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The Loom of Time

Author Unknown

Man's life is laid in the loom of time
To a pattern he does not see,
While the weavers work and the shuttles fly
Till the dawn of eternity.

Some shuttles are filled with silver threads
And some with threads of gold,
While often but the darker hues
Are all that they may hold.

But the weaver watches with skillful eye
Each shuttle fly to and fro,
And sees the pattern so deftly wrought
As the loom moves sure and slow.

God surely planned the pattern:
Each thread, the dark and fair,
Is chosen by His master skill
And placed in the web with care.

He only knows its beauty,
And guides the shuttles which hold
The threads so unattractive,
As well as the threads of gold.

Not till each loom is silent,
And the shuttles cease to fly,
Shall God reveal the pattern
And explain the reason why

The dark threads were as needful
In the weaver's skillful hand
As the threads of gold and silver
For the pattern which He planned.
prologue

Going Home

I clung to the leather seat and felt my heart fall as the private plane rose into the sky, streaking away from India. If I took off my seatbelt, I was sure I would sink right through the floor and drop thousands of feet, freefalling to the jungles below. Only then would I feel right again. I had left my heart in India; I could feel it missing. All that was left of me was a hollowed-out shell, numb and empty.

The worst part was . . . I did this to myself.

How was it possible that I had fallen in love? And with someone so . . . complicated? The past few months had flown by. Somehow, I had gone from working at a circus to traveling to India with a tiger—who turned out to be an Indian prince—to battling immortal creatures to trying to piece together a lost prophecy. Now, my adventure was all over, and I was alone.

It was hard to believe just a few minutes ago I had said good-bye to Mr. Kadam. He hadn’t said much. He had just gently patted my back as I’d hugged him hard, not letting go. Finally, Mr. Kadam pried my arms from the vise I’d locked him in, muttered some reassurances, and turned me over to his great-great-great granddaughter, Nilima.

Thankfully, Nilima left me alone on the plane. I didn’t want anyone’s company. She brought lunch, but I couldn’t even think about eating. I’m sure it was delicious, but I felt like I was skirting the edge of a pit
of quicksand. Any second, I could be sucked down into an abyss of despair. The last thing I wanted was food. I felt spent and lifeless, like crumpled-up wrapping paper after Christmas.

Nilima removed the meal and tried to tempt me with my favorite drink—ice-cold lemon water, but I left it on the table. I stared at the glass for who knows how long, watching the moisture bead on the outside and slowly dribble down, pooling around the bottom.

I tried to sleep, to forget about everything for at least a few hours—but the dark, peaceful oblivion eluded me. Thoughts of my white tiger and the centuries-old curse that trapped him raced through my mind as I stared into space. I looked at Mr. Kadam’s empty seat across from me, glanced out the window, or watched a blinking light on the wall. I gazed at my hand now and then, tracing over the spot where Phet’s henna design lay unseen.

Nilima returned with an MP3 player full of thousands of songs. Several were by Indian musicians, but most of them were by Americans. I scrolled through to find the saddest breakup songs on it. Putting the plugs in my ears, I selected PLAY.

I unzipped my backpack to retrieve my grandmother’s quilt, only then remembering that I had wrapped Fanindra inside it. Pulling back the edges of the quilt, I spied the golden serpent, a gift from the goddess Durga herself, and set it next to me on the armrest. The enchanted piece of jewelry was in a coil, resting; or at least I assumed she was. Rubbing her smooth, golden head, I whispered, “You’re all I’ve got now.”

Spreading the quilt over my legs, I leaned back in the reclined chair, stared at the ceiling of the airplane, and listened to a song called “One Last Cry.” Keeping the volume soft and low, I placed Fanindra on my lap and stroked her gleaming coils. The green glow of the snake’s jeweled eyes softly illuminated the plane’s cabin and comforted me as the music filled the empty place in my soul.
The plane finally landed several mind-numbing hours later at the airport in Portland, Oregon. When my feet hit the tarmac, I shifted my gaze from the terminal to the gray, overcast sky. I closed my eyes and let the cool breeze blow over me. It carried the smell of the forest. A soft, dewy sprinkle settled on my bare arms from what must have been a recent rain. It felt good to be home.

Taking a deep breath, I felt Oregon center me. I was a part of this place, and it was a part of me. I belonged here. It was where I grew up and spent my whole life. My roots were here. My parents and grandma were buried here. Oregon welcomed me like a beloved child, enfolded me in her cool arms, shushed my turbulent thoughts, and promised peace through her whispering pines.

Nilima had followed me down the steps and waited quietly while I absorbed the familiar environment. I heard the hum of a fast engine, and a cobalt blue convertible pulled around the corner. The sleek sports car was the exact color of his eyes.

Mr. Kadam must have arranged for the car. I rolled my eyes at his expensive taste. Mr. Kadam thought of every last detail—and he always did it in style. At least the car's a rental, I mused.

I stowed my bags in the trunk and read the name on the back:
Tiger’s Quest

Porsche Boxster RS 60 Spyder. I shook my head and muttered, “Holy cow, Mr. Kadam, I would have been just as happy to take the shuttle back to Salem.”

“What?” Nilima asked politely.

“Nothing. I’m just glad to be home.”

I closed the trunk and sank down into the two-toned blue and gray leather seat. We drove in silence. Nilima knew exactly where she was going, so I didn’t even bother giving her directions. I just leaned my head back and watched the sky and the green landscape zip by.

Cars full of teenage boys passed us. They whistled, admiring either Nilima’s exotic beauty and long, dark hair flying in the wind or the nice car. I’m not sure which inspired the catcalls, but I knew they weren’t for me. I wore my standard T-shirt, tennis shoes, and jeans. Wisps of my golden-brown hair tangled about my loose braid and whipped at my brown, red-rimmed eyes and tear-streaked face. Older men cruised past us slowly too. They didn’t whistle, but they definitely enjoyed the view. Nilima just ignored them, and I tuned them out, thinking, I must look as awful as I feel.

When we entered downtown Salem, we passed the Marion Street Bridge that would have taken us over the Willamette River and onto Highway 22 heading for the farmlands of Monmouth and Dallas. I tried to tell Nilima she missed a turn, but she merely shrugged and said we were taking a short cut.

“Sure,” I said sarcastically, “what’s another few minutes on a trip that has lasted for days?”

Nilima tossed her beautiful hair, smiled at me, and kept driving, maneuvering into the traffic headed for South Salem. I’d never been this way before. It was definitely the long way to Dallas.

Nilima drove toward a large hill that was covered with forest. We wound our way slowly up the beautiful tree-lined road for several miles.
I saw dirt roads leading into the trees. Houses poked through the forest here and there, but the area was largely untouched. I was surprised that the city hadn’t annexed it and started building there. It was quite lovely.

Slowing down, Nilima turned onto a private road and followed it even higher up the hill. Although we passed a few other winding driveways, I didn’t see any houses. At the end of the road, we stopped in front of a duplex that was nestled in the middle of the pine forest.

Both sides of the duplex were mirror images of each other. Each had two floors with a garage and a small, shared courtyard. Each had a large bay window that looked out over the trees. The wood siding was painted cedar brown and midnight green, and the roof was covered with grayish-green shingles. In a way, it resembled a ski cabin.

Nilima glided smoothly into the garage and stopped the car. “We’re home,” she announced.

“Home? What do you mean? Aren’t we going to my foster parents’ house?” I asked, even more confused than I already was.

Nilima smiled understandingly. She told me gently, “No. This is your house.”

“My house? What are you talking about? I live in Dallas. Who lives here?”

“You do. Come inside and I’ll explain.”

We walked through a laundry room into the kitchen, which was small but had lemon-yellow curtains, brand new stainless-steel appliances, and walls decorated with lemon stencils. Nilima grabbed a couple of bottles of diet cola from the fridge.

I plopped my backpack down and said, “Okay, Nilima, now tell me what’s going on.”

She ignored my question. Instead, she offered me a soda, which I declined, and then told me to follow her.
Sighing, I slipped off my tennis shoes so I wouldn’t mess up the duplex’s plush carpeting and followed her to the small but cute living room. We sat on a beautiful chestnut leather sofa. A tall library cabinet full of classic hardbound books that probably cost a fortune beckoned invitingly from the corner, while a sunny window and a large, flat-screen television mounted above a polished cabinet also vied for my attention.

Nilima began rifling through papers left on a coffee table.

“Kelsey,” she began. “This house is yours. It’s part of the payment for your work in India this summer.”

“It’s not like I was really working, Nilima.”

“What you did was the most vital work of all. You accomplished much more than any of us even hoped. We all owe you a great debt, and this is a small way to reward your efforts. You’ve overcome tremendous obstacles and almost lost your life. We are all very grateful.”

Embarrassed, I teased, “Well, now that you put it that way—wait! You said this house is part of my payment? You mean there’s more?”

With a nod of her head, Nilima said, “Yes.”

“No. I really can’t accept this gift. An entire house is way too much—never mind anything else. It’s much more than we agreed on. I just wanted some money to pay for books for school. He shouldn’t do this.”

“Kelsey, he insisted.”

“Well, he will have to un-insist. This is too much, Nilima. Really.”

She sighed and looked at my face, which was set with steely determination. “He really wants you to have it, Kelsey. It will make him happy.”

“Well, it’s impractical! How does he expect me to catch the bus to school from here? I plan to enroll in college now that I’m back home, and this location isn’t exactly close to any bus routes.”

Nilima gave me a puzzled expression. “What do you mean catch the
bus? I guess if you really want to ride the bus, you could drive down to the bus station.”

“Drive down to the bus station? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Well, you aren’t making any sense. Why don’t you just drive your car to school?”

“My car? What car?”

“The one in the garage, of course.”

