

Edward F. Tablak

Where Am I?

Chapter 1.

The first drop splattered on his forehead, a surprise, since he was certain he would be finished with his morning run before the rain arrived. Within seconds he was being drenched with a deluge.

He looked upwards and noticed that a large dark cloud hovered directly overhead surrounded by a lighter gray sky on all sides of the cloud. Visibility was near zero with the heavy downpour.

He decided to enjoy the warm rain that was part of the pineapple express coming out of the southwest direct from the Hawaiian Islands

Just as he reached the half way mark, his turn around spot, he was aware of the splashing of footsteps directly behind him.

As he turned, he came face to face with a tall woman, sporting a mop of auburn hair plastered to her head, rain dripping from her forehead which she was trying to wipe away but without success.

She paused just as he had before starting the homeward half of her morning run.

Andrew's eyes moved slightly downward where he saw her tee shirt and shorts plastered to her body so that she could do nothing to hide the perfect 35, 32, 36 torsos. Realizing that continued appreciation of her body would be considered rude; he quickly lifted his eyes to meet hers.

Her laugh hinted of just a bit of nervousness. "I guess it is a bit too late to turn my back since you have already taken my measurements."

His smile was warm and friendly. "There was no way to deny the gift of your beauty which Mother Nature bequeathed on me for that moment.

He stripped off his large sweat shirt, moved to help her slip into it so that it draped the upper part of her virtual naked body.

"Thank you. That was very thoughtful of you. We should start the run back before our pulse rates slow down, wasting the first half of our workouts."

He nodded his agreement.

"You set a nice pace, making it easy to follow."

He asked, “Would you care to join me instead of trailing me? I usually slow down to a jog for the last half mile. We could introduce ourselves during that time.”

Her smile was as warm as his. “I think I’d like that.”

During the silent part of the run, Liz did not try to rid her mental picture of this hunk who had helped her out of an embarrassing situation. Since she was running alongside of him, she had to visualize again that blond haired chest and the rippling muscles of his shoulders and upper arms as he moved toward her to cover her with his sweat shirt.

She had noticed the long tapered fingers as he gently placed his sweat shirt over her head.

She liked the comment about her beauty and the fact that his words and his demeanor had no hint of lasciviousness, only appreciation.

She heard his soft voice saying. “If we slow down a bit, I would like to introduce myself. My name is Andrew Gregory, resident in pediatric surgery at O’Connor Hospital.”

“Wow, what a coincidence. I’m Liz Palmer, chief resident in Medicine at Kaiser Hospital in Santa Clara. Do

you know Jack Berry, chief resident in Medicine at O'Connor? ”

“I do. Nice guy. Are you his fiancée?”

“Oh, no, but his Nancy is a close friend. She is in residency at Kaiser, San Jose. The three of us were in the same class in med school at Stanford.

Before they arrived in the parking lot, they had exchanged three other names that both knew.

They came to her tiny Mazda Miata. “I haven’t a change of clothes, Andrew. May I return your shirt after I wash and dry it?”

She was about to ask for an address when Andrew said, “If you drive over to my SUV, I can let you have a towel or two to dry yourself. In fact, I have some scrubs into which you can change. Since we are nearly the same height, the fit should be close enough.”

She laughed, “Except for the shoulders.”

He smiled as he said, “My windows are tinted, allowing you some privacy.”

“But you need to change.

“I have some chinos and another tee shirt and can change after you do.”

“Are you sure you’re not just playing Galahad?”

“Cross my heart.”

“All right. After that, you can follow me home where I can make some hot coffee or tea and dry our clothes in the clothes dryer.”

She was thinking, “I think I need to know more about this savior who came to my rescue in the rain.”

She couldn’t believe how horrible she looked as she viewed her reflection in the mirror. Her hair was ruffled but not combed after drying it with Andres’s towel. A bit of mascara formed a small blot on her cheek. Her lips looked a little bluish. “What a mess.”

She got out the hair blower and brushes to minimize the damage, wiped her face with a cloth and put on a light bit of lip rouge, pulled on her chinos and an oversized sweat shirt.

She heated some scones to go with the coffee

They sat across from each other at a small table in what could be described as a breakfast nook.

“Andrew, I’m willing to share and I would like to know more about you. You saved the day with your warmth and gentleness in the midst of my embarrassment.”

“Sure, as long as you keep your promise to do the same.”

“Care to tell me why a guy who looks more like a 49er linebacker has become a pediatric surgeon.”

He took his time, appearing to edit his remarks. “I grew up in the small community of Almaden, south of San Jose. My dad was the family doctor in the community, beloved by his patients, especially the youngsters.

He loved children although he and mom had none of their own. I was adopted at age two.

From some very early age, He invited me to observe when he was treating children. I have no idea what criteria he used to decide which patient’s visits were proper for me to attend.

I loved it and considered it a great privilege. He taught me how to wash my hands, use antiseptics and wear gloves as I grew older. I often assisted him during minor surgery when I was in my mid-teens and older. I was thrilled

when he invited me to assist when his patient was an infant or a toddler.”

“His nurse took every opportunity to teach me how and what and why she was doing her chores. My curiosity kept asking for more.”

Dad and Nurse Betty handled each child as though each was a precious load to be protected. They were just as caring, to my surprise, with the young community bully. The bully was about four years older than I.

I wasn't in the office the day that Pete Josephs, the bully, came in with a green fractured left arm, but I do know that Pete never acted the bully again. For whatever reason, Dad never shared with me the events in his private office that day.”

Liz found herself sitting on the edge of her seat by the time Andrew had finished. “That sounds like you were almost foreordained. I'll bet you work with children just as your dad did.

Andrew grinned. “Still does to a limited extent. He has a new young associate by the name of Pete Josephs.”

Liz said, “The young bully. What a wonderful story. That is truly inspirational and, by the way, you are a marvelous story narrator.”

“Thanks. Now it’s your turn.”

“First, let me refill your cup and please, have another scone.”

She started her story. “Someplace along the line I learned to love solving problems. I remember having a jigsaw puzzle, a picture of the United States, early in my life.

My dad and mom bought me some crosswords for children when I was in the fourth grade. I became an avid solver of daily crosswords.

I remember the thrill of being able to solve the first mathematical word problem when I was still in elementary school.

I presume from your story that you were an only child. Well, I was and precocious, at that. Dad and Mom were teachers, he a science teacher and Mom a Social Studies teacher. They both teach in the Cupertino area where I was born and raised.

Both plan to retire in the next few years. They plan to travel to all parts of the globe.

Between the two I received a liberal education, at the dinner table, during homework time at home and in Dad's car to and from school, starting when I was eight years old.

From Mom I had special tutoring in social graces, ethics, religion and a well-developed eagerness to read.

Dad taught me the thrill of solving problems and the excitement of doing research to know the why and how's.

I guess I was inspired to follow in my parents' footsteps to earn my keep while helping others. Medicine seemed to be a field in which I might be able to fulfill that inner need.

I'm not sure where I go from here. I am finishing my three year residency in Family Medicine. I believe I qualify as the Jane of all medical trades but the master of none."

Andrew said, "Liz, where you go is your choice. From what I hear and have read, there are fewer of you than in most specialties. The threat of being overworked has pushed most young physicians into specialties where the hours are better and the pay is better."

“I’m finding that to be true but I have a need inside to offer my services to all peoples, not just to Americans who can afford to buy health insurance. I want to serve all people, those who can afford me and those who now have no access to health care.”

She looked at her wrist watch. “What a wonderful morning this has been. I go on duty in two hours with chores on my list and long shifts ahead.”

Andrew asked, ‘Any chance we can meet some evening for dinner and continue this discussion?’”

“That would be nice but what are the odds of two residents coming up with the same time off?”

“Little to none but that does not mean ever. If you are willing to risk giving me your cell number, I can try to work out something.”

Liz laughed, “That was a clever ploy but you may be worth the risk.” She rose to retrieve his things from the clothes dryer. She handed him a large grocery bag with his clothes and a personal card tucked into the pocket of his scrubs.

As she closed the door behind him, she let out a sigh. “I was afraid he wouldn’t ask. If he hadn’t I would have found some excuse to invite him.”

Andrew walked to his car quite disappointed that Liz did not take him up on his offer for dinner. He knew that as chief resident, she controlled the assignments and therefore could easily manage her own schedule with some discretion.

He himself, as a very senior resident could arrange with his chief for special time off except in an emergency at the hospital.

“Damn. I haven’t had a date since Marie and I parted three months ago.”

While Liz hadn’t revealed more than the tip of an iceberg, he was reading between the lines and sensed a depth of character hidden behind oversized blouses and chinos.

He hadn’t had the opportunity to tell her that he, too, was hoping for more than a cushiony practice or even a challenging position in the right hospital.

It was after one A.M. when he came off duty. He was too tired to drive home. Besides, he was to come on duty at ten, less than nine hours hence. He flopped on his cot in the hospital and was out like a light in minutes.

While having his breakfast at the cafeteria, his mind was filled with images of Liz in that first brief moment in the rain. As the image slowly faded, his mind began working on some new way to contact Liz.

“Maybe when I get off duty at six this evening, I can drive over to Kaiser. I may find her on duty or find someone who knows her.”

By six that evening, he decided that his idea was the wrong approach. At his apartment, he showered, made his dinner, watched some TV and hit the sack early.

He rose at six, had a light breakfast and decided to wear his scrubs to work. He remembered the bag into which Liz had put his laundered scrubs.

It was two minutes later that he found the card tucked into the pocket. His face broke into a wide grin.

“Good morning, my handsome savior. I was beginning to believe that you had more important things to do than taking me to dinner.”

“Clever girl. I might not have remembered that grocery bag for weeks.”

He heard her chuckle. “I doubt that, at least not, if you were interested.”

Andrew laughed. “How could you know that about me?”

He heard the teasing in her voice. “I’m psychic and you just confirmed my belief by calling me within minutes of fiddling the card. Am I right?”

“Guilty. So what am I thinking?”

“Let me think for a moment. You have Saturday off and would like to drive me to the City.”

“Almost but not quite. You’re right about Saturday, but southward not northward. I would like to take you to the Monterey Peninsula.”

“That sounds so inviting, Andrew. I think I can arrange to be available. Let me call you back.”

Andrew gave her his cell number and proceeded to dress and leave for the hospital.

His phone rang just as he pulled into the hospital parking lot. Her number appeared on his cell display. “Hi, Liz.”

“We have a date. Want to leave early?”

“How about seven? We can beat any traffic heading for Pebble.”

“Agreed. Got to run.”

Chapter 2.

“She is lovely.” Andrew was getting out of his car and Liz was already walking toward him. Tan slacks accented her long legs. A light brown, synthetic fur collared jacket was topped by the lovely face that he remembered. Her auburn hair was topped by a brimmed tan hat with a band that read “Bryce Canyon.”

His mother would have said, “Classy with just the right touch of sass.”

Liz smiled to herself as she saw his appreciation, saying, “I thought the chinos might be a little too casual.”

“You look great, Liz.” He opened the car door, took her tote bag and placed it on the rear seat alongside his tote. He wondered, hopefully, if she had brought some night clothes.

“Thanks. I have sneakers for a walk on the beach and some towels in case we find a spot and enough sun to lie on the beach. Weather prediction is for a warmish winter day.”

Traffic was light in town and on highway 101. During the first part of the drive they chatted about their workloads since that special morning.

Liz switched the subject to a more personal matter. “Andrew, I was taken with your response to my question the other day. Would you care to tell me a little more, perhaps something more about the early years?”

“Are you sure? That subject can’t be very stimulating.”

She laughed. “You are from Mars and have no idea what interests a woman from Venus.”

Andrew realized that Liz had a bit of a teasing in her repartee with him and wondered if she did the same with her colleagues.

“All right, but you have to promise to share more of your story.”

“You have my word.”

He began. “I had a great childhood, loved but not spoiled. I was tutored and stimulated to read widely beyond my test books and kid’s fiction.

My best friend was Tillie, a freckled red head who was truly precocious. We did everything together until our thirteenth birthdays. We played baseball football, basketball

and even doctor and patient in the loft of her family's horse barn

I was lost without Tillie when her family moved away but along came Mary, then Sue, then Fran, my high school sweethearts.

Despite a busy social life, my mom kept me on the learning track. Her guidance was not limited to scholastics. We talked frankly about boy and girl relationships, learning to love and respect one's neighbors, especially my girlfriends.

Apparently, I was always headed toward medicine but Mom encouraged me to study other subjects, such as psychology, art and music appreciation, English composition, etc.”

I was big enough to be recruited by the football coach but Mom and Dad convinced me to say no. I was tall enough to make the varsity basketball team and played well enough to be on two championship teams.

I had more than my share of female adoring fans hoping to tell their crowd that “I slept with Andrew.” I finally yielded my virginity after the season of my senior year.”

Athletic and Merit scholarships were there for the taking. I opted out of athletic scholarships at the college level, mostly because of the time that would limit my pursuit of the sciences.”

Andrew figured that was enough to perk Liz’s interest so that she would reveal some secret from her growing up years.

Liz asked, “are you implying that you never went steady during your high school years?”.

“That’s right.”

“That suggests you were innocent, real bait for some hot freshman when you got to college.”

“Yep.”

“Wow. I can’t say the same went for me. I was into male anatomy exploration when I was fourteen and finally seduced poor Albert when I was fifteen. Since I decided that I did not like playing the field, I got Jerry Lawrence to be my steady during my junior and senior years.”

“I was a tomboy before I learned the difference between boys and girls. I was better than most of the boys playing softball and hoops on the playground.

I played on the girls' basketball team and was the tallest girl on the team, thus becoming the highest scorer. Our team got to the championship playoffs but lost in the early rounds.

Like a lot of girls, I dressed to show off my female assets, but it must have been in competition with the girls because I turned down a lot of invitations from boys. I was faithful to my steady.”

They opted for brunch on the water front in Monterey. It was during their conversation that both talked about earning pin money by tutoring some of the richer kids who were granted admission because of family donations to the university.

They were discovering enough parallels to keep them digging for more as the day progressed. They drove around the end of the peninsula toward Pacific Grove, stopped to walk the rocks on the Oceanside, looking for tide pools cleared by the ebbing tide.

Liz was full of stories of trips to the beach with her dad who led her in explorations of sea life at the edge of the sea and inspiring her to read and learn more about life in the sea.

Since both had driven the Seventeen Mile Drive many times, they chose to drive to the highway and then south to Camel.

While window shopping it seemed natural for them to be holding hands. They spent considerable time viewing the art in two different galleries. Liz was taken with modern Bernard Buffett oil, which, of course, was out of her price range.

As they emerged from the second gallery, Liz said, “Enough window shopping. Let’s find some shore line to walk and talk.”

Andrew asked, “How about starting with watching the otters playing in the water. There is a wonderful spot in some National Preserve where we can sit on the hillside and get a great view.” Before he completed the sentence, she was pulling him toward the parked car.

They had almost an hour of laughter watching the antics of the sea otters in a small cove only a short distance from the highway.

“Andrew, are you up to a longer drive. Have you ever been to the dining room at Nepenthe or the restaurant at Vantaa?”

Liz kept a running description of the beauty along Highway 1 while Andrew kept his eye on the oncoming traffic especially at some of the tighter spots.

They stopped several times for special views and a coffee break. The ocean view from the dining room at Nepenthe was spectacular and the food delicious.

Afterwards, Liz drove them just a bit farther south to a small beach that was completely deserted. Despite the cold, she shed her shoes and walked the water's edge holding Andrew's hand. He had no choice but to follow. They frolicked like two youngsters on a holiday.

The sun was setting under a cloud bank as they approached Carmel. They parked in order to watch and sat in silence, glorying in the beauty of the moment.

When the last piece of gold disappeared, Andrew asked, "Is it too early for dinner at the restaurant that Clint Eastwood made famous?"

"I think the restaurant will be open but I'm not ready for dinner after that late lunch. Why don't we make a reservation for seven, and then drive down to the end of Ocean Avenue and watch night fall?"

She didn't wait for his answer. She had whipped out her cell and was hitting a speed dial. He was surprised when she confirmed an eight o'clock time.

"I thought you said seven."

"Nothing available until eight. That would mean a lot of time making out in the back seat of your car. I've become enamored with you, Andrew Gregory and would like to spend as much time as possible with you. They probably have a nice room overlooking the water at the Pine Inn."

Judging by the grin on his face, she knew she had made the right decision. Andrew had been giving off signals of wanting more time with her. She read it in the way he held her hand or touched her arm.

In her best teasing voice, she said, "We can rest and refresh or do anything else that comes to mind."

Later, in the glow of having been loved by her new Adonis, Liz said, "Don't move an inch, Andrew. I don't ever remember a time I have been so loved by anyone. Just hold me tight and let our bodies not part. I do not want to lose this glorious feeling of being one with you."

Andrew kept his promise while replaying the last ten hours of his life with Liz. He came out of his reverie as

her body stirred. She pulled him to lie atop her. “Wow. What a way to awaken from a nap. Finding my lover deep inside me as though we were bound to each other is stirring my juices.”

Andrew said, “This has never happened to me. I love what is coming but we did make reservations.”

“Don’t move. Can you reach my cell on the side table? Please hand it to me.”

A minute later. “I’m sorry to disappoint but the Gregory party will be unable to make our dinner date. Thank you.”

“Now, where were we?”

An hour later, ensconced in the deep warm bathtub surrounded by bubbles, Andrew was gently caressing Liz’s breast. “They are as beautiful as I remembered them almost every waking hour since they were exposed to the world in that soaking rain.”

“Thank you, dear. It was your gentle covering me that made me take a good look at the real you. In that moment I knew I had met someone unique, someone I had to really know. Your responses to my probing over coffee whetted my appetite.”

