?" She wiped her nose. "That's all you care about! Jeremy Lucas, you better not walk out that door!"

He turned. "What are you gonna do, chubby, sue me? That'd be a one way to get your mitts on my inheritance."

"Fuck you, Jeremy! It's over between us. Is that what you wanted to hear? It's over! I hate you!"

"Whatever." He shrugged and shook his head.

"Now you're going home to get it from the hag like nothing ever happened. And she'll deliver, no doubt."

"At least she doesn't scream like a banshee when I screw her. She lies perfectly still."

"You asshole!" Lana shouted. "Maybe I'll call her tomorrow. Would you like that?"

Jeremy turned around. "Lana, you bitch. You wouldn't dare."

"Try me," she said. "Maybe I'll pass a note around at Archer, too. Start with big-mouthed Mary—she'll tell everyone how you're a dominance freak and Rachel's just your slave."

"Right." He laughed. "I'll just say you're lying. Who are they going to believe? A vice president or his trashy, pregnant assistant whose biggest dream in life is to win the lottery?"

"Jeremy, you are truly a bastard!" She threw a plastic tumbler of soda at him. He dodged it, but got splattered with Coke and ice as the cup bounced off the wall.

"Hey, watch it," he said. "You're just flustered about being pregnant. I know you'll work it out; you're inventive." He winked.

"It's over," she cried and then said slowly, "I knew it."

"Well, whiz kid, what did *you* think I would do? Suddenly give you a ring?" Jeremy laughed as he threw two hundred dollar bills on the coffee table. "Here, you'll need this. I creamed Bob at racquetball today." He casually put on his coat, opened the door, and walked out, vaguely kissing the air in Lana's direction as he left.

Lana Holub looked through the peephole on the door at the snow fluttering through the beam of the security light in the center of the parking lot.

She slumped into the bedroom. The life she'd always dreamt about was over. She had imagined flowery, soft focus images of a wedding day—the perfect white gown with long train flowing down the aisle, a bouquet of miniature orchids and roses flying in slow motion to a hundred eager hands, and Jeremy gliding with her across an empty dance floor to joyous applause.

Now this—the dream had turned into a nightmare.

In sparse light, she looked into the full-length mirror on the closet door. She tore off her teddy, ripping a spaghetti strap. She studied her figure, the vague impression of puffiness around her middle. She had never found it easy to keep her weight down, but always told herself she was pleasingly plump in all the right places. At least that's what Jeremy had said. But tonight he had called her "a midget cleaning lady!"

She looked at her nails. Despite the fact that she had typed his boring memos for five years, she had kept her nails in great shape, except for the newly torn bits of cuticle around several of them.

The phone on the bedside table rang. She picked up the receiver. "Hello?" she said, sniffing.

"Hi, Baby," a stern female voice said. "Glad I didn't wake you."

"Oh, hi, Ma. Just got home from a date."

"You and your dates. It's a wonder you aren't married yet! Twenty-seven isn't so young, ya know. Why don't you settle down, get married, and give me a grandchild?"

Lana's mother always wanted her to be like her other daughter Deborah, with two perfect kids from her first marriage, a Ford Aerostar, and new husband Bryce, the most successful doctor in Topeka, Kansas.

Lana sighed.

"Something wrong, Sweetie?" Her mother coughed a ragged smokers' cough.

"Nothin'."

"Come on, Lana. There's something going on. A mother can always tell."

"Oh, Ma," Lana said, trying to control tears, "it's nothin' I can't handle."

"It's that guy, isn't it? Jerry somebody? Your boss?"

"The royal asshole," Lana cried, and patted her tummy. "He just dumped me."

There was only silence on the other end.

Then her mother said, "Don't worry, honey. Just watch. He'll get what's coming to him.

They always do."

Jackie Eadon 5/24/06 4:39 PM

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