“The one in the. . . Oh, no. You have got to be kidding me!”

“No. I’m not kidding. The Porsche is for you.”

“Oh, no, it’s not! Do you know how much that car costs? No way!”

I pulled out my cell phone and searched for Mr. Kadam’s phone number. Right before I pressed SEND, I thought of something that stopped me in my tracks. “Is there anything else I should know?”

Nilima winced. “Well . . . he also took the liberty of signing you up at Western Oregon University. Your classes and books have already been paid for. Your books are on the counter next to your list of classes, a Western Wolf sweatshirt, and a map of the campus.”

“He signed me up for WOU?” I asked, incredulous. “I’d been planning on attending the local community college and working—not attending WOU.”

“He must have thought a university would be more to your liking. You start classes next week. As far as working goes, you may if you wish, but it will be unnecessary. He has also set up a bank account for you. Your new bank card is on the counter. Don’t forget to endorse it on the back.”

I swallowed. “And . . . uh . . . exactly how much money is in that bank account?”

Nilima shrugged. “I have no idea, but I’m sure it’s enough to cover your living expenses. Of course, none of your bills will be sent here. Everything will be mailed straight to an accountant. The house and the car are paid for, as well as all of your college expenses.”
She slid a whole bunch of paperwork my way and then sat back and sipped her diet soda.

Shocked, I sat motionless for a minute and then remembered my resolve to call Mr. Kadam. I opened my phone and searched for his number.

Nilima interrupted, “Are you sure you want to give everything back, Miss Kelsey? I know that he feels very strongly about this. He wants you to have these things.”

“Well, Mr. Kadam should know that I don’t need his charity. I’ll just explain that community college is more than adequate, and I really don’t mind staying in the dorm and taking the bus.”

Nilima leaned forward. “But, Kelsey, it wasn’t Mr. Kadam who arranged all of this.”

“What? If it wasn’t Mr. Kadam, then who. . . . Oh!” I snapped my phone shut. There was no way I was going to call him, no matter what. “So he feels strongly about this, does he?”

Nilima’s arched eyebrows drew together in pretty confusion, “Yes, I would say he does.”

It almost tore my heart to shreds to leave him. He was 7,196.25 miles away in India, and yet somehow he still manages to have a hold on me.

Under my breath, I grumbled, “Fine. He always gets what he wants anyway. There is no point in trying to give it back. He’ll just engineer some other over the top gift that will only serve to complicate our relationship even further.”

A car honked outside in the driveway.

“Well, that’s my ride back to the airport,” Nilima rose and said. “Oh! I almost forgot. This is for you too.” She pressed a brand-new cell phone in my hand, deftly switching it with my old phone, and hugged me quickly before walking to the front door.

“But, wait! Nilima!”
“Don’t worry, Miss Kelsey. Everything will be fine. The paperwork you need for school is on the kitchen counter. There’s food in the fridge, and all of your belongings are upstairs. You can take the car and visit your foster family later today if you wish. They are expecting your call.”

She turned, gracefully walked out the door, and climbed into the private car. She waved gaily from the passenger seat. I waved back morosely and watched until the sleek black sedan drove out of sight. Suddenly, I was all alone in a strange house, surrounded by quiet forest.

Once Nilima had gone, I decided to explore the place that I was now going to call home. Opening the fridge, I saw that the shelves were indeed fully stocked. Twisting a bottle cap off, I sipped a soda and peeked into the cupboards. There were glasses and plates, as well as cooking utensils, silverware, and pots and pans. On a hunch, I opened the bottom drawer of the refrigerator—and found it full of lemons. Clearly, this part was Mr. Kadam’s doing. The thoughtful man knew drinking lemon water would be a comfort to me.

Mr. Kadam’s interior design touch didn’t end in the kitchen, though. The downstairs half bath was decorated in sage green and lemon. Even the soap in the dispenser was lemon-scented.

I placed my shoes in a wicker basket on the tiled floor of the laundry room beside a new front-loading washer and dryer set and continued on to a small office.

My old computer sat in the middle of the desk, but right next to it was a brand new laptop. A leather chair, file drawers, and a shelf with paper and other supplies completed the office.

Grabbing my backpack, I headed upstairs to see my new bedroom. A lovely queen-sized bed with a thick ivory down comforter and peach accent pillows was nestled against the wall, and an old wooden trunk
sat at the foot. Cozy peach-colored reading chairs were arranged in the corner, facing the window overlooking the forest.

There was a note on the bed that lifted my spirits right up:

```
Hi, Kelsey!
Welcome home. Call us ASAP—
we want to hear all about your trip.
All of your things are stored away.
We love your new home!
Love,
Mike and Sarah
```

Reading Mike and Sarah’s note in addition to being back in Oregon grounded me. Their lives were normal. My life with them was normal, and it would be nice to be around a normal family and act like a normal human being for a change. Sleeping on jungle floors, talking to Indian goddesses, falling in love with a . . . tiger—none of that was normal. Not by a long shot.

I opened my closet and saw that my hair ribbon collection and clothes had indeed been moved from Mike and Sarah’s. I fingered through some things I hadn’t seen in a few months. When I opened the other side of the closet, I found all the clothes that had been purchased for me in India as well as several new items still in garment bags.

*How on earth did Mr. Kadam get this stuff here before me? I left all this in India.* I closed the door on the clothes and my memories, determined not to open that side of the closet again.

Moving to the dresser, I pulled open my top drawer. Sarah had arranged my socks exactly the way I liked them. Each pair of black, white, and assorted colored socks was wound into a neat ball and placed
in a row. Opening the next drawer wiped the smile right off my face. I
found the silky pajamas I had purposely left in India.

My chest burned as I ran my hand over the soft cloth and then
resolutely shut the drawer. Turning to leave the bright, airy room, a detail
suddenly hit me, causing my face to flush scarlet red. My bedroom was
peaches and cream.

He must have picked these colors, I surmised. He’d once said that I
smelled like peaches and cream. Figures he’d find a way to remind me of him
even from a continent away. As if I could forget . . .

I threw my backpack on the bed and instantly regretted it, realizing
that Fanindra was still inside. After taking her out carefully and
apologizing, I stroked her golden head and then put her on a pillow. I
took my new cell phone out of my jeans pocket. Like everything else,
the phone was expensive and totally unnecessary. It was designed by
Prada. I turned the phone on and expected his number to show up first,
but it didn’t. There weren’t any messages either. In fact, the only num-
bers stored on the phone were Mr. Kadam’s and my foster parents’.

Various emotions raced through my head. At first, I was relieved.
Then I was puzzled. Then I was disappointed. A part of me pondered,
It would have been nice of him to call. Just to see if I arrived okay.

Annoyed with myself, I called my foster parents and told them I
was home, tired from the flight, and that I would come over for dinner
the next night. Hanging up, I grimaced, wondering what kind of tofu
surprise would be in store for me. Whatever the health food meal turned
out to be, I would be happy to sit through it as long as I got a chance to
see them.

I wandered downstairs, turned on the stereo, made myself a snack
of apple slices with peanut butter, and started rifling through the college
papers on the counter. Mr. Kadam had chosen international studies as
my major, with a minor in art history.
I looked through my schedule. Mr. Kadam had managed somehow to get me, a freshman, into 300- and 400-level classes. Not only that, but he had also booked my classes for both the fall and the winter terms—even though winter registration wasn’t available yet.

WOU probably received a big, fat donation from India, I thought, smirking to myself. I wouldn’t be surprised to see a new building going up on campus this year.

KELSEY HAYES, STUDENT ID 69428L7
WESTERN OREGON UNIVERSITY

FALL TERM

College Writing 115 (4 credits). Introduction to thesis writing.

First Year Latin 101 (4 credits). Introduction to Latin.

Anthropology 476 D Religion and Ritual (4 credits). A study of the religious practices around the world. Delineates religious observance as seen through anthropology, while focusing on particular topics including spirit possession, mysticism, witchcraft, animism, sorcery, ancestor worship, and magic. Examines the blending of major world religions with local beliefs and traditions.

Geography 315 The Indian Subcontinent (4 credits). An examination of South Asia and its geography, with emphasis on India. Evaluates the economic relationship between India and other nations; studies patterns, issues, and challenges specifically related to geography; and explores the ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity of its people, historic and modern.

WINTER TERM

Art History 204 A Prehistoric through Romanesque (4 credits). A study of all art forms of that period with specific emphasis on historical and cultural relevance.

History 470 Women in Indian Society (4 credits). An examination of women in India, their belief systems, their cultural place in society, and associated mythology, past and present.
It was official. I was a college student now. Well, a college student and part time ancient Indian curse breaker, I thought, remembering Mr. Kadam’s continuing research in India. It was going to be difficult to focus on classes, teachers, and papers after everything that happened in India. It was especially odd knowing that I was supposed to carry on and go back to my old life in Oregon just like that. Somehow my old life didn’t seem to fit anymore.

Luckily, my WOU courses sounded interesting, especially religion and magic. Mr. Kadam’s selections were subjects I probably would have picked for myself—other than Latin. I wrinkled my nose. I’d never been too good with languages. Too bad WOU didn’t offer an Indian language. It would be nice to learn Hindi, especially if I’m going back to India at some point to tackle the remaining three tasks outlined on Durga’s prophecy that will break the tiger’s curse. Maybe . . .

Just then, “I Told You So” by Carrie Underwood came on the radio. Listening to the lyrics made me cry. Brushing a tear away, I considered that he probably would find somebody new very soon. I wouldn’t take me back if I were him. Letting myself think about him for even a minute was too painful. I tucked away my memories and folded them into a tiny wedge of my heart. Then, I shoved a whole bunch of new thoughts in place of the painful ones. I thought about school, my foster family, and being back in Oregon. I stacked those thoughts like books, one on top of the other, to try to suppress everything else.

