

The student of hatha yoga should practice in a solitary place, in a temple or a hermitage, an arrow-shot away from rocks, water, and fire. The hermitage should have a small door and no windows. It should be level with the ground and have no holes in the walls. It should be neither too high nor too long, and clean and free from insects. It should be laid daily with cow dung.

—*Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, ca. AD 1400



CHAPTER I

mY CELL PHONE RANG at 6:27 a.m., ripping me out of a nightmare in which I was teaching a yoga class wearing only a bra and panties.

“Amanda? Maxine here,” snapped a voice that was not the one I was hoping for. Strange how the fantasy—*maybe it’s Matt*—could hijack my mind before I was even awake. I squinted blearily at the glowing red numbers on the clock. Oh, damn. I must have slept through my alarm. In exactly thirty-three minutes I was supposed to be at The Blissful Body Yoga Studio, substitute teaching the Monday

Rise and Shine class. The regular teacher had called me late last night, croaking with laryngitis; I knew that I was probably seventh or eighth on her list, but still, for an aspiring yoga teacher, not even certified yet, subbing for this class was a rare honor. And here I had almost slept right through it.

“Oh, hello, Maxine.” I tried to sound as professional as possible as I scrambled out of the tangled sheets and began groping around on the floor for my yoga pants. Of course it wasn’t Matt; I’d told Matt I never wanted to speak to him again. Maxine was my editor at Bigday Books, the publishers of the For Idiots: Guides to No-Risk Adventure series, which Maxine hoped would put her mark on the publishing industry. Her book contracts were helping me pay my way—barely—through my yoga teacher training, which I was counting on to launch me into a Right Livelihood career in which I never again had to dodge calls from credit card collection agencies. I switched on the overhead, scrunching my eyes against the light. “What can I do for you?”

“I have a very important question for you.” That wasn’t surprising; all Maxine’s questions were very important. And almost all of them came extremely early in the morning. Bigday was based in Manhattan, and Maxine believed that “Pacific standard time” was just another excuse used by California writers to justify their chronic lack of work ethic.

“Lay it on me.” I picked up a turquoise camisole and sniffed the underarms.

“Amanda, what do you know about enlightenment?”

“About *what?*” I was pulling the shirt over my head as she spoke; the phone must have slipped. Maxine couldn’t have just asked me about enlightenment. I had cranked out two manuscripts for her in the last eighteen months. The first one, *RV Camping for Idiots*, had forced me to spend my entire August traveling in a rented Winnebago from

state park to state park, sandwiched each night between families with screaming toddlers watching *Dora the Explorer* on portable televisions. The second one—*The California Winecountry for Idiots*—had been particularly problematic given that I was in the middle of a yoga teacher training program in which the instructor had advocated drinking nothing but lemon water with cayenne and maple syrup. “I’m sorry, I didn’t quite catch that.”

“En-light-en-ment.” Her voice radiated impatience. “I know you’re into this whole yoga craze. So tell me: What is enlightenment?”

“Well . . .” 6:31. Would anyone notice if my socks didn’t match? “As I understand it, enlightenment is a state of blissful awareness that’s not dependent on any external circumstances.” I tucked the phone in the crook of my neck and tugged a comb through my hair until it snagged, then gave up. “It’s the understanding that you’re not separate from anything else in the universe: the trees, the sun, the—”

“Okay, I get it. My question is, is this something that people are looking for?”

“Well, sure, I guess so. Some people, anyway.” I grabbed my rolled-up yoga mat and held the phone to my ear as I went down the creaking stairs, speaking softly so as not to wake up my housemate. Ishtar was annoyed enough about living with a writer; she claimed that when I worked my mental vibrations seeped through the wall into her bedroom, disrupting her meditations on global harmony. In retaliation, whenever I sat down at my iBook she had begun playing her tablas and singing hymns to the Earth Goddess with great hostility and volume. “I mean, it’s really the whole point of the yoga practice. It’s—”

“So where would people go to get it?”

“Oh, I don’t think you have to go anywhere.” Even I knew that. The books filled two whole rows in my bedside bookshelf, all with

the same optimistic message: *Be Here Now; Wherever You Go, There You Are; Present Moment, Wonderful Moment*. “You can find it anywhere, like in the sound of a bell ringing, or a butterfly flapping its—”

“A-man-da??” It was her ominous voice, the one that told me that if I wasn’t careful, I’d be working at Starbucks again. “I’m talking about travel that involves No-Risk Adventure.”

“Well, if you had to go somewhere—India, I guess. I mean, that’s where yoga came from.” I grabbed my battered mountain bike from the front hall and wheeled it out the door into a swirl of morning fog mixed with the salty wind off the San Francisco Bay. I groped for a metaphor she would relate to. “It’s like going to Paris to buy your clothes, versus just getting them at Target.”

“So if we wanted to do a book about this yoga thing that really set us apart from the competitors—something a cut above all this *Yoga for This* and *Yoga for That*—we should send our writer to India to get enlightened. Am I correct?”

I slung my legs over my bike. My ancient Honda had died a few months ago—the engine finally seized up at 185,000 miles—and I hadn’t been able to afford a new one. And with my credit cards run up the way they were—charging yoga workshops, teacher trainings, an occasional dose of Xanax—no one would give me a loan. “Yes. I’d say that’s correct.” If I pedaled hard, I could still be there on time.

“Ah.” She sounded supremely satisfied. “So, Amanda. This is my concept. We send you to India. You track down this enlightenment thing, tell our readers all the places they can go to get it. We cover your expenses. When you find it, you come back, and as soon as you write the book, you’ll get the rest of the advance.”

“Um . . .” I was feeling a bit slow on the uptake. I coasted down the hill, past the rows of Victorians with their windows still shuttered. I’d been dreaming for years of going to India. Was Maxine actually

offering to send me there to write . . . to write . . . “What is the book I’m supposed to write, exactly?”

Maxine let out a sigh. “Amanda. Have you not been listening to me? The book is ‘Enlightenment for Idiots.’ Are you on board with this? Or do I need to find someone else?”