A white cover with grey text

Description automatically generated

Copyright © 2024 by Deependra Bhandari.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any form whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations in critical articles or reviews.

This book is a work of fiction. While inspired by true events, all characters, incidents, and dialogues have been fictionalized or altered for dramatic purposes. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Printed in the United States of America.

Book edit : Jodie Renner

Cover design : Paras Shrestha (Made.by.Studios)

Cartography : Dinesh Lamichhane (Made.by.Studios)

ISBN - Paperback : 978-1-959853-10-7

ISBN - Hardcover : 978-1-959853-11-4

First Edition : June 2024

To Bijaya, my amazing wife, this book belongs to you as much as it does to me. Without your unwavering support, it wouldn't have come to fruition. Thank you for always being by my side.

To Jodie Renner, an exceptional book editor, thank you for believing in this project and for your invaluable assistance in refining my rough draft into a captivating novel.

To Arjun (who prefers to remain anonymous), I appreciate you sharing your journey, which sparked my interest in this topic and motivated me to conduct further research to write this novel. Thank you for your invaluable contribution.

Table of Contents:

[PROLOGUE](#_Toc166604267)

[Chapter 1](#_Toc166604268)

[Chapter 2](#_Toc166604269)

[Chapter 3](#_Toc166604270)

[Chapter 4](#_Toc166604271)

[Chapter 5](#_Toc166604272)

[Chapter 6](#_Toc166604273)

[Chapter 7](#_Toc166604274)

[Chapter 8](#_Toc166604275)

[Chapter 9](#_Toc166604276)

[Chapter 10](#_Toc166604277)

[Chapter 11](#_Toc166604278)

[Chapter 12](#_Toc166604279)

[Chapter 13](#_Toc166604280)

[Chapter 14](#_Toc166604281)

[Chapter 15](#_Toc166604282)

[Chapter 16](#_Toc166604283)

[Chapter 17](#_Toc166604284)

[Chapter 18](#_Toc166604285)

[Chapter 19](#_Toc166604286)

[Chapter 20](#_Toc166604287)

[Chapter 21](#_Toc166604288)

[Chapter 22](#_Toc166604289)

[Chapter 23](#_Toc166604290)

[Chapter 24](#_Toc166604291)

[Chapter 25](#_Toc166604292)

[Chapter 26](#_Toc166604293)

[Chapter 27](#_Toc166604294)

[Chapter 28](#_Toc166604295)

[Chapter 29](#_Toc166604296)

[Chapter 30](#_Toc166604297)

[Chapter 31](#_Toc166604298)

[Chapter 32](#_Toc166604299)

[Chapter 33](#_Toc166604300)

[Chapter 34](#_Toc166604301)

[Chapter 35](#_Toc166604302)

[Chapter 36](#_Toc166604303)

[Chapter 37](#_Toc166604304)

[Chapter 38](#_Toc166604305)

[Chapter 39](#_Toc166604306)

[Chapter 40](#_Toc166604307)

[Chapter 41](#_Toc166604308)

[Chapter 42](#_Toc166604309)

[Chapter 43](#_Toc166604310)

[Chapter 44](#_Toc166604311)

[Chapter 45](#_Toc166604312)

[Chapter 46](#_Toc166604313)

[Chapter 47](#_Toc166604314)

[Chapter 48](#_Toc166604315)

# PROLOGUE

*Darién Gap, Colombia, March 2010*

It was only the third day, but Arjun felt like he had been walking for weeks now. His mouth was dry, his body was sweaty, and his feet were killing him. He wished they could sit down and rest. Suddenly, his companions stopped in front of him. He peeked ahead—seven men in khaki uniforms were pointing guns at them.

“Hola,” one of them said. “We want everything. Bags, wallets, watches, everything.”

*Oh no.* *God, please help us*. Arjun’s worst fears were coming true. He just hoped they could all get out of this alive and unhurt.

Somebody up ahead said, “Please leave us some food. We are starving. We haven’t eaten—”

“Shhh... no talk.”

Two *banditos* searched their bodies while the rest of them stayed there, pointing guns at Arjun and his companions.

One of the men kept looking at Maria and her mother.

The robbers emptied every pocket of the travelers and put their valuables in a plastic bag. Then they took all the backpacks and moved them away. The man who’d been staring at Maria and her mother came back and pulled Maria by her arm. “NO!” Her mother yanked her back. The man pulled her so hard that Maria screeched in anguish. Afraid of hurting her, Maria’s mom loosened her grip a bit, and the man kicked the mom. She screamed and let go. He looked at the guys. “Any problem with you? We kill you right here.” He raised his voice, “Any problem?”

Nobody said anything.

Arjun couldn’t just stand there and let Maria get taken away by these animals. “Please, don’t do this—she is just a kid,” he said, walking towards the man. The man let go of Maria and punched Arjun so hard in his face that he was stunned for a few seconds. His nose felt like it might be broken and he could taste blood in his mouth.

Arjun felt Maria’s presence behind him. He feared he was going to fail today. There was no way he could save her from these men.

The man reached out to grab Maria again. “Any problem now?”

Arjun pushed the man’s hand away. “She is just a kid. Leave her alone.”

The man started laughing. “Who stop me, you?” Then he started punching and kicking him. Arjun did not try to fight back—barely able to stay on his feet, he held his arms up to avoid the blows on his face. He was sure he was going to be killed today, and he regretted he could not save the little girl.

The man stopped. Arjun noticed Maria’s mom had grabbed her and moved her farther away. He glanced back at the man, who was gesturing another guy for a gun. He grabbed it and pointed it at Arjun’s chest. “You think you hero? You have problem, now?”

Arjun prayed to God with all his heart and said what he believed to be his last words. “She is just a kid.”

“Let it go, Arjun,” he heard a voice behind him. It was one of his friends. The man flipped the gun over and whacked Arjun on the head with it. The pain was so severe that Arjun blacked out and collapsed on the ground.

# Chapter 1

##### Kathmandu, Nepal, March 2006

Arjun wandered aimlessly through the unusually quiet streets of Kathmandu, his thoughts entangled in introspection and contemplation. His studies weren’t going well, and because of the general strike, he was now out of work and broke. On top of that, he didn’t feel welcome in his father’s home. He wished he could afford his own place in the city, but that was impossible.

He sat on a bench, watching people pass by. They seemed to have purpose, not like him. He felt like a failure. He was nineteen years old and still hadn’t managed to attain his two-year intermediate college diploma. He missed his mother and sisters and brother back in Kavre, the remote village where he had grown up.He had come to Kathmandu to complete his education and was living with his father, stepmother, and their five-year-old daughter, where he felt like an intruder.

A few months after arriving in the city, he’d found a part-time job in a restaurant as a cook. But the pay wasn’t even enough for his basic daily expenses. On top of that, the political situation of the country was so bad these days that the revolutionist Maoist Party had called a general strike, *Nepal bandha,* which had shut down all the major cities*.* No vehicles except bicycles were allowed in the streets, no businesses were permitted to operate, and even the schools and colleges had been shut down. Everyone was suffering. The situation in Nepal was out of control, and the government was unable to stop the madness.

Despite Arjun’s desire to work, there were no opportunities in Nepal.

Late in the evening, Arjun reluctantly headed home. As he entered, he heard laughing and giggling from the living room. He peeked in. His father and stepmother were watching television. They glanced at Arjun, then back at it. No greeting or smiles. He went to the kitchen, where he found a bowl of rice and curry set aside for him on the table. He touched the bowl. It was cold, but he didn’t feel like warming it up. He sat on the chair and ate, then went to his room.

The next morning, he woke up in his small room and glanced at the wall clock—10:30 already. Nobody had come to wake him up. He was not surprised. He turned on the radio on his nightstand.

“After seven days, the strikeorganized by the Maoist party of Nepal has been suspended. The revolutionist party is giving the government a chance to reconsider their proposal to bring the party into the government. This is not an easy decision for the government, especially for the king, to fulfill their demands, one of which is to end the monarchy system in the country,” said the voice on the radio.

*Great. I can go to the college to pick up my entrance card.* He got up and dressed.

He headed to the kitchen, where his stepmother was standing by the stove, cooking.

“I’m going out. I’ll be back in a few hours,” he said.

“Okay,” she replied without looking up.

He walked to the bus station. Unlike yesterday, when the city felt empty, the streets were congested with vehicles again—motorbikes, micro- and mini-buses, auto rickshaws, cabs, cars, and trucks, horns blaring as they all vied for space. When Arjun first came to Kathmandu, he was astonished at how beautiful the city was. With all the temples and Buddhist stupas, he was so impressed by the culture and history of the place. The woodwork and carvings in the old palaces were nothing like he had ever seen before. Four years ago, when he arrived, Kathmandu wasn’t as crowded. Since the tension between the Maoists and the military became unbearable, the poor villagers migrated to Kathmandu and other cities in ever-increasing numbers. But jobs were scarce there, and survival was not easy. People stayed, preferring to die in hunger than live in terror.

There was a long queue at the bus station, so Arjun decided to walk.

The exam was scheduled to take place in a week. The board exam was organized only once a year, and if a student did not pass every subject, he had to wait another year. Arjun had been trying to complete the two-year college diploma for four years already, but he was still not sure he would be able to pass the exam. It was not entirely his fault. The public colleges had so much politics that a normal guy was easily distracted. Only really hardworking, dedicated students managed to complete their college with good grades. Arjun was neither hardworking nor dedicated when it came to studies. He had been the same since his childhood, when he would rather work all day on the farm than go to school.

After waiting in line, he finally picked up the entrance card, then strolled over to the cafeteria to see if any of his friends were there. He looked around but didn’t see any of them, so he decided to head out. As he walked along the path toward the gate of the college, he saw policemen patrolling the city just outside the college.

When he approached the gate, he heard a loud noise behind him. Before he could figure out what was going on, a bunch of rocks flew over his head towards the policemen. He stopped and looked back.

A group of students shouted in unison, “End government controls. Make our country free. End this monarchy system! The corrupt king must leave the throne.”