For now, thinking about other things and other people was an
effective distraction. But I could still feel his ghost hovering in the quiet, dark recesses of my heart, waiting for me to be lonely or to let my guard down, so that he could fill my mind again with thoughts of him.

_I'll just have to stay busy, _I decided. _That will be my salvation. I'll study like mad and visit people and . . . and date other guys. Yes! That's what I can do. I'll go out with other people and stay active and then I'll be too tired to think about him. Life will go on. It has to._

By the time I headed for bed, it was late and I was tired. Patting Fanindra, I slipped under the sheets and slept.

The next day, my new cell phone rang. It was Mr. Kadam, which was both exciting and disappointing at the same time.

“Hello, Miss Kelsey,” he said cheerfully. “I am so glad to hear that you have arrived back home safely. I trust everything is in order and to your satisfaction?”

“I didn’t expect any of this,” I replied. “I feel supremely guilty about the house, the car, the credit card, and school.”

“Don’t give it a moment’s thought. I was happy to arrange it for you.”

Curiosity getting the better of me, I asked, “What’s going on with the prophecy? Have you figured it out yet?”

“I am attempting to translate the rest of the monolith you found. I sent someone back to Durga’s temple and had pictures taken of the other pillars. It appears each pillar features one of the four elements: earth, air, water, and fire.”

“That makes sense,” I said, remembering Durga’s prophecy. “The original pillar we found must have been related to earth since it showed farmers offering fruits and grains. Also, Kishkindha was underground and the first object Durga asked us to find was the Golden Fruit.”

“Yes, well it turns out that there was also a fifth pillar that was
destroyed a long time ago. It represented the element of space, which is common in the Hindu faith.”

“Well, if anyone can figure out what’s next, it’s you. Thank you for checking in on me,” I added before we both promised to speak again and hung up.

I studied my new textbooks for five hours and then headed to a toy store to buy orange-and-black stuffed animal tigers for Rebecca and Sammy since I’d completely forgotten to bring them back something from India. Against my better judgment, I also ended up buying an expensive, large, white stuffed tiger.

Back at home, I grabbed the tiger around the middle and buried my face in the fur. It was soft but didn’t smell right. He smelled wonderful, like sandalwood and waterfalls. This stuffed animal was just a replica. Its stripes were different, and its eyes were glassy—a lifeless, dull blue. His eyes were bright cobalt.

What on earth is wrong with me? I shouldn’t have bought it. It was just going to make forgetting him that much harder.

Shaking off the emotion, I pulled out a change of clothes and got ready to visit my foster family.

As I drove through town, I went the long way around so I could avoid the Polk County Fairgrounds and more painful memories. When I pulled in front of Mike and Sarah’s house, the door opened wide. Mike hurried toward me . . . but couldn’t resist getting a better look at the Porsche and ran past me to the car.

“Kelsey! May I?” he asked sweetly.

“Knock yourself out,” I said and laughed. Same old Mike, I thought and tossed him the keys so he could drive himself around the block a few times.

Sarah put her arm around my waist and guided me toward the house. “We’re so glad to see you! Both of us are!” She yelled and frowned at Mike who waved happily before backing out of the driveway.
“We were worried when you first left for India because we didn’t receive too many calls from you, but Mr. Kadam phoned every other day and explained what you were doing and told us how busy you were.”

“Oh? And what did he say, exactly?” I asked, curious to know what story he had made up.

“Well, it’s all very exciting, isn’t it? Let’s see. He talked about your new job and about how you will be interning every summer and working with him on various projects from time to time. I had no idea that you were interested in international studies. That is a wonderful major. Very fascinating. He also said that when you graduate, you can work for his company full time. It’s a fantastic opportunity!”

I smiled at her. “Yes, Mr. Kadam’s great. I couldn’t ask for a better boss. He treats me more like a granddaughter than like an employee, and he spoils me terribly. I mean, you saw the house and the car, and then there’s school too.”

“He did speak very fondly of you over the phone. He even admitted to us that he’s come to depend on you. He’s a very nice man. He also insists that you are . . . how did he say it . . . ‘an investment that will have a big payoff in the future.’”

I shot Sarah a dubious look. “Well, I hope he’s right about that.”

She laughed and then sobered. “We know you’re special, Kelsey, and you deserve great things. Maybe this is the universe’s way of balancing the loss of your parents. Though I know nothing will ever take the place of them.”

I nodded. She was happy for me. And, knowing that I would be financially secure enough to live comfortably on my own was probably a big relief to them.

Sarah hugged me and pulled a strange-smelling dish out of the oven. She placed it on the table, and said, “Now, let’s eat!”

Feigning enthusiasm, I asked, “So . . . what’s for dinner?”
“Tofu and spinach whole wheat organic lasagna with soy cheese and flax seed.”

“Yum, I can’t wait,” I said and wrestled a half-smile to my face. I thought fondly of the magical Golden Fruit that I had left behind in India. The divine object could make the most delicious food appear instantly. In Sarah’s hands, maybe even a healthy meal would taste good. I snuck a bite. *Then again . . .*

Rebecca, six years old, and Samuel, four years old, ran into the room and bounced up and down trying to get my attention. I hugged them both and directed them to the table. Then I went to the window to see if Mike was back yet. He had just parked the Porsche and was walking backward to the front door, staring at the car.

I opened the door. “Umm, Mike, it’s time for dinner.”

He replied over his shoulder, never taking his eyes off the car, “Sure, sure. Be right there.”

Sitting between the kids, I scooped up a wedge of lasagna for each of them and took a tiny piece for myself. Sarah raised her eyebrow, and I rationalized my small portion by saying that I’d had a big lunch. Mike finally came in and started chatting animatedly about the Porsche. He asked if he could take Sarah on a date and borrow the car some Friday night.

“Sure. I’ll even come over and babysit for you.”

He beamed while Sarah rolled her eyes. “Who are you planning on taking out, me or the car?” she asked.

“You, of course, my dear. The car is just a vehicle to showcase the beautiful woman sitting at my side.”

Sarah and I looked at each other and snickered.

“Good one, Mike,” I said.

After dinner, we retired to the living room where I gave the kids their orange tigers. They squealed in delight and ran around growling at each other. Sarah and Mike asked me all kinds of questions about India, and
I talked about the ruins of Hampi and Mr. Kadam’s house. Technically, it wasn’t his, but they didn’t need to know that. Then they asked me about how Mr. Maurizio’s circus tiger was adapting to his new home.

I froze, but only for an instant, and told them that he was doing fine and that he seemed very happy there. Thankfully, Mr. Kadam had explained that we were often out exploring Indian ruins and cataloging artifacts. He’d said my job was to be his assistant, keeping records of his findings, and taking notes, which wasn’t too far from the truth. It also explained why I was going to minor in art history.

Being with them was fun, but it also wore me out because I had to make sure I didn’t slip and tell them anything too weird. They’d never believe all the things that had happened to me. Sometimes I had a hard time believing it myself.

Knowing they went to bed early, I gathered my things and said goodnight. I hugged them all good-bye and promised to visit again the next week.

When I got home, I spent a couple of hours studying and then took a hot shower. Climbing into bed in my dark room, I gasped quietly as my hand brushed against fur. Then I remembered my purchase, shoved the stuffed tiger to the edge of the bed, and tucked my hand under my cheek.

I couldn’t stop thinking about him. I wondered what he was doing right now and if he was thinking of me or if he even missed me at all. Was he pacing in the steamy jungle? Were he and Kishan fighting? Would I ever get back to India—and did I really want to? I felt like I was playing whack-a-mole with my thoughts. Every time I punched one thought down, another one would surface in a different place. I couldn’t win; they kept popping up from my subconscious. Sighing, I reached over, grabbed the leg of the stuffed tiger, and pulled it back onto the bed. Wrapping my arms around its middle, I buried my nose in its fur and fell asleep on its paw.
The next few days spun past quickly and uneventfully, and then it was time to start school. I collected my term assignments from each class and realized that my experiences in India would come in handy. I could write about Hampi for my research paper on an Indian metropolis, discuss the lotus flower as a religious symbol in anthropology, and theme my world religion final around Durga. The only class that seemed overly challenging was Latin.

Soon I had settled into a comfortable routine. I saw Sarah and Mike often, went to class, and I spoke to Mr. Kadam every Friday. The first week he helped me with an oral report on the SUV versus the Nano and between his vast knowledge of cars and my hair-raising description of actually driving in India, I got the best grade in the class. My mind was so full of assignments that I had very little time to worry about anything else—or to think about anyone else.

One Friday phone call brought an interesting surprise. After chatting about school and my latest paper about the weather patterns in the Himalayas, Mr. Kadam broached a new topic.

“I’ve signed you up for another class,” Mr. Kadam began. “One that I think you will enjoy, but it will take up more of your time. If you are too busy, I’ll understand.”
“Actually, another class would probably be a good idea,” I replied, curious to know what he had planned for me next.

“Wonderful! I have signed you up for a wushu class in Salem,” Mr. Kadam explained. “The class is on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays from 6:30 to 8:00 p.m.”

“Wushu? What’s that? Is it some kind of Indian language?” I asked, hoping that wasn’t the case.

Mr. Kadam laughed. “Oh, I do miss having you around. No, wushu is a type of Chinese martial arts. You mentioned once that you were interested in trying martial arts, correct?”

I breathed out a sigh of relief. “Oh! Yes, that sounds like fun. Yes, I can fit it into my schedule. When do classes start?”

“Next Monday. I anticipated that you would say yes, and I have sent a package with the necessary materials. You can expect it to arrive tomorrow.”