Andrew said, “You must see something too deep for me to grasp about myself but I’m glad you do. I hope you are receptive to spending a lot of time digging for more.”

Her smile said it all.

She said, “I’ve lost track of time and speaking of time, when do you report for duty? Not too early tomorrow, I hope.”

“Not until three tomorrow afternoon.”

“Good. That leaves plenty of time for exchanging secrets, hopes, and dreams while we make love to each other. Right now, I’m hungry. What would you like?”

“How about getting a bellman to run out for some pizza?”

“How did you know that I was hoping you would say that?”

He laughed. “You’re the psychic who manipulated my thought. You sound dangerous.”

“I hope you like danger because I want to spend a lot of time with you. Now, let’s shower off the soap and call the bellman.”

Five minutes later she was saying, “Lord, Andrew, even the way you caress my body with the towel, I am turning to jelly.”

She reached for another towel and returned the favor.

The bellman brought a small fold up table and two chairs and set them up next to the fireplace, then lit the fire and bid them good night.

An hour later, they were lying in front of the fire, staring into the flames, sharing events of their past. Andrew had just finished telling her how Helga, a girl he dated while at the university, got him interested in working with the Red Cross disaster team when major fires in the city displaced families “Seeing those frightened kids hanging on to their parents watching their homes disappear was always so moving. I found ways to divert their attention with a story or candy bars, mostly so they would not witness the pain of their parents.”

That reminded Liz of an incident while she was in college. “My closest friend received word that their family home had burned to the ground and both her parents were in the hospital. She literally went to pieces, unable to make the simplest decisions about first steps. I ended up driving her

home to Weed in Northern California, went to the hospital to visit her parents who were not seriously injured.”

I stayed three days, helping her find temporary housing, discussing a prepayment with their insurance company and finally getting Marie to a point of functioning.

I must say that I grew up in a hurry when I realized all the adult decisions and actions that I had undertaken and I was only nineteen years old.”

They spent another hour exchanging trivia that seemed important to each of them when they were much younger. He shared his fears of being inept at love making during his first experience. She said that was probably true of many boys because she practically had to rape a willing partner on her first experience.

“Andrew, is it really true that you never went steady even after high school? Something you said earlier today gave me that impression.”

‘I guess you could say that. Thinking back, I can’t recall any girl that I dated more than a half dozen times. I never considered my social life to be high enough on the scale to pay that much attention. I was probably considered a bore and a bit old fashioned by today’s standards.’”

Liz cuddled up as the flames began dying “I haven’t had a steady since I graduated from the university. Med school, internships and my residencies left little time for dating. That may have been different if I had met you earlier in my life.

You ignited a spark within a few minutes of our meeting in the rain. That spark ignited a desire to find the deep you. During each hour of the few we have shared, the spark grew until it was the flame that drew me closer just like a moth or Icarus.

Would you consider being my steady for the next six months or so? I think you will be so easy to love and I want to try you on for size while I will do my dandiest to make you fall in love with me. I’m willing to run the risk if you are.”

He put his arm around Liz, his lips to her ear. “I’m probably half way there, Liz and would love to be your boy if you will be my girl. Finding time to be with each other might prove frustrating, given the hours of residents.”

“True but as Dad would say “if there’s a will there’s a way’. I have two thoughts. One is that I have some leeway being the chief resident so I can schedule some days off a little more easily. Second, I have plenty of room at my

apartment. You could keep some clothes there, planning to stay overnight when we have a short period of time to be together.”

Liz continued, “It’s too early to ask you to move in. If that becomes our mutual desire, then we can talk about it. How does that sound?”

“Almost too good to be true.”

“Good. Now that my stomach has been satisfied, I feel another hunger begging to call. I need those fingers and lips whispering the language of love to my body until I scream.”

Scream she did, follow by moans of pleasure as Andrew discovered the secret of extending their bliss until they both collapsed.”

On the drive home, Liz was in a glorious mood. She shared a secret of the time she accidentally set afire a dry grass field at age five. She had been playing with matches in the field because she would have gotten a light spanking if her dad had caught her doing that at home. “I never told that secret to anyone for all these twenty five years.”

“That must have been traumatic. How about your experiences as an intern or a resident? What was your worst moment?”

Liz was silent for a moment before saying. “The worst was my first day on rotation in Emergency. I was about done with my shift when a call announced two ambulances were on the way from a multi-car accident.”

I was with the primary doctor on call and pulling the first gurney that the ETs had unloaded. As the doctor reached for the wrist of the patient, she coughed and died within seconds.

I had just witnessed the death of a lovely teenage girl. I became nauseated and ran about ten feet before I threw up. I was embarrassed and began to move away. The doctor called, “Grab a towel, wipe your mouth and help me. There is no one else.”

It took me days to adjust to the fact that this was the life I had chosen. Let’s change subjects.”

She had a beautiful singing voice and began to sing, accompanying the music on the radio.

“This weekend reminds me of three great standard songs from the distant past. ‘You came to me from out of

nowhere', you'd be so easy to love' and "You'd be so nice to come home to". She turned off the radio and sang all three songs, serenading the new man in her life.

Three miles short of the San Jose ramp, the traffic came to a halt for a reason unknown to them. It was an hour before they were able to start a slow crawl which continued until they saw the turned over big rig.

Andrew let out a sigh of relief. He would be on time Liz laughed. "Lucky you, sweetie. You can rest until we see each other again. That wasn't my plan. I was hoping for more time at the apartment before you left for the hospital."

It was three days before they were able to see each other. Liz brought some Chinese takeout for a late evening snack.

They exchanged keys and matched calendars to set up tentative dates for the next month

Liz stored Andrews clothing that she had suggested he bring.

"I'll bring mine when we see each other next Thursday at your apartment."

Since neither had duty until after noon, they did not rush to bed, letting their desire simmer while making plans and sharing stories.

The full moon cast a brilliant light on the wall across the bedroom and reflected like gold on the two naked bodies on Liz's bed.

“Honey, you might like to know that you are the only man I have ever invited into my bed. Even when I was going steady, we made love in Steven's bed.”

The sun was slipping in around the edge of the drapes. “Time to rise and shine, lover boy. Liz was already in her jogging suit and was holding Andrew's sweats.

He rubbed his eyes, asking, “How do you look so beautiful and act so perky after those few hours of shut eye?”

“It's this new boyfriend I have. He brings out the beauty from my soul and stirs all my juices.”

They opted for their run at the local high school track. It was a five minute jog from her apartment just enough for their warm up after their stretches in the living room.

Liz had some clothes washing to do so Andrew made an omelet and two rashers of bacon for each of them and hot strong coffee, preceded with a glass of V8 for himself and OJ for Liz.

They cleared the table and stored the dishes in the dishwasher and headed for the shower to enjoy the new ritual of bathing each other.

There were evenings when both were dead tired on a pre-arranged date night. That was the way of life for hospital Residents.

They often surprised each other with a special bottle of wine or dessert that the local bakery owner delivered to their apartment on his way home after work. They celebrated their one month anniversary, six weeks after their first meeting that being the first weekend in which both had overlapping forty eight hour leave.

Liz's colleagues were delighted in what they considered to be the new Liz. They found her easier to approach for shift changes or other small favors. Her face glowed with radiance

Fred, the oldest of her fellow residents, said, “She’s in love.” A hunt was on to find the source of her happiness.

When they had the next weekend match with an eighteen hour overlap, Liz pushed the envelope to include as many activities as possible

Both had arrived after midnight and went right to sleep. Liz was eager to get started in the morning.

At six thirty, Andrew practically jumped off the mattress when her hand moved ever so slightly across his chest. “Time to rise and shine. We have a full day ahead.”

Thirty seconds of silence greeted her comment. Then she jumped as he returned her opening greeting with his own movement. Within seconds they were in a wrestling match that ended in a dead heat.

They laughed their way through the shower and the breakfast that Andrew prepared.

Dressed in jeans and woolen shirts, they headed north in Andrew’s SUV

They spent the early afternoon on the Marin shoreline, lunch in Muir Beach and then a shopping tour in San Francisco.

No weekend was without a special surprise initiated by Liz. At the end of the shopping tour, she took his hand and led him to a newly opened sporting goods store.

Andrew couldn't think of anything either of them needed. Liz pointed to the back wall which was a sheer rock wall, where several teenagers were involved in the art of rock climbing.

“Liz, I don't know the dandiest thing about climbing.

She laughed. “Neither do I but Nick, the owner, is heading our way. I hired him to be our teacher while we both experience something new.”

His face broke into a grin of acceptance. Both were apt students and were soon racing each other to the top while Nick played referee.

They drove to Pacifica on the coast for a fish fry and then opted to drive to Andrew's apartment for the balance of their time together.

Both were avid mystery fans. Liz found her latest James Paterson novel and Andrew the latest by Stuart Woods. He had tuned in radio station KDFC, the classical station for the Bay Area.

A series of Beethoven sonatas filled the air as they delved into their stories.

An hour later, Liz put down her book and cuddled up to Andrew on the sofa. “Are you interruptible?”

“I must be. I see a lovely face about six inches from my nose. I have the feeling that the subject is important.”

“Honey, we’ve covered a lot of subjects in this brief time together except one that can be important if this affair ends up at the altar.

The subject is religion. I know that our busy lives have not allowed much time for attending worship or any participation in a church activity. Yet, I know that the spiritual side of life is important for me and I hope for you.”

Andrew said, “It has been .I grew up and participated in youth programs at a very progressive Presbyterian church in San Jose. I attend with my family

when I manage a Sunday with my folks. They drive at least fifteen miles to worship at this church in Willow Glen. ”

“What a wonderful coincidence. At Cal I was active in the college age group at St John’s Presbyterian Church in Berkeley and occasionally attended services at First Presbyterian Church in Palo Alto while at Stanford.”

Andrew seemed momentarily withdrawn. Liz reached to pull his face a bit closer. “Come back from wherever you just travelled.”

“I just had a thought .How would you like to meet my folks tomorrow?”

“Wow. That came out of nowhere. Sure. Why not? I’m not due back at the hospital until three.”

Andrew picked up his cell phone. “Isn’t it too late to call?”

“Nope. Dad is asleep in his armchair and mother is watching SNL. Hi Mom.”

He listened for a moment. “I want to introduce you to a lovely young lady, a fellow physician. We can meet you at church and then go out for brunch.”

He listened for a full minute. “That works. See you in your favorite pew about nine fifteen.”

He turned to Liz. “Roast beef dinner at home, at noon. Mom says conversation is easier at home than in a crowded restaurant.”

Both were moved by the music, the prelude by the organist, the anthem by a marvelous choir and a sermon on endings and beginnings.

As Andrew drove to Almaden, with Dad in the front seat, the conversation in the back seat was animated and felt to him like two friends reunited after a long absence. He knew his mom would give him thumbs up during her first opportunity.

By the time they were ready to sit down to the meal, Liz had captured his dad’s heart as she had his mom’s. He did get the thumbs up just as he had helped his mom out of the vehicle.

Conversation sparkled. After a brief analysis of the sermon, Liz volunteered the kind of information that she knew Mom would want to hear but would not ask of Andrew’s new girl.

Andrew's wrist alarm signaled that it was time to leave. "Liz has to report for duty and I, too, a couple of hours later."

His dad's wink spoke volumes and his mom's whisper told him that Liz was a keeper

Liz drove Andrew to his apartment and took his car to work. She was in high spirits about the reception she had from the senior Gregory's. As she dropped him off, she said "See you tonight about midnight. You have permission to have my side of the bed warm."

She thought about the warm visit and acceptance by Andrew's parents she said aloud "Elizabeth Gregory. That sounds nice. Dear Lord, thank you for bringing him into my life. I was afraid that I might have to settle for something more mundane."

She let her mind reflect on the essential Andrew. He opened himself fully, never flinching at any question she posed. His love for her was also so apparent. There was nothing he wouldn't do for her. He showed a willingness to join her in any and all chores, including washing clothes, folding them, clearing the table.

She loved the way he couldn't keep his hands off her and the way he responded when she returned his favor

He seemed to be sensitive to her every mood. Often, when she walked in late and tired, he was ready to cater to her need at the moment. In return, she found herself more alert to his needs and moods.

“God. Thank you. Thank you.”

Two weeks later, Liz's folks were as taken with Andrew. He drove away after their visit, certain that he and Liz's dad, Phil, would become extremely close friends and he was right.

Chapter 3.

Over the span of the few months until their contracts were fulfilled, the two of them became aware that theirs was a love for a lifetime.

Like many folks, they were concerned with the dim view of Middle East politics and threats of terror. It was Andrew who kept Liz's ship steady. She tended to react with her heart.

She kept reminding herself of his words. "There is little or nothing we can do to resolve the threat, except to stay calm, be observant and live our lives of service to others."

She laughed when he delivered his postscript, "and love your nearest neighbor with all you might."

That she promised and did with all her might.

During those lonely nights either at her apartment or in the hospital, her mind was actively trying to imagine Andrew at the same moment asleep in their bed at his apartment or in a cot at the hospital. Most nights, it was the image of his body next to hers that brought sleep to her tired body.

They found the time to talk on the phone several times a day. Phone conversations late at night only increased the loneliness for Liz. One night, just after midnight, after talking with Andrew, she rose from her bed at the hospital, dressed and drove to his apartment to lie with him for just a few hours before her early morning call.

During one of their rare long evenings, Andrew slipped a diamond on Liz's finger with her very enthusiastic approval. Later in the evening after sealing their pledge with a long tender session of loving, they sat on the bed, propped up with large pillows against the head board.

Together they concentrated on long range plans. They decided that they would have two children, about two years apart. Liz would ask for at least six months of maternity leave with each child. They opted for contracts with a hospital or an HMO, perhaps Kaiser. This would give them more family time.

They made a slew of other plans, knowing that nothing could be set in concrete at this juncture.

The toughest agreement was setting the date for the wedding. Come July, Liz would get her licenses. Andrew would start his Fellowship.

Andrew wanted the wedding to be held in September. He tried to convince Liz to give up her planned work with Doctors without Borders. “Have you really thought about being separated for ten months, Liz?”

“I have, honey, many, many times but I feel that if I don’t do it now, I will not have another chance.

DWB wanted her ASAP. “That doesn’t leave a lot of time for planning a wedding unless we elope and we both agreed no to that idea.”

In the end, Andrew capitulated. As she said, “Completing your pediatric surgery fellowship at UCSF will take most of the year”

“Maybe you can find the home we want to buy. With the help promised by both our families and our agreement on the parameters, you know that I will be happy with your decision.”

As their workloads decreased in the last months of their residencies, Andrew moved in with Liz. Like two kids on a honeymoon, they spent hours making love as if they could store up all their love to hold during the coming separation.

Liz agreed to write twice a week and he would do the same.

Andrew's parents had the young couple and Liz's parents for a farewell dinner two evenings before Liz's departure.

The ambience during the last evening was somber, in spite of Liz's attempt to lighten the mood. Making love was a disappointment leaving very wet pillows that had been dampened by their tears.

Chapter 4.

The flight to Tokyo was not quite full. Liz had an aisle seat five rows from the back and a vacant seat next to her. She was pleased that after an hour into the flight, the passenger in front of her had made no move to lower the back of his seat into Liz's lap.

She reached into her tote for the book on disasters that was part of her reading assignment.

“Early intervention following disasters, especially when the disaster is associated with widespread damage to property and ongoing financial problems for the people. Most often there is violence that resulted from those who want to take advantage.

Expect to find of trauma in the form of injuries, threat to life, and loss of life. The responder will face the mental health needs of children, women, and survivors especially in less developed countries.

The family is central to understanding and meeting those needs. The responder, regardless of his or her field of expertise, should try to listen for the children who signal separation from family.

The complexity of disasters demands quick responses to them, interagency cooperation and

coordination.in order to note the need for mental health response.”

Liz had read other material needed to think ecologically and the requirement to design and test societal- and community-level interventions for the population at large and conserve scarce clinical resources for those most in need.

She put the book into her tote and decided to put her engagement ring in the tote bag. There was no reason to risk losing the diamond.

She laid her head on the back rest, closed her eyes and brought to her screen her favorite picture. She was remembering the first minute of her meeting with Andrew, his look of appreciation and his move to assure her modesty.

The jolting of the plane awakened Liz; she felt lost for a moment, and then remembered there was this stop at Anchorage before the long leg to Tokyo.

She spent most of the rest of the flight studying other materials supplied to orient her to her responsibilities, specifically in the area where she would be stationed in Bangladesh.

Liz had planned for a twenty four hour layover in Tokyo, simply to get a feel for this metropolis. Seventy five

minus after touchdown she was registering in a boutique hotel just off the Ginza.

It was four o'clock local time and the streets were crowded with shoppers and revelers, mostly tourists. Shoulders and hips bumped as the crowds moved slowly.

Suddenly just in front of her, a woman shrieked. Liz saw the young boy, turn and dart in her direction. She put out her right leg and tripped the thief who was holding tightly a woman's purse.

The young blond woman, most likely German, according her speech, jumped on the boy and began beating him. He flung the purse about five or six yards away. The young woman went for the purse, giving the thief the chance to escape.

No one made an attempt to stop the boy, including a couple of well-built young men. Quite a few of the observers were laughing, as though they had witnessed a street show, which they had, sad as it was.

Three times in the next hour, she was approached by Japanese men, hoping to set up a tryst.

Back at the hotel she arranged for a bus tour of the inner circle of the city. The young woman who was their

guide was beautiful and spoke American English and what Liz assumed was excellent German

The concierge explained this unique tour, for which an extra charge had been made “Our leaders want our guests to understand all interpreters and tour leaders, very clearly.”