Arjun wasn’t sure whether they were really students at the university or just paid members of the Maoist party. There were various organizations of the other political parties in the universities and anybody could have started the riot. The revolution party seized every opportunity to demonstrate.

It was unusual for the police to enter schools or colleges, but the rocks and taunts had angered these officers, so they stormed through the gate and started chasing the protesters. Arjun stopped, aware he needed to protect himself. The students threw a few more rocks at the police, then started running.

Arjun turned and ran too. He didn’t want to be mistaken for one of the protestors and arrested, then tortured in jail. He saw a bunch of people entering a classroom and closing the door. He didn’t want to be in the same room as them, so he ran alone to an empty classroom, left the door open, and hid under the last seat of the long classroom. The classroom was so big that it could easily fit 150 students. From the door, nobody would notice anybody hiding under the seat on the last row.

He heard loud banging on the door of the other classroom, and then the door opened with a thud. Out in the hallway, people were screaming, crying, and swearing. Some tried to run away, and others tried to fight back.

“Is there anybody in there?” asked a voice from the hall.

Arjun stayed motionless, trying to control his exploding heartbeats.

“No, nobody in this one,” said another voice at the door.

Slowly the racket in the hall subsided, until finally there was a pin-drop silence. Arjun stayed there for a few more minutes, just in case, then got up and walked away.

*Even schools and colleges are not safe anymore!* He sighed in frustration.

*Asan Bazaar*, the street full of stores, was about fifteen minutes’ walk from the university. Arjun’s shoes were falling apart, so he hoped to find a new pair on sale. He entered a shoe store and scanned the men’s shoes.

He spotted a nice pair of brown sneakers and tried them on. They fit. He picked them up and walked to the man standing behind the sales counter.

“*Dai,* how much are these shoes?” he asked.

“Rs. 2,300.”

“That’s too expensive,” Arjun said. “Can you sell them to me for less?”

“*Bhai,* this is an original brand. Other stores charge Rs. 3,500 for the same shoes. We don’t have much profit on them.” The guy paused for a few seconds. “Give me Rs. 2,200.”

“If you give them to me for Rs. 1200, I will buy them.”

“Are you kidding me, *Bhai?* That’s way under our wholesale price.” He took out a notebook from under the counter and flipped few pages. He pointed to a number on a page. “Look here, this is our wholesale price.”

Arjun looked at the notebook. He saw Rs 1,600 written next to the name of the shoes. But he didn’t believe it. That’s what most of the salespeople did to convince their shoppers during the process of bargaining. Arjun was almost sure the wholesale price was way below the price he showed.

“Just give me 1,700 and the shoes are yours,” said the guy. “It looks like you really like them. Consider this big discount a gift from me.”

Arjun looked down at his only pair of shoes. The right shoe had a big tear at the toe and his black sock was clearly visible through it. In a few more days, his toe would be out of the shoe. He took out his old wallet and peeked inside it.

“Can you please give them to me for 1400?” Arjun showed his wallet to the guy. “Look, that’s all I have.”

“No way. Forget it. Look for shoes you can afford and don’t waste my time.” The guy glared at him, then turned his back.

Arjun couldn’t believe what he’d just heard. He looked around. Everybody was looking at him. He bargained for things all the time, and nobody had ever been so rude to him. After all, that’s how bargaining worked.

Arjun didn’t say a word. He left the shoes on the counter and walked out of the store. *I’m gonna go home and bring back Rs. 1,700 and throw it in his face. How dare he humiliate me like that?*

He got on a city bus, which was so crammed with passengers, people had to shove through to get on or off. The conductor came to collect the fare. Arjun took out his wallet and paid the money, then put the wallet back into his pocket.

Arjun noticed a guy standing too close to a lady beside him, who was trying to lean away. The driver hit the brake, and the guy pressed himself on her.

“Excuse me!” The lady frowned.

“Not my fault,” replied the guy. “Tell the driver not to drive so rough.”

“Mind your space, buddy,” said Arjun sternly.

“Feel free to take my space,” said the guy. He walked by Arjun towards the door of the bus, pushing Arjun on his way past. Arjun turned back to look at him.

“Sorry!” he said, with a fake smile.

He didn’t look or sound sorry. Arjun did not respond. The guy got out of the bus and the bus started moving.

“Thank you,” said the lady. “That’s so nice of you.”

“It’s my pleasure.” Arjun smiled. “What a jerk!”

Arjun got off at his stop and went home. His dad, Amit, was eating lunch. He was just a shorter version of Arjun—same face, just older, with wrinkles.

He looked at Arjun. “Where were you?”

“I went to the college to pick up the entrance card.”

“I hope you pass and get your diploma this time,” he said. “It’s getting embarrassing.”

“I hope so too,” Arjun said uncomfortably.

“Did you eat?”

“Not yet,” he replied. “Um…I need to ask you something.”

“What?”

“I need Rs. 400. I went to buy a pair of shoes and was short 300. I need that and 100 more, so I have some money till I get my pay from the restaurant.”

“You can’t be serious,” Amit replied. “You think money grows on trees for me? How about taking some responsibility now? Have you even tried looking for another job? It’s about time for you to be serious and support yourself and help your family. How long do you expect me to take care of you?” Amit took a sip of water. He took out his wallet and handed Rs. 400 to Arjun. “This is the last time you will get it from me.”

Just then, Arjun’s stepmother and his little stepsister, Saanu, walked into the kitchen. Arjun looked at the beautiful gold bracelet on Saanu’s tiny wrist. As a child, he had always wanted to have silver bracelets. He had asked his father many times, but his dad never had enough money. He glanced at his stepmother, whose neck, ears, and hands were covered with gold jewelry, then looked down at the gaping hole in his scuffed shoe. Arjun didn’t say a word. He wished he had never come to the city, but the school in the village only went up to grade ten. In order to get a decent job, he needed grades eleven and twelve or a two-year intermediate college degree, which he could only get here.

Arjun didn’t resent Saanu— it wasn’t her fault. He would never forgive his stepmother though, who had pursued a married man with four kids. She was just a few years older than his eldest sister. He never understood how a woman could destroy another woman’s happiness and break up a family, just like that. Because of her, his mother was a lonely single parent living far away in the village.

His dad never had enough money even for the basic necessities for Arjun and his family, but his stepmom and stepsister were living the dream life.

Sometimes, Arjun wanted to file a polygamy case against his dad and stepmother, so they would go to prison, but that would not change the past. No matter how much he disliked what his father did, Arjun couldn’t see him suffer in prison. And also, Arjun’s mother would never forgive him if he did that.

“Take it before I change my mind,” Amit said, bringing him back from his thoughts.

Arjun didn’t want the money anymore, but walking around with a torn shoe would be even more embarrassing. He didn’t have a choice. He took the money from Amit and went to his room.

Arjun closed the door. He shook his head and took a long breath. *You think it’s fun asking you for money and being treated like this? How can you treat your new family so well and your old family so poorly!*

He sat on his bed. Something was missing from the back pocket of his pants. *Where is my wallet?* He stood up and checked both pants pockets. The wallet was gone. He remembered the guy in the bus who had pushed him while he gave him a fake smile.

“God damn it!” Arjun sat back on his bed, holding his head in his hands.

# Chapter 2

A speeding cab whizzed past Arjun as angry protestors carrying iron rods and wooden clubs chased after it. The cab swerved and crashed into an electric pole.

The driver struggled to restart the cab, but it was no use. The protestors ran toward it, yelling and brandishing their weapons. The passenger door was flung open and a man jumped out of the vehicle and ran. He was a short guy with dark red spikey hair.

“What?” whispered Arjun. “Uncle Kumar!”

He used to see Kumar often a few years back. Kumar was a friend of Arjun’s father. He had lived in a small room in Kathmanduand had difficulties paying his rent. Amit had helped him with it several times. Kumar's livelihood depended on driving a cab, but a misfortunate accident led to the termination of his contract, plunging him further into debt. He had been jobless for almost six months, and the persistent debt collectors waited outside his place. To avoid them, he would only come to his room at night and leave early in the morning. Sometimes, he could not make it out on time, so he had to hide inside all day.

Four years earlier, through some connection, Kumar had gone to Kuwait. Since then, his life had changed. Now people waited outside his house, not to collect debts but to pay him in advance to take them to Kuwait. He would offer them jobs in Kuwait and charge them a fee to arrange it. Some people didn’t even care to know the kind of jobs they would get. Kumar told them that they would make Rs. 20,000 to Rs. 25,000 a month, and for that amount of money, they would do anything.

Arjun ran towards Kumar, who had entered a narrow alley off to the street and was peeking out. When Arjun reached the alley, Kumar was pacing back and forth, running his hands through his hair.

“Uncle, what’re you doing here?”

“Arjun!” whispered Kumar. “I didn’t know *Nepal bandha* has been so serious these days.”

“Ummm… you haven’t even seen anything!” replied Arjun. “I didn’t know you were back.”

“Yeah, just came back recently for a visit.”

Both of them peeked back at the crowd, who were circling the cab. Nobody was following Kumar. Two individuals yanked the driver out of the taxi by his T-shirt and dragged him onto the street. The scared driver struggled to free himself. He somehow pulled his T-shirt off and managed to get free. The guys had nothing but his torn T-shirt in their hands. Half-naked, he ran away so fast that the protestors couldn’t catch him. Besides, they were more interested in destroying the vehicle than beating him.

The two guys rejoined the rest of the group, who were smacking the cab with iron rods and wooden clubs. Glass pieces were scattered all over the street. The cab looked completely trashed. The angry mob wrenched a door off the cab and threw it on the street.

“Oh shit. Oh shit,” whispered Kumar nervously.

“What’s the matter, Uncle?” asked Arjun. “Were you not expecting that? This country has been going through hell. Thank God, they didn’t catch you. They would have punished you for breaking their rule of no vehicles on the road.”

“That’s not it, Arjun*.* I forgot to take out the handbag I stashed under the seat. I was hoping they would let it go, so I could go back to the cab to pick up my bag, but now…”

Kumar paced around as if he was going to go get his stuff, but he was too scared to step out of the alley.