“Mr. Kadam, you really don’t have to do all this for me. You need to restrain yourself from piling on more gifts, or I’ll never be able to pay back this debt.”

He chided, “Miss Kelsey, there is nothing I could ever do that would come even close to paying the debt I owe you. Please accept these things. It makes an old man’s heart very happy.”

I laughed. “Okay, Mr. Kadam, don’t get all dramatic about it. I’ll accept if it makes you happy. But, the jury’s still out on the car.”

“We’ll see about that. By the way, I have deciphered a bit of the second pillar. It may have something to do with air, but it’s too soon to draw any conclusions just yet. That’s one of the reasons I’d like you to learn wushu. It will help you develop a better balance of mind and body, which may prove to be helpful if your next adventure takes place off the ground.”

“Well, I certainly don’t mind learning how to fight and defend
myself too. Wushu would have come in handy against the Kappa.” I joked and continued, “Are the translations difficult?”

“They’re very . . . challenging. The geographical markers that I have translated are not found on the Indian continent. At this point, I worry that the other three objects we’re looking for could be anywhere in the world. Either that, or my brain is too tired.”

“Did you stay up all night again? You need your sleep. Make yourself some chamomile tea and go rest for a while.”

“Perhaps you are right. Maybe I will have some tea and do some light reading on the Himalayas for your paper.”

“You do that. The resting part, I mean. I miss you.”

“I miss you too, Miss Kelsey. Good-bye.”

“Bye.”

For the first time since being home, I felt a surge of adrenaline rush through my body. But, as soon as I hung up the phone, depression kicked in again. I looked forward to our weekly phone calls and always felt sad when they were over. It was the same kind of feeling I would get after Christmas. Holiday anticipation would build up for the whole month. Then, when the presents were opened, the food was eaten, and the people left to go their separate ways, I always experienced a gloomy feeling of loss.

Deep down, I knew that the real reason I was sad was because there was only one present that I wished for. I wished he would call. He never did, though. And each week that passed without hearing his voice destroyed my hope. I knew I was the one who left India so he could start a life with someone else. I should have been happy for him. I was, in a way, but I was also devastated for myself.

I had the vacation-is-over-now-it’s-time-to-go-back-to-school blues. He was my ultimate present, my own personal miracle, and I’d blown it. I’d given him away. It was like winning backstage passes to meet the
rock star of your dreams and donating the tickets to charity. It sucked. Big time.

Saturday, my mysterious martial arts package arrived via courier. It was large and heavy. I pushed it into the living room and grabbed my office scissors to cut through the tape. Inside, I found black and red workout pants and T-shirts, each bearing the Shing Martial Arts Studio logo which showed one man throwing a punch to the face, and another kicking a foot toward his opponent’s abdomen.

I also pulled out two pairs of shoes and a silky red jacket and pants set. The jacket had black frog clasps in the front and a black sash. I had no idea when or how I would ever have need to wear this, but it was pretty.

What made the box heavy was the assortment of weapons I found inside. There were a couple of swords, some hooks, chains, a three-section staff, and several other things that I’d never seen before.

*If Mr. Kadam is trying to turn me into a ninja, he’ll be very disappointed,* I thought, remembering how I froze during the panther attack. *I wonder if Mr. Kadam is right and I’ll need these skills. I guess they’d come in handy if I return to India and have to fight whatever stands in the way of obtaining Durga’s second gift.* The idea made the hair on the back of my neck stand straight up.

Monday, I walked into my Latin class early, and my happy routine hit a snag when Artie, the lab assistant, approached my desk. He stood very close to me. Too close. I looked up at him hoping the conversation would be quick so he could move out of my personal space.

Artie was the only guy I’d seen in a long time brave enough to wear a sweater-vest with a bow tie. The sad thing was the sweater-vest was too small. He had to keep pulling it down over his rather large stomach. He looked like the kind of guy who belonged in a musty old college.

“Hi, Artie. How are you?” I asked impatiently.
Artie pushed his thick glasses up the bridge of his nose with his middle finger and popped open his day planner. He got right to the point. “Hey, are you free at 5:00 p.m. on Wednesday?”

He stood with his pencil raised and his double chin tucked up against his neck. His brown watery eyes bore into mine as he waited expectantly for my reply.

“Umm . . . sure, I guess. Does the professor need to see me for something?”

Artie scratched busily in his planner, shifting some things and erasing others. He ignored my question. Then, he closed his planner with a POP, tucked it under his arm, and yanked his brown sweater-vest down to his belt buckle. I tried not to notice when the material inched back up.

He smiled weakly at me. “Not at all. That’s when I’ll be picking you up for our date.” Without another word, Artie stepped around me and headed toward the door.

*Did I hear him right? What just happened?*

“Artie, wait. What do you mean?”

Class was getting started, and the sweater vest turned the corner and was gone. I plopped down in my seat and puzzled through our cryptic conversation. *Maybe he doesn’t mean a date-date,* I reasoned. *Maybe his definition of a date and mine are different. That must be it. Better check to make sure, though.*

I tried unsuccessfully to catch Artie in the lab all day. Clarification on the date would have to wait.

That night was my first wushu class. I dressed in the black pants, a T-shirt, and the white slippers. I left the top down on the convertible as I drove through the forest into Salem. My whole body relaxed as the cool evening breeze moved around me. The just-setting sun was turning the clouds purple, pink, and orange.
The martial arts studio was large and took up half the building. I wandered into the back. An open area was surrounded by mirrors and large blue mats that covered the floor. There were five other people already there. Three young men and one fit young woman were warming up off to one side. Stretching on the floor in another corner was a middle-aged woman who reminded me of my mom. She smiled up at me, and I could tell she was a little scared, but she also had a determined gleam in her eye. I sat down by her and bent over my legs. “Hi, I’m Kelsey.”

“Jennifer.” She blew her bangs out of her face. “Nice to meet you.”

Our teacher wandered into the studio, accompanied by a young man. The white-haired instructor seemed old but very spry and tough. In a thick accent, he introduced himself as Chu . . . something, but said we should call him Chuck. The young man next to him was his grandson, Li. Li was a younger version of his grandfather. His black hair was cropped short, and he had a tall, wiry, muscular frame and a nice smile.

Chuck started the lesson with a short speech: “Wushu is Chinese martial arts. You know about the Shaolin monks? They do wushu. My studio’s name is Shing, which means ‘victory.’ You will all have a chance to feel victory as you master wushu. Do you know the name kung fu?”

We all nodded.

“Kung fu means ‘skill.’ Kung fu is not a style of martial arts. It just means you have skill. Maybe the skill is riding horses or swimming. Wushu is a style. Wushu is kicks, stretching, gymnastics, and weapons. Now, who are famous people that use wushu?”

Nobody answered.

“Jet Li, Bruce Lee, and Jackie Chan all use wushu. First, I will teach you greetings. This is how you greet your teacher each class. I say, ‘Ni hao ma?’ And you say, ‘Wo hen hao.’ This means ‘How are you?’ And ‘I am fine.’”
“Ni hao ma?”
We responded with a stuttered, “Woo hena how.”
“Wo . . . hen . . . hao.”
“Wo hen hao.”
Chuck grinned at us. “Very good, class! Now let’s start with some stretching.”

He guided us through calf and arm stretching and then encouraged us to sit on the floor and reach for our toes. He said he wanted us to stretch several times a day to increase our flexibility. Then he had us do splits. Four of my classmates were doing fine, but I felt bad for Jennifer. She was already huffing and puffing just from the stretching, and she was making a very determined effort to sink down into splits.

Chuck smiled at all of us, including his struggling student, encouraging her on. Next, he brought his grandson forward to demonstrate the first stance he wanted us to work on. It was called a horse stance, which looked like it sounded. From there, we moved into bow stance, which killed my calf muscles, and the cat stance. The flat stance was the hardest. The feet stay parallel, but the body has to twist awkwardly to the side. The last one we learned was the rest stance, which didn’t turn out to be restful at all.

For the remainder of the class, we practiced the five different stances. Li helped me position my feet properly and spent some time demonstrating the flat stance, but I still couldn’t get it. He was very encouraging and smiled at me often.

Jennifer was red-faced but seemed happy when our class was over. The time flew by very quickly. The exercise felt good, and I looked forward to my next class—which was the same night as my date with Artie.

I looked for Artie in the language lab three times on Tuesday to clear things up and hopefully cancel. When we finally connected, Artie made
a big show of rescheduling our date and kept flipping pages in his day planner until I ran out of excuses. I started to feel guilty and decided that it wouldn’t kill me to go out with the guy just once. Even though I had zero romantic interest in Artie, he could end up being a friend. So I accepted an invitation later in the month.

The next couple of weeks passed without incident, but I soon found myself in another unusual situation. My anthropology partner, Jason, asked me to the homecoming football game.

His request totally surprised me. Then something snapped in my brain, and I realized I’d missed all the clues that he’d been sending. I’d been looking at the world through a film of plastic wrap. My mind was so focused on schoolwork that I had assumed he just wanted to work too.

Jason seemed like a nice guy, but he didn’t hold a candle to the man I left behind in India. I quickly made a mental list of each, and Jason’s side came out short. I knew it wasn’t fair to compare the two. Nobody could compete with him. Still, Jason didn’t make me feel excited or scared, happy, or nervous. My heart didn’t race with anticipation. I couldn’t even tell if we had any chemistry. I just felt numb.

I have to get over him someday. I have to move on, and try to date, I told myself. I bit my lip. He’s probably ruined my chances of being happy with someone else. How could I ever like other men when they couldn’t possibly compare with him?

Disgusted with my circular argument, I told Jason I would love to go with him to the football game. He seemed delighted at the prospect, but I worried that he mistook my enthusiasm to forget the past with my interest in him.