Her dinner was exquisite. She went by cab to a delightful family type restaurant, where the clientele seemed to be families or older couples. Not a westerner to be seen.

She arrived early for her flight and she decided to see if a good cup of coffee was available. She found a table, with a view of the taxiways and the apron alongside the building in which she was sitting.

She heard a soft voice, speaking excellent English but tinted with an Asian accent. “The other seats are taken. May I share this table with you?”

“Of course. Please.

Two minutes later, Liz, the extravert, had Su Liana engaged in conversation. The young woman was returning home to Katmandu and her family after six years studying at Stanford. She ended her short narrative, saying, “I

have been accepted at med school at Southern California and plan to return next fall. May I assume that you are a doctor?”

Her eyes lifted from Liz’s jacket lapel.

“Yes. I just got my boards and license and will spend most of the year with Doctors without Borders. I guess I am a good candidate, since I am geared for Family Practice.”

“I am so glad to hear that. The developing countries in Asia need all the medical assistance they can get. We are short of doctors and nurses, even in quiet times, let alone during and after disasters like our earthquake this past year.”

“I understand. Our government encourages us to be part of that help. They will forgive part of my educational loans for the service I render this year.”

Su Liana said, “We should go. Boarding will take place soon. They separated when Liz stopped at a rest room on the way to the security lines.

Liz was a little confused as she read the electronic board to find her gate. Most of the time she was pushed along by the eager crowds

Finally, she was seated near the front of a plane that was not quite full. The doors closed. The attendants were scurrying about as they performed their duties.

Liz felt the tug of the tractor pulling the craft away from the blocks. The senior female attendant opened the microphone. “Ladies and gentlemen, Welcome to Asian flight 342, to Katmandu, Nepal. We will.”

Her voice was interrupted when Liz shrieked, “I’m on the wrong plane. Please take me back to the gate.”

The babble in the coach section grew louder, mostly people wondering what was happening, some screaming in fear that something bad was happening.

Liz was trying to apologize for her outburst. The second officer came rushing out of the cockpit: His appearance brought a hush to the voices in the aft cabin. He walked to the flight attendant who was holding the microphone.

Liz couldn’t understand his question to the flight attendant since he was probably speaking Nepalese.

He received an answer to his question, and then turned to Liz, who rushed an apology to the officer. “I’m sorry I overreacted in the moment, but in some strange way, I

ended up on the wrong flight. I will miss my appointment by at least a day.”

“I just checked my travel plan. The other flight is just boarding. If you took me back to the gate, I might make that flight.”

“Sorry, Miss. Flight regulations will not permit us to do that. Even if that were not so, another plane has moved into our spot and there is no place for us to tie up.”

“Damn. May I make a call, at some point, in order to let my people know?”

“Probably, but that is up to the Flight Captain. Please have a seat. The Captain will want to talk with you but that could be twenty or more minutes from now, that is when we are headed on our planned path.”

Thank you. It’s my bad luck aided by some inattentive personnel who allowed me to board the wrong plane.”

She inserted the jab at the airline personnel so that the Captain would be alerted to her indignation.

A half hour later a very, very apologetic captain arrived. In the end she had two free scotches in the first class cabin, to which she had been upgraded.

“Furthermore, you will be refunded the amount of your flight ticket and, furthermore, you will be flown to your original destination on a morning flight. That is the most I am permitted to offer.”

“Thank you. Now, may I make that call?”

At that moment, the intercom was calling for the Captain to return to the cockpit. He rose, nodded his disapproval, and moved quickly to the cockpit.

Disappointed, she sat back in her seat. She could hear the buzz of the conversation, probably speculation about the conversation which had been in English, of course, while most of the passengers were Asian.

To herself, she thought, “What a lousy start to my adventure. I hope this is not an omen. I wonder what Andrew is doing at this moment.” She drifted into reverie with loving remembrances of his caring touch and sweet gentle kisses.

She opened her eyes and from her seat toward the rear of the plane, Liz saw a stream of liquid flowing from the

inward engine on the left side of the plane. After a moment, the streaming disappeared.

She looked at her watch. “That was a long nap. We must be over Nepal.”

She saw little out the window from her aisle seat. The day was gray. She imagined the multitude of peaks below the plane, thinking, “A forced landing would be impossible in this mountainous country.”

She closed her eyes, hoping to bring focus on her loved one; Andrew She felt a jolt, like something striking the plane. She looked out the window and she saw the inward engine smoking and then burst into fire.

Within seconds, the pilot had extinguished the flames and turned off the engine. She took a deep breath of relief as she remembered the ability of the plane to fly on as few as two engines and the number of backup systems built into planes for safety purposes.

It was only a few minutes later that she heard screams from the other side of the plane. . From her seat she could see flames over the wing... It appeared to be a large flame, maybe two flames. People were acting crazily. Some

were standing up and reaching for suitcases and many shouting words which Liz could not understand.”

The melee was interrupted with the voice on the intercom. “The captain must be asking for calm and he got their attention.” The standing passengers took their seats.

One of the attendants managed to get to Liz. “We are going to have to land. Have you read the material regarding crash landings?”

“Yes. Help the others. I know what to do.”

She refastened her seat belt. She estimated about two minutes or less to crash time.

A thousand images fought each other for position at the front of her mind. Andrew’s soft smile, mother’s arms around her shoulder, Dad’s lap. Then a stupid thought popped up. “I still owe Maggie ten bucks.”

She became aware that she was not afraid for herself but was sorry to leave her loved ones without another chance to say good bye.

She created an image of the four of them huddled in a big hug in a very strange setting that she could not fathom.

She heard a voice saying something that she took to mean “Brace you.”

She bent over, head between her knees and waited for the crash while crazy images flashed across her mind.

Chapter 5.

The helicopter quickly rose, leaving its human cargo to initiate the search for survivors.

The first responders, viewing the carnage, were surprised that the debris was scattered over such a short distance. “The deep snow seemed to have cushioned the crash, somewhat. Search carefully. There may be survivors.”

A blanket of snow covered the bits of strewn wreckage. A light snow had fallen during the six hour period since the time of the crash.

The searchers move with precision according to detailed instructions learned from past experiences.

The veteran responders had the usual task of enduring the stench of burnt clothing and flesh, the sight of dismembered bodies and airplane parts spread across the landscape.

With meticulous care they covered every part of the scene.

Hours later, each of the searchers were shaking their heads side to side, signaling that no survivors were found.

The long hard task of identifying the passengers was about to begin.

The wife of the head man of the village had just checked the bedroom of the two children and had retired to the bed with her husband. In this remote mountainous area of Nepal, a cold snowy night with a thin sliver of moonlight usually meant a hush blanketing the village.

Every resident was tucked in under heavy blankets and happy to be so. Anna heard a sound of tapping and then scratching, strange sounds. It seemed that the sound was coming from the front door of the cottage.

She nudged her husband who groaned and turned over. She persisted. “Aadit, something strange is happening. It may be a wild animal. Get your gun and have a look.”

That got his attention. They both listened for the sound that seemed to be weakening. Each pulled on a robe and walked to the door.

“Who’s there?”

A small weak voice, like that of a child, spoke words unknown to the headman. His wife opened the door slowly while he held his gun at the ready.

There in the doorway was a huddled mass of a heavy black cloth, wrapped around the body of a woman...

Adit put down the gun. He helped Anna to lift the woman so that she could wobble into the house. They had her sit in a chair at the kitchen table.

She could not hold her head steady. Slowly it drooped onto her crossed arms on the table.

Anna rushed to the stove to heat some water. Adit stirred the embers in the fireplace to start a fire, and then moved the woman onto a chair closer to the fire

The woman tried to speak but no words emanated from her mouth. Anna put her index finger over the woman's lips.

She had to help the woman hold the cup of tea as she sipped the hot fluid. Slowly some color came to her cheeks as the fire began to radiate some heat in the direction of the woman.

Anna heated some bread and offered the woman a piece along with another cup of tea. Slowly the woman appeared to thaw and tried to speak. Even if Anna or Adit knew English, the words would have been indistinguishable. Her parched lips refused to allow the right sounds to escape.

Judging from her features and clothing, Adit assumed the woman was European or American. He tried to recall if any of the young men in the village had ever known or met anyone from the west. Perhaps, Mite, who worked occasionally as a Sherpa, might know some words.

The woman was holding her head as if to ease the pain of a headache. Anna prepared a powder mixture that she used for family members with a headache.

She took the woman to their bed. The woman, who understood the sacrifice that her hosts were making, tried to resist. She was no match for Anna, who undressed her and put her into a night gown and then gave her a long massage.

She kneaded carefully around the deep cuts and scratches sealed by dried blood and scabs. There were bruises as well but Anna decided that tending those wounds could wait until morning. Her examination also revealed the lump on the back of the head that made her wonder if someone had attacked her.

She was determined to treat those wounds once the guest had a good rest.

When the guest was asleep, Anna and Adit found some blankets and created a bed for themselves in front of the fire.

Before the guest could rise from her bed, Anna insisted on examining her feet and hands. Sure enough, she detected frostbite on two toes on each foot. After futile attempts to find words to communicate, using sign language, she indicated that her guest was to stay in bed for two days, not to walk on her frost bitten toes.

Anna assumed the woman must have been higher in the mountains. Although summer still produced very cold nights, the frost bite was a mystery.

She brought a basin of warm water, cloth and towels and helped the woman refresh herself, then brought a bucket so that she could relieve herself.

Anna mixed a dose of pain medication and gave it to the guest to relieve the pain of her wounds and the frostbite and the continuing headache.

The two teenage children had to have their curiosity satisfied by sneaking a peek at the guest who arrived

overnight. The woman, seeing them, waived for them to enter. They did but could not understand the words that she was saying. They were disappointed but smiled and retired from the room.

During the midmorning, Anna gently washed the wounds and applied some salve to help the healing process.

The women talked as though her patient understood her. At one point she said something that her guest interpreted as Nepal. ,”Why am I in Nepal? Dammit, who am I?”

That afternoon, Adit brought the young Sherpa who know a few words of German and Dutch but could not understand a word spoken by the guest.

So it went for a few days. The family voted to give her a name. They chose Akhil, which means Complete, since she came complete from some mysterious background.

Her headache worsened as she struggled to remember “Am I married?” For some reason, she knew that if that were true, she would have a ring on her finger. “No ring.”

Over the next few weeks, she learned a number of words in Nepali and made herself useful. She learned to

milk the cow and the goat, and along with the twins, cleaned the muck from the barn.

Anna was surprised at Akhil's skill with the thread and needle. She repaired the children's torn shirts and lengthened their trousers. She was a big help stitching the patches for the quilt that Anna was creating.

The woman adopted the name Akhil and concentrated on learning the dialect of her hosts. As she became a bit more adept at verbal communication, she decided to attempt the explanation of her mysterious arrival, even though there was little she could tell.

She kept going over the event with no real memory of where it started. She recalled walking and walking, sometimes in snow and at other times on rocky ground. She was aware that she was walking downhill most of the time.

She had seen no one even when daylight dawned. There were loads of trees, some rocky crags up high, gray skies, then snow and then darkness again.

She felt tired, her legs about to give out but something told her that stopping would bring her life to an

end. She kept trudging ahead. She recalled that she had sunk to the ground when she saw light ahead.

Seeing the light was enough to get her to her feet and start toward the light, which went out when she was fairly near. She kept her eye on the spot as best she could until she came to the small house.

She slumped to the ground and began knocking; realizing that her knocks were very feeble.

It wasn't much of a story but it was the only one she had to tell.

The family sat spell bound as she struggled to use her new language skills and some sign language to tell her story. One of the twins, using simple terms and hand signals, said. "My brother and I thought you might have survived the plane crash but the television says there were no survivors."

Even if she remembered being on an airplane, she had no way of knowing that the world would not even know of her existence since there was no record of her being on the plane.

It took him a long time with hand signs to make his message clear to Akhil.

She tried to communicate, “I think I am American but I have no memory of who I am, where I lived. My mind has no memory.”

Adit’s sign language told her that, “The television said that no Americans were on that plane.”

That night, sleeping on her temporary bed in front of the fire, Akhil decided she needed to make a move. She felt that she was a burden on the family, even if Anna denied it. She needed to find some larger communities where people were more cosmopolitan and might help her find her way.

Meanwhile back home, Andrew and his and Liz’s parents were going berserk.

Neither had received an email as expected. Liz had promised both a communication as soon as she landed at her destination, Dhaka in Bangladesh. That was weeks ago.

After a multiplicity of phone calls to the airlines, Andrew was convinced that for some reason, Liz had not boarded the flight to Dhaka from Tokyo. It had taken days and days but he did discover that she had booked a hotel room in Tokyo but there the trail ended. She had personally checked out the morning of her scheduled flight to Dhaka.

He called the local police department to see if they could have the Tokyo unit put out a missing persons notice to their field force,

They complied but with no results after weeks of publishing the notice.

“How does a person disappear off the face of the earth without a trace?”

It was difficult to concentrate on his work, yet he could not afford to delay. He was running out of funds and needed to complete the fellowship and find a position.

He talked each day with Liz’s folks and tried to keep his own family up to date. Together they prayed on the phone for Liz’s safe return.

He found it difficult to sleep with his thoughts creating a myriad of scenarios. His lack of appetite caused him to lose weight. He dared not look into a mirror. His mind was such a jumble that it would have made no sense if he were trying to explain to someone.

Chapter 6.

The family was planning their trip to Sudal, the largest community in their district, Although it was small, only about a hundred buildings, according to the twins, it was a place for them to market their produce and Anna's sewing, This provided the cash for them to buy items of clothing for each member of the family.

Father and the boys took off about three in the morning to set up their produce and Mother's sewing items in a good spot where foot traffic was the highest.

Mother and Akhil departed about five. The walk would take almost four hours and Anna wanted to be early enough to have early pickings of the wares that she wanted to purchase.

Akhil had no funds to spend and would have helped the men sell their products, but they were experienced and gently declined her offer. She was free to roam and discover whatever during the day. They would not be returning until at least three in the afternoon unless they had sold everything prior to that time.

Akhil had packed her few clothing items that Anna had made for her and had them in a rucksack on her

back, just in case she found some reason to make a first step in a new direction

Anna was aware of the possibility but none of the others were.

Akhil decided to do a little exploring. She was walking slowly but her mind was working at solving the mystery of being a woman with no memory of her past.

It was about eleven o'clock when Akhil ran into a short line of people of all ages standing in a line leading to a newish building. She noticed a young woman exiting the building, holding her arm as though she were pressing on a small bandage. "Is this some sort of clinic for injured or ill people?"

She started to move toward the entrance but the increased murmur of the people in line made her aware that they believed she was trying to go to the head of the line. She quickly swerved and headed for the rear.

The door was unlocked so that her entry went unnoticed. The scene felt familiar. There were three large cubicles where doctors were examining patients. There were two tables where it appeared nurses were administering injections.

“How do I know that?”

One of the doctors was just finishing his exam and pointing his patient in the direction of one of the tables.

He was approached by a nurse. Looking past the nurse, the doctor noticed Akhil. He took the nurse by the arm and led her toward Akhil.

As the doctor approached, he put out his hand in a welcoming posture. “Hello, I’m Dr. Bhak. Are you an American visiting in the area? Are you from England or Northern Europe?”

Akhil suddenly was at a loss for words. How could she explain who she was when she didn’t know who she was?”

“I guess I am or I think I am.”

He chuckled. “That’s cute. Well, your first words say that you are American. I would guess they were perfect American English I went to an American elementary and high school in Katmandu and have met may Americans who visit here in Nepal.”

“Come join us. We are ready for a break. This is Nurse Su Mi.”

The nurse gave her a welcoming smile. “I notice that your jacket is locally made. Are you staying with friends?”

“I guess you could say that.”

Su Mi looked quizzically at Akhil, who blushed and began to stammer as she tried to respond. “When I saw the line outside and a woman emerging with a bandage on her arm, I sensed this must be a clinic. I believe I have worked in clinics in my life but I am not sure.”

That statement made both her hosts look at her with question marks on their faces.

“I believe I am either a doctor or a nurse, but I can’t back that up. Some weeks ago I appeared in the middle of the night on the doorstep of a family in a small village about a four hour walk from here. I have no idea where I came from. I have no memory of any past life.”

“Were you injured?”

“I had bruises, cuts and scratches which healed quickly when treated by my hosts.

Su Mi poured some tea and toasted several pieces of bread. She added some jam and handed a piece to Akhil. “And absolutely not a whisper of an idea of your past?”

“Absolutely nothing.”

Dr. Bhak said, “My friends call me Li and I would be pleased if you addressed me that way. What are your plans?”

“The family calls me Akhil. I have no plan but I must not continue to be a burden on the family that has taken me in. They will object to that statement but I am another mouth to feed and eventually clothe and they are in no position to support me that way. There is no way for me to support myself in that village. I need to move on, find some way to support myself.”

“In the back of my head, I have this sense that I may come out of this memory loss at any moment or perhaps never.”

Su Mi looked at Dr. Bhak with a question mark on her face. He smiled. “Yes, Su Mi. I think we can.”

He turned to Akhil. “We can use some help here at the clinic. It won’t pay very much but enough to allow you to rent a room and take care of personal needs like food, clothing and personal needs.”

Su Mi waxed enthusiastically. “It’s not much but it’s a start. You may rediscover yourself if you have a background in medicine.”

Akhil could see that Su Mi was holding her breath while hoping for an immediate yes.

She let the idea roll around her mind for a few minutes. Looking into both faces she could see that they both thought it was a good first step for her.

“Are you sure you’re not just making up this position?”