“Just forget about it,” Arjun said. “It’s not worth the risk.”

“I can’t leave it there.”

“Why not? Do you have a lot of money in there, or what?”

“Yes, I have Rs. 20,000 in cash, but I am not even worried about that. I have hundreds of thousands worth of paperwork in there. I am completely screwed if I lose that.”

Arjun looked back at the protestors, who were pounding on the car and jumping on it. He thought for a few seconds.

“Wait for me here,” he said. “I’m going to try something.”

Before Kumar could say anything, Arjun walked toward the crowd. He joined the group and started acting like he was part of it. He kicked the vehicle and shouted, “*Bandha* means *bandha.* Who the hell does he think heis to run a cab during a strike? We need to teach this guy a lesson.”

One of the guys in the group shouted, “Hell yeah, that’s what we were talking about.”

Arjun peeked inside the driver’s side of the cab, then went around to the passenger’s side. He opened the door and reached under the seat. He quickly opened the handbag and felt inside. He could feel a thick file folder and two big bundles of cash. He left the folder in the bag under the seat and took out some of the money.

“Look what I found!” he yelled. He threw the money in the air. The bills scattered and dropped like falling leaves. While the crowd rushed to pick up the money, Arjun grabbed the handbag and strode back to the alley, with the handbag in front of him so they wouldn’t see it.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you,” Kumar said. “Arjun, you saved my life. Let’s get out of here before they find out about it.”

Arjun and Kumar glanced back at the protestors to make sure they weren’t coming toward them. After collecting the money, a few of them checked to see if there was any more treasure under the seat. One of the protestors had the driver’s T-shirt in his hand.

“Let’s burn this shit!” he shouted.

“Yeah, let’s do it!” screamed the group.

Arjun and Kumar watched from the alley as the guy unlocked the gas tank. He pushed the T-shirt into the tank, then pulled it out. It was soaked with petroleum. He took out a lighter and lit the T-shirt while the protestors shouted with excitement. The guy threw the burning T-shirt into the cab. The fire spread to the car seats, then boom! The flames were higher than the protestors.

Arjun and Kumar turned and hurried down the alley.

“So, what type of paperwork do you have in there?” asked Arjun.

“I’m taking people to Kuwait in a week. I have their passports and all the original documents in there. If I had lost them, I’d have been screwed. I owe you big time. Thanks again for helping me out.”

“It’s my pleasure, Uncle,” he said. “Hmmm… is it really worth going to Kuwait? I hear the life of labor is too hard out there.”

“It depends,” Kumar said. “If you’re working in a field, it’s very hard. The weather in summer easily exceeds 38 degrees Celsius. You can imagine how hard it is to work outside in that heat all day without breaks. But if you work inside a building, it’s not bad at all.”

Arjun nodded, thoughtful.

“By the way, what are you doing for work these days?” asked Kumar.

“I work in a restaurant, both in and out of the kitchen. Except now, with the strike on, I’m out of work.”

“So, you know how to cook food?”

“Yes, Uncle,” he replied. “I’ve been working as a cook for almost four years. I started as a part-time cook while I went to college. Now, I do everything there.”

“Do you speak English as well?”

“Yes, Uncle. Besides Nepali, I’m fluent in both English and Hindi. Would there be any opportunities in Kuwait for me?”

“Of course,” replied Kumar. “Cooks get paid well in Kuwait, especially if they can speak English. Whatever you make here in a year, you can easily make in a month or two there. It’s little hard in the beginning and you don’t get much, but once they know your work, they will try to make you happy.”

Arjun smiled. *This could be the big break I’ve been waiting for.*

“Uncle, I’m definitely interested. Would you be able to help me out?”

“Yes, I will,” replied Kumar. “I will get to return your favor. I will help you in every possible way.”

“Thank you, Uncle.”

“No, no. Thank you for saving my ass out there.”

They reached the street at the other end of the alley.

“All right, Arjun, I’m in a rush now. I need to drop these papers to my partner. In the meantime, think about what we’ve discussed. I need to see your father too. I will come visit him tonight.”

“All right, Uncle. I’ll see you then.”

Kumar rushed off to the right. Arjun wanted to call his old friend Prabhat, so he decided to go see if the cyber café was open during the strike. After walking for a few minutes, he arrived at the gate of a house that had a closed shutter on the front. The sign at the top of the shutter said Bhim’s Cyber Café. He opened the gate and walked in.

Inside were ten computers, eight of them occupied. A short, skinny guy sat behind the counter, using a computer. Next to the counter was a small booth.

“What’s up, Bhim?” Arjun said. “I knew you would be open.”

“What’s up, bro?” replied Bhim. “I’m taking a chance, but only locals know about it. I can’t close my business for a never-ending strike, you know.”

“For sure,” Arjun said.

“What can I do for you today?”

“I need to make a call to my best friend, Prabhat. It’s been ages since I talked to him.”

“Where to?”

“America.” Arjun took out a piece of paper with Prabhat’s phone number on it and handed it to Bhim. “How much is it?”

“America? That will be expensive, bro. Rs.20 a minute.”

*Oh!* “That’s expensive, but go ahead—I’ll just make a quick call.”

Bhim dialed the number.

“It’s ringing. Go in the booth and use that phone.”

Arjun walked into the booth. There was a phone set. He picked up the receiver. Bhim hung up the other phone.

The phone stopped ringing and Arjun heard a voice. “You have reached the voicemail of Prabhat. Please leave a message after the tone.”

Confused, Arjun open the door of the booth, still holding the receiver and looked questioningly at Bhim.

“What happened?” asked Bhim. “Didn’t he answer?”

“No, a lady picked up the phone. Maybe he has a girlfriend, a white one. She was asking me to leave a message, but I didn’t know what to say…”

Arjun remembered he was still holding the receiver. “Oh, shit.”

He hung up the phone.

“I hope you don’t mind me telling you,” Bhim said, “but once people go to America, they forget their old friends, you know? They forget everything. Their life is so much better there, they don’t have time to think about anybody back home.”

“Hmmm… I hope he doesn’t do that.”

“I hear America is like heaven,” Bhim said, “and making money is as easy as picking leaves out of a tree.”

“I hear that a lot too, but I try not to think about it. I’m not lucky enough to win a Diversity Visa or smart enough to go there on a student visa. The door of America is never open for people like us.”

They both nodded.

“But at least you should not complain. You have your own business so you can support yourself.”

“What are you talking about, bro?” These strikes are ruining my business. I’m taking a big risk by opening today. If the protestors find out I’m open, they’ll trash the place.”

“That’s true,” Arjun said. “What a shitty situation we have in this country. We can’t even live or work freely here.”

The phone rang. Bhim picked it up. “Hello… Um... yes, yes. He is right here.”

Bhim handed phone to Arjun. “It’s your friend.”

*My friend?* “Hello?”

“Hello Arjun, it’s me, Prabhat.”

“Prabhat! How did you know I was here?”

“I heard your voicemail and just dialed the number back. By the way, that wasn’t my girlfriend.” Prabhat chuckled. “That was the answering machine.”

“Oh God, you have a machine that talks to people?”

“No. It just receives messages when people can’t answer the phone.”

“Stupid me,” Arjun said. “I don’t know anything about the world.”

“Don’t worry about it. That doesn’t make you stupid.”

“It’s good to talk to you, my friend. I guess you’ve heard how crappy life is here these days. How is everything in America? Do you just study or work as well?”

“Yes, I have seen the news,” Prabhat said. “I hope the situation there improves soon. I have a scholarship, which helps a lot. I also work part-time to pay for rest of my expenses. Hopefully, it will be worth it once I graduate.”

“Hmmm… how much can you expect to get paid once you get a job?”

“I don’t know… I should be able to get $40,000 a year to start with.”

*What!* *40,000 times Rs.70 is Rs.2,800,000. That much money can buy two-story house in Kathmandu!*

# Chapter 3

“Wow, what a surprise,” said Amit. He hugged Kumar. “When did you get back?”

“Just a week ago,” replied Kumar, entering the living room. “I came here for fifteen days’ vacation. And a few people want jobs in Kuwait, so I’ll take them back with me.”

Kumar was holding a plastic bag. He handed it to Amit.

“A small gift for you,” he said.

“Oh man. You didn’t have to do that. Thank you.” Amit took the plastic bag from Kumar and put it aside.

Kumar waved at Arjun, who was on the floor helping Saanu with the English alphabet. He waved back.

Kumar took two candy bars from his pocket and offered them to Saanu. “Hey, little one, look what I got you. Come over here.”

Saanu came close to him. He handed her the candy bars and gently pinched her cheeks.

“So, how are you?”

“I’m fine,” she replied, and went back to Arjun.

“Kids grow so fast,” said Kumar. He sat on the couch next to Amit.

“So true, it feels like she was just born yesterday.”

“Where is *bhauju*?” asked Kumar.

“She went to buy some groceries.” Amit looked at Arjun. “Go get us something to drink.”

“Sure.” Arjun stood up. “Uncle, tea or coke?”

“Tea sounds good,” replied Kumar.

Arjun came back with three cups of tea on a tray. He sat on the other side of his dad on the couch.

Taking a sip of his tea, Kumar said, “Do you ever think about sending him abroad?” He pointed his chin at Arjun. “Cooks get paid well in Kuwait.”

Amit frowned. “I don’t know. It’s not up to me—he needs to make this decision himself. I don’t want his mother to fight with me for sending him away. Besides, I don’t know if he could manage to work there.”

Kumar set the cup on the table. “What do you mean—if he could manage it? He’s not a kid anymore. Think about your days…our days. What had you accomplished by his age? You already had a kid by then, and you were able to take care of your family. If you send him out of the country, he will see the world. He will learn to be clever and resourceful. He can work there for a few years and earn some money. Then he can come back and build a house in Kathmandu. Hopefully by then, the situation of the country will be better, and he can do something here if he doesn’t want to go back.”

Amit looked at Arjun. “What do you think?”