That night in wushu class, we learned kicks. There were several types: the front stretch-kick, the side stretch-kick, inside and outside circle-kicks, and heel-palm-kicks. My favorite was toe-fist-kick. It made me finally feel like I could punch something.
We practiced kicks all evening until Chuck started randomly calling out kicks to see how fast we could remember them. During the last part of the class, we teamed up in pairs, and I worked with Jennifer. Li asked me to demonstrate the kicks and helped position my arms properly, guiding me through the stance, before moving on. Soon, Li announced that class was over. I thanked him and practiced some more on my own.

“Li likes you,” Jennifer whispered conspiratorially when I had finished. “I don’t know if he’ll muster up the courage to do anything about it, but it’s obvious. He watches you all the time. How do you feel about him?”

“I don’t have any feelings about him. He’s a nice guy, but I never thought of him that way.”

“Oh. There’s someone else.”

I frowned at the thought. “No. Not anymore.”

“Oh, honey, you can’t just let life pass you by while you nurse a broken heart. You have to get back up on that horse and try again. Life is too short not to have love in it.”

I knew she’d been happily married for fifteen years. Her husband was a sweet, balding man who obviously adored her. Every night after class he told her that she looked amazing and was getting so thin that he couldn’t see her from the side anymore. Then he’d kiss her damp curly brown hair and open her car door. If anyone was an expert on love, it was probably Jennifer.

I thought about what she’d said. I knew she was right. But how do you change your heart?

Jennifer smiled sympathetically, gathered her things, and squeezed my shoulder. “See you next week, Kelsey.”

I waved as they drove away and stared out at the black, empty street for a few minutes, lost in thought. When I turned back to gather my things, I noticed that everyone had left already. Li was standing by the front door, waiting patiently for me to go so he could lock up.
“Sorry, Li. I guess I just lost track of time.”
He grinned at me. “No problem.”
I scooped up my towel, car keys, and water bottle and headed for the door.

Just as I got into my car, Li called out, “Hey, Kelsey. Wait.” He ran over to my door as I rolled down the window. “I wanted to invite you to a game night. A bunch of my friends are getting together on Halloween to play Settlers of Catan. It’s a build-up-your-empire type of game, and there will be good eats. My grandma loves to cook. Would you like to come? I can teach you to play.”

“Umm.” I didn’t have any plans for Halloween. I knew kids wouldn’t come up to my house because it was way too far off the beaten path. Going over to Mike and Sarah’s didn’t seem like a good option either. All the neighborhood kids avoided their house because they gave out sugarless treats and lectured the parents on the evils of too many sweets.

Li was still standing there waiting for an answer; so I gave him one. “Sure, it sounds like fun.”
He smiled. “Great! See ya!”

I drove home feeling weird. When I walked in the door, I threw my bag on the couch and pulled a bottle of water out of the fridge. I went upstairs, opened the door to my bedroom balcony, and sat on a deck chair. Leaning my head back, I stared up at the stars.

Three dates. I had three dates in two weeks, and I wasn’t looking forward to any of them. Something was definitely wrong with me.
DATE 1
I couldn’t believe the time for my date with Artie had arrived so quickly. I drove to campus, parked, and sat in the car, stalling. I really didn’t want to go out with Artie. His persistence had paid off, and I suspected it wasn’t the first time he had used the same tactic.

Resigned to get the date over with, I made my way to the language lab. Artie was standing there staring at his watch with a brown package tucked under his arm. I wandered over to him and slid my hands into my jean pockets.

“Hi, Kelsey. Come on. We’re running late,” he said and walked briskly down the hall. “I have to drop a package off at the post office first for an old friend.”

He wasn’t only big. He was tall, and his stride was much longer than mine. I had to almost jog to keep up with him. Artie strode right through the parking lot, turned onto a sidewalk, and started heading for town.

“Uh, shouldn’t we take your car?” I asked. “The post office is a mile-and-a-half away.”

“Oh, no. I don’t own a car. They’re much too expensive.”

Good thing I wore my tennis shoes, I thought.
Artie was walking silently and stiffly ahead. I decided it was probably up to me to get the conversation going. “So . . . who's the package for?”

“It’s for my old high school girlfriend. She goes to another school, and I like to keep in touch. She dates lots of people on and off, the same as me,” Artie boasted. “I date lots of girls. You should see my day planner. I’ve got dates lined up for years.”

It was the longest walk of my life. I tried to pretend I was walking in the Indian jungle, but it was too cold. The sky was dark and overcast, and a stiff wind was blowing. It wasn’t walking-outside weather. I shivered in my jacket and passed the time half-listening to Artie and half-admiring the houses that were decorated for Halloween.

We finally reached the post office, where Artie mailed his package. I looked around at the different tiny restaurants on Main Street and wondered which one we would be dining at. I was starving. I’d forgotten to eat lunch because I was too wrapped up in studying. The smell of Chinese food wafting from next door was mouthwatering.

By the time Artie finally stepped outside, I was really cold. I clapped my hands and rubbed them together for warmth. If I had known we’d be outside this long, I would have brought gloves. It turned out Artie had a pair of leather gloves in his pocket, but he put them on his own hands.

My glutton-for-punishment brain insisted that he would have given me his gloves. Heck, he would have given me the shirt off his back if he thought I might have need of it.

“So, where to next?” I asked. My eyes darted hopefully over to the Chinese restaurant.

“Back to campus. I have a real treat in store for you.”

I tried to plaster an enthusiastic smile on my face. “That’s . . . great.”

On the long walk back to campus, Artie talked about himself. He spoke about his childhood and family. He described all the awards he had won and mentioned that he was president of five clubs, including
the chess club. He never asked one question about me. I would have been shocked if he even knew my last name.

My mind wandered to a conversation with a very different man.

I heard his warm, hypnotic voice very clearly. Suddenly, I was standing under a tree. The tree where I’d said good-bye. The tree where I’d last gazed into his cobalt blue eyes. The cold, chafing wind of Oregon dropped far away, and I felt a balmy Indian summer breeze blow softly through my hair. The gray overcast evening faded, and I was looking up at twinkling stars in a night sky. He touched my face and spoke.

“Kelsey, the fact is . . . I’m in love with you. And I have been for some time. I don’t want you to leave. Please . . . please . . . please . . . tell me you’ll stay with me.”

He was so beautiful, like a warrior-angel sent from heaven. How could I have denied him anything, especially when all he wanted was me?

“I want to give you something. It’s an anklet. They’re very popular here, and I got this one so we’d never have to search for a bell again.”

My ankle tingled as I remembered his fingers brushing against it.

“Kells, please. I need you.”

How could I leave him?

My mind snapped back to the present, and I struggled to contain the strong emotions that surfaced when I allowed myself to think about him. As Artie droned on about how he’d won the debate championship single-handedly, I berated myself for allowing my thoughts to take me to a dangerous place. The fact was, even if I was having second thoughts about my choice to leave, he hadn’t called. That proved that I made the right decision, didn’t it? If he really loved me as much as he said he did, he would have tried to contact me. He would have pursued me. He would have come for me. He needed space. I was right to leave him. Maybe now I could start healing and let him go.

I wrenched my attention back to Artie and made a real effort to
listen to his conversation. There was absolutely no way Artie was the right guy for me—or for any girl for that matter, but that didn’t mean I was out of options. I still had a date with Jason tomorrow and one with Li next week.

When Artie and I arrived back on campus, my stomach was growling so loudly that it could be heard within a three-block radius. I seriously hoped that we would be eating at the campus café soon.

He led me to the Hamersly Library media center, asked for two headsets, and gave the lady a paper. Then, he pushed two wooden chairs in front of a six-inch, black-and-white television in the corner of the media section.

“Isn’t this a great idea? We can watch a movie, and I don’t have to spend a dime!” He grinned while my mouth dropped open. “It’s very clever, don’t you think?”

I pursed my lips. “Oh, it’s clever alright.”

I quickly shut my mouth after that and bit back a sarcastic reply. Did he think girls actually liked to be treated this way? It wasn’t that a date had to be expensive or that any money had to be spent at all. What annoyed me was that Artie was smug about everything and he didn’t think his dates were important enough to listen to. I felt disgusted and hungry. As the movie started, he slipped giant gray earphones over his ears and pointed to mine.

I dusted mine off with my shirt, plugged in the cord, and slammed the headphones over my ears, very irritated that I would be sitting there for two more hours. The opening credits of the movie Brigadoon flashed across the screen, and I mentally sent messages to Gene Kelly to dance faster.

An hour into the movie, Artie made a move. He was still staring straight ahead at the tiny movie screen when he picked up his heavy arm and settled it on the back of my wooden chair.
I peeked at him out of the corner of my eye. He had a slight smirk on his face. I imagined he was mentally checking off a task in his planner.

- ✔ Seduce date by talking about other girls
- ✔ Impress date with number of awards you have received
- ✔ Do not spend money on date
- ✔ Make date watch corny movie in media center
- ✔ Sneak in comments about your frugality
- ✔ Put arm around date at exactly the halfway mark of the movie

I leaned forward and sat uncomfortably on the edge of my seat for the entire second half of the movie. Making the excuse that I needed to use the restroom, I stood up. He did too and walked over to the lady at the desk. As I walked by, I overheard him asking her to stop the movie and rewind it just a bit so we would remember where we left off.

*Great! That adds five more minutes to this fantastic experience!* I hurried as fast as I could because I was worried that he might try to start the whole thing over again. I considered the idea of running madly out of the building, but he could see the bathroom door from where we were sitting, and it would be rude. I was determined to just suffer through the last part of the movie, and then run home.

Finally, finally, the movie was over, and I jumped up like someone had just pulled the fire alarm.