Li said, “Absolutely not. This is a valid need and you fit the bill, but even if it were made up, you would have to say yes. “

He looked at his watch. We have to go back to work but we can work out details when we go off duty at six this evening Come to the cubicle. We need to do an examination to check your wounds although mostly healed after all these weeks. ”

Akhil nodded her agreement. “Afterwards, I will return to the family to bid my farewell.”

Li pronounced her reasonably fit but could not determine the source of some of the wounds.

He said to Su Mi, “Based on her description of the wounds during the first few days, she appeared to have been brutalized by either an animal or some very cruel person. That bump on her head could be a sure indicator.”

As Akhil found her way back to the stalls, she felt as though part of a load had been lifted off her back. She was taking a positive step.

Anna was surprised but Akhil could see the relief in her eyes. She found the words to say, “I want to repay you.”

Anna protested and finding a way to communicate. “If you can, come back and visit us.”

She whistled an apparent signal to the others in the family. They came running. A few words from Anna made it clear that Akhil would be leaving them. Each took her hand and kissed the back as their way of saying goodbye.

Anna handed her a small parcel that was her lunch packet. Akhil, with tears streaming down her face, hugged Anna for a very long moment. It was the only way she had of

communicating her feelings and gratitude for all that Anna had done.

Chapter 7.

While waiting for her new friends, Akhil tried to discover why she had a sense that she had experience in the field of medicine. Try as she might, nothing came to the surface of her mind.

The other patrons of the café stared at the foreigner who entered, accompanied by the doctor and head nurse at the clinic. The room was soon abuzz with speculation.

The threesome was ushered to a back table, with a bit of separation to allow for some private conversation, although the odds of any other person understanding English, was extremely remote.

Su Mi said, “I’ve arranged for a cot to be set up in the storeroom for tonight. This will be your temporary room until we find something permanent. I have put some personal items including a towel and hand cloth for your use.

Now let me explain the menu.”

While waiting for the food to arrive, Li said, “We need to get you a Nepali-English dictionary. Su Mi and I are the only English speaking members of the team. We plan to introduce

you as a trainee volunteer from the States. Everyone is familiar with the fact of volunteers from the west for all sorts of activity. “

Su Mi interjected, “You and I can go to my apartment where I have the dictionary and practice the basic words for use during the introductions tomorrow morning.”

“Wow. You are very thorough. I’m a bit overwhelmed.”

Both smiled at her appreciation of their efforts. Li continued, “I have a special Nepali-English dictionary of medical terms at the office. We need to store the material that has arrived but has not yet been unpacked. It’s a simple job but crucial for us.”

Su Mi said, “I will type up a special list of terms describing in both languages most of the products in our storage unit which should make your first days easier”

Akhil answered with, “Thank you, Su Mi. I will be happy to do anything. This looks like a learning opportunity for me as well as a contribution to the team. Thank you.”

Su Mi found a family willing to rent a room with kitchen privileges for Akhil. It was a pleasant room with a view of the snow-capped peaks in the distance.

“The couple had this spare room, recently vacated by their son who had received a scholarship to study engineering at the University of California in a place called Bur kea Lee in California.

The name rang a faint bell in Akhil’s mind but try as she might, nothing came forth.

During the first two weeks Su Mi took her to the market and taught her the art of buying her food. She also gave her a few cooking lessons.

Su Mi also invited her to dinner, mostly to have time to practice her English while tutoring Akhil in Nepali.

Within weeks, Akhil was comfortable greeting the staff members and the occasional patient that crossed her path.

Her new landlords invited her to join them in the evening meal, recognizing that she was fatigued and was just learning to cook. She practiced her verbal skills during those sessions, bringing about a lot of laughs among the three of them.

Learning the spoken language came easily to Akhil but reading the written language required a lot of help from Su Mi and Dr. Bhak. The typed list and the dictionaries helped.

After several hours of instruction, she finally found the key and was able to translate pretty much on her own, although it was slow going.

It seemed that autumn was short lived before a hard winter set in. Akhil had maintained a regimen of walking and floor exercises to get into shape and stay that way but the winter brought restrictions with the fierce winds and extreme cold days.

She spent a few minutes each evening searching her mind for a clue to her past but to no avail. She wondered about parents, brothers or sisters. “I must have had some relationship with men or a man, my age.”

One of the advantages of learning, informally, to speak a new language is that the student picks up the idioms along with the formalities. This was true, especially when she had the opportunity to work with children.

During the winter months, Dr. Bhak arranged for the preschool children who accompanied their folks to the

clinic to come indoors into the back room while the adults still had to wait in lines. Akhil was the caretaker who read stories and learned some of the games that children liked to play indoors.

In the midst of this intercourse with the children, she occasionally noted symptoms that the parents had not, so that she referred those children to the pediatrician resident.

As the first signs of spring arrived, Dr. Bhak called a formal meeting of the staff. The purpose of the meeting was a special announcement.

“Our team has been requested to caravan to the small villages within a twenty kilometer radius to operate a mobile clinic for the many families who have been unable to come here during the winter months. We need to be ready within three weeks.”

At the end of the meeting, he called Akhil aside. “The other doctors and I, based on observations, believe that you have been trained as a diagnostician or in Family Medicine. While I cannot take advantage of those skills legally, I think we can take advantage of your presence while on the road. How do feel about serving as our triage leader?”

“Are you serious?”

Yes, I am. Some of the villagers will need immediate attention while others have less serious illnesses. We need to set up priorities since our visits will last only for a few days each. I will assign Su Mi to work the first few hours as your co-leader as a formal checkup or until you are comfortable. What do you say?”

Akhil grinned. “Promoted in less than a year. I’m flattered. Of course, I am willing to give it a shot.”

During the three weeks prior to leaving, Akhil spent extra hours on her medical vocabulary and getting Su Mi to help her with grammar. She needed to be able to ask questions of the patients that would be coming to her during the clinics. Direct communion with a patient was better than hearing responses through a translator.

Although no day passed in which she did not reflect on her condition, the challenge of her new duties kept the reflective moments to a minimum.

The residents of two villages were to be treated on their first stop. Akhil estimated the crowd to be about a hundred and fifty adults and children packed in the central square of the first village. Almost all had arrived at dawn.

Dr. Bhak spoke with the headmen of the villages, outlining the procedures that would be used. They were to explain to the patients that the two women were assigned to evaluate each case to decide the degree of injury or illness and arrange for the most needy to be placed at the head of the line. He also explained that, if a late arrival was determined to have a greater need, that person would be placed ahead of those already in line.

The headmen nodded their understanding and promised to keep order.

Eight hours later, a hundred and sixty one cases had been ranked. Folks were told the approximate time and date to be present to have their needs attended.

Dr. Bhak decided that Akhil might be useful as an extra nurse. He used the term Nurse's Aide to describe her temporary position.

Su Mi would meet with stragglers who were late arriving.

Akhil was assigned to work with Dr. Hari Adar, a young man about her age. Li introduced the doctor as recently appointed to the hospital staff as the newest addition

to the pulmonary staff. Akhil got the message, “bright but limited experience.”

The long afternoon of examining, questioning, checking x-rays came to an end at six thirty. Weary staff members retired to their respective trailers to rest and refresh before heading to the camp ground where their chef had prepared dinner for the staff.

Akhil was standing line with her plate and utensils when she heard a soft voice asking, “May I join you for dinner?” It was Ddr.Adar.

“That would be nice, Hari.”

They were seated at the end of a long table, occupied by a dozen staffers, all of whom were chatting with their neighbors. Conversation was difficult with the rising competitive rising of the voices.

Finally, Hari and Akhil took their tea mugs and moved onto the benches outside the tent.

Hari said, “Dr. Bhak tells me you are suffering from amnesia.”

“That’s true. I have no memory beyond a long walk to reach the home of a family in a remote village.”

“He also said that you believe that you have some history of working in medicine during your prior life. Watching you work today, I came to the same belief. If you don’t mind, I would like to think of you as a consultant rather than just the nurse.”

“I would be open to any and all comments and even ask a question or two.”

“I’d be honored, Hari, but this is presumptive only.”

He nodded and switched subjects. “You must live in frustration, unable to make plans for the future and, wondering about your history.”

“It is, but I am indebted to Li and Su Mi for making it possible to have the opportunity to serve others. I’ve also developed patience, hoping that someday, the wall will come crashing down and open the door to my past.”

“Now, tell me about Dr. Hari Adar.”

“There is not much to tell. I’ve always been interested in science and medicine. My father is a physician and took me with him to visit patients. I fell in love with the smell of hospitals, made friends with other doctors and nurses as I became a teenager.”

I attended med school in England and completed my residencies in two hospitals in Katmandu. I was just appointed to my position at the hospital in Silkin, a city of about eighty thousand.”

Akhil smiled as she asked, “That was about Hari, the doctor, how about Hari, the man?”

He blushed. “There is little to talk about. I was pretty much an introvert, loved to read and create things with my hands.

Being shy, I had limited relationship with girls until I was at the university. I’ve never gone for any long period with any one girl or woman. Med school and internships and residencies are pretty demanding. You would have known that.”

“I love chess and work out in a gymnasium. When I have the chance I love to play soccer although I am not very athletic.”

“That would have fooled me. You must have a strong workout regime to develop that set of shoulders and arm muscles.”

Hari blushed and nodded.

He swiftly changed the subject. “Have you thought about trying a large city where you might expand your horizons and find some new opportunities?”

“Yes. I have thought about it but I have no financial resources. Besides, I am not sure I want to get the attention of the government. I have no idea how they might view my presence. My story has to be taken on faith and bureaucrats are not known to be that trusting.”

“I agree but I can’t believe that you will settle for the limited life you have here even if you are making a contribution.

“You’re probably right, but it has to do for the present.”

About ten the next morning, Su Mi walked briskly to Dr. Adar’s cubicle. “I have a new arrival with an extreme lung infection of some sort. It may be pneumonia.”

“Bring him to us five minutes from now. We are almost finished with our current patient.

Su Mi stayed with them for the beginning of their examination and questions. Su Mi said “Based on the initial questions I thought it might be pneumonia, but I would have expected some nausea or more chest pain. “

Hari questioned the patient and listened to his lungs. “No wheezing to speak of and he said no nausea. Akhil, care to probe and ask some questions, please”.

A few minutes later, she said, “Probably not pneumonia I would guess pleurisy”.

“His chief symptom is a sharp, stabbing pain when he breathes in or out. This pain goes away when he holds his breath and when I put pressure on the painful area.

However, it will definitely get worse when he moved. His low fever is a symptom but his loss of appetite makes me feel sure it is pleurisy.

Su Mi and Hari were nodding affirmatively as Akhil spoke. Hari said, “Let’s begin testing to ascertain our guesses.”

Akhil asked Su Mil to get the equipment to start the blood test while Hari called for the mobile chest x-ray equipment. The three were moving like a long trained team.

The blood tests indicated no infection, no autoimmune disorder. They discovered a fluid buildup that was putting pressure on the lungs and causing them to stop working properly.

Hari said, “We need to remove the fluid and tissue from the pleural space for testing. That means a thoracentesis. I’ve read about the procedure but never performed one.”

Akhil said, “I have a feeling that I have. I can picture myself doing so.”

“Great, you can guide me in my first test.”

Once they were ready, Akhil started instructions. “Now, inject the local anesthetic between his ribs to the area where fluid is located.” She pointed to the specific area. “Next insert the needle through the chest wall between his. Now remove fluid for laboratory analysis.

An hour later, when the lab affirmed the result to be pleurisy, the patient was prepped for the long ambulance ride to the hospital for the operation.

Su Mi and Hari were effusive in their congratulations of Akhil; s memory of the details of performing the biopsy.

During the following few days, Akhil had two other minor breakthroughs, similar in nature.

Chapter 8.

Over the course of the following weeks, Akhil and Hari developed a close working relationship. His asking for thoughts on various cases brought forth more memories of her medical background.

She surprised herself when she was asked to serve as an operating room nurse in their minor surgery unit on two occasions. She felt very much at home but realized that this had not been of major interest. She couldn't explain it but it was what her gut was telling her.

By the end of the mobile clinic, the two were spending a great deal of off time together. Li and Su Mi talked of them as an item, although the most intimate action was hand holding as they sat on a bench on the lawn.

On the last evening before their return to home base, the two were still under the stars after every one had retired. The hunger for companionship of the opposite sex drove them into a frenzy of making out with deep throated kisses and roaming hands, while knowing that would be the limit of their activity.

After along deep kiss, Hari said, “Akhil, you must come to Silkin. We must find a way. I want to pursue a personal relationship and it seems that would also please you. I will make it a mission to find a way to bring you to Silkin.”

“Oh, Hari, that would be wonderful and yes, I would like to spend more time with you.”

“I will give you my address and phone number before I depart the caravan tomorrow. If you are still in agreement, I will find a way to bring you to my home.”

Akhil nodded affirmative as she moved her lips to meet his in a good night kiss.

Akhil replayed that scene over and over again as she lay in her bed. The feel of a man’s body on hers and the taste of his lips brought a warm familiar feeling.

Eventually, her mind moved to wonder about such experiences in her prior life. Was there a man with whom she had a close personal relationship?

The last thing she remembered before falling asleep was the kiss from Hari.

About ten days after returning, Akhil was surprised to receive a package in the mail. She noted the

return address as that of Hari and wondered what kind of surprise he had sent. She squealed with delight when she discovered an I-phone, just like the one he had shone her during their times together.

The package was accompanied by a letter which contained some very personal notes as well as detailed instructions for setting up and using the “aps” as well as the speed dial with his phone number.

She shared the news of her gift with Su Mi and Li during the lunch break. When Li saw the multiple uses of the phone, he said, “I must save enough funds to buy one. There is so much information available at one’s fingertips

Five minutes after arriving home that evening she placed he first call to Hari. They chatted for a half hour, exchanging news and, of course, personal thoughts about absence from each other’s presence.

Akhil spent hours each evening researching all sorts of information about the United States. All of it was fascinating.

She spent hours reading the history of the founding of the country and the great forefathers who

established the nation. She felt a certain pride as she realized she was a descendant of men like that.

She researched the operations of hospitals across the nation, information about new legislation about health care for more low income families and the political opposition.

She was dismayed as she discovered details of the terrorism that was killing or maiming or making refugees of so many families in the Middle East.

All this was interesting but did nothing to help her recovery of memory. A name of a person or a place would tickle her memory but nothing more than that.

As winter approached, days grew shorter. It was now dark as Akhil walked from the clinic to her room. There were no lights on the last seven streets before her place. Only the center part of the community had electric streetlights.

It was on a cold windy night that she developed a strange feeling. Even before she reached the darkened section of town, Akhil felt she was being followed. The moment she turned onto the first dark street, she turned around quickly but saw no one.

The feeling did not go away. Three blocks later she did a quick pirouette but wasn't sure whether she saw someone duck behind a tree.

She increased her pace and reached home without seeing anyone. The feeling remained. She tried to see out her window after she put out the light. She suspected that someone was hiding behind the trunk of the large tree across the way, but it was only a feeling.

The next morning she waited until Ari. One of the janitors walked by and joined him. She knew he lived about a quarter mile beyond her home. She said nothing but was pleased to have the company. It eased her mind.

It was her intention to walk home with Ari but a late arriving patient kept her busy past her quitting time.

This evening the feeling was even stronger. "Am I paranoid, afraid of my own shadow?" Her first attempt for a quick look back proved negative but not the second.

Just as she entered the darkened zone, she made a genuflection in order to pretend to tie her shoe lace. A quick peek backward brought into views a figure darting behind a tree.

She sped up with six blocks to go. A block from home, she did another pirouette and spotted a long lean male figure trying to hide.

Akhil ran a full speed without looking back. She greeted her hosts and went directly to her room but did not turn on a light.

She stood back but was peering out the window. About twenty minutes later she noticed a slight movement behind the large tree. It seemed to be coattail but nothing more. She waited another ten minutes but had to leave when she was being called to dinner.

During the lunch break on the following day, Akhil told Li and Su Mi about her fears. Su Mi gasped, and then said, “We should tell the constable.”

Li was hesitant to go that far. “After all, he had several evenings to harm her if that was his intent. She never actually saw any evidence except a man stepping behind a tree on the way home and maybe a person outside. Is there someone on staff who lives in the same direction with whom Akhil can walk home?”

Akhil said, “Khusbu, the janitor does, but he usually leaves before I am ready.”

Li said, “Let me work on that.”

Khusbu was a large and very strong man. When he met with Li and Akhil, he asked Akhil “How far behind you was this person?”

“I would guess about twenty meters.”

Why don't I let you leave and I follow about thirty meters behind. Walk at your normal pace. I am familiar with that since we have walked together several times. The person will have no idea I am behind you about thirty meters. We should be able to see a form ten or fifteen meters ahead of me. Act as you have during the last two evenings. If he comes nearer or you hear him approaching, scream loudly. I can reach you within seconds. “

Li asked, “Khusbu that sounds risky for you. Are you sure it isn't better just to walk with her?”

“That may only delay the man. Let me do this.”

Akhil left the clinic at six with Khusbu following as planned. About twenty five meters into the darkened area of the walk, a figure of a man stepped from behind a large tree trunk about fifteen meters ahead of Khusbu and began walking behind Akhil.

When Akhil made a quick turnaround, she was surprised that her stalker did not try to hide. Instead, he seemed to increase his pace. She felt a rush of fear. The first thought she had was to make a dash, hoping to reach home before the stranger caught her.

Realizing that she probably could not outrun her stalker for the long distance to her home, she began to panic and then remembered the plan. Khusbu was behind the man.

She looked back. Her stalker was within ten meters and she saw Khusbu speeding toward her. “What should I do if this man reaches me before Khusbu can get here?”