“There is nothing to think about, *buba*. Uncle Kumar is right. I can’t live my whole life cooking or serving food to people for almost no money. My friends have gone to different countries and started buying things that I can’t even dream of right now. The situation in this country will not let me grow. I have to go there.”

“That’s a good decision,” Amit said. “You are a man now, and a man needs to see the world.” He looked at Kumar. “When can you take him?”

“Does he have a passport?”

“No.”

“Well then, it’s going to take some time. When I get back to Kuwait, I’ll send you some paperwork. In the meantime, get him a passport and make all your arrangements here. As soon as I send you the paperwork, he can just fly to Kuwait. I’ll come pick him up at the airport.”

He took a sip of tea.

“How about the expenses?” asked Amit.

“I charge Rs. 100,000, fifty percent of which I give to the company, and the rest I keep for myself for my hard work. Since you are a good friend, and for what Arjun did today, I won’t take my cut. So it will only be Rs. 50,000.”

\* \* \*

*Kathmandu, Nepal, July 2006*

Arjun’s stomach was in a knot as the time approached to leave for the airport. His mother, Sunita, who had arrived from their village two days ago, looked as gloomy as the weather outside, which was dark and windy, threatening to rain. Arjun knew his mother hated being here, in this house with her husband’s new young wife, but she had to come to bid farewell to her son before he left the country. She also wanted to perform a ritual to ensure his safe and blessed journey. She had stayed quiet all day yesterday, weaving a long garland of marigolds for the prosperous journey of her son. She wanted to be there to wish him well, but she worried about sending her son off to work in a country where the culture was so different from her own.

Arjun’s mother had slept in his bed, while he slept on the floor. The night before, when he carried his big suitcase and backpack to the living room, Arjun had noticed Sunita’s red face and tearful eyes as she left the living room to go to Arjun’s room to sleep. Arjun knew she was angry and resentful at her husband Amit and his new wife. It was not easy for her to let a young woman share the bed with her husband while she was in the house. Arjun felt sorry for his mother. She had already lost her loving husband. She would do anything in her ability to get him back, but there was nothing she could do about the situation. She could still fight with them, show her aggression to relieve her tension, but she stayed quiet. Arguing before somebody went away would be considered bad luck, and she couldn’t wish that on her son. Arjun lay down on the floor while his mother climbed into his bed. They talked for a long time before he fell asleep. It was good to spend some time with his mother again.

A few friends and relatives had gathered for Arjun’s farewell. The flight was at two p.m. and it was almost eleven o’clock already. Amit pulled the suitcase towards the door. Arjun walked past him, carrying his backpack. Sunita, along with her sister and few other ladies, waited outside the door to perform the farewell ritual. She was holding a holy plate, the *Thali* containing vermilion *tilak* paste and a few flowers. On both sides of the door were *kalashes* filled with water, flowers, and red *tilak* on top, with some Nepali rupees, crisp and new. Sunita’s eyes glistened with tears. She put her ring finger on some *tilak* from the *thali* and pressed it to his forehead. She passed the *thali* to her sister, who passed her the garland of marigold in return. Sunita lifted it. Arjun bowed his head, and she placed it on his neck. The garland hung down to his waist. One of the ladies passed her a bowl of yogurt. She scooped a spoonful of yogurt and fed it to Arjun.

The ritual for a safe and blessed journey was complete, and Arjun stepped out of the house with his eyes filled with tears. He tried to control his emotions so his tears would not appear as a flood to his mom that would later drown her, long after his leaving. As everybody walked behind Arjun, little Saanu accidentally kicked one of the *kalashes*. The water splashed on the floor. Arjun’s stepmother, who was standing nearby, rushed and pulled Saanu away from there. One of Arjun’s friends straightened the *kalash*, attempting to ward off negative omens. Apprehension surrounded the house. Sunita started to cry, worried for Arjun’s journey. Looking at his mom, Arjun could not hold on to his heart, so a few drops of tears rolled down his cheeks as well.

To get away from the tense situation, Amit said, “The taxi is waiting outside. The ritual for a blessed journey was complete. The *kalash* was knocked over after it was done, so it’s not a sign of bad luck. Let’s go.” Arjun followed his dad to the cab. Sunita wiped her tears and walked behind them. The driver started the vehicle. Arjun turned and waved as they pulled away.

\* \* \*

The plane landed in Kuwait at nine p.m. The country was getting ready to sleep, but Arjun’s life was just waking up—the beginning of his life in an unknown world. Arjun got off the plane. *Now what?* He walked around the airport looking for Kumar. People seemed to be staring at him and he wondered why. Somebody touched him on his back, so he turned around.

“Arjun, how was your journey?” It was Kumar.

Arjun felt relieved. With Kumar were two men in long white robes. One was tall and skinny and the other was short and chubby.

“Arjun, this is Mohammed, the son-in-law of the man you will be working for,” Kumar said, indicating the tall man.

Arjun extended his right hand for a handshake. “Nice to meet you, sir.”

Mohammed looked at Arjun without any expression, then shook his hand. “Okay.” He paused for few seconds and continued, “Welcome to Kuwait.” He looked at Kumar and said something in Arabic. Kumar translated it for Arjun. “He asked you to wipe off your *tilak*. It is not appropriate for here.”

Arjun hesitated, nervous. He didn’t want to wipe off the *tilak*, the sign of an auspicious journey, before completing his journey. But he did not want to be rude.He took out his handkerchief and rubbed off the *tilak*. He was glad he had handed his garland to his father when the security asked him to take it off. Otherwise, his mother’s hard work for his peaceful journey would have ended up in the trash can before his journey was complete.

Kumar grabbed his luggage and pulled it along and Arjun followed them to the parking lot. The short man opened the driver’s side door of the car and the tall guy got in the passenger side. Arjun and Kumar sat in the back. The inside of the car was quiet except when Kumar asked Arjun in Nepali how his dad was doing and how his brother and sisters were doing with their studies. He answered that they were doing fine.

The bright city lights excited Arjun’s heart. He gazed out the window, enjoying the view of the city.

“So many bright lights. Is there a festival today?” he asked.

“Every day is *Tihar* here,” Kumar said. “That’s what is different in a developed country. We brighten our house once a year in *Tihar*, but their city looks like this every day.”

Arjun smiled, wondering what the bright city would bring him in his life.

“I’m getting off shortly, but they will take you to your place,” Kumar said. “They know me as Jalal. So, if they ask anything about me, or about us—anything at all—just tell them yes and okay, all right?”

“All right, uncle.”

A few minutes later, the driver stopped the car. Kumar pointed to a house on the other side of the street. “That’s where I live. See you soon, and don’t forget what I told you!”

“Sure.” Arjun nodded. “Can I please get your number?”

“Almost forgot about it.” Kumar took out his wallet and handed him his business card. “Here you go.”

Kumar turned to the men and said goodbye in Arabic. He opened the door and climbed out.

About ten minutes later, the driver stopped the car at a residential area in front of a two-story building.

“That’s the house,” said Mohammed.

They walked out of the car and went to the house. Mohammed rang the doorbell.

A young South Asian guy opened the door. He greeted Mohammed. “*Salaam Walekum!*” the guy bowed his head a little, touching his forehead with his right hand.

“*Walekum Salaam,*” Mohammed replied. “Is your boss asleep already?”

“I’m not sure. He is in his room,” the guy replied. He looked at Arjun and smiled a little. He seemed to be a year or two older than Arjun. He had brown skin, thick eyebrows, and a pointed nose, more distinct than Arjun’s.

“Okay, tell him we left,” Mohammed said. The guy nodded.

Mohammed and the driver walked back to their car. The guy closed the door and introduced himself. “Dev from India. What’s your name?”

“Arjun, from Nepal.”

“Okay, Arjun, I take you to your room,” said Dev and walked straight through the living room. Arjun followed him. Dev opened the door of a room and turned on the lights. “This is our room. We share it.”

It was a small room with two beds placed next to each other with a small gap in between. In the corner was a small refrigerator, with a twelve-inch television on top of it. To the right of the door was an attached bathroom. Besides those, there was only a tiny window, a wooden wardrobe, and a small fan in the room.

“Okay, Arjun, I’ll call the boss. You stay here.” Dev walked out of the room. Arjun changed his clothes and started unpacking, trying not to feel nervous. After few minutes, Dev came back.

“The boss says you can come now.”

“Okay.” Arjun followed him. In the living room, a man in his late sixties was sitting on the couch. He had gray hair that covered half of his forehead. He was wearing thick glasses with string that hung behind his neck.

“How are you? My name is Ahmad. You can call me Boss,” said the man in English, with a thick Arabic accent.

“I’m fine, thank you, Boss,” he replied politely.

“Your name?”

“Arjun.”

“You Thomas here!” Ahmad laughed, and said something in Arabic. Dev translated it for Arjun. “Boss said it’s too much trouble for them to remember all the foreign names of their workers, so your name Thomas here, easy for everyone.”

That felt strange to Arjun to lose his name, just like that. But he nodded. “Okay.”

“Hungry or no?” Ahmad asked.

“Yes sir.”

Ahmad looked at Dev. “Joe, give food to him.”

Dev nodded.

“Tomorrow, watch Joe, learn how to cook food,” Ahmad said.

“Sure,” Arjun replied.

“Now all good… Go to your room.”

Arjun walked back to his room and went to take a shower. When he came out of the bathroom, Dev had a plate of food waiting for him.

It was chicken *biryani* with only few pieces of chicken in it. Arjun took a forkful. It tasted too bland for *biryani.* Was it really biryani, or did they make it differently here? Would it be rude to ask? Maybe Dev just wasn’t a very good cook?

He decided to ask anyway. “Is *biryani* supposed to be like this here?”

“Yes, it’s not as spicy as Indian *biryani*. They use different spices here. Besides, the boss doesn’t like food that’s too spicy.”

Arjun was hungry. He finished it all.

The next morning, he got up at nine am and went to the kitchen. Dev was busy making tea and breakfast for the family.

“Good morning, brother,” said Dev. “Did you sleep okay?” He glanced at Arjun, then quickly went back to stirring the food in the pot.

