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**Some Comfort Among Us**

*a sneak preview*

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## Chapter ONE

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*"Dear Stephie, I wish you could see this place," Ann wrote to her daughter a month after her arrival. "India is not what you think it is, it's much, much more. I never thought it would be so beautiful. Listening to your father all those years talking about the Raj and his ancestors and all that British pomp and circumstance, I pictured it frozen in time – a place where lily-complexioned ladies wore white cotton dresses and played croquet on the lawn, and sunburned young men with blond mustaches wore topees and riding breeches and administered justice under the trees in the heat and the dust.*

*"The Indians were always incidental, sweeping and serving in the background. And the country itself, the land, was a subtle and dangerous enemy. It was full of wild animals and poisonous snakes, a breeding ground for fevers, mysterious and deadly diseases that carried off children and young women before they even unpacked their things. The drinking water was poison, the climate was unhealthy and any kind of travel was hazardous.*

*"I remember your father telling me the story of his grandmother who lost four babies to fever before she died of it herself. And then his father's first wife died in childbirth. I can just picture her coming over on the boat in 1924, a young woman with her hair freshly bobbed, nervous and excited about meeting a young man in the Civil Service or a dashing young soldier to marry.*

*"But I've seen things that take my breath away, like the silken swaying of sari-clad women. I've heard choruses of songbirds, not just a few, but hundreds at a time; smelt the pungent fragrance of frangipani and tasted the succulence of mangoes. Sometimes I just stop and listen. There's so much life (!) here that it makes up for all those frozen Canadian winters, those dead, hard, gray winters.*

*"If I seem giddy, it's probably the vegetarian diet and the cleansing of the soul I've been undergoing. They tell me this isn't unusual—it's like waking up from a coma or taking the bandages off after surgery: you've been given a second chance. I know I'll be able to look at things from a totally different perspective from now on and maybe my old hang-ups will simply fall apart like rags. Got to run. Time for massage therapy. Love, Mother."*

Stephanie closed her eyes and tried to remember the details of her mother's face, the high, slightly prominent cheekbones, the delicately pointed chin, the small lines that appeared around her eyes when she smiled. But all she could think was how naïve her mother was to believe she could solve her problems at an ashram halfway around the world.

"I'm going to find release from the bondage of the self," she had told Stephanie during lunch at a fashionable downtown cafe. "I feel fragmented, unwhole. My body is separate from my mind and they're both separate from the universe. I need to find a way to transcend these earthly bonds and feel at peace with the cosmos. No amount of reading books is enough. I have to go to India where these things happen and find a teacher to show me the way."

"A guru, you mean?" Stephanie had asked, trying not to let her skepticism show.

"Yes, a guru. A person who has experienced enlightenment and will show me the path." Ann wanted her daughter to understand but she knew Stephanie was only pretending to be interested. "I know it's hard for you to take all this seriously but it's very important to me and I want you to know I'm not just going off on a lark. I need to do this."

"I know you do, Mother, and I'm trying to understand, but I really don't know very much about this stuff. I mean, I hope you're not going to join the Hare Krishna."

Her mother had laughed but Stephanie remembered the sadness in her eyes.

"And what if I did join the Hare Krishna? Would you and your father try and get a court order to stop me, or would you give me your blessing and let me go?"

"Don't joke about it. It's not funny."

"No, it's not funny. And I'm glad you don't think it is. I want to be taken seriously, Stephe, especially by my family. I'm not going to come back with my head shaved. I'm going to come back with a deeper understanding and appreciation of the Life Force. I'm going to come back whole."

At that point Stephanie would have said anything just to get out of there. "All right, you can have my blessing if you want it. I hope you find what you're looking for and I hope you bring it back with you."

Afterward, when it was all over and the real anger hit, when all the hurt and confusion and regret surfaced, Stephanie Hobart, young, smart, fearlessly independent, would wonder why she hadn't been better equipped to deal with the events that happened over the next few months. Her memories would be of moving through those days as if on a conveyer belt, accumulating layers of emotion that would eventually suffocate her certainty.

## Chapter TWO

Ann's last letter told them she was suffering from headaches and persistent diarrhea so she'd decided to come home and get treatment before it got worse. A local doctor told her she might have an intestinal parasite but he hadn't done a test. "I'd rather go to the Tropical Disease Clinic at Toronto General," she wrote, "and get treated at home."

"Does that mean she's tried all the hocus-pocus remedies and they didn't work?" Stephanie said to her father. "Don't be unkind," he said. But secretly he agreed with his daughter. Ann had probably been receiving spiritual treatment for what was clearly a physical problem and in the meantime her condition had likely worsened.