“Okay, Artie. Well, this was great. My car is parked just outside, so I’ll see you on Monday, okay? Thanks for the date.”

Unfortunately, he didn’t take a hint and insisted on walking me to my car. I opened the door and quickly wedged my body behind it.

He put his hand on the car door and leaned his corpulent body toward me. His bow tie was a few inches from my nose. He forced an awkward unnatural smile to his face.
“Well, I had a great time and want to go out with you again next week,” Artie said. “How about next Friday?”

_Better nip this one in the bud._

“Can’t. I have another date planned already.”

He pressed forward undeterred. “Oh.” He didn’t even blink. “What about Saturday?”

I searched my brain frantically for an escape. “Uh . . . I didn’t bring my planner with me, so I don’t know my schedule that far ahead.”

He nodded as if that made perfect sense.

“Look, I have a terrible headache, Artie. I’ll see you in lab next week, okay?”

“Okay, sure. I’ll call you later.”

I quickly slipped into my car and shut the door. Grinning, because I knew I’d never given him my phone number, I drove through the quiet streets of Monmouth and up the mountain to my peaceful home.

**DATE 2**

For my next date, I was better prepared for the weather. I wore my red WOU sweatshirt and also brought a thicker coat and a red cashmere scarf and gloves that I had found tucked in a drawer. Normally, I would have shunned anything he had bought for me, but I didn’t have time to buy new ones, and even if I did I’d be using his money anyway.

I met Jason in the stadium parking lot and immediately began cataloging his good qualities. He was cute, a little on the skinny side and shorter than average, but he dressed decently and was smart. Leaning up against his old Corolla, he raised his eyebrows in shock when he saw me emerge from the Porsche.

“Wow, Kelsey! Nice wheels!”

“Thanks.”

“Are you ready?”

“Yep. Lead the way.”
We shuffled into the crowd of people heading over to the football field. Most were wearing red or Western Wolf shirts, but there were also the navy-blue-and-white colors of the opponent, Western Washington University, scattered here and there. Even a couple of Viking hats were bobbing up and down in the crowd. Jason led me to a truck surrounded by couples having a tailgate party. A small grill was full of smoking sausages and hamburgers.

“Hey, guys! I want to introduce you to Kelsey. We met in our anthro class.”

Several faces peered over and around their neighbors to get a good glimpse. I waved shyly back at them. “Hi.”

I heard a couple of “Hey, there’s,” and “Nice to meet you’s,” and then they went back to their conversations, forgetting we were there.

Jason filled up a plate for me and then popped open a cooler. “Hey, Kelsey, want a beer?”

I shook my head. “Soda, please. Diet, if you have it.” He handed me an icy diet soda, grabbed a beer for himself, and pointed to two empty lawn chairs.

Sitting down, he immediately rammed half his hot dog in his mouth and chewed loudly. It was almost as bad as watching a tiger eat. Lucky for me, it was a little less bloody.

_Ugh. What’s with me? Am I intentionally looking for things that annoy me? I really have to chill out or Jennifer’s right: I’m going to miss out on life._ I looked away from him and started picking at my food.

“So, you aren’t a drinker, eh, Kelsey?”

“Umm, I guess not. I’m underage first of all. Secondly, alcohol lost all appeal for me when my parents were killed by a drunk driver a few years back.”

“Oh. Sorry.” He grimaced and scooted his beer out of sight under the chair.

I mentally groaned. _What am I doing?_ Immediately, I apologized,
“It’s okay, Jason. Sorry to be such a downer. I promise I’ll be much more perky at the game.”

“No problem. Don’t give it a second thought.” He went back to scarfing down his food and laughing with his friends.

The problem was that I did give it a second thought. I knew my parents’ death wasn’t something you should normally bring up on a first date, but . . . I knew that he would have reacted very differently from the way Jason did. Maybe it was because he was older, more than three hundred years older. Or maybe it was because he wasn’t American. Maybe it was because he’d lost his parents too. Or maybe it was because he was just . . . perfect.

I tried to shut it down, but I couldn’t help myself. I flashed back to a time when I woke up from a nightmare featuring my parents’ death, and he was there to comfort me. I could still feel his hand wiping the tears from my cheeks as he pulled me onto his lap.

“Shh, Kelsey. I’m here. I’m not leaving you, priya. Hush now. Mein aapka raksha karunga. I will watch over you, priyatama.” He’d stroked my hair and whispered soothing words to me until I felt the dream fade.

Since then, I’d had time to look up the words I didn’t understand in India. I’m with you. I’ll take care of you. My beloved. My sweetheart. If he were here with me now, he would’ve pulled me into a hug or onto his lap, and we would have been sad together. He would have stroked my back and understood how I felt.

I shook myself. No. No, he wouldn’t. He might have once, but now he’s moved on. He’s gone now, and it doesn’t matter anymore what he would have done or how he would have reacted. It’s over.

Jason was filling another plate, and I tried to look interested and involve myself in the conversation. Half an hour later, we all got up to head to the football field.

It was nice being outside in the crisp fall air, but the benches were
cold, and my nose was frozen. The cold didn’t seem to bother Jason and his friends. They stood up and cheered a lot. I tried to join in, but I never knew what I was cheering about. The ball was too far away and too small for me to see much. I’d never had much interest in football. I much preferred movies and books.

I glanced up at the scoreboard. The first half clock was running down. Two minutes. One minute. Twenty seconds. BZZZZ! The timer sounded, and both teams ran off the field. The homecoming parade started and several antique cars drove around the outside of the field. Beautiful girls dressed in chiffon and silk were perched up on the top of the backseats, waving at the crowd.

Jason joined all the other guys in wolf whistles and screamed out his appreciation with the frenzied throng. The scent of sandalwood drifted over the bleachers, and a silky soft voice whispered in my ear, “You are more beautiful than any woman out there.”

I whipped my head around, but he wasn’t behind me. Jason was still standing up and screaming with his friends. I slumped back in my seat. Great. Now I’m hallucinating. I pressed my knuckles to my head and pushed, hoping the pressure would shove him back to the recesses of my mind.

When the second half of the game started, I stopped trying to feign enthusiasm. This was the second date that had turned me into a popsicle. My body slowly froze to the bench, and my teeth chattered. After the game, Jason walked me back to my car and awkwardly put an arm around my shoulder, massaging it to try to warm me up, but he rubbed too hard and left my shoulder sore. I didn’t even bother to ask who had won.

“Hey, Kelsey, I had a great time getting to know you better tonight.” Did he get to know me at all? “Yeah, me too.”

“So, can I call you later?”
I considered that for a minute. Jason wasn’t a bad guy; he was just a guy. First dates were usually awkward anyway, so I decided to give him another shot.

“Yeah, sure. You know where you can find me.” I gave him a half-hearted smile.

“Right. Catch ya in anthro on Monday. See ya.”

“Yep, see ya.”

He headed back to his wild group of friends, and I wondered if we had anything in common at all.

**DATE 3**
Before I knew it, it was Halloween—and my date with Li.

There was something about Li that made me feel very comfortable. He was more fun to be around than Jason, and I grudgingly admitted that it was very possible I felt more relaxed around Li because he reminded me a little of the man I was trying to forget.

Reluctantly, I pulled back the door to the closet that I vowed never to open and found a long-sleeved, burnt-orange top designed to look like a short trench coat. It was accented with wooden buttons and a tie belt. To go with it was a pair of dark blue stretch denim jeans. They fit perfectly, like they’d been tailored just for me. A dark pair of boots sat in the bottom of the bag and, slipping those on, I twirled in front of the mirror. The outfit made me look tall and chic and well...stylish, which was not my norm.

I left my hair cascading down my back in curly waves for a change. Dabbing on some apricot lip gloss, I drove to the studio, being careful to go slower than usual to avoid any wandering trick-or-treaters.

Li was sitting in his car listening to music and bobbing his head up and down. As soon as he spotted me, he immediately turned off the radio and got out of his car.
He grinned. “Wow, Kelsey! You look great!”

I laughed easily with him. “Thanks, Li. It’s very nice of you to say that. If you’re ready to go, I can follow you to your grandmother’s.”

I walked back to my car, but Li raced past me and opened the door. “Whew, I almost didn’t make it!” He grinned at me again. “My grandfather always taught me to open doors for ladies.”

“Oh. Well, you are the perfect gentleman.”

He bowed his head slightly, laughed, and then walked back to his car. He drove slowly too, and checked his rearview mirror often to make sure I made it through the intersections. We stopped in a nice, older neighborhood.

“This is my grandparents’ house,” Li explained as we stepped into the foyer. “We always meet here for game night because they have the biggest table. Plus, my grandma is a great cook.”

Li took my hand and pulled me into a cute kitchen that smelled better than any Chinese restaurant I’d ever been to. A tiny white-haired woman was peering into a rice cooker. When she looked up, her glasses were steamy.

“Kelsey, this is Grandma Zhi. Grandma Zhi, huó Kelsey.”

She smiled, nodded, and grasped my fingers in hers. “Hello. Nice to meet you.”

I smiled back. “Nice to meet you too.”

Li dipped his finger into a simmering pot, and she picked up a wooden spoon and smacked him lightly across the knuckles. Then she chastised him in Mandarin.

He laughed while she clucked her tongue fondly. “See you later, Grandma.” I caught her smiling proudly at him as we turned the corner.

I followed him to the dining room. All the furniture had been moved to the side to make space for the large dining table, which had been extended with four leaves. Huddled around the table was a group of
Asian boys who were having a heated discussion about the placement of tiles on the game board. Li walked me over to the group.

“Hey, guys. This is Kelsey. She’s going to be playing with us tonight.”

One guy waggled his eyebrows, “Alright, Li!”

“No wonder he took so long.”