“Good morning, Dev. Yes, it was all right.”

He looked back at Arjun. “Since the boss not here, we can talk in Hindi. I am not good in English! Do you know Hindi?”

“That’s fine. I like Hindi better,” replied Arjun.

“Great.” Dev smiled at Arjun, looking relieved at being able to communicate more easily. Then his expression turned more serious. “The boss has summoned you to the living room as soon as you wake up. He wants to talk to you.”

“Okay, I’ll go see him now.”

“He is in his *Namaz,* the prayer, so we can talk for few more minutes.”

“Okay.”

“You have a week to learn how to cook food the way they like it.” Dev opened the refrigerator, took out garlic paste, and added a spoonful to the pot. He stirred it a few times. “You need to learn how to do all the stuff in the house. Then you will be in charge of this kitchen.”

“What? What do you mean? I’ll be working in this house as a servant?” Arjun said.

“Why? You didn’t know that?”

“I was told that I would have a job as a cook, and I have experience for it. They must be expecting somebody else, not me.”

“Sorry to break it to you, brother, but you are going to be a cook and much more, but not for a restaurant.” Dev wiped his hand on his shirt. “You will be working all day in this house.”

# Chapter 4

Arjun took a deep breath. He thought about the time he threw a plate of food. His mother had cooked *dhido*, traditional Nepali food made from corn flour, a dish he didn’t like. The memory of his selfish behavior filled him with remorse. *I was such a spoiled child. Poor aama—I gave her so much trouble.*

Now Arjun had to cook food and wash all the dirty dishes of rich strangers. Worst of all, he was going to be a servant in this house! What did that mean? He didn’t know what the boss expected from him. He wanted to go back to his country already, but his family had spent a lot of money to send him here. Besides, what would people say if he returned to his country as a loser, someone who couldn’t even keep a job?

“Brother, are you all right?” asked Dev.

Arjun wanted to cry, but he controlled his tears as he didn’t want to appear weak. “Where will you go after you train me?” he asked in a low voice.

“Don’t worry, we will be still together in the house. I am going nowhere. The boss promised to make me his personal driver.”

“Good for you, brother. Looks like you are really excited about it.” Arjun tried to smile.

“Yes, for sure. It’s less work and more money. Besides, the boss said that after I work here for few more years, he will send me to America or Canada or some other country where I can work half the hours I work here and make at least five times the money. I dream about it all the time.”

“Really?” *There might be some opportunity if I work hard here.*

“That sounds great,” Arjun said.

“Yeah, but I deserve it, you know! I have worked very hard in this house. I miss my family all the time. I talk to them very rarely, not even twice a year.”

“Why is that? Can’t you call them more often?” Arjun asked.

“No, we can’t go out of the house, and it is very expensive to call back home from here. The boss even charges us for incoming calls.”

“What do you mean, we can’t go out of the house?” Arjun was confused. *That can’t be possible.*

Dev turned off the burner, moved the pot, and peeked into the living room through a tiny glass window on the door. He stirred the tea to see if it was ready.

“Go ahead—the boss is waiting for you.” He gestured toward the door. Arjun walked to the living room. Ahmad was sitting on a couch in front of a big television. Arjun stood in front of him.

“So, how are you?” Ahmad asked.

“I am fine.” Arjun looked at him for an instant then looked down at the floor.

“Okay… good,” said the man.

Dev entered the room with tea. He handed it to the boss.

Ahmad took a sip of the tea. “How much money do you owe Jalal?” he asked.

Arjun frowned in confusion and shook his head. “Nothing! I don’t owe him anything.”

Ahmad put the cup on the table. He looked surprised. He smiled and slowly nodded few times. “Ummm…okay.”

Dev left the room.

“Since you don’t owe Jalal any money, you will earn 50 dinar a month. That’s about 177.50 US dollars. Is that clear?” Ahmad said.

“Yes, boss.”

Okay, Thomas, go learn everything Joe can teach you. Pay attention, and when I think you’re ready, you will take over the cooking.”

“Okay, boss.” Arjun nodded. *What choice do I have?* He walked towards the kitchen.

“Wait,” the man said. “Bring me your passport. I’ll keep it safe for you.”

Arjun looked back, confused. “I can keep it safe myself, if you don’t mind.”

“I do mind. It’s the rule in this house to keep you all safe. Everybody gives me their passport, so they don’t worry about losing it. You are the same. You are part of this house and my responsibility.”

“Okay, I understand. I’ll bring it to you.” With a sinking feeling, he went to his room and brought Ahmad his passport. *Now I can’t leave without his permission. Am I trapped here?*

Dev was washing dishes. He passed a clean cloth to Arjun. “You can dry. By the way, how much money are you going to get?”

“Fifty dinar a month.” Arjun took the cloth from Dev and started to dry the dishes. “How about you?”

“Forty-five dinar,” he replied. “The agent who brought me here got a commission from the boss, and that reduced my pay. So for two years, I’ll be getting just 45 KD a month. When I become the boss’s driver, he will increase my pay.”

“Hmmm… okay.” Arjun opened the cupboard to put away the dry dishes. “I didn’t understand why the boss asked me how much money I owe Jalal— my father’s friend, Kumar. I’ve never borrowed any money from him.”

“Hmmm… I think your father’s friend was just trying to get a commission for getting you here. Did you pay him his commission before?”

“We paid Rs. 50,000 to him, which he said would go to a company. He did not want a commission from our side. He is a good friend of my father,” Arjun replied.

Dev turned off the tap and started wiping the basin. “I paid a commission to the agent while I was in India, and the boss paid him extra money because the agent told him that he had managed all the expenses for me to get here. But he didn’t! When I understood what was really going on, it was too late.”

Arjun took a long breath, beginning to figure out Kumar’s game. He must have told Ahmad he had paid all Arjun’s expenses so he could get more money from him.And I get less? he thought. How could he do that? I risked myself to save him that day, and this is how he returns the favor? Didn’t he realize I would figure it out one day?

After a few minutes, the phone rang. It was mounted beside the door inside the kitchen. Dev picked up the phone. He started talking in broken English and Arabic. The only thing Arjun understand was “tea… yes… okay, madam.’ Dev hung up the phone and took out the tea kettle and put some water in it. “The lady boss wants some saffron tea.” Dev put the tea kettle on the stove and turned it on.

“Where is she?” asked Arjun.

“She is in her room. She is getting up now.” Dev opened the teapot.

“And she called here from her room?”

“They do it all the time. We have to stay in the kitchen and work all the time. They don’t want to come to the kitchen and ask us to make tea.” Dev added two tea bags to the pot.

*Not only do I have to stay in the house, but I have to stay in the kitchen all the time?* Arjun thought longingly of the freedom he’d had at home, wandering the streets of Kathmandu and meeting up with his friends.

“The boss and his wife had an argument a week ago—since then, they have been living in separate rooms. They do that drama from time to time.” Dev added two pieces of cardamom to the teapot.

“Who else lives here?”

“They have two daughters and a son. The daughters live in their own houses—one of the men who brought you here yesterday is the oldest son-in-law. They come here once in a while, especially when the boss needs to go to the hospital.” Dev added a pinch of saffron powder to the kettle.

“The boss is sick? What’s wrong with him?”

“I don’t know. They never tell me, but they take medicine all the time.” Dev looked at Arjun. “Their youngest son lives here in the house. He works at the airport in the evening shift as a security guard. I don’t like him. He sneaks into the kitchen like a cat and yells at us if he finds us not working.” Dev added a cube of sugar to the teapot and poured the water in.

“Wow, really? That’s weird.”

“Oh…I forgot to tell you,” Dev said. “There is a girl in this house, Julie, who is a personal maid of the boss lady. She is from your country.” He paused, and then continued, “There used to be a girl from my country. Her two years’ visa ended two months ago. When she left she was happy, but I nearly cried. I could talk to her when the bosses were not around.”

“What do you mean you could talk to her when the bosses were not around? Couldn’t you talk to her whenever you wanted?” asked Arjun.

“Oh no! Brother, don’t be happy to know that there’s a girl here from your country. Most of the time you won’t even see her—she has to stay in her room, and you have to stay here. You can’t even go to the living room unless you have work to do there. Also, if you see her, you can’t talk much in front of the boss or they will yell at you.”

*Oh God, what else?*

Through the window in the door, Arjun saw a woman walking to the living room. Dev poured tea into a cup. “Let’s go, I’ll introduce you to the boss lady. Her name is Fatima.”

Fatima looked to be in her early sixties. Her face was covered with wrinkles and she had a dark-brown birthmark on the right side of her forehead. She nodded at Arjun and mumbled a few words in Arabic, which Dev did not translate.

They came back to the kitchen. A few minutes later, a short guy in his mid-twenties walked into the living room and looked toward the kitchen. He had a short beard and a mustache. Arjun nodded at him and smiled. The guy did not react.

“What are you doing, brother?” whispered Dev. “He’s not looking at you—he’s probably watching TV. He’s nearsighted.”

They stayed busy with the kitchen work, and the guy walked into the kitchen. He pushed Dev with his elbow as if Dev was in his way. Dev tripped a bit and adjusted himself, taking support from the wall.

The guy walked by Arjun. “New servant! Who are you? Are you his cousin?” He pointed his chin towards Dev.

Arjun just shook his head—he didn’t know how to handle that humiliating tone. He grabbed a towel and started wiping down the stove while the guy stood looking at him.

“Hey, you—don’t act like a prince in this house when I’m talking to you. You are just a freaking slave. Listen carefully when I talk to you.”

The guy crossed the line of Arjun’s patience. He jerked his head and stared into the guy’s eyes directly. The guy wavered a bit but tried to gain control of the situation by throwing the ceramic fruit basket on the floor. It crashed and broke into pieces.

“Naseer!” Ahmad yelled from the living room.

He spit on Arjun’s clothes and left.

Arjun looked down at the spit on his shirt, shaking with anger. His face felt flushed. He closed his eyes and took several deep breaths, trying to calm himself. When he opened his eyes, Dev was just staring at him with a towel on his hand. Arjun walked toward the living room.