She reached into her tote for the bag with the cloth with a rock inside, that she had carried for protection, planning to swing it into his face.

The stalker was within three meters and Khusbu another two meters behind when the man said, “Miss Akhil, may I talk with you for a minute?”

Khusbu and Akhil both heard the gentle words that came out of this man who had frightened her for days. Khusbu stopped suddenly and Akhil froze with the rock in hand.

The scene was a tableau of a man in a posture of begging, Khusbu with an arm raised and Akhil, hand in her tote bag.

The man said, "I've been trying for three days to get the courage to ask you for a favor."

Akhil looked at him carefully. She asked, "You're Aspru, aren't you?"

"Yes. I was in the clinic with a bad cold and fever last week. "

"Yes. I remember. How may I help you?"

"I'm embarrassed to ask but my girlfriend needs some advice. She's pregnant and is very ill all day every day. I wonder if you might stop by and talk with her?"

"My goodness, why don't you bring her to the clinic? We have classes for mothers-to-be."

"Our parents do not know about the baby and we are struggling to decide about how to break the news. She is the daughter of a prominent man in town. This will be a scandal."

Akhil made a decision. She said, “Khusbu, I think it is all right for you to go home to your family. I will go with Aspru.”

The young man turned suddenly, not even cognizant of the presence of another. For a moment he froze in fear until Khusbu put him at ease. With a smile on his face, Khusbu left for home and a story to share with his wife.

After a lot of questions and answers and a preliminary exam, Akhil found the young woman in good condition but perhaps a little underweight and suffering from a bad case of morning sickness that lasted most of the day.

“Aspru, both of you must come to the clinic tomorrow morning. Come to the back door. No one will be aware of your presence except for our staff. I will have prepared the doctor for your visit. Can you make it at ten o’clock?”

Akhil sighed with relief as she left for home. Her host family, the Badals, was concerned because of her late arrival. They had kept her plate warm. As usual they hovered nearby to be sure she ate well.

When the young couple left the clinic on the following morning, Akhil wondered how the families would receive the news. She hoped it would be with loving arms

It was just about two years since the date of her arrival in Nepal, that Akhil received a phone call from Hari. “Dearest Akhil, I believe the time has come. After months of lobbying with the board of examiners, I received word that the board is willing to hear your story. They have set a date two weeks from now for an interview in the morning and a three hour examination of your skills in the afternoon.

This is for a position of nurse at the hospital. We are short-handed, which makes this a possibility.”

“Oh, Hari, that is exciting news.”

Before she could continue, Hari interrupted. “I plan to drive down the day before and bring you back the same day. “

Akhil was about to ask when Hari said, “You can decide where you will sleep. I know what I would prefer.”

Akhil let that roll around her mind for a moment and then said, “That decision can wait. I must tell Dr. Dhaka about the possibility.”

“I agree and am so pleased that you will try. I miss you, so much. This has been a long wait.”

“I miss you, too.”

Chapter 9.

Andrew was celebrating his first anniversary as the pediatric surgeon working at Kaiser San Jose with a day each week at Santa Clara.

For two years, a day did not go by without Andrew praying for Liz's return. He was sure that she was living but unable to communicate. His worst thought was that she had been abducted in Tokyo and was caught up in some slave trade scheme.

In a down moment, he had speculated she had met someone with whom she had fallen in love and didn't have the courage to tell Andrew. "No way. That is not how Liz would act. She always plays fair."

Two of his special memories often filled the screen of his mind. One night, just after midnight, after talking with Liz, Andrew turned in for the night. He had just fallen asleep when he heard a noise. It was Liz letting herself into his apartment.

She had risen from her bed at the hospital, dressed and drove to his apartment to lie with him for just a few hours before her early morning call.

The other memory was as vivid as if it had happened yesterday. She had jumped with glee when he slipped the diamond on her finger. He recalled the tenderness with which she made love to him that night.

Now, after two years, the frequency of his remembrances was a bit less. His work was absorbing.

His new colleagues often got together after work. The unmarried usually stayed for an extra round of beers or drinks and engaged in non-medical discussions.

Recently, Andrew had been giving Rhonda a lift home, about six blocks from the pub and on Andrew's route to his new apartment.

Rhonda was the resident pediatric surgeon who had just started her final year of residency. She, like his other colleagues had no idea of Andrews's situation. He would never share his loss of Liz with anyone.

Rhonda was tall and fair. Her hair was light brown with a hint of red, but not auburn. Her dad was a pediatrician in upstate New York. She had a brother who was a surgeon at Columbia Presbyterian in Manhattan

She was an avid football fan and had two forty-niners season tickets for the coming season. She had planned

to invite a colleague to accompany her to each of the home games.

On a couple of occasions, Rhonda had invited Andrew into her apartment when he had driven her home from the pub but each time he seemed to have a valid reason for saying no thanks.

That didn't stop her from trying. She was intrigued with this mysterious handsome man who had nothing to say about his personal life while his colleagues ribbed him with the title "Silent Cal."

She was pleasantly surprised when he accepted her invitation to go to the season opener on a Sunday afternoon in September.

Rhonda knew every forty-niner number and name as well as position played by each player. She knew more about the finer points of football than Andrew and was an ardent vocal fan.

She screamed and jumped into Andrews's arm when the placekicker scored the field goal for a victory, with ten seconds remaining on the game clock.

On the drive home, Rhonda said, “My friend Jane and her husband will be sorry they missed the game. They have tickets for the two empty seats to the left of ours.”

Andrew asked, “Where shall we stop for dinner?”

“After the game, dinner is always at my apartment. Ham, bacon, waffles and coffee are standard fare for the post game. You can buy me lunch someday if you think you need to repay me, which you shouldn’t.”

“All right, but I need to tell you I had fun, in fact, more fun than I have had in ages. Thank you.”

At the apartment, Andrew felt warmth as he stepped through the doorway. The décor featured soft tans and browns highlighted with yellow. It exuded early autumn.

Two vases of yellow Chrysanthemums stood out, one in the entry way and the other at the end of the sofa. It had the feeling of another apartment, part of his history.

His thoughts were interrupted. “Make yourself at home. The bathroom is the last room on the right. Cocktails or wine?”

He replied, “Scotch, neat, please.”

She laughed. “I would have bet on that, although you only have beer at the pub.”

He was looking through the small library when she brought the drinks. “If you see anything you like, feel free to borrow. I’m an avid mystery fan, as you can see.”

“Take the big chair and relax.”

She took a seat at the end of the sofa and said “Cheers.” He noticed that she also had a scotch neat. He tasted his. “Pinch bottle.”

“You are a scotch drinker. Yes. My daddy savored good scotch and taught me the finer points of drinking alcohol, starting when I was eighteen.”

“Fascinating. That sounds like a very smart father. He probably saved you a lot of grief during your college days.”

She laughed. “As did my three older brothers, two of whom were at Columbia during my freshman and sophomore years. One or more of my brothers vetted every boy I dated, starting with my ninth grade boyfriend and continuing through my second year at Columbia.”

“How did that feel?”

“Frustrating in the early years but something for which I was grateful later on and even to this day. My brother, Jimmy, taught me the finer points of judging my dates and saved me a lot of trouble. I never had a bad experience, mostly because I had a good bead on every boy after the first date. No second dates unless I had positive vibes.”

With some acute probing, Andrew had Rhonda telling him the story of her youth. She talked of her transition as a tomboy, who played rough house with her brothers before becoming the head cheerleader and salutatorian of her class.

She laughed when she told stories of loving to dance real tight but learned to easily dismiss roaming hands of her high school boy friends.

“Wow. You have me telling secrets. It’s time to eat. Want to help me mix the batter while the bacon is on the stove?”

Over the meal, she attempted to draw some information from Andrew but received only some surface data.

Andrew helped cleanup and store dirty dishes in the dishwasher. She teased him at the door when he was leaving. “You’re handy with the cleanup. I’ll have you back again. Besides, you owe me a story after the way you sucked mine from me.

He thanked her and kissed her forehead as thanks for the day.

That evening, Andrew reflected on the day. He had a great time. Rhonda was fun, intelligent, forthcoming and open. “Why was I hooding back Liz is gone and a woman in my life would be nice.”

Rhonda also wondered why Andrew set up a wall when she probed for personal information. He never held back on other conversation. “I’m sure he likes me and will accept another invite to the game but something had a hold on him.”

She was pleasantly surprised at lunch on Monday when she saw Andrew scanning the room and then smiled at her as he came to her table. “Like some company?”

“Absolutely. You look a little tired. Tough morning?”

“Yes. Three delicate operations on infants. Tough but rewarding.”

“That’s always nice to hear. I understand I will be assisting you for the first time this afternoon.”

“I know. I’m looking forward to the experience.”

“Me, too. I hope I don’t turn into all thumbs.”

“I’m sure that won’t happen. I will be asking you to close. “

“I’ll be ready.”

Two hours later. “Great job, Rhonda.”

“Thanks. I was surprised when you invited me to operate early instead of at the end only.”

“I had talked with your chief resident who thought you were ready for the next step and you were. Congratulations.”

“I owe you for the vote of confidence.”

“You can buy me lunch tomorrow.”

Rhonda laughed. That’s not enough. How about dinner at my place, tomorrow evening?”

He thought for a moment, and then said, “I can do that.”

“Sevenish?”

I'll be there."

She responded to his knock with, "It's open." He walked in, holding out a bottle of Haig and Haig pinch bottle. She chortled, wiped her hands on the apron, took the bottle and kissed him on the cheek. "Should I worry about Greeks bearing gifts?"

"I hope not."

They were both a little light headed by the time the meat loaf was served. Jokes, and fun stories of resident days were exchanged and laughter filled the apartment. The fun mood continued through dinner.

They cleared the dishes and stacked the dishwasher before having coffee and dessert.

They sat on the sofa while having coffee. Rhonda said, "It's time for something more serious. You're not leaving until I find out a bit more about the young man who has become a surgeon with such delicate hands in the operating room."

She saw a faint flush rise to Andrew's cheeks. "I'm sorry, Andrew."

“Its fine, Rhonda. I have a hard time when people compliment me. I do appreciate the comment and probably will blush but welcome all kind remarks.”

He began. “I had a great childhood, loved but not spoiled. I was stimulated to read widely.

I had a precocious friend, Tillie, a freckled red head. We did everything together

We played baseball, football, basketball.

Tillie left when her family moved away by then I saw girls in a different way and had a great social life in high school.

My mom kept me on the learning track during those years. Her guidance was not limited to scholastics. We talked about learning to love and respect one’s neighbors, especially my girlfriends.

Apparently, I was always headed toward medicine I was big enough to be recruited by the football coach but Dad convinced me to say no.

I did play varsity basketball.”

How about girls?”

“I dated quite a bit but never went steady and I didn’t lose my virginity early.

Both continued with some stories of the years at college.

“Andrew. Where did you complete your residency?”

It was a long moment before he responded. “Good Sam and a fellowship at UCSF.”

Rhonda noticed Andrew’s face darken just a bit and wondered what dark memory she had awakened for him.

She waited for him to add something or change the subject, but Andrew stayed silent.

She moved closer to Andrew, asking, “Want to talk about it? I seemed to ask the wrong question.” She placed her hand gently on his arm.

He covered her hand with his and took a deep breath. It’s a sad story, Rhonda. Any mention of those years, triggers a sad chapter in my life.”

“I’d be honored to listen if you need to talk about it.”

Silence was the word that described the next full two minutes.

Finally, he said, “I guess it’s time to let go and telling you might help.”

Rhonda reached for his hand to show her compassion and support him.

“The facts can be told in just a few sentences. I was in love with Liz and engaged to be married. She was determined to fulfill a lifetime dream of serving with Doctors without Borders for a year before taking a position as an Internist.

I wanted to marry before she left but she insisted on waiting until her return. I yielded, much to my regret at the time.

I drove her to SFO from where she flew to Tokyo. Neither I nor her family has ever heard from her since.

Despite every effort we made, the only fact that we discovered was that she did not board her flight to Bangladesh. That was two years ago.”

When he had finished his short story, he practically collapsed into Rhonda’s arms. She held him in her

arms as his tears dampened her blouse. She felt her own tears streaming down her cheek, intermingling with his on her breast.

Her arms were tiring but she did not want to disturb Andrew. He finally stirred and sat up.

Unsure of the next step, Rhonda decided that a shot of scotch might be the right medicine. She poured a full two ounces and handed him the glass, then set the bottle on the coffee table.

Andrew gulped down the whiskey and poured another short shot which he also gulped down.

“Rhonda, I’m sorry I spoiled this lovely evening with my sad tale.”

“Don’t apologize, Andrew. I’m honored that you felt free to share your story with me.”

Andrew, absent mindedly, poured more scotch and sipped the wonderful brown liquid. Within minutes, he was slurring his words.

She saw his mind trying to grasp the meaning of her next question. “I’m sloshed, Rondo.”

She laughed, saying, “That’s okay, Andrew. You’re in good hands. She rose and pulled him into a position for sleeping on the sofa. He was asleep within a minute. She pulled off his shoes and socks and found a light blanket to cover him.

In her own bed, Rhonda was a long time finding sleep. Her mind whirled with the mystery of the disappearance. “What was her name? Oh, yes. Liz.”

She tried to imagine what Andrew had suffered for those two years, waking each day with hope of word from his loved one.

She understood now why he did not succumb to the flirtations of some very attractive women at the hospital. She was willing to bet that she had been the only woman to whom he had responded during these last few months.

She wakened Andrew just before six. When he finally oriented himself, she said, “You need to get home and prep yourself for the day’s work.”

“I have a terrible headache. What happened to me.?”

“You got drunk and slept on my sofa. Now, hurry. I’m off at six tonight. Come by for a bite at seven thirty and we can talk.”

Even before his first operation at ten o’clock, Andrew had recalled fully the event of the prior evening.

When he told that to Rhonda at dinner, she smiled. He thanked her for her hospitality and understanding. “You do know that you are one of only six who know this story.”

“I know and it is our secret. What can I do to help?”

“I’m not sure. Are you willing to be my friend and put up with my moods?”

“I’ll try. You’re usually great company. You’re funny and tell great stories. If you like, you can join me at the football games. Since you like basketball, maybe we can see some Warrior games later in the season.”

“That sounds like a good recipe but they may put a cramp on your other social life.”

“That can wait until I get through this residency. With my hours, we may even have to postpone some evens.”

“I remember.”

“For instance, I haven’t any time free until next Saturday evening and Sunday.”

As he left about nine thirty, he gave a light hug and a kiss on her forehead with “Thank you.”

The risk when a man and woman are into a close friendship is that one may fall prey to that word called love. By December Rhonda knew she was falling in love with Andrew.

Although no word of Liz was ever uttered, Rhonda occasionally felt her presence standing between her and Andrew.

One Sunday afternoon, during half time of the forty-tinier game on the television, Rhonda said, “The forty-niners are taking a beating .Let’s turn off the game and talk.”

She had been holding his right hand in hers. She turned and took hold of the other hand as well. She looked directly into his eyes. Andrew, I am falling in love with you. I don’t know if you love me but I know you like me. My heart aches for you. I hate the end of each day together when you are ready to leave. I want you to stay.”

“My body aches for you. I need you to make love to me and s to stay over instead of going home. I can no longer limit my promise to you.”

She knew her tears were escaping but she did not want tears to be an influence in his decision so she stood and turned away.

Within moments she felt his hand snaking around her waist, pulling her toward his body. His warm lips were kissing her neck.

“Dearest Rhonda. I had no idea and have been hesitant to say anything. During these last two weeks, I found myself wanting to say something but I was fearful of driving you away. I did not want to risk losing my best friend.

I’m not sure the word is love but I have this desire for something more than just friendship while I cherish the friendship.”

His words were music to her ears. She whipped around, put her arms around his neck and planed a deep kiss on his lips and was thrilled when his response was just as enthusiastic.

When they separated after a very long kiss and embrace, they looked into each other's eyes and saw a hint of shyness.

Their thoughts were similar. No matter how many naked bodies a doctor has seen, there is that special moment when he will expose himself and have a first look at the divine body of the woman with whom he is about to make love.'

Moments later, the shyness is replaced with her hand leading him to her bedroom where they will slowly undress each other and then rise to a new level of relationship.

They clung to each other, out of breath, bodies still talking to each other. His first words were, "I'm sorry I couldn't wait. Passion outran patience."

She put her finger over his lips. "Hush, sweet one. You were marvelous, are marvelous. I loved every movement, every kiss, every touch and every caress. That gentle kiss of thanks sent another shiver down my spine."

Andrew took her hand and moved it to his lips. "I owe you more than a thank you kiss. I was scared and you sensed it. You took the lead to show me the way to pleasure

and then yielded to me until both of us were hungry for each other.

Rhonda was moved with his confession. “It takes an inner strength and confidence for a man to admit his weakness. It is another discovery, another trait that draws me to him.”

“Now, just lie there and recuperate. I will prepare a snack to strengthen you and get your juices flowing so we can continue making love in the afternoon.”

He loved the way she flowed to her feet, leaned over to kiss him sweetly and sashayed to find a robe. “I love the way she likes to tease, keep me off balance and waiting for something new to happen.”

While they snacked and sipped second cups of coffee, they faced the hard question. “What shape would this affair take? What if I can’t totally shake my hope for Liz’s return? What happens if she does return?”

Rhonda faced each question with very direct answers. They were the questions she had asked herself during the week nights when she was contemplating the confrontation.

She said, “To the first question, I want us to go on as we have with no changes except for an open expression of our feelings.”

“As to the second question, I believe our love will grow to the point that the image of Liz will slowly fade.”