For both Stephen Hobart and his twenty-five year old daughter, the habit of protecting Ann and treating her as if she were lacking basic survival skills had started early in Stephanie's childhood. She knew her mother wasn't like the other mothers but she never let anyone know how much it bothered her. While her friends' mothers met in the afternoon to play bridge, Ann went to fortune-tellers and learned to read the future in a deck of cards. And while other mothers examined their children's hands to make sure they were clean, Ann examined the lines in Stephanie's palm and told her she would have a long life. Other mothers painted and decorated their homes, but Stephanie's mother painted canvases with bold strokes and dark colors. Once Ann painted a woman's face with her mouth wide open and told Stephanie it was every woman's cry for help.

Ann was always studying some new philosophy or occult belief system that would lead her closer to the meaning of life. She wanted to understand why things

happened. Ann looked to the beginning of things to find explanations for them—astrological birth charts, childhood relationships, prenatal life. Her husband Stephen, an economist with the Bank of Canada, looked at the consequences to understand the reason for things. It was a fundamental difference between them. To him it didn't matter if you were the seventh son of a seventh son. What mattered was what you did with the resources at hand.

Their daughter was like him, impatient and striving, but with a contemplative side that came from her mother. Stephanie was interested in theories and ideas. She had studied political science at university and landed a job as a researcher for a television newsmagazine program. She told her father that someday she would produce her own shows. Research, she told him, was the quickest route to the top.

"She'll probably be the last one off," said Stephen, as they watched the first weary travelers from the Bombay flight straggle out the automatic doors of the arrivals gate. Ann was always the last one off a plane, the last one out of a theater. "Why get pushed around by all these people?" she would say. "Why not just wait a few more minutes and leave at our own pace?"

Because there won't be any taxis left or the restaurant will give away our reservation, Stephen would say. What he meant was, because I don't want to be last, I want to be first. But that impulse didn't exist in Ann. It never bothered her to wait for things. She always found something to occupy her mind, something to talk about or just think to herself about if he didn't feel like talking.

Stephanie and her father watched the last passengers emerge from the arrivals gate pushing overloaded luggage carts, but Ann wasn't among them.

"Just give her a few more minutes," Stephanie said. "She's probably still clearing customs."

"Maybe she's ill," said Stephen. He started jingling the coins in his pocket to keep his hands busy. "Maybe she needs help."

"I'm sure they'd page us if that were true." Stephanie refused to worry. Her mother was just taking a long time to do a simple thing, as usual.

"I'm going to ask someone," Stephen finally said, looking around for an Air India uniform. "She should have been out by now."

They caught up with a young woman just as she was closing down the Air India counter. "Everyone is off the plane," she said. "I'm quite certain of it."

They insisted she check again. Knowing they wouldn't give up, she went off in the direction of the arrivals gate. When she returned a few minutes later, their fears were confirmed. Then she checked the computer. "It would appear that Mrs. Hobart was not on the airplane when it left Bombay," she finally said, looking at them over the top of the computer terminal. "I'm sorry, that's all I can tell you. Her ticket was not used."

## Chapter THREE

Stephanie saw the worry lines forming around her father's eyes. His handsome face appeared to cave in on itself as the lines around his mouth deepened. "Maybe she got sick again and decided not to leave," she said, trying to reassure him. "It's a long flight. Maybe she just wasn't up to it."

Stephen's frown told her he wasn't convinced. Normally he would assume Ann had missed her flight. It had happened before. But the fact that she was suffering from some undiagnosed tropical disease in a place like India was worrying. What if she was delirious with fever in a strange place and couldn't get help? He kept fiddling with the change in his pockets, wishing he had a cigarette. But it had been seven months since he'd quit and he never carried them anymore. Why had he ever agreed to let her make that godforsaken trip alone? Why hadn't he insisted she take a friend along? He would gladly have paid the expenses. Now he cursed himself for being so stupid. He should have known it would turn out badly.

"Come on, let's get back to the house," said Stephanie. "I'll bet there's a telegram waiting for us." Stephen allowed her to take the lead as they headed for the parking garage. He walked half a pace behind his tall, attractive daughter and saw why people always said how much she was like him. She was five feet eight to his six foot two, with wide shoulders and slim hips. She was large-boned and strong like her father and she walked with an athletic grace that came from years of dance classes and figure skating

lessons. Able, smart and needing to be in charge, she preferred solitary activities like walking, swimming and climbing. Her hair was the color his had once been before it had turned silver, the color of teak after it's been polished to a glossy sheen—a color that was almost identically matched in her eyes, with tiny green flecks that flashed when she was angry or excited. Stephanie's ruddy complexion came from her mother, however, giving her a perpetually healthy glow so unlike the elegant pallor of her father's skin.