Dev grabbed his arm. “No, brother! Don’t go. If you confront him, it will just make things worse.”

Arjun freed his hand. “Thank you, but I need to talk to him. We’re not animals.”

He walked to the living room. Both husband and wife stared at him as if he had broken some law by entering there. Naseer was still standing, his face red with anger.

“Boss, I can’t do this. I am not a stray animal. He can’t just come and spit on me for no reason.” Arjun pointed to his shirt where Naseer had spit. “I need to use your phone to call Jalal. I was supposed to work in a restaurant as a cook, not in a house like this.”

“*Baba…*” Naseer was about to say something, but Ahmad interrupted. “Go to your room.”

Naseer jerked his head and stormed out. He slammed his door loudly.

Ahmad looked towards the sound, then back to Arjun. “The phone is not working, no outgoing calls, you can’t call anybody. And Naseer won’t do that again. Now go back to the kitchen and tell Joe to make some tea for Naseer.”

There was nothing Arjun could do. Hopeless, he returned to the kitchen.

At about one o’clock in the afternoon, lunch was ready. Arjun was hungry as they hadn’t eaten anything since morning.

“Aren’t we going to eat?” he asked Dev.

“We’re not supposed to eat anything until after they have eaten. We will be in trouble if we do. I used to get hungry a lot when I first came here, but now I’m getting used to it.”

“Oh God! Really?”

“If you’re hungry, eat something when they are not around. But be very careful they don’t find out about it.”

“Don’t they get hungry before now?”

“They keep fruit, cookies, and other snacks in their rooms,” Dev said. “Only things that need cooking come from the kitchen.”

“Joe, is the food ready?” They heard Ahmad yell from the living room.

“Yes, boss,” replied Dev.

He asked Arjun to follow him to set the table in the dining room, which was attached to the living room. Dev showed Arjun how to place the plates and silverware, then they went back to the kitchen for the food. When they got back to the dining room with the food, Ahmad, Fatima and Naseer were sitting at the table, all silent.

Nearby was a small room where a young girl was folding clothes. She looked at Arjun and smiled. *She must be Julie.* Arjun smiled back. She went back to folding the clothes.

Ahmad heaped a mound of rice on his plate, then looked at Arjun. “Jalal said you were a cook.”

“Yes.” Arjun nodded.

“You can cook us mutton tomorrow.” He looked at Dev. “Joe, teach this guy about our spices. I want to see if he can cook how we like it.”

“Okay, boss.” Dev replied obediently.

After they started eating, Dev returned back to the kitchen. Arjun followed him.

“You took all the food to the dining room. What are we going to eat?” asked Arjun, his stomach growling.

“That’s what we do every day. We get to eat the leftovers.”

“Why don’t we just put aside a little for us before we give it to them?”

“If they saw us doing that, we’d be punished.”

*Punished for eating? That’s crazy.* Arjun wished he had never left Nepal. His heart sank at the thought of being trapped here—for how long? Kumar’s betrayal made him livid. *Why did Kumar do this to me?*

After the bosses finished eating, Arjun followed Dev to the dining room and brought back the dishes and leftover food. The young girl came to the kitchen to join them to eat.

“Julie, this is Arjun. He is from Nepal too.”

“Wow, that’s awesome.” Julie had a genuine smile. “It’s so nice to meet you, Arjun. My name is Maya, but they call me Julie here.”

Arjun felt too depressed to respond to her enthusiasm. He forced a smile. “Nice to meet you too.”

It was the only opportunity the servants had to talk to each other quietly, but Arjun was not in the mood for conversation, so after saying a few words, he stayed quiet.

Stress and worry had taken away Arjun’s appetite. He drank water and stayed with them while they were eating. After Julie ate, she washed her plate and went back to her room.

Arjun helped Dev finish the kitchen work.

“They went to take a nap, so we get to take a little break now,” Dev said. “Do you want to watch TV or…?”

“I would rather take a nap. I’m a little tired.” Arjun went to their room. He needed to save his energy.

# Chapter 5

“Never let any of the bosses see you idle,” Dev said. “They want us working all the time.”

Arjun and Dev were standing in the kitchen. They had already served lunch to the bosses, washed the pots and pans and dishes, put everything away, and cleaned the stove and counters. They’d even swept and washed the floor. Arjun looked around—everything seemed to be done properly. “What if there is nothing to do in the house?”

“There is always something to do,” Dev said, wiping the window.

“But you cleaned that window this morning.”

“Doesn’t matter, clean it, reclean it. Sometimes I clean the window three times a day. Rewash the clean dishes and dry them several times,” Dev said. “Good advice for you, brother—if everything is done, get out some rice or lentils and pretend that you are checking for tiny pebbles and sand—it’s easy and impressive for the boss.”

“But won’t we get exhausted from working all day long like that?”

“No worries, brother—when the bosses go outside the house, you can relax a little, but make sure everything is done before they get back,” Dev said with a smile.

Before he left Nepal, Arjun had suspected that life overseas would not be easy as playing and squabbling with his brother and sisters back in his village. But he had hoped to work eight-hour shifts, five or six days a week, and enjoy the rest of the time with his new friends. He had definitely expected that life in Kuwait would be better than staying in his father’s house, where nobody cared about him, and working in a restaurant, where he could barely make enough money for his survival.

Life here in Kuwait was the opposite of what he had dreamed of. He had to wake up at six o’clock in the morning and sweep, clean, and mop the house. Then he worked in the kitchen, cleaning and recleaning all the dishes, making lunch and serving it to the bosses, and so on. Finally, the work would be done around eleven or eleven-thirty at night, after the bosses went to bed.

That first week, Dev spent his time teaching Arjun what needed to be done in the house and how to cook Arabic food. He was tired, but at least he had somebody to talk to. Within a week, he felt as if Dev had been his buddy for ages.

After a week, when Arjun could manage things in the house, Ahmad sent Dev to his daughter’s house to learn to drive and to help them in their household work. Then the darkness covered Arjun’s loneliness. Sometimes, he wanted to run away till his heart would burst with the thumping of his heartbeats. Soon, Arjun was all alone in the kitchen all day long, working, cleaning, thinking, and missing home.

Arjun had to listen to them complain about how bad he cooked the food, that they’d never had a worse cook than him before, that Jalal had tricked them into having a rookie cook, and so on. There was nothing he could do except keep trying harder to please them. It felt like he had finally passed the cooking test for them yesterday. After taking a bite of stuffed lamb, Ahmad had smiled. “Good… very tasty. Joe doesn’t make it this good. If you cook like this, you make me happy.”

Arjun was relieved that at least he did not need to hear them complain about the food every single time they ate. But he had many more things to worry about.

There was a door that led to the backyard, but it was always closed. Dev had told him not to open it without permission from the bosses. One day, after the bosses went to take a nap, Arjun opened the door and went outside. He sat on the ground and stared at the high wall surrounding the yard. Drops of his memories started rolling down with his tears. Since he was all alone, he didn’t have to control his emotions. The continuous flow of tears soothed his heart. He covered his face with his hands, and let the tears run down his cheeks. Suddenly something dropped on the ground beside him and his heart skipped a beat. It was a piece of paper wrapped around something. His heart beat faster with the fear that it could be a trick his boss was playing on him. He turned around. He didn’t see his boss. He looked at the house in front of him, then his eyes went up. Three girls on the second floor of the neighboring house smiled and waved at him from an open window.

He waved, smiling awkwardly, hoping they couldn’t see his embarrassing tears from that far. He was thankful to those welcoming faces, though. He picked it up and unwrapped it to find two candies. He put one in his mouth and saved the second one for Dev. He nodded and smiled and mouthed, “Thank you.” Then he straightened the wrinkled paper.

It was a short note, “Hi, how you? Where from?” He looked at them, smiling again. One of the girls threw a pencil. He caught it and wrote on the piece of paper, “My name is Arjun and I am from Nepal. Where are you from?” He wrapped a small stone in it, then threw it back up to them. They caught it and introduced themselves to Arjun. One girl was from the Philippines and the other two were from India. They smiled and gestured back and forth. With Dev gone, he had been so lonely. Now he had some new friends, and his life in the dark felt a little brighter.

The friendship between them flourished every day. By the time the bosses would go to take a nap at three pm, his work would be finished, and he would be ready to talk to his new friends. They started whispering back and forth more and more. For that one or two hours, he would forget all his pain. Sometimes they would talk in Hindi, and the Indian girls would translate it for the Filipino girl, and sometimes they would talk in broken English. The other times communication would just flow on pieces of paper.

Every day the girls would get something to throw from the window for Arjun—candies, fruit, chips, or small snacks, depending on what they could save from what they got from their boss. Their love and generosity added zest to the treats for him. He had nothing to give them back except smiles of love and appreciation.

After a month, Dev came back to the house. He had passed the driving test. He was ready to be the personal driver for the boss. He was proud and excited.

They spent most of the night talking.

The next day, after his daily routine, the boss went to take his nap at three pm.

“Dev, I’d like to show you something,” Arjun said.

“Yeah? What?”

“You gotta follow me for that.” Arjun smiled and walked out the back door, with Dev following.

The girls were already at the window. One of them opened the window. “Hi, guys, how are you?” The girls whispered loudly in unison.

Arjun waved and returned their greetings.

Dev pulled his arm and whispered, “What the hell do you think you are doing? This is not Nepal. You can’t talk to girls like this. What if the boss finds out about this? He will chew us alive.”

“You nervous, Dev?” one of the girls asked with a smile.

“Or you don’t like us!” said the second one, laughing.

“Calm down, Dev. He’s not going to find out about it,” Arjun said. “Aren’t you living in hell in there? I know if he sees us, we will be punished and won’t be able to come out here again. But what the hell, can’t you take that risk to enjoy your life? Live your life, don’t worry about the future.”

“Okay.” Dev smiled. He was ready to take the risk.

It was one o’clock in the afternoon and Arjun was starving—he hadn’t eaten anything since breakfast. Ahmad and his wife had left the house after breakfast when their son-in-law came to take them to the doctor for checkups and run other errands. Their midday meal was ready, but they still weren’t back.