“As to the other, it would depend on when Liz showed up. Life is a gamble and I will be willing to risk the outcome of such an event, since I believe it will never happen.”

“The question, Andrew, is you. Are you willing to take the risk? If you are, I promise to love you and support you to achieve your dreams. All you need to do is say yes and share your dreams.”

Rhonda could see in his face a desire to please her but shadowed by some doubt. She waited. She would give him time to consider, even a few days but she knew she would demand some sort of answer.

He reached across the table to take her hands in his. “Rhonda, I cannot bear the thought of losing you. One in a lifetime is enough. I am willing to take the risk because I do believe that your love will challenge me to love you, even if it takes some time.”

She beamed, rose and came to sit on his lap. “That is enough for me. Now, carry me to our bed, where we can seal this pledge. “

The reprise was everything they wanted it to be.

Chapter 10.

Akhil could feel the tension. Her entire body was as tight as a drum. Hari was due to arrive ten minutes ago. She had risen early, packed her bag and bathed. She was ready an hour before Hari was due.

She thought about the nice party that the staff at the clinic had held for her going away. All were aware of the circumstance and the possibility for Akhil to find a more productive use of her talent. The gossip also informed every one of her relationship with Dr. Hari, who had been with them last summer.

Her heart seemed to jump when she spied the red auto slowly easing over the bumps in the dirt lane that was her street. Hari waved as he came to a stop.

Akhil picked up her bag and headed for his car. He rushed to meet her, took her bag and planted a kiss on her lips.

She blushed, certain that her host family was watching the proceedings. The thought vanished quickly as Hari opened the car door and helped her into the seat.

Since it had been several days since they spoke on the phone, Akhil brought him up to date on her activities and then he did the same for her.

They lapsed into a nice silence as she watched the scenery flash by. “Hari, will we be there in time to make a purchase? I need to buy a suitable dress for the interview. I would be embarrassed to show up even in my best dress.”

Hari smiled. “We will arrive just in time. I’ve located a boutique where you can buy some personal items. The woman usually stays open later than most shops but she does not carry dresses.

But at my apartment I have arranged to have an assortment of outfits on consignment. I am sure that you will find something suitable. I have been observing what various nurses wear after hours at the hospital. I hope that will be satisfactory.”

Akhil was surprised but held her voice to neutral. “What about size? Usually there is need for some alterations.”

“I have a seamstress standing by. I’ve tried to be prepared since our arrival could be delayed for some reason.”

Akhil was feeling uncomfortable, feeling somewhat restricted in choosing her wardrobe but said nothing.

Hari ran into a traffic jam outside the city. It was just a fender bender, but it delayed their arrival so that most of the

shops were closed.as they drove into town. Hari had been right.

The boutique was open so that Akhil was able to buy a bra, some panties and a slip.

Hari's apartment was on the sixth floor of a six floor apartment complex. "What a beautiful view, Hari."

"Yes. I love to sit at sunset with a glass of wine and watch the people hurrying home after a day's labor.

He dropped her bag in the entryway. "Why don't you refresh yourself before we look at the dresses?"

Fifteen minutes later she was in the spare bedroom, changing from one dress to another, walking out to the living room to model for Hari and seek his opinion. She could have taken any one. His taste was exquisite.

They both agreed on the blue with white accents. It was also within her budget. She had noticed that all his choices would have fit her pocketbook.

Twenty minutes after she decided, a knock on the door brought the seamstress and another thirty minutes later, Akhil was ready for her interview.

She turned to look for her bag in the spare bedroom but it wasn't there. Hari noticed her searching eyes. "I left it in the entryway in case you decided to stay at the hotel. I did not want to make any assumptions. I respect you too much for that."

"Thank you Hari. That is very considerate. I've spent hours thinking about this evening and I've decided that tonight is the right time for us to begin our deeper relationship. Please bring the bag to the bedroom so I can unpack."

Her grin was as inviting as her words. Hari took her in his arms for a gentle and welcoming embrace before fetching her bag.

Hari asked, "Would you rather eat out? I can order a delivery."

"Let's eat in. I need to talk about tomorrow and we need to talk about tonight. I think it is better in the privacy of your apartment."

"I agree. Let me make a call. Would you like to taste some wine before I make the call?"

“A very small glass. I have had no alcohol since I arrived in Nepal. I didn’t like what I saw when my friends drank too much.”

“I promise I won’t let that happen to you. To be sharp for tomorrow and very present later this evening”

She sipped a bit of the wine and enjoyed the taste. Hari joined her on the sofa.

“Shall we discuss the business and put it behind us while we celebrate our reunion.”

Hari could see her tension but she smiled and agreed. By the time the food arrived, Akhil had a complete picture of the proceedings set for the morning.

Akhil helped Hari clear the table. He then took her hand and led her to the sofa. They spent an hour watching a comedian on television but Hari noticed that the distracting did nothing to relieve the tension in Akhil’s body

She moved close and whispered, “Hari, I sense that I have had this experience but remember nothing. I’m scared. The core of my being is aching for you. I have a sense that whatever happens will be joyful but I cannot remember how that joy actually comes about.”

“I should have taken time to read a book or two on the subject.”

“Oh, sweet one, “I will lead us through the journey to joy. Just respond in whatever way seems natural.”

She nodded her understanding. When Hari took her in his arms and brought his lips to hers, she responded just as she had on the lawn during their days in the village. She found herself warring for dominance of his lips and tongue, the result of which was a message trying to reach deep inside her body.

When they came up for air, she was grinning. Moments later, she sensed Hari’s hand slipping inside her bodice and cupping her breast her response was to reach inside his shirt, and caress his nipple and play with the light hair on his chest.

His caressing of her breast again sent signals deep. She moved close to find his lips with hers. The result was another exciting and rewarding battle.

She finally pulled away. “Hari, my whole body is aching.

He laughed gently. “We have just experienced what is known as foreplay. Since we both have heightened our

desire, let us move to the bedroom where I would like to undress you and you may do the same for me, if you wish.

She nodded and accepts his hand.

He was practically gaping as she stood before him dressed only in silk panties. “Akhil, you are so beautiful. You have been masking this gorgeous body from the world. You have been graced with beauty outside as well as inside. Now, would you help me to undress?”

When he stood naked before her, she was grinning. “I read something about a Roman god whose description seems to fit you. What’s next, Adonis? I’m shivering with excitement.”

From the moment they lay together, their mutual ministrations became familiar until both lay back, having attained nirvana, grinning from ear to ear.

She lay in silence and let her mind relive the last half hour. Within minutes, she felt good bumps rising on her skin. The sensation seemed familiar, making her certain that there was a lover in her past.

“Hari, you were fantastic. I don’t believe there is any part of my body that you missed. I thought I was going to die a thousand wonderful deaths. “

She rolled atop him and planted a sweet thank you kiss. “I am so glad that you came into my life. Now, I need some sleep so I may be successful tomorrow.”

The morning interview went well according to Hari. “They were impressed with you and your general medical knowledge. My uncle was impressed with your communication skills, with no formal Nepali language lessons. You noticed, I’m sure, that he concentrated on your knowledge of Nepali medical terms .I’m sure you will pass the written test with flying colors

Akhil did just that in the afternoon session. When she left the examination room, he was waiting for her. “How did you do?”

“I believe I did extremely well.”

“Good. Uncle says they will have an answer before five o’clock. How would you like a tour of the hospital in the interim?

“That would be good. When do you think I will begin?”

“Within a day or two. The hospital is desperate.”

“An orientation will do me good. Besides, I need to check out what the nurse’s wear.”

“They wear light blue uniforms in all departments except surgery. The hospital provides the uniforms.”

“That’s good to hear. My funds are limited.”

The good news was received at five thirty. Hari insisted on a celebration at a fine restaurant. Akhil was feeling a bit light headed after a second glass of wine without eating much of the snacks that preceded dinner. “Hari, this wine is making me giddy. I better sober up or you will have to carry me home.”

“I’ll do that but you’re not to worry. Dinner will take care of the slight dizziness. Let’s have fun celebrating a new beginning.”

They did and well into the night. They lingered over coffee, too full to have dessert. Just before they were ready to leave, a small musical trio struck up a dance number.

Hari immediately took Akhil; s hand to lead her onto the small dance floor. “Hari, I don’t know how to dance. I did see a couple dancing on that TV show but I can’t do that.”

“Trust me, honey. You must have danced in the past. It is something one does not forget. Just follow my lead.”

Three minutes later, “This is beautiful, Hari. Thank you. I’d like to try that twirl that the other couple just completed.”

Hari sent her out spinning, holding her with his left hand. She thought she was floating away until his hand was pulling her in to his arms.

Akhil laughed aloud. “Again, Hari.”

They danced three tips before heading home. She was all smiles and laughter during the trip home. The moment, they walked in the door, she moved close to Hari, and began undressing him.

Two very tired lovers rose when Hari’s alarm sounded. He was headed to the operating room for an eight o’clock date.

Akhil spent the day walking around the neighborhood and taking the bus to the shopping area in order to acquaint her with what women were wearing in the city, what clothing cost and trying to figure out how she was going to cope.

She picked up a newspaper to read while she had coffee in a small café. She went directly to the rental section to see if she would be able to find a situation similar to the one she had just lived in with a family.

She found two but both were asking for more money than she thought she could afford on her new salary.

Back at the apartment, she checked out the food pantry and refrigerator and planned the evening meal. Hari came in at five thirty, catching her in an apron, peeling potatoes. He grinned and opened his arms as she ran to welcome him.

She poured more coffee after they had cleared the table. “Hari, what is my starting salary?” I need to work out a budget.”

He named a figure. She said, “Good. That’s a bit more than I thought.”

“Why a budget? You will have no rent and, if you wish, you may pay for some of the food.”

“Oh, Hari. I can’t move in with you. I am not ready for that step. I will stay some overnights at your invitation but I must have my own quarters.”

“That’s silly, Akhil. You have your own room to sleep in if that is your desire.”

“I don’t think so. It is still twelve to sixteen hours a day. That leaves little room to live independently, which I believe we should do until things are settled.”

He said, somberly, “I thought you were settled as we spent these last days together.”

“Oh, Hari. I loved every minute and want to spend many more as we have but we need some space in between. Moving in feels like a more permanent commitment for which I am not quite ready. My future is still in doubt even if the passing years seemed to prove otherwise.”

Hari scowled. This was not the way he had planned. He sounded solemn as he said. “I had hoped for something more. I love you, Akhil and I wish the future was clearer.”

I have spent much time thinking about the possibility of your regaining your memory and what that might mean for us.

If it happened tomorrow or five years from now, the same situation will be before us. If you are not wedded to someone, then I hope our life will go on uninterrupted.

If that is not the case, I will be heartbroken but that will be so tomorrow as well as any time in the future. In the meantime, I want to be with you every possible moment of whatever time is left for us.”

She rose and went to sit in his lap. “Oh, my sweet, I feel as you do but I dread having to cut short our life together if I do remember.”

He nuzzled her neck and said. Don’t you see? This week or years from now, this is the life we have been dealt. Let’s make the most of what we have.”

Her mind wanted to argue but her heart was seeing his logic with a clearer light. She felt the tears coming. She knew not if they were of sorrow or joy. His tears melted with hers and he pulled her closer.

To Hari it seemed an eternity before she whispered, “I guess you’re right. What you want is also what I want but I hoped to limit your pain.”

“I’m, glad, Akhil. Whatever lies ahead, joy or pain, it will be the same for both of us.”

There was no way that she could leave his bed that night. She clung to him through the night as though he might slip away if she let go.

Chapter 11

Nurse Akhil was assigned to be the attending nurse for two Doctors of Internal Medicine. Dr. Supra practiced adult medicine while Dr. Lassa had a Family practice.

She checked the vitals of each arriving patient, escorted them to the exam room. There she questioned each patient while reviewing their medical history on the computerized data system.

She stayed with the doctor and patient unless she was dismissed by the physician. She was able to be of special assistance on occasion because of her diagnostic skills. She never volunteered her ideas unless the doctor seemed to want corroboration.

She made sure she did not upstage a doctor. After all, she was a nurse even if she was aware of deeper knowledge.

One morning while serving Dr. Supra, Akhil escorted a male adult, forty five years of age.

After her preliminary interview, she decided that the patient was suffering from Cirrhosis

Cirrhosis is a result of advanced liver disease.

She figured he was losing liver function. She guessed he was lying about the amount of daily alcohol use. She knew it might have been the result of other diseases but probably not.

Twenty minutes later, Dr. supra asked her opinion and confirmed her response. He began asking hard questions about the amount of alcohol consumption by the patient, who admitted to over use.

Both doctors were offering high praise of her services so that her quarterly review brought about an increase in her salary.

Patients were amazed to hear this foreigner speak fluent Nepali during their interviews.

On another occasion, Dr. Supra interrupted an exam b asking her to step outside for some conversation. “Nurse Akhil, I need to do some research. Please try to keep the patent calm. I may be gone for a little while.”

She asked, “Doctor, Are you thinking of an alternative to hepatitis?”

“Yes. Have you seen something like this before?”

“I think so but not sure. I think it may be Autoimmune Hepatitis, or lupoid hepatitis. That may be a starting place.”

Twenty minutes later he was back and called her into the hallway.

“You were right. I discovered that the symptoms fit. It’s a chronic disease of the liver that occurs when the body's immune system attacks cells of the liver causing the liver to be inflamed. The patient is suffering fatigue and muscle aches and signs of acute hepatitis including fever, jaundice. “

“I think a battery of tests will confirm. Thank you, Nurse.”

Dr. Supra sang her praises at lunch with some colleagues the next day.

A month later she had a similar experience with Dr.Lessa. A young teenage boy was back in the office after two previous visits. He was having severe stomach distress and the medications prescribed were having little effect.

Dr.Lessa was befuddled. While the patient was in the waiting room, he asked Akhil to hold the patient until he did more research.

“Doctor, if I may be so bold. In the back of my mind, the word Celiac keeps popping up. I haven’t looked it up since the memory had just come to mind.

Dr.Lessa had other thoughts so he started his search with other diseases but eventually looked up her suggestion

He found that the disease is an autoimmune disorder of the small intestine that occurs in genetically predisposed people Symptoms includes pain and discomfort. He recognized the list of symptoms, sensitive digestive tract, chronic constipation and diarrhea. The boy was probably anemic and he would have to be tested.

By the next day, Dr.Lessa was singing Akhil's praises.

Over the following weeks, Dr. Lassa occasionally turned to Akhil, asking for her opinion. He chose to do so when he was of two minds regarding a diagnosis.

The two doctors decided that Akhil should be considered for some position of more importance than a nurse in the medicine department. Knowing of the close relationship with Hari, Dr. Supra called to invite him to lunch.

At the table, Dr.Lessa said, "Hari, I love to do all kinds of research on the computer network. I heard you say that you do the same on that I-phone you own. Have you ever

looked at the way some of the large hospital systems are organized, specifically in the United States?”

“No. I can’t say I have.”

“We’ve been so taken with Akhil’s medical knowledge that we were wondering if there is some way to make better use of her talent. You may even know more about that than we do.”

“Yes. I, too, am impressed with the scope of her knowledge. In fact I have come to the conclusion that she was trained as a doctor, perhaps Family Medicine.”

Dr. Lassa said, “In some American systems, they have positions that are titled Nurse Probationers. Their function is similar to our Family Doctors, except that they are supervised by a Family Doctor or an Internist.”

“Interesting, I hadn’t heard of that. Are you suggesting that Akhil might have those skills?”

“We think so and wondered if you would be willing to speak with your uncle about exploring the idea?”

“Have you thought about how such a person might become qualified or licensed?”

Dr. Supra interrupted. “In fact, I have devised a stripped down version of our examinations and the kinds of questions that a hearing board might use for the oral exam.”

“Gentlemen, I am impressed. I will talk with Uncle to see if he is open to the idea. If so, I will arrange for the two of you to present the suggestion. You do know this may take time. It would also be beneficial if you had another candidate from among the nurses in your department.”

Dr.Lessa said, “We do have two other candidates if the applications are open to all qualified nurses.”

A week later, Hari announced a date for the interview “You will make your presentation to three members of the executive committee of the board. My uncle says that one will be a hard sell because he’s skeptical of most things new.”

Meanwhile, Akhil made new friends with a half dozen nurses and two lab technicians. Four of them were single and arranged for a girls night out once every two weeks. They went to dinner, attended a movie or an evening bowling, a new game in Silkin.

Hari took her to football games and the movies. When the snow fell, he taught her to ski on the bunny hill but

within weeks she showed her athletic prowess and hit the slopes with Hari, except for the slopes where experts and professionals played.

No matter the activity, her natural enthusiasm made anyone within hearing, smile. Hari was so proud.

For the most part, her busy life left little time to ponder her future but there were moments when some person or some event triggered an inkling of something familiar.

When she met some American women during a long weekend in Katmandu, she tried to estimate her age. At a party for foreign guests, hosted by the hotel, she cleverly got two American women to discuss their ages, 31 and 34, respectively. She chose them because she thought she was in their age range. She knew that Hari was thirty seven and felt that she was a bit younger.

For Akhil, there was something special about making love in a hotel room At least she thought so. Akhil made the most of it, creating clever ways of seducing Hari, to his great pleasure.

They slept late, had brunch in their room sitting at the window with its magnificent view.

On the drive home, Akhil was effusive in her thanks for the weekend. “I learned so much about your culture at the museums and historical locations. “I had fun at the party and appreciated meeting the American women.

Of course the best hours were the ones we spent in our room.”

As they approached the apartment after the drive back, she said, “Hari Dhaka, you are the greatest. I love you. I love you. You always make me feel so special, personally and professionally. Thank you, sweet one.”