“You’re lucky that Wen bought the expansion kit.”

There were other various mutterings and some chair shifting. I thought I caught one quiet comment about bringing a girl to the party, but I couldn’t tell who was talking. After a few moments, everybody settled down to begin the game.

Li sat next to me and guided me through the game process. At first, I never knew if it was a wise decision to trade wheat for brick or ore for sheep, but I could always look to Li for help. After a few turns, I started to feel confident enough to hold my own. I changed two of my settlements for cities, and all the boys groaned.

Near the end of the game, it was obvious that the final point was going to be a race between a boy named Shen and me. He ribbed me good-naturedly about how he was so close that I’d never make it. I put down a sheep, an ore, and a wheat and bought a development card. It was a bonus point, the last one of the game.

“I win!”

The boys grumbled about beginner’s luck and made a big show of counting all my points one more time just to make sure my count was accurate. I was surprised to learn that hours had gone by. My stomach growled to remind me.

Li stood up and stretched. “Time to eat.”

His grandmother had set out a delicious buffet for us. The boys piled their plates full of fried rice, pot stickers, steamed pork dumplings, vegetable stir fry, and miniature shrimp egg rolls. Li grabbed sodas for both of us, and we sat down in the living room.

He expertly picked up his pork dumpling with chopsticks, and said,
“So tell me about you, Kelsey. Something besides wushu. What did you do this summer?”

“Oh, that. I umm . . . worked in India as an intern.”

“Wow! That’s amazing! What did you do?”

“Mostly cataloging and keeping records of ruins, art, and historical stuff. What about you? What did you do this summer?” I turned the question on him, eager to get the spotlight off of India.

“I worked for Grandfather in the studio mostly. I’m trying to save up for medical school. I got my undergraduate degree from PSU in biology.”

I quickly did the math, which didn’t seem to add up. “How old are you, Li?”

He grinned. “Twenty-two. I took a lot of classes and went to summer school too. Actually, all the gamers are in college. Meii is majoring in chemistry, Shen is studying computer engineering, Wen has graduated and is working on his master’s in statistical analysis, and then there’s me in medicine.”

“You guys sure are . . . goal-oriented.”

“What about you? What’s your major, Kelsey?”

“International studies with a minor in art history. Right now I’m studying India,” I said, popping another dumpling in my mouth. “But maybe I should switch to wushu to get rid of all these calories.”

Li laughed and took my plate. We wandered back to the game room, and I stopped to look at a picture of Li and his grandfather Chuck. They were holding three trophies each.

“Wow, so the studio won all of those?”

Li peered at the picture and flushed. “No, those are all mine. I won them in a martial arts tournament.”

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. “I didn’t know you were that good. That’s quite an accomplishment.”

“I’m sure my grandparents will tell you all about it,” Li said, steering
me back into the kitchen. “There’s nothing they like to do more than talk up their posterity. Right, Grandma Zhi?” Li pecked her on the cheek and she fluttered her hands to shoo him away from her dishwater.

The guys had set up a new game that was much easier to learn. I lost, but it was really fun. By the time the game was done, it was past midnight. Li walked me out to my car in the cold, starry evening.

“Thanks for coming, Kelsey. I had a great time with you. Do you think you’d like to do this again? We get together every two weeks.”

“Sure. Sounds like fun. So does my winning the first game mean you’re going to go easy on me in wushu class?” I bantered.

“Nuh-uh. When you win, I go harder on you.”

I laughed. “Remind me to lose next time. What happens when you win?”

He grinned. “I’ll be giving that question some serious thought.”

Li backed away and stood under the porch light, watching me drive off.

I climbed wearily into bed thinking that, given enough time, I might actually learn to like Li. He was fun and sweet. I didn’t really feel anything for him other than friendship, but maybe that could change in the future. Normal life was starting to feel . . . normal again. I rolled onto my side, cuddled under my grandmother’s quilt, and accidentally knocked my white stuffed tiger off the bed.

For a while, I considered leaving it on the floor or putting it in the closet. I lay still, quietly staring at the ceiling, trying to muster the strength of mind to do it. My resolve lasted only five minutes, and I berated myself for being weak. Leaning over the bed, I cuddled my stuffed tiger to my chest, apologizing profusely for even thinking about it.
ow that Halloween was over, my focus turned to preparing for finals and avoiding Artie. Somehow, he tracked down my cell phone number and called me at exactly 5:00 p.m. every evening. Sometimes, he waited for me after class. The guy would not take a hint.

I also spent time trying to sort out my feelings for Jason. We went on a few more dates, but I always felt like we were communicating on two different wavelengths. He thought Shakespeare, poetry, and books were boring, and I couldn’t appreciate the subtle differences between college and pro teams. I don’t think he cared much that we weren’t compatible. Deep down, I knew that my relationship with Jason was not heading anywhere, but he was a mental diversion, and I still liked to partner with him in class.

Just when I thought I had casual dating figured out, Li decided to make it even more complicated. We were chatting in the studio when he suddenly became quiet. He rolled his water bottle back and forth nervously between his palms.

Finally, he spoke, “Kelsey . . . I wanted to ask you if you’d like to see me. Alone. Like a real date.”

My mind started to race with confused thoughts. “Oh. Umm, yeah, sure,” I said slowly. “I like hanging out with you. You’re a lot of fun and easy to talk to.”
He grimaced. “Right, but do you like me like me, or do you just like me?”

I thought for a minute about what to say next. “Well, to be honest with you, I think you’re great, and I like you a lot. In fact, you’re at the top of my like list. But, I don’t know if I can be serious with anyone right now. I just sort of broke up with someone recently, and it still hurts.”

“Oh. It’s hard to get over things like that. I understand. I’d still want to see you, though. I mean, if you think you’d like to go out with me and if you’re ready to.”

I considered a moment. “Okay, I’d like that.”

“So, how about we start with a martial arts movie? There’s a place that shows old movies at midnight on Friday nights. Want to go?”

“Okay, but only if you promise to teach me one of the cool moves from the movie,” I added, happy that we had settled the matter. Sort of, anyway, I thought as we parted ways.

Li and I began to see each other outside of game night and in class. He was a gentleman and our dates were always fun and interesting. Despite having all this attention, I felt lonely. It wasn’t the kind of loneliness I could cure by being around other people. My soul felt lonely. Nighttime was the hardest because I felt him, even an ocean away. An invisible tether was wrapped tightly around my heart, connecting us. Its relentless pull kept trying to tug me back. Maybe someday the cords would wear and finally break.

Wushu class was the perfect outlet for venting some of the frustration I felt with my life. The moves were precise and didn’t require any emotions at all, which was a welcome change. I was starting to get pretty good too. My arms and legs had more definition, and I felt much stronger as well. If someone attacked me, I might actually be able to fend them off, which was an empowering thought. Who needed tiger protection? I’d just kick my enemy in the face.
As students, we weren’t supposed to have thoughts like that, but most people didn’t actually have to face immortal Kappa monkeys that wanted to eat you, like I did. So I allowed myself to visualize my many possible opponents and kicked with intensity. Even Li made a comment that my kicks were getting stronger.

Li made good on his bargain and taught me an offensive move from the movie. He let me practice on him but I kept messing it up, and we fell to the mat in a tangle, laughing.

“Kelsey, are you alright? Did I hurt you?”

I couldn’t stop laughing. “No, I’m fine. Great move, huh?”

Li was leaning over me, his face close to mine. “Not bad. Now I’ve got you right where I want you.”

All of a sudden, the happy, light atmosphere blew away and was replaced by thick, expectant tension. He leaned his face a little closer to mine and hesitated, watching my reaction. I froze and felt a wave of sadness wash over me. Turning slightly away, I closed my eyes. I couldn’t kiss him. The idea felt nice, but not goose-bumpy nice. It just didn’t seem right.

“I’m sorry, Li.”

He chuckled me lightly under my chin. “Don’t worry about it. Let’s get a milkshake; what do ya say?” His eyes were a little sad, but he seemed determined to keep things lighthearted between us and quickly diverted my attention to other things.

Mr. Kadam broke through my dating funk with welcome news. He’d figured out a major section of Durga’s prophecy and asked me to help with some research, which I was more than willing to do. I pulled out a notepad and asked, “What have you got for me?”

“The tests of the four houses. Specifically, it says a house of gourds, a house of temptresses, and a house of winged creatures of some kind.”

“What kind of winged creatures?” I gulped.
“I’m not sure at this point.”
“What about the fourth house?”
“It would appear there are two houses with winged animals, I believe one will be a type of bird but later in the prophecy metal or iron is also mentioned. The other winged animal has the symbol for ‘large’ next to it and the same symbol is found again later in the prophecy. I’d like you to research any myths you can find about passing through houses or a test of houses and let me know what you come up with.”
“I’ll let you know.”
“Good.”

The rest of the conversation turned to mundane things and though I was happy he was including me in the research, my stomach churned at the thought of returning to India. I was all set for the danger, the magic, and the strangely supernatural, but going back also meant I’d have to face him again. I was good at going through the motions of an ordinary life but underneath the surface, where I could hide my innermost feelings, something churned. I was disconnected, out of place. India called to me, sometimes softly, sometimes with a roar, but the beckoning was constant and I wondered sometimes if I’d ever be able to settle down to a normal life again.

Thanksgiving meant a tofurky feast at Sarah and Mike’s. I kept glancing at their festive pumpkins and squash cornucopia during the meal trying to figure out how such friendly-looking gourds might become something dangerous, and I spent the time wondering how they would play into the next quest. It was a cold and rainy day, but my foster parents had the fireplace blazing. Surprisingly, I actually enjoyed some of the vegetable dishes. I couldn’t do the sugar-free, gluten-free pie, though. It just seemed wrong.