“Can we just eat something? I’m so hungry,” Arjun said.

“I am too. Let’s take a chance. I think Naseer is still sleeping,” replied Dev. “As long as nobody sees us, it shouldn’t be a problem.”

Dev put some hummus in a bowl and took out *khubz* bread. They tore off pieces of the pita-like flatbread and dipped them in the hummus. They were both about to take a bite when the kitchen door opened.

“You two buffalo!” shouted Naseer, entering the kitchen. “Stealing our food, breaking rules!” He snatched the bread from their hands and tossed it in the garbage. “It’s going to be a very entertaining day. I’m glad I caught you two culprits.” He laughed as he snatched away the bowl of hummus and the rest of the flatbread.

“We’re sorry,” Dev said. “It’s never going to happen again.”

Arjun remained silent.

“No, no, you’re not sorry,” said Naseer. “And definitely not that guy.” He pointed at Arjun. “But you will be sorry today, when my *baba* comes.”

Arjun still did not say anything. He was not sorry, and he wanted to let Naseer know.

Dev lightly tugged Arjun’s sleeve. “You are sorry too, right, Arjun?”

Arjun saw Dev’s pleading eyes, but still did not say anything. He knew there was no value of sorry. Naseer was already on his way back to his room with the bread and hummus in his hands.

They continued to busy themselves, trying to ignore their growling stomachs. Later in the afternoon, Ahmad and Fatima returned.

Dev and Arjun were in the kitchen, already preparing the evening meal when Naseer barged in. “Both of you come to the living room,” he ordered with a grin on his face. “My baba is rewarding you for your work.” They did not reply, but simply walked behind him.

“What’s this?” asked Ahmad, frowning as he pointed at the bowl of hummus and pieces of *khubz* on the floor.

“Sorry, boss,” Dev said, “it’s never going to happen again.”

Arjun tried to explain. “Boss, we were really hungry, and we did not know when you would come back. That’s why—”

Ahmad interrupted, “There are rules here you buffaloes need to follow! Who is boss here, you or I? Who eats first?” he shouted. “Who eats first?” His eyes bulged and his face was red with anger.

There was no answer. Naseer started laughing.

“You hungry, right?” shouted Ahmad, looking at Dev. Dev hung his head, his skin covered with a sheen of sweat. He did not answer.

“I asked you a question—you hungry?” repeated the man.

Dev shook his head, no.

Ahmad coughed out sputum and spat. The thick yellow sputum landed on the bread. “Eat that, you dog!”

“No boss, please no. It will never happen again,” Dev pleaded.

“I said eat that.” Ahmad took off his belt and smacked Dev with it. “You teach new guy to break rule! You eat that right now.”

“No, boss, it was I who decided to eat first,” Arjun said. “It’s not his fault. Please don’t punish him.”

“You going to make the rules in this house now?” replied the man furiously. “I need permission from you?” He turned on Arjun and hit him with the belt six times. It was extremely painful, but Arjun was determined not to show any reaction.

The boss looked back at Dev. “What did I say to you, you deaf buffalo? Eat that right now.” He struck him again and again with the belt. Ahmad was red-faced, sweating, and out of control.

“No boss…please no…” The belt did not stop. Dev could not take it any longer. He kneeled down, took the bread, closed his eyes, and shoved it in his mouth.

“Swallow it.” Ahmad struck him again with the belt. Dev tried to swallow, but his stomach churned and food came back to his mouth. He covered it and ran to the restroom. He puked. Arjun heard him vomiting again and again. Furious and humiliated, Arjun looked down, holding himself back from reacting.

# Chapter 6

Late that night, Arjun lay in bed, unable to sleep. It was oppressively hot, and the tiny fan in the room didn’t help. He looked over at Dev, who was fast asleep. Arjun had been thinking a lot lately about his situation here, and the incident this afternoon made it much worse. There was no hope in this house—he had to get away. But how could he escape? Ahmad had confiscated his passport. Arjun had been hoping Kumar would call him here, so he could ask him to find him a better job. But Kumar never called. Several times, Arjun had asked Ahmad if he could make a call, but the response was always the same—the phone was not working, there was no outgoing service. Ahmad locked the phone all the time, so there was no way he could make a call. Unable to find a solution, Arjun drifted off.

“Wake up, brother! It’s late already.” Arjun opened his eyes. Dev was standing in front of him. “I’m preparing breakfast for them. You go clean the house before they find out you’re still sleeping.”

“All right. Thanks, Dev.” Arjun got up and quickly cleaned himself up, then went to sweep and mop the house.

After finishing the work, Arjun headed over to the kitchen. Fresh *falafel*, *khubz* flatbread, and a bowl of hummus were on the kitchen counter ready to be served. A tomato-based hot *daqqus* sauce was still in the pan. Dev was scrambling eggs*.*

“Make sure you don’t eat any scrambled eggstoday,” Dev said.

“Why?” asked Arjun, curious.

“This is why!” Dev spat in the frying pan and stirred it few times. “You don’t want to know what else I did to these eggs*.* How could he treat us like that just for eating when we’re hungry?”

“Don’t do it, Dev.” Arjun held his arm lightly. “It won’t make us any better than them if you act like them. We might be poor, but we are way richer than them in our hearts. If you do that, you will be poor both inside and out. Revenge won’t make you a better person.”

Dev looked at him for a while, then nodded. “I guess you’re right. I was angry and humiliated by what he did yesterday but playing his game won’t help.” Dev dumped the eggs in the garbage, then broke new eggs in a bowl and whisked them with a fork.

The kitchen phone rang. Arjun picked up the phone.

“Is the food ready?” Ahmad asked.

“It’s almost ready, boss,” replied Arjun.

“Bring it quick. I’m hungry.”

“All right boss.”

“Listen, after breakfast, we go shopping for groceries and other things. I need both of you to come to carry all the food and other supplies.”

“Okay, boss.”

Ahmad hung up the phone.

“What did he say?” asked Dev.

“He wants breakfast immediately, and afterward we go grocery shopping with him.”

Arjun was excited. He had not been out of the house since his arrival here. As he set the dining table for breakfast, his mind was in a whirl. How could he work this outing to his advantage?

After they finished cleaning the kitchen, Arjun and Dev went to their room. Arjun pulled out his suitcase from under the bed and took out his wallet, then put the suitcase back. Wallet in hand, he hummed a happy little tune.

“Don’t expect too much, brother—we are there to help them, nothing else.”

“I know, but I have an idea that might get me out of here.” Arjun sat on the bed, smiling.

“Don’t do anything stupid, and don’t take out money to buy anything without permission from him.”

“You worry too much, my friend. I’m not even going to buy anything.”

“Then what’s that wallet for?”

“That’s the surprise. You will have to wait for that.”

Dev looked at Arjun, confused.

They headed back to the kitchen.

Arjun heard Ahmad and Fatima entering the living room, so he peeked through the little window in the kitchen door. Ahmad was wearing a shirt and pants, while Fatima was covered from head to toe in a black burqa. Arjun had never seen her like that before. At home, she always wore shorts and a blouse or T-shirt, which even seemed a little inappropriate for her age. He thought that’s how she dressed all the time. But it was so hot today, and her entire body was covered in the burqa. He looked at Dev, amazed.

“That’s how women dress here when they go outside the house,” whispered Dev. “Besides their family members, women are not even allowed to show their face to any men.”

“But we see her dressed in shorts, and we aren’t her family members.”

“Do you think they consider us men or human beings at all?” replied Dev.

Dev and Arjun followed Ahmad and Fatima out to the driveway.

Dev opened the car door for Ahmad, and Arjun did the same for Fatima. Then Dev sat in the driver’s seat, with Arjun beside him. As they drove through the city, he gazed around, wondering why such a prosperous city did not have a suitable job for him, and wishing he could get out more. *Why can’t they let us get fresh air like this more often?*

The store was huge. There were many women shopping, and almost all of them were wearing burqas.Arjun thought it must be so hot and stifling under there. Did the women wear the burqas willingly, or were they forced to do so? Why weren’t other people allowed to see their faces? But he stopped himself. *Who the hell am I to judge their culture and traditions?*

Arjun remembered feeling a similar culture shock when he first arrived in Kathmandu. Back in his village, he had always seen women in *saris, kurtas,* and longskirts. But in Kathmandu, he was shocked to see girls in tight jeans and sleeveless tops. He had been amazed at the freedom modern city women had to wear and do whatever they want.

Arjun controlled his wandering mind. He had a more important goal today. He surreptitiously glanced around the store, hoping to see what he was looking for. Dev pushed the cart beside the bosses, who were filling it with the groceries and other household items.

All of a sudden, Arjun stopped. “Boss, I have a terrible stomachache. Can I please go to the toilet?”

Ahmad glared at Arjun. “No, hold it till we get back. There is time for everything, you stupid buffalo.”

“Boss, I can’t. It’s really bad… Please.”

“Well, make it quick. The toilet is at the other end. If anybody asks for your ID or passport, tell them you came with me.”

“Okay, boss.” Arjun turned to leave, winking at Dev, who looked confused.

Arjun rushed toward the other end of the store. He glanced back at them, but they were out of sight. He did not have to go to the restroom. He took out his wallet and pulled out five dinar and a business card. Now he needed to make a phone call. He looked around but couldn’t see a phone anywhere in the store.

Nervous, he peered at each person looking for someone who might be willing to help him. A man in a business suit walked by, holding a cell phone. Arjun approached him.

“Excuse me, sir,” Arjun said. “Do you speak English?”

“Yes. What do you need?” replied the man.

“I’m new here, and I’m lost. I need to make a call to my uncle. It’s urgent. Would you please take five dinar and let me make a call?” Arjun showed the business card and five dinar.

The man looked at Arjun, hesitating.

“Please, sir; it’s just a local call.”

The man held up his phone. “What’s the number?”

Arjun handed the business card to the man, and he dialed the number, then passed the phone to Arjun.

Kumar answered.