Hari was careful to say nothing about the policy change that the board was considering. He wanted her to understand that if the proposal was adopted and she was promoted, that she must thank her two doctors.

Life settled into a nice routine. She loved her work and looked forward to coming home to share her day with Hari and have him tell her of his challenges and success.

She was occupied with her days and her love of Hari that she spent very little time thinking of her other life. There was the rare exception.

It was one of coldest nights of the winter. The bedroom was cold. Hari was awakened when he heard Akhil

sobbing. He reached to pull her close .Her night gown was damp. Her hair was a wet mop and her forehead dripping with sweat. When she felt his hand on her shoulder, her body jerked away. “No. No. Don’t touch me. “I’m not yours.” Her voice trailed away in a groan.

As Hari tried to get a grasp, Akhil fought back. Her hands formed into claws and seemed to be heading for his face. Hari grabbed both forearms and held them at bay.

“Akhil, wake up. You’re safe in bed with Me, Hari.”

For a few more seconds, she strained against his grip then slowly yielded. “Hari. Hari, is that really you?”

“Yes, sweet one. Apparently you were having a nightmare. It must have been horrible. You are soaked in sweat. Can you pull off your nightgown while get a large towel?

She made no move to undress but curled into a tight ball, her hands covering her face. He began to dry her face and whispered loving words. She slowly uncurled and did not resist his taking off her nightie.

He dried the rest of her body, lifted her and took her to the warm bath that he had started when retrieving the

towel. She pulled his arm, indicating that she wanted him with her, All this without a word spoken.

Hari sat behind her, tandem style. He ran the water deep enough to cover their bodies and added some bubbles. It was her special way to relax.

Fifteen minutes elapsed before she said a word. In a calm voice, she began. “I had just returned to my home after a very long trip overseas after my divorce. I had been gone for months .I had met and became engaged during the month’s long excursion. My fiancée would be arriving tomorrow.

I had just started to unpack when the doorbell rang as I slowly opened the door to see who was calling; my ex pushed the door into my face, entered the house and began yelling.

“Get into bed, you slut.” He began undressing, telling me we were still married and he wanted to screw me right now. “I waited eleven months while you were screwing guys around the world.”

All this was happening in a suburb of Paris and the language was French.

I was frightened. I was sure he would beat me if I refused. I froze. When I didn't move, he advanced, grabbed the top of my blouse and tore it off my chest.

“Keep your mouth shut and do as I tell you. I began to sweat and shoot my head side to side. When I stood still, he moved toward me and I decided to fight back and began shouting.”

The next thing I remember is hearing your voice.”

The moment she finished, she broke down. She choked as she tried to continue and began to sob.

Both knew that there was no way to explain the nightmare although both had ideas. Hari let his hands begin to caress her arms and her thigh. She moved his hands to caress her breast and other sensitive parts of her body.

Eventually she rose, handed Hari a towel, saying, “Take me to bed, Hari. Your love will help to ease the memory of that dream.”

It was almost four months later that Akhil and two other senior nurses were invited into the office of the hospital Supervising Nurse. The meeting was held before the official day began. “Ladies, I am pleased to announce an honor that is in the works for you, if you decide to accept.”

“The board has created a new position. It is titled Practitioner Nurse. I know little of the details but I am asked to notify you to appear as a group for the board meeting on Saturday meeting at ten o’clock.”

I do know that the position gives the practitioner much more responsibility.”

The three of them were abuzz with speculation as they departed but no one could offer any more information. “Akhil, Hari must have said something to you.”

“He has said nothing. I am in the dark just as you are.”

When Dr. Supra entered the office, Akhil immediately asked him if he was aware of the new position. His face broke into a wide grin. “Yes, Akhil. In fact, Dr.Lessa and I made the proposal to the board months ago.”

“What is the position? Why did you make the proposal, if I may ask?”

“You may ask. Dr.Lessa and I were so impressed with your knowledge that we thought you could carry more responsibility we were aware of a system in the United States that takes advantage of nurses with superior talent. I have

been asked to say nothing more since the board will tell you in detail.”

“There are two others. Are we being promoted?”

“I can’t say but that is not the way the board works. I imagine there will be interviews and exams before the positions are filled.”

Hari told her he knew no details although he had heard a rumor of a change being made by the board.

Three very tense women sat in straight back chairs waiting for the board to arrive. Akhil felt the perspiration under her arms despite the cool air conditioned room.

Seven members of the board paraded in and took their seats behind the long table. Akhil noted that five were members who had interviewed her so long ago.

The spokesman gave a detailed account of the procedures they had followed, the reasons for the change including the need for more doctors and the fact that the decision was unanimous

The chairman read of the specifics of the new position and then recapped with “In essence, you will be serving as physicians, just like your current doctor. You,

however, are under close supervision of one specific doctor and will be required to check with your supervising doctor if you have any doubt about diagnosis or treatment. Is that clear?”

The three nurses nodded their understanding.

The chairman continued. “Interviews and examination will be held two months from now. Study material will be furnished in order to help you brush up, although we expect that the knowledge you have accumulated over the years of practice will be enough for you to pass the written exam. You have already been judged as good candidates.”

Only the three of you will be tested. If you choose not to accept the change, no judgment will be made. You will continue your excellent service in your current position.”

From the day that Akhil arrived in Silkin, she insisted that only Nepali would be spoken at home. She was determined to become proficient in her new language, spoken and written. While there were moments when she wondered about her origins, the instances became fewer and fewer. She decided that she should consider herself a Nepali, at least in practice.

During the three month preparation period, she spent more time on her language skills than she did on the medical studies.

She was more than ready.

At the end of three months, Akhil was seeing her first patient, a return visit by one of Dr.Lessa patients.

Akhil and Hari celebrated the beginning of this new chapter with another weekend in Katmandu. It was as joyous as the previous visit

After a late night of dancing and celebrating in the room, a very tired couple was having breakfast in their room. Just as they were finishing, Hari rose, came around the table and knelt at Akhil's knees. "Sweetheart, please say that you are willing to marry me."

Akhil gasped. "Hari, this is so unexpected but I believe I am ready. The question of that other life seldom enters my mind these days. You are my life, Hari, and I love you."

Hari reached into his pocket for the ring which he slipped on her finger. "This is a symbol of my love and my pledge to take care of you for the rest of our lives."

With tears rolling from two sets of eyes, the kiss was sweet and long.

After an extended conversation, they picked a date five months hence. “We need to go to my home to have you meet the family.

I need to alert you. The first visit may be a little bit difficult. Mother is the rock of our family. She inherited a small fortune and occasionally uses that to wield power over her children.

I haven’t the slightest doubt of her coming to love you but she will give me strong reasons for not approving a marriage. She is a strong Hindu and expects all her children and their spouses to be the same. She has picked the woman she believes I should marry. She will argue that a mixed racial and religious marriage will end in divorce and mar the reputation of the family.”

Akhil’s face went ashen. She could not say a word. Hari was sure he had been wrong to be forthright. He hastened to soften the reaction

“Mother will be enamored with your mastery of Nepali, your medical achievements and position at the hospital.

All of that will open her mind, allowing the essential you to capture her heart.”

Akhil was not totally convinced but her love for Hari allowed her to give him the benefit of the doubt.

“Once she understands that you have no family and overcame great odds, she will open her arms. Then she will insist on planning the wedding. Even it is a family and close friends only, the number of guests will be large.”

“We could be married here and then go to your family.”

“Not the best way in our family tradition. Beside my mother will come to love you and you will adore my father. My brother and sister will become close friends although we will be living miles apart.”

Her face lit up. “It would be wonderful to have a family. Oh, Hari, I do love you.”

Chapter 12.

Akhil was perfectly comfortable with her first patient. He was surprised when Dr.Lessa did not show up but relaxed when Akhil explained. He made a joke. “You’re prettier. Besides, I know he respects you.”

Most of the new patients never questioned the fact that a nurse treated them in place of a doctor.

On Mondays, Akhil was assigned to work as part of the emergency team. She took most of the routine cases, including children with coughs or fevers, adults or children with minor injuries or adults who felt sick but could not describe their symptoms.

It was on her fifth rotation to Emergency that she received a phone call at four in the morning. “Please come to Emergency immediately. A major vehicle crash involving seven injured occurred about twenty miles outside of town. Ambulances are on the way. The first should be here within the hour.”

She was assigned to receive the third gurney to be unloaded from the ambulance. She watched as the first two were rushed by. Both were bloody teenage boys on their way to OR.

She rushed to listen to the ET who would announce the vitals and his knowledge of the condition of the patient. Her heart sank when he said, eighteen year old girl, who died three minutes before we arrived. We’ll deliver her. Take the next gurney.”

Akhil's patient was the luckiest of the seven. The boy had a broken femur and some deep lacerations. She led her team to the surgery unit of ER rather than OR. She was relieved of her patient by the young surgeon in the cubicle

She reported to the coordinator who suggested she take a break and wait for further instructions.

As she sipped a cup of tea, her thoughts travelled back to the scene at the entrance where she saw, briefly, the face of the dead teenager.

In an instant, she saw the face of another teenage girl. It was a youngster who died on a gurney in front of her at another hospital some years ago. It was the first time she had seen her patient die.

Suddenly she was bewildered. "What's happening? Where am I? Who am I?"

Her mind was whirling with pictures of her past life. One moment she was seeing the dead patient who arrived from the accident. The next moment she was sitting in a room, telling someone about seeing a girl die in front of her.

Hari flashed by. Then she was assisting someone named Andrew in an OR. Now, Andrew was embracing her.

The pictures slowed down. She was remembering an argument with a flight attendant, saying she was on the wrong airplane, begging to return to the gate.

She felt herself trembling as a picture of fire on the plane filled her mental screen and the sound of screams filled her ears.

She heard a voice asking “Are you feeling unwell, Akhil? You’re trembling and perspiring.”

“Y Yes.”

“I don’t agree: said the ER coordinator.

“I’ll be fine in a moment.”

“I doubt that. We have plenty of help now. Take the day off. Better yet, have Dr. Lassa check you over before you leave.”

“Thank you.”

In addition to being at sea, Akhil was nauseous. She lost last evening’s supper, and then climbed into bed. Her mind was too busy to allow sleep, which is what she hoped for.

It probably was an hour before she was calm enough to organize her thoughts.

“What’s happening? I just discovered that I am recovering my memory after some lengthy period of time “

“Where am I? I am lying in my bed, the bed I share with my love, Hari. We live in his apartment in Silkin, Nepal.”

Why am I here and how did I get here? I survived a plane crash and was cared for by a very poor family in the mountains.”

She began to recite mentally a thousand things she remembered but decided that a more important question needed to be answered first.”

“Who am I, really? My real name is not Akhil.
“Wow, what a coincidence. I’m Liz Palmer, chief resident in
Medicine at Kaiser. No, I finished that work and passed all
my boards

My parents are living and I am engaged to a great
guy, Andrew Gregory, a resident. No, he must be a practicing
pediatric surgeon by now I wonder how long is now.”

Slowly, the details of her past life came into focus.
She recalled events of her childhood, of her teen years and her
college and graduate study years.

As she relived the last few years of her earlier life,
she knew now how she had been able to help her associates
with medical knowledge.

As she recalled the details of her deep love for
Andrew, her pledge to marry him, as well as her decision to
wait until her year abroad was over, her mood grew somber.

“I have hurt Andrew, who must have spent days
and days trying to find me.”

Akhil speculated, “I must have been a misplaced
passenger, who walked away from a plane on which I was
never a listed passenger. That had to be the case. Otherwise, I
would have been found before this.”

The hours of reemerging and speculating took its toll
on her. She fell asleep, fully clothed, sprawled across the bed.

“Akhil, what is it? What is wrong?”

She came awake, gasping and dazed. “Where am I?
Oh, Hari.” She sat up and threw her arms around him, buried
her head in his chest and began to sob.

Hari was sensitive enough to hold her and wait. He was befuddled .She seemed well physically with no injuries, no temperature. Her heart beat was a bit rapid but not extremely so.

He pulled her to lie with him until the tears ceased flowing and her breathing eased.

“Oh, Hari, What are going to do?”

“What is it, honey? Do about what?”

Akhil realized that at the moment she had shared nothing with Hari.

She pulled him close. “This morning, in the midst of an emergency, seeing a dead teenage girl on a gurney, brought to mind a scene from a long time ago in another emergency.”

“In that second, my memory returned. I know who I am or who I was. I spent the afternoon recalling events of my early life, the manner in which I arrived in Nepal and the people in my life.”

The sobs and tears were again in full force. Her body trembled and Hari pulled her face close for a gentle kiss. When she quieted, he said, “Nothing has changed between the two of us and nothing will. I promise.”

“But what if Andrew is still waiting for me to show up and still wants to marry me? I gave him my pledge.”

“Sweetheart, there is an old saying. Life provides enough trouble. Never borrow more. We will do whatever is necessary. Now, let’s have a glass of wine while you tell me as much as you want of the essentials.”

She started with, “My name is Elizabeth Palmer, called Liz by my friends and family

I was a precocious, child. My folks were teachers who tutored me

I received a liberal education, at the dinner table, and their help with my homework

From Mom I had special tutoring in social graces, ethics, religion and a well-developed eagerness to read.

Dad taught me the thrill of solving problems and the excitement of doing research.

They endured and still loved me through my mildly wild teen years. We are very close and this must have been horrendous for them, having me simply disappear.”

She was inconsolable for another long moment.

When she regained her composure, she talked about Andrew. She laughed, telling Hari of her meeting Andrew in the rain, the way Andrew handled the exposure of her breast through a thin wet t-shirt by giving her his large sweat shirt.

“We fell deeply in love almost as quickly as I did with you, Hari. We had a great loving year together until I completed my residency.”

“Andrew wanted a September wedding. He tried to convince me to give up doing work with Doctors without Borders, reminding me what a long separation would feel like

but I felt that if I didn't do it then, I would not have another chance. Our separation was very unsatisfactory.”

There were no tears as she said those words but there was a choked voice and then silence.

Hari interrupted. “Why don't you rest for a few minutes while I prepare a light dinner?”

She nodded and again wrapped her arms around Hari.

As they were having dessert, Akhil began the story of her flight. “Through some mysterious circumstances, I ended up in a plane headed for Katmandu instead of Dhaka. Since the plane had departed the gate before we discovered the error, I was unable to leave the flight. I was promised free passage to Dhaka from Katmandu.”

Akhil went silent and put down her fork.

“There was an engine fire on my side of the plane but within seconds, the pilot had extinguished the flames and turned off the engine.

I relaxed, remembering the ability of the plane to fly on two engines but a few minutes later I heard screams from

the other side of the plane. . From my seat I saw flames over the wing. It was a large flame.

People were acting crazily. Some were standing up and reaching for suitcases and many shouting words which I could not understand.”

I heard a voice on the intercom. I thought, “The captain must be asking for calm” and he got their attention. The standing passengers took their seats.

One of the attendants, realizing that I might not understand the word, managed to get to me. “We are going to have to land. Have you read the material regarding crash landings?”

I said yes and she was off to help the others.

“I remember refastening the seat belt. Guessing about two minutes or less to crash time.

A myriad of images filled my mind. Andrew’s soft smile, mother’s arms around me and my sitting on Daddy’s lap.”

“Hari, for some reason I was not afraid for myself but was sorry not to be able to say goodbye. I found myself praying for my parents, Andrew and his parents. I must have been trying to block the hysteria, the screams of the passengers”

I recall awakening, pain throbbing throughout my body, blood oozing from parts of my body and my mind in a daze I had a fierce headache. I had to lift a severed leg off my chest in order to stand. I became nauseous and vomited at the sight that greeted me.

I wandered over the scene to see if anyone else was alive and perhaps find my baggage or tote bag.

I could not recall the crash at all. My only memory was what I viewed and some of my thoughts as I walked through and around the scattered debris.

You know the rest of the story of my walk and discovery by the family in that remote village.”

Her shoulders sagged as she withdrew back into her mind and went silent.

Hari took her in his arms and moved to the sofa where he had her lie down while he sat beside, her holding her hand.

His mind was actively seeking next steps. He guessed that she would want to phone her family which, in his opinion would be a mistake. A call out of the blue could be shocking, maybe too much for one of her folks to grasp.

By the time she was ready to talk, he had developed a tentative plan. He suggested she take a sleeping pill. “We can make a plan in the morning after considering some of our options.”

She began to object but felt too tired to argue. “Okay, honey, but you must hold me until I sleep.”

Hari called her office and left word that she was too ill to come into work in the morning. He called a colleague to take his place in OR for the next two days.

Akhil understood his reasons for delaying communicating with her parents or Andrew. They decide that the first step was to go to Katmandu where she would go to the American Embassy to request a replacement for her passport and visa.

They discussed the difficulties of proving her identity and her citizenship.

Hours later they arrived in Katmandu and registered at the same hotel where they had stayed previously. They presented themselves at the embassy at ten o'clock.

Mr. Kenneth Griffiths, a low level officer at the embassy greeted them and handed both an application form, then said that he would return in twenty minutes to review the applications.

Ms. Palmer, may I see some identification?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Griffiths. I lost all my papers that might establish my identification."

The officer stiffened. He thought, "No one loses every bit of ID."

Akhil sensed his cynicism but waited for his question. His tone was just a trifle sharp. "How did you lose every bit of identification?"

Both, she and Hari were ready for the response when she said. "I lost them in the crash of Flight 952, four years ago."

"What are you trying to pull, Ms. Palmer? There were no Americans aboard that flight and furthermore there were no survivors. I remember the details well. Reviewing the

details was my first assignment after I had arrived from Washington to start m duties here.”

“I understand your doubt but if you will be patient with me, I can explain.”