“So, what’s new? Any hot guys you want to tell us about at school?” Sarah teased.
I looked up from the pumpkin pie I was stabbing cautiously with a fork. “Um, well, I am kind of dating,” I admitted shyly. “There’s this guy named Li and then there’s Jason. It’s nothing serious. We’ve only gone out a few times.”

Sarah was thrilled, and both she and Mike pestered me with a lot of questions that I didn’t really want to answer.

Luckily, Jennifer had also invited both Li and me for Thanksgiving dinner, and I managed to excuse myself from my foster parents’ in plenty of time to head to Jennifer’s. She lived in a nice house in West Salem. I brought a lemon meringue pie, the first one I’d ever attempted to make, and I was proud of the result. I’d let the meringue toast just a little too long, but other than that, it looked good.

Li lit up when he saw me at the door and said to Jennifer, “See? You break the lucky wishbone, and your wish does come true!”

He confided to me that he’d already stuffed himself at his family’s Thanksgiving dinner but that he’d saved his dessert stomach for my pie—and was true to his word. Li ate half of my pie in one sitting.

Jennifer also had made a pumpkin pie, a marionberry pie, and a cheesecake. I took a little sample from each and was in heaven. Li groaned, complaining that his stomach was so full he’d have to sleep over. Jennifer’s kids jumped up and down at the thought, accidentally dislodging their pilgrim hats, but settled down immediately when she popped in A Charlie Brown Thanksgiving DVD.

I was helping Jennifer clean up in the kitchen when she asked, “So? How’s it going with,” she whispered knowingly, “Li?”

“Umm, it’s going fine.”

“Are you guys, you know, together?”

“It’s hard to say. I think it’s too early in our relationship to call us together.”

She shrunk a little and frowned at the dishwater. “Is it still that other one, the one you never talk about, who’s holding you back?”
I paused with my damp towel in mid-sweep of her nice turkey platter.
“I’m sorry if I was rude. Honestly, it’s just hard to talk about him. But what do you want to know?”
She picked up another plate, washed it, and dipped it in the rinse water. “Well, who is he? Where is he? Why aren’t you together?”
“Well, he’s in India. And we aren’t together because . . .” I whispered, “Because . . . I left him.”
“Was he mean to you?”
“No, no. Nothing like that. He was . . . perfect.”
“So he didn’t want you to leave?”
“No.”
“Didn’t he want to come with you?”
The corner of my mouth quirked up in a small smile. “I had to beg him to stay behind.”
“Then I don’t understand. Why did you leave him?”
“He was too . . . I was too . . .” I sighed. “It’s complicated.”
“Did you love him?”
I set down the platter that I’d been wiping dry for five minutes and twisted the towel in my hands. Quietly, I answered, “Yes.”
“And now?”
“And now . . . when I’m alone . . . I feel like I can’t breathe sometimes.”
She nodded and washed a few more dishes. The silverware clinked softly in the bubbly water. Angling her head slightly, she asked, “What’s his name?”
I stared dully at the kitchen window. It was dark outside, and I could see myself reflected with my slumped shoulders and dead eyes.
“Ren. His name is Ren.”
Saying his name bruised my already broken heart. I felt a tear slip down my cheek and looked up at the window again, just in time to see
Li in the reflection standing behind me. He turned and walked out of the room, but not before I saw his expression. I’d hurt his feelings.

Jennifer reached over and squeezed my arm. “Go talk to him. It’s better to discuss things quickly. Otherwise, mountains are made of molehills.”

This situation already felt like a mountain to me, but she was right. I needed to talk to Li.

He had left the house already. As I gathered up my things and said thanks, Jennifer strolled out of the kitchen and waved me on.

I headed out the door and found him leaning up against his car with his arms folded across his chest. “Li?”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry you had to hear that.”

He sighed deeply. “It’s okay. You warned me before we started this that it was going to be hard. I guess I only have one question.”

“Okay.”

He turned to face me and looked deeply into my eyes. “Are you still in love with him?”

“I . . . I think so.”

He visibly deflated.

“But, Li, it doesn’t matter. He’s gone. He’s on another continent. If he wanted to be with me that badly, he could be, and he’s not. He’s not here. He hasn’t even called me, in fact. I just need . . . time. A little bit more time to . . . to put aside these feelings. I want to be able to.” I reached out and took his hand. “It’s not fair to you, I know. You deserve to date someone who doesn’t have this kind of baggage.”

“Kelsey, everyone has baggage of some kind.” He kicked the tire of his car. “I like you and I want you to like me. Maybe it will work out if we just take it slow. Learn to be friends for a while first.”

“Is that enough for you?”
“It’ll have to be. I don’t have any other options except not seeing you, and that’s not a good option for me.”

“Okay, then, we’ll take it slow.”

Li smiled and leaned down to kiss my cheek. “You’re worth waiting for, Kelsey. And just for the record, the guy was crazy to let you leave.”

Though I had borrowed stacks of books from the library and spent countless hours online, I still hadn’t found any useful information about the test of the four houses. I hoped the winged creatures on this part of the quest were going to be harmless butterflies, but somehow I doubted it would be that easy. At least we now had a clue as to how the air theme was going to fit in, I thought.

With my head tucked in books most of the time, Thanksgiving led quickly into the Christmas season. Bright Christmas displays could be seen in all the neighborhoods and all the store windows. I continued to date both Li and Jason, and in the middle of December, Li took me to his cousin’s wedding.

During the last two weeks, I’d been telling myself repeatedly that I really wanted things to work out with Li, that it would be alright if I opened my heart to him. He looked very handsome when he picked me up. He wore a dark suit, and my heart stirred when I saw him. Maybe not with love, but at least with happiness to be with him.

“Wow, Kelsey. You look great!”

I had dipped into my forbidden closet and come out with a peach princess dress made of satin and organza. The top had a fitted corset that flowed into a peach calf-length petal skirt.

The wedding was held at a country club. When the ceremony was over, lion dancers and musicians appeared, and we followed them parade-style to the reception area. One of the musicians played a
mandolin. It looked similar to the guitar that had been hanging on the wall in Mr. Kadam’s music room.

Red parasols, golden Chinese fans, and fancy origami decorated the dining room, which Li explained were traditional at Chinese weddings. The bride wore a red dress, and instead of boxed gifts, guests gave the couple red envelopes full of money.

Li gestured toward a group of boys all wearing black suits with sunglasses. My eyes widened, and I had to stifle a giggle when I realized it was our game group. They grinned and waved to me. One of them had a large briefcase handcuffed to his wrist.

“Why are they dressed like that?” I asked. “And what’s in the briefcase?”

He laughed. “One thousand dollars in crisp, one dollar bills. They’re going to handcuff the case to the groom. It’s a joke. My cousin used to be a part of our game group until he got too busy at his job. He’s the first to get married so he gets the briefcase.”

We made our way through the receiving line, and Li introduced me to his cousin and his new bride. She was petite and very beautiful and seemed a little shy. After that, we found our seats at the dinner table, where we were soon joined by all of Li’s friends. They teased him about not wearing his shades too.

The bride and groom performed a candle-lighting ceremony to honor their ancestors, and then dinner was served: fish to symbolize abundance, a whole lobster to represent completeness, Peking duck for joy and happiness, shark fin soup to grant wealth, noodles for long life, and sea cucumber salad for marital harmony. Li tried to get me to taste sweet lotus seed buns that symbolized fertility.

“Umm . . . thanks,” I said uncertainly, “but I’ll pass for now.”

After good wishes from both sides of the family, the couple danced their first dance.
Li squeezed my hand and stood. “Kelsey, may I?”

“Sure.”

He spun me around the dance floor once before his friends started to cut in. I never got more than one full dance with Li. A handful of dances later, a three-tiered cake was brought out. The inside was orange, and the outside was decorated with pearly almond-flavored icing and beautiful sugar orchids.

When Li dropped me off that night, I felt happy. I’d really enjoyed being a part of his world. I hugged him and pecked him goodnight on the cheek, and he smiled at me like he’d just won a worldwide martial arts title.

I spent Christmas Day with my foster family. Sipping hot chocolate, I watched the kids open their presents. Sarah and Mike had given me a jogging outfit. They were always trying to get me to embrace the highs of running. The kids gave me gloves and a scarf, which I told them I desperately needed. I planned to hang out with them that morning and then spend the rest of the day with Li who would pick me up for an afternoon date at 2:00 p.m.

His present, a martial arts movie collection, was sitting on my coffee table in the living room. I’d already made up my mind that if he didn’t try to kiss me by the end of the date, I would kiss him. I had even hung mistletoe outside my door. An irrational part of my mind said that maybe kissing him was the key to breaking the bond I still felt with the man I left. I knew it probably wouldn’t be that easy, but it was the first step.

My thoughts drifted to my date. The kids were playing with their new toys, and the adults were sitting by the Christmas tree, listening to carols, and talking quietly when the doorbell rang.

“Are you expecting anyone, Sarah?” I asked as I got up to answer it.
“It’s probably a package from Mr. Kadam. He said to expect a surprise.”

I twisted the deadbolt and opened the door.

Standing on the front stoop was the most beautiful man on the planet. My heart stopped and then galloped thunderously in my chest. Anxious cobalt blue eyes explored every feature of my face. Lines of tension and stress faded from his expression, and he breathed deeply like a man who had been underwater too long.

Now content, the warrior-angel smiled softly, sweetly, and reached out tentatively to touch my cheek. I felt the link between us wrap its fingers solidly around my heart and tighten, drawing us closer. Circling his arms around me hesitantly at first, he touched his forehead to mine and then crushed my body to his. He rocked me back and forth gently and stroked my hair. Sighing, he whispered only one word, “Kelsey.”