If it had been anyone else they had come to meet Stephen would have taken control of the situation in just the same way. Said something practical. Kept things moving. But this time it was different. This time it was Ann. She had missed planes before, but she always called. Ann had some strange ideas, but she wouldn't make him worry like this. If she *had* just missed the plane—who knew what could happen in a place like India; the traffic must be dreadful—there was probably a telegram waiting for them right now.

Stephanie walked over to the driver's side of the car and put her hand out for the keys. "Let me drive. I know you're worried and I don't want you driving through a red light."

"I've never driven through a red light in my life, young lady," said Stephen, clenching and unclenching a fistful of coins in his pocket.

"I know, but if I drive, you can think of a plan." Stephen reluctantly handed over the keys and climbed into the passenger seat. He didn't have the energy to argue with her.

It was nearly midnight and even though traffic in Toronto seemed to be increasing every day, it parted mercifully for them as they merged easily onto the express lanes of the freeway. Once off the highway, Stephanie headed south to the prosperous

neighborhood her parents had lived in since she was a child. Ten minutes later she swung the car onto the circular driveway of the large two-story brick home and eased to a stop beside her own Honda Prelude. Her father was out of the car and unlocking the front door before she'd turned off the engine.

Stephanie followed him into the library and sat on the leather sofa. Stephen was already dialing the phone.

"Who are you calling?"

"CN/CP to see if there's been a cable."

When he asked them to double check, Stephanie knew there had been no telegram. Stephen began immediately dialing another number.

"Who are you phoning now?"

"Arthur Ross in Ottawa. Maybe he can get someone at the Embassy in New Delhi to make some calls or get someone to go to that ashram and find out what's going on."

"But the ashram's a long way from Delhi," she reminded him. "It could take days."

"I know, but it's a start. They've got more contacts over there than I have. There's no phone at that damn place. The fastest way is to get someone to go there." He held up his hand to stop her from speaking. "Hello Arthur," he said into the phone. "Arthur, I'm sorry to call you at this hour, but—he listened to the voice at the other end—"Yes, it's me, Stephen. Look Arthur, I'm sorry to call so late, but Ann was supposed to be on a plane from Bombay tonight and she never showed up. Apparently she never got on the plane. In her last letter she said she hadn't been feeling well—I don't know what—

something tropical. I'm extremely worried. This is just not like her. Is there any way you can contact the Embassy and get a runner to go out there and find out if she's okay?"

Stephanie watched her father as he listened to his old school friend and fraternity brother. Arthur Ross, External Affairs mandarin, was probably wearing pinstripe pajamas, standing barefoot in the front hall of his Ottawa mansion while he reassured his former classmate he would do everything he could to locate his wife. The old boys' network, she thought. That was how things really got done. Forget about protocol and regulations and a level playing field. You weren't even in the running unless you'd paid your dues at Upper Canada College, the elite private school for the sons of the rich and powerful. She wondered if she would ever be able to pick up the phone and dial her way into the higher echelons of power.

"Arthur says it could take two or three days," she heard her father say and realized he was no longer on the phone. "They can try and get someone there through the Red Cross, but if the village is off the beaten track, there's no quick way in."

They looked at each other for a moment as they slowly realized what was happening. Stephanie could hear the grandfather clock in the hall chiming the quarter hour. She couldn't stand the thought of waiting two or three days. And what if her mother had already left the ashram and was stuck in Bombay too sick to travel? They might never find her if they had to go through official channels.

"I'm going to go and get her myself," she heard herself say. "Even if we hear something in a couple of days, we still won't be able to do anything. If I'm over there or on my way, at least I can bring her home."

She waited for her father to protest, to argue with her, to tell her she wasn't capable enough. Instead he said, "So then I can worry about both of you."

"Dad," she said, knowing he could be persuaded, "maybe it's not such a big deal. Maybe she has a bad case of the runs and can't deal with a twenty-hour flight by herself. Not just that, don't forget, she has to get to Bombay first by bus and train."

Stephen looked at his daughter and knew she was right. "I don't like the idea of you going alone, Steph. I have a conference in Ottawa in three days with the Germans and I can't get out of it. See if Paul can go with you. Tell him I'll pay."

"For God's sake, she's not in the jungle. This isn't *Heart of Darkness*." Stephanie heard the annoyance in her voice. She took a deep breath. "I can handle it," she said quietly. "I'm not a child."

"Oh you can handle it, can you? India isn't like France, you know." But Stephen knew she'd made up her mind. "That's exactly what your mother said just before she got on the plane. 'Don't worry. I can handle it.'"

"I don't need to ask your permission," Stephanie reminded him. "I'm going and I'm going alone."