“There can be no explanation. You could not have been on that plane and survived. Even if that were so, why have you waited more than four years to apply for your passport?”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Palmer. If you persist in this charade, I will have to call Security and have you escorted from the building.

Hari interrupted with,” Mr. Griffiths. “Ms. Palmer, who is my fiancée, has just recovered from a serious case of amnesia, caused by her injury in that crash. As a respected physician of major repute in my community, I can provide a string of people who can vouch for the amnesia and the character of Ms. Palmer over that four year period. We need the help that the embassy promises its citizens rather than hostility.”

Mr. Griffiths was taken aback by the boldness of this Nepali citizen and changed his tone. Sir, you must

understand my position. All evidence provided by your government states clearly that no one survived that accident.”

“Are you or someone in this embassy willing to listen and investigate Ms. Palmer’s story?”

‘On the basis of her presentation to this point, I am not in position to say yes. I will need to refer this to my superior.’”

Please do so.”

“This may take some time. Can you return tomorrow?”

“We will wait. Ms. Palmer has been waiting for four years. I am sure another few hours will not bother either of us, although I hope you will not make her wait too long.”

When they were alone, Akhil said, “Hari, you are magnificent. I bet someone else will see us within the hour. She was right.

Thirty minutes later, they were ushered upstairs to the office of the Chief of Security. Akhil looked into Mr. James steel blue eyes and read doubt. His greeting was neutral, neither warm nor hostile.

She saw the doubt fading as she went deeper into her story. At the end of her presentation, Mr. James said, using a clearly even tone, “Ms. Palmer, you must realize how strange this sounds but you do not strike me as someone who would try to pull off a hoax on the United States Government.”

“You realize this make take time to trace back the facts. I will begin an immediate investigation. There is another major problem. You will still need to find a way to establish your identity If you are in some national or institutional DNA data base, the task will be easy.”

Akhil said, “I can’t think of any place except some trace of any DNA at one of the hospitals. There may be something at my family home but I would not want to shock my elderly parents except as a last resort.”

“I understand. Here is my card. Call me if you have anything that will help. I have your information and plan to keep you updated.”

Chapter 13

Three weeks later, in the midst of a physical exam, Akhil answered her cell phone, “Please hold for Mr. James.” A moment later, “Ms. Palmer, I am pleased to tell you that our investigator has verified your information. I must congratulate you. Every source was most complimentary on the contribution you made to the community and the institution you served.”

“The hospital staff in Silkin holds you in high esteem. Did you know that the board has been seeking ways to have you become a citizen?”

“I had no idea. Thank you for your faith in me. I must tell you I have been most anxious.”

I have some other news. We have verified your identity through the Department of Motor Vehicles in California.”

“We shall mail your passport and related paperwork within a few days. Also, Mr. Griffiths apologizes for his strong negative reaction. I am sure you forgive him. All embassies are on high alert, given the risk of terrorism and conditions in the Mideast.”

“Please extend my thanks for his continuing even when he doubted my story.”

Her patient read good news on the face of the doctor and smiled. She loved Akhil.as did most of her patients.

When she completed the exam, she went to find Dr.Lessa in order to share the good news. He was delighted and gave her a hug. “Take the afternoon off. We will cover for you. Perhaps you can have lunch with Hari.”

Hari was in OR performing his last operation of the day. She was waiting for him just outside OR and practically jumped into his arms.

They went directly home for lunch and planning.

Hari asked, “Have you thought of a plan?”

“I have an idea. My father has a brother, ten years younger than Dad. He and I were very close when I was a youngster. He lives about thirty miles from my folks and visits regularly. Uncle Ben would absorb the miraculous news more easily and could find a way to break the news.”

Hari was enthusiastic about the approach. “Great. If we call this evening it will be midafternoon in Californian. How will you discover the number to call?”

“He is the editor of the local newspaper. That number will be easy to find.”

Hari placed the call. After a few minutes of disbelief and questioning, he was ready to talk with Liz. The conversation lasted a half hour, ending with a promise by Uncle Ben to prepare her family for a phone call twenty four hours later.

That phone call lasted an hour, interrupted by long periods of tears and choked voices and finally acceptance of the miracle and an explanation of the young man who had called Uncle Ben.

Liz promised to call back with details of their plans for the trip. She was still shedding tears of joy five minutes after the end of the call.

“Oh, Hari. I am so happy. I owe my life to you. I would not have come to this point without you.”

She burst into laughter. “I had no idea this little special phone you gave to me would become the connection

back to my roots. No words can truly express my joy and my gratitude for having you in my life. ”

“You have been so patient with me while you have been my support. Meanwhile, I have been so absorbed with my situation that I have neglected my wifely duties.”

She took his hand and led him to the ultimate place of interpersonal harmony.

Much later, he whispered, “Thank you, sweet one.”

She kissed his chest and laid her head on the spot. “Will you be able to take off enough time for a trip to meet my family? I will be so pleased to have them meet you.”

She heard a small sigh and felt his body ease. “Did I just hear a sigh of pleasure?”

“You did. I have been holding my breath waiting to hear those words of invitation .I have been imagining your reunion with family but worried about your reunion with Andrew and its implication for our future.”

She cried, “Dear one. I am so sorry that I have not been clear. My future is with you. We should be married as planned after we return from California.”

She was smothered with kisses that said all that he wanted to communicate.

The flight attendant announced that the flight would arrive an hour late at Heathrow in London. However, because of delay due to headwinds, we will be landing soon after arrival in the area.”

To Liz, that translated to “we are short of fuel.” She felt her body tense up. Her mind flipped back to the flight to Nepal. She quickly shifted her thoughts to the handsome man in the seat beside her. She put on a smile and tucked her arm into the curve of his.

The connecting flight to San Francisco originated in Prague and was also delayed because of high winds. Shortly before the new departure time, the gate attendant announced another delay but gave no reason. The uncertainty played havoc with Liz’s mind.

When the captain announced a refueling stop in Newfoundland, Liz began to tremble. Hari felt her tremors. He put his arm around her, saying, “Sweet one, it means the captain is taking safety measures. Just put your head on my shoulder.”

His words were not enough to calm her. She flew with white knuckles the long last leg to SFO.

Shortly after the captain pointed to Salt Lake City, Liz, looking out the starboard window was sure she saw fuel coming out the rear of the inward engine. She felt her body start to convulse but focused on Hari.

She looked again but saw nothing. “My nerves are shot to hell and my imagination is working overtime.”

She forced herself to relax a bit by centering on the coming reunion.

As they passed into California, she went to the powder room to refresh and put on a smiling face for Uncle Ben. Never the less, she gripped Hari’s arm tightly on the last leg to touchdown and let out a sigh when she felt the wheels hit the runway.

Uncle Ben greeted them at the baggage claim area of San Francisco Airport. “You look absolutely radiant and beautiful, Liz. Welcome home.” Hari thought that the long embrace between Liz and Uncle Ben would never come to an end.

Ben turned to Hari. “Welcome, Doctor Dhaka. Thank you for the great part you played in bringing this lovely niece of mine to her family. Liz wrote us in detail of all that you have done for her.”

Liz’s folks came dashing from the house to greet Liz. As Uncle Ben said later, “The welcome home was a very wet one.” No one was spared shedding tears at the home coming. Liz had been lost and now was found.

Chapter. 14

A few weeks earlier, Andrew and Rhonda were sitting on the sofa, his right arm around her shoulders. They were watching an X-rated movie on HBO. Rhonda was stirring with expectation. The story was coming to the predictable climax

She reached for Andrew's hand and pulled it to cup her breast. His other hand was toying with her earlobe, a signal that he was as excited as she was.

The moment the movie ended, she rose and led Andrew to their bed.

Since they first went to bed together, this period was their longest period of abstinence.

Off duty, they were usually inseparable. She had decided to hold off starting work, now that her residency was complete and she was licensed

The wedding date was set for seven weeks from yesterday. It was to be held at the Community Church in the Almaden Valley with a reception at the country club. There would be no more than fifty guests, including family.

The reason Rhonda was delaying the start of her career was a decision that they wanted to begin a family as soon as possible. In fact, the wedding date was set so that there was high probability that the baby would be conceived during their honeymoon in Hawaii.

Later, Rhoda was saying, “Andrew, there is never anything routine about our love making. I am always so fulfilled, just as I was on that first day. You would not believe how often I stop in the middle of the day to thank God for leading me into your life.”

“Dear one, the same goes for me, perhaps not as often but just as heartfelt.”

He caressed her cheek with the back of his hand “I never thought it would be but I am so in love with you and am so glad you agreed to start our family. Boy or girl?

“Whatever. That baby will be loved and nurtured by the greatest dad in the world and probably spoiled by four grandparents vying with each other for the chance to do so.”

Rhonda’s thoughts wandered for a moment. “It seems that Andrew has truly left the memory of Liz deep in the recesses of his mind. However. I am ready to help through any difficult moments, just as I promised.”

The other thought that came to the surface was,
“What will happen if she happens to call or show up after all
these years?”

She quickly shunted her mind to the love scene in
which she was even now a full participant.

“Just hold me tight while I nap, honey.

Chapter 15

Liz's folks and Uncle Ben sat in awe. Tears flowed frequently during the three hours that Liz told her story. She said, "The one blank in my memory is the actual crash. I can visualize myself, head down, bracing for the crash. The next memory is awakening and then lifting a severed leg off my chest."

"I don't remember where I picked up the heavy coat. It certainly was not mine. When I began walking, I must have been in a daze. I had no way of knowing what direction to take. I'm guessing that we may have landed at the edge of a glacier I recall walking on ice or hard snow and then on rocky soil."

"I can still sense the joy of the moment I spied the light in the window."

Mom asked, "What happened to the engagement ring?"

"When I was remembering the events, I recalled putting it in my tote bag. I didn't think I needed to have it with me in the rural areas of Bangladesh."

Hari was a silent observer of the reactions of the family members. As Liz approached the story of Hari coming

into her life, he was surprised and delighted to see no hint of racial or color prejudice. In his opinion, they were color blind, accepting him as Liz's lover. He wished he could say the same for his mother.

Uncle Ben had to leave before dinner but he invited Dad and Hari, to come to the newspaper for a visit.

During the dessert and coffee time, Mom pressed Hari for information about his life and his family. He obliged with enthusiasm and included high praise for Liz and her contribution to the communities where she served. "I feel certain she will be approved and licensed to practice medicine in Nepal, based on her credentials here."

The silence and facial expressions that greeted his comment caused him to do a double take. He realized that nothing about the future had been discussed up to now.

Hari saw Mom doing her best to hold back the tears but to no avail. She rose and left the room. Dad put on his stoic face. Liz' eyes were saying, "This is my fault."

Dad followed Mom.

Liz went to Hari. "I'm sorry, dear."

He put his arms around her. “I understand and believe I know how they must feel. The wait for her folks to return was somber.

A half hour had elapsed before they heard the approaching step. Dad was the first to speak. “We were hoping to make up for the lost years, Liz.”

Liz put her arms around both and said, “I was sure you were which is why I was having a hard time bringing up the subject. During the plane ride, I spent time thinking about my coming wedding to Hari and the plans I had for my future repaying the doctors and hospital staff, all of whom had contributed to my recovery.”

“Dad, I remembered that you were planning to do a lot of traveling”

Mom, who had composed herself, said. “That thinking was rather selfish and short sighted. Even if you were in the States, you might have been practicing in Maine or Florida and still thousands of miles away.”

Hari could see that she was still on the edge of losing her control again.

Dad asked, “When do you have to return?”

Hari said, “I have to leave in six days.

Liz said, “I have an extra week.”

Mom choked as she asked “So soon?”

“Yes, Mom. I was lucky to get this much time. My replacements are doing double duty and one is due for his vacation”

“We hoped for a long visit or even a permanent return but Dad and I need time to adjust to this news.”

The tension did not totally disappear but eased. Mom changed the subject. “Liz, shall we start dinner?”

As they moved toward the kitchen, Liz asked, “Mom “What can you tell me about Andrew?”

“I wondered when you would get around to that subject. I had a chat with his mother recently. She tells me that he had come to grips with your not returning. He is engaged and about to be married. What do plan to do?”

“I’m not sure how, but Andrew needs to know that I’m alive. It might have been better if he were already married.”

“Do you have a plan? A phone call from you would be an awful shock.”

“I agree. I was thinking of sending a hand written long note outlining the events and asking him to lunch. I will need his office address. Otherwise, his fiancée might intercept the note.”

Two days later, Andrew couldn't believe his eyes as he saw the handwriting on the envelope. “Someone is playing head games with me. That's cruel.”

He set the envelope aside. “I should just toss it away right now.” He tossed it into the waste basket.

Two hours later, he returned from OR and began to change clothes. He noticed the envelope and after some hesitation, he retrieved the envelope and slit it open.

He gasped and fell into his chair. He felt a stinging in his eyes just before the tears eased out and onto his cheeks. “Impossible. Why has she waited until now to write me?”

He wiped his eyes and began to read. When he finished, his heart went out to Liz. As he wrestled with the meaning of this turn of events, he was looking for clarity.

“I definitely must meet with her but I can't tell Rhonda, at least not yet. What are Liz's expectations? I'm in love with Rhonda. Lord, what a mess?”

Andrew called but talked to her father. “Liz is out. How are you, Andrew. May I take a message?”

“Shocked but happy that Liz is alive. Please tell her Thursday at two is fine. She suggested the date at Mike’s Café.

For Andrew it was extremely difficult to keep Rhonda in the dark. He spent hours trying to fill in the blanks of things not explained in the letter. “Is she still in love with me? How will Rhonda react when I tell her?”

As he walked through the doorway of the cafe, Andrew was stiff, feeling like an automaton walking to meet Liz. His first reaction when he saw her was, “God, she is even more beautiful than my memory of her.”

As he approached the table, Liz stood, her face strained and her body as tense as a tight rope. She opened her arms and welcomed Andrew.

His heart jumped as he experienced a familiar feeling. He kissed her lightly on the forehead before she eased out of the embrace.

“Andrew, I am deeply sorry for the pain I must have caused you.”

“It’s not your fault, Liz. You must have gone through some kind of hell for those years trying to understand who you were.”

“Yes, but God has a way of helping the mind to deal with uncertainty.”

She was aware of the tension in Andrew’s body and the questions that he must have been considering about their past and future.

Liz never remembered whether it was intentional or not when she placed her left hand on Andrew’s arm. She did see the strain on his face disappear when he noticed the large diamond on her finger.

She smiled. “I hear that you are about to be married. I’ m happy for you Andrew. Through the years of my amnesia, my mind kept worrying about people in my real life. When I recovered, yours was the first face that flashed on my mind, even before my folks.”

Andrew took her hand in his. “It took me a long time before the memory of our love faded, Liz. The night before I proposed to Rhonda, I went through a short ritual, sort of a requiem for a lost love.”

“That’s beautiful. I am so happy you found a new love.”

“I made my pledge to Hari before I regained my memory but nothing changed. He is a pediatric surgeon. We are planning a wedding within months.”

It was a stunning moment. In that instant, two previous lovers had become new lifetime friends.

The next two hours were filled with stories of two lives whose pain was endured and met with courage.

Chapter 16.

Mom, Dad and Hari were having tea and conversation at home at the same time that Liz and Andrew were involved.

Mom was saying, “Hari, I am sorry I made such a scene. Do forgive me.”

“There is nothing to forgive. The words I let slip were a shock to a mother who had just found her long lost daughter. You had every right to expect a long reunion.”

Dad said, “That may be but we also hurt you inadvertently and we are sorry. Once we thought things through we realize that our expectations were foolish. We now understand that Liz might likely be practicing medicine anywhere in the world. Her fascination with the work of Doctors without Borders should have been a clue years ago.”

Hari moved to another subject. “Liz tells me you have just retired and are planning to do a lot of travelling. Will you be doing that soon?”

Mom smiled and said. “Yes. We will be selling our home and moving into a community where the property is maintained by the community trustees, leaving us free to come and go as we please.”

Hari interrupted. “I hope I am not being too presumptuous but I would like to help you make travel plans to Nepal. You should come as soon as possible. Mom, as mother of the bride, you should be part of planning the wedding.

Mom beamed and turned to Dad. “Dear, we could change plans and make this the first stop of a trip to India and China. That would give us the long period with Liz that we had hoped for here.”

As Hari saw Dad nodding, he beamed. “Wonderful. In the future, you must plan to stay with us and hopefully meet your first grandchild.”

Mom and Dad laughed. “Nepal will be on our regular schedule”

Hari said, “I will make every effort to bring Liz or send her and our children annually to visit with you. In our family, closeness between children and grandparents is very important. In some ways, I am closer to my grandmother than I am to my mother.”

When Liz walked in the door she asked, “Who’s preparing dinner?” She walked into the kitchen and saw Mom

and Hari at the stove. .She poked her nose in between and asked, “Dad and Mom. Where did you find the spices?”

Mom laughed. “You know Dad. He can find any food you want some place in the valley. We have over fifty different language groups living in the valley.”

The evening celebration started with the meal and continued until bedtime. Two days later, they were bidding good bye to Hari.

As the next week came to an end, Dad said, “In all our past times, we three have never been as close as we have since the second day of your arrival.

They worshiped at the Stone Church on Sunday, moved with the brief inclusion of prayer for Liz’s safe return offered by the pastor.

On the drive to the airport, they talked about phone conversations and wedding plans and shed their goodbye tears.

At the San Francisco airport, in the final moment before Liz entered the security check line, Mom put her arms around the other two.

“The setting is not the same as it was for Romeo and Juliet but I would like to paraphrase her words.

Good bye, good bye. Parting is such sweet sorrow,
that I shall say good bye till it be the morrow.”

The end.