“Hello, Uncle. It’s me, Arjun,” he said in Nepali.

“Hmmm… Arjun. How are you?”

“Not good. Uncle, I didn’t come here to be a servant.”

“Well, you screwed up. I helped you and you broke that trust,” Kumar said. “How hard was it be to tell your boss that I helped you?”

“Uncle, he didn’t ask me whether you helped me or not. He asked me how much money I owed you. You told me I don’t owe you anything, so why would I say I did? If you wanted me to tell him I owe you money, why didn’t you prepare me for that?”

“Couldn’t you just say ‘yes’? That’s all I wanted you to tell him. If he had asked you how much it was, you could have simply said, ‘I don’t know, my father arranged it,’ or you could have said, ‘Ask my uncle, Jalal.’”

“If I had to pay you this way, why did you pretend to do it for free?” Arjun asked, his voice rising. He forced himself to calm down, realizing the man was still standing right next to him. Besides, it was not smart to argue with Kumar anymore, now that he understood Kumar’s game.

“I didn’t know you were so ungrateful, Arjun. Didn’t I do it for free? What’s the harm to you if I get few bucks from your boss for helping him? You wouldn’t lose anything. That’s how commission works here.”

“It does matter to me when he cuts my pay to give you the commission.” Arjun said, trying to be as calm as possible.

“They don’t do that. However you got that idea, it’s not right. I would never take cuts from your pay. How can you even think that?” Kumar tried to sound convincing, but Arjun didn’t fall for it.

The businessman tapped on his shoulder and pointed to his watch, then gestured for the phone. Arjun nodded, then tried one last tactic before he had to hang up. “I don’t even care about that anymore, Uncle. That’s not what’s bothering me. I came here to be a cook, not a servant. You can’t even imagine how bad he treats us there. Please help me get the job you promised.”

“That was the plan. You were supposed to stay in the house and learn to make their food. Once they were confident about your cooking, they would take you to their friend’s restaurant to work. But since you screwed it up now, I can’t help you. They don’t even want to talk to me anymore. I can’t just go there and take you out of their house. It’s not possible. Now it’s up to you to win their hearts, so they can get you a restaurant job.”

Arjun slumped, defeated. Everything was beyond him now. “Uncle, please don’t do this to me. I didn’t come here to be a slave.”

“There’s nothing I can do for you at this time,” replied Kumar.

Arjun couldn’t take it anymore. His eyes filled with tears. He looked at the phone in disbelief, then disconnected. His dreams were shattered. His only hope of rescue was destroyed with the phone call. He was stuck in this country as a slave—for how long?

“Are you all right?” asked the man in the suit.

“Yes sir,” Arjun said, controlling his tears. “Thank you for your help.” He handed the phone and five dinar to the man.

Arjun walked away before the man could say anything. He wiped his tears and went to find his boss.

# Chapter 7

Arjun stared at the tiny fan in their bedroom that had stopped working, so the oppressive heat made it impossible to sleep. He had told Ahmad about it, but instead of getting a new one, he had yelled at Arjun for not handling it with more care. Lack of sleep, the heat, and feeling imprisoned in the house all combined to increase Arjun’s stress. He was only able to doze off early in the morning.

When he woke up, he noticed Dev was not on his bed. He got up and made his bed.

Dev wasn’t in the kitchen and the house was quiet. Dev was probably driving them somewhere. The bosses had been visiting their relatives a lot lately. Dev, their driver, was happy to get out of the house these days.

At around 11:30, he was cleaning the kitchen when he heard yelling and thumping coming from the living room. He peeked through the kitchen door. Ahmad was hurling Dev by the collar of his shirt. “You ignorant, brainless animal!” Ahmad threw him to the floor. “You are going to pay for the damage, you buffalo! It will come out of your monthly pay.”

“I’m sorry, Boss! It was an accident.” Dev lay on the floor—stuttering with fear.

Ahmad kicked him like a mad horse. Dev curved his body inward, blocking his face with his hands. Fatima came out from her room, eyes wide, and asked her husband something in Arabic. The only words Arjun understood were “Why…what… he….?”

Ahmad answered and Arjun picked out “this… buffalo……destroy.”

Fatima started screaming, but this time Arjun didn’t understand a word. He muttered, “Here goes the other buffalo.”

Ahmad got tired and stopped kicking. He reached into Dev’s pants pocket and took out his driver’s license. He tore it into pieces and threw them on Dev’s face. Ahmad turned and stalked to his room, yelling back in English, “Clean the damn thing, you cursed animal. And don’t think I forgive you—you will pay the damage.” Fatima followed her husband.

Arjun grabbed the broom to sweep the living room floor. Dev got up and went to the kitchen.

“What happened, Dev?” asked Arjun, as soon as he came back.

Dev gazed at the floor. “It’s my bad luck. I was backing up the car to park and I hit the next-door neighbor’s car.”

“Oh shit. How bad is the damage?”

“Both cars are scraped a little.”

“Oh no! What did the neighbor say?”

“He talked to the boss in Arabic, so I didn’t understand much. I guess the boss agreed to pay the damage or something.”

“He didn’t say anything to you?”

“Yes, he said something to me in English, but I didn’t quite get it. I thought he said, ‘It’s okay. It’s not a big deal.’ But why would he say that?” Dev looked at Arjun. “The boss didn’t think it was okay. He was furious. He yelled at me and hit me a few times, then shoved me in the house, threw me down, and started kicking me.”

“Poor you! That’s so unfair.” Arjun hugged Dev.

“Ouch!” Dev pulled away. “My back and shoulders hurt really bad.”

“I’m sorry.” Arjun shook his head. He didn’t know how to react.

Around three o’clock, Ahmad and Fatima went to take a nap, and Naseer went off to work. Arjun finished the kitchen work and went to his room. Dev took off his shirt. His shoulders, arms, and back were covered with blue bruises. *No wonder it hurt*.

“What a shitty life,” Dev said. “I can’t even drive properly. I must have been dreaming to think that one day I could work in a country like America.”

“Don’t think that way, my friend. Millions of accidents occur every day in the world. It was just an accident, and it doesn’t make you stupid or unskillful.”

“I guess, but he is going to charge me for the damage I caused. I’m scared. I’ll be here all my life trying to repay him,” Dev said, in a quiet voice. “I wished he hadn’t screamed at me when I was backing up the car.”

“What do you mean?”

“When I was reversing, I saw the neighbor’s car coming. I was being careful and driving back slowly. But the boss suddenly yelled at me and I jerked and hit the gas pedal harder.”

*Oh my God*. “Well then, it’s not all your fault, Dev. Maybe Ahmad will realize that when he cools down.” Arjun wished he believed his own soothing words.

They heard the door open. They glanced toward it. It was Julie. Arjun was surprised—she had never been to their bedroom before.

“How are you feeling?” Julie whispered.

“Not good,” Dev replied.

“I thought you could use this.” Julie held out a jar of ointment. “I was giving Fatima a massage, and when she fell asleep, I took it from her room.”

“Thanks a lot. This will really help.”

Arjun took the ointment. “Do you want to sit for a while?”

“No… no, I should be getting back,” Julie said, backing up. “If they catch me here in your room, I’ll be in big trouble.”

“That’s true. It’s smart to be careful,” Arjun said.

Julie silently closed the door and left.

The next day, around three o’clock, Dev and Arjun went out the back door to see their friends. The girls were already waiting upstairs at the neighbor’s house. They opened the window and threw down a handful of candies.

“Dev, how are you holding up?” asked one of the girls in Hindi.

“Better, I guess…” replied Dev. “How did you know about it?”

“We heard our boss talking to his wife about it yesterday.”

Their boss was the one whose car got dented. “Was he mad at Dev?” Arjun said.

“No, actually, he felt sorry for him,” she said. “I heard him say, ‘The old man next door is crazy. He was beating his servant so badly, I had to tell him to stop. That was just an accident. I even told him he doesn’t need to pay me for the damage. A true Muslim doesn’t behave like that. Servants should be treated like a part of family.’”

Arjun and Dev looked at each other, wide-eyed. The boss won’t even have to pay for the damages, but he’ll still reduce Dev’s pay? So mean and unfair! But what could they do about it? They couldn’t reveal how they knew.

It was the time of *Ramadan*. Arjun was busy cleaning the kitchen floor when the phone rang. Ahmad wanted a cup of tea. Arjun put the kettle on to boil.

The tea was ready, but Ahmad had not opened the door of his bedroom yet. Arjun wondered if he wanted the tea in his bedroom.Arjun went to the door and knocked twice. He heard Ahmad coughing and “open” was the only word he heard. He opened the door. Ahmad was sitting on a chair with a cookie in his hand. On the small table in front of him was an open package of cookies. Ahmad had made it very clear that nobody was allowed to eat before sunset during the month of *Ramadan*. Fatima was still sleeping in the bed.

“Didn’t you hear me, you deaf buffalo?” said Ahmad furiously. “I told you not to open the door.”

Ahmad pulled out the drawer and took out a tennis ball. He threw it at Arjun’s face. Arjun ducked instinctively, and the ball hit the door. It bounced back and landed on Fatima’s face. She woke up with a cry of anger. She looked at Arjun. He placed the tea on the table and raised his hands to indicate it wasn’t him. Fatima turned and glared at Ahmad, whose face was red with anger and embarrassment. Before Ahmad could say anything, Fatima started shouting at him in Arabic. Arjun retreated and closed the door, letting them fight.

When the bosses and their son were in their rooms, Dev and Arjun would quietly step out the back door to see their friends. The owner of the girls’ house didn’t restrict the girls from eating because of *Ramadan*, since they weren’t Muslims. The girls always seemed to have extra snacks, which they tossed over to Dev and Arjun. They would save some for Julie and gave it to her when the bosses weren’t looking.

# Chapter 8

“Boss, I want to go back to my country. Please use my pay to buy me a ticket to Nepal,” Arjun said, while Ahmad was handing him his monthly pay in the living room.

Arjun had been a captive servant for four months and was long past tired of the life here. Never getting out, working all day in the kitchen, and frequent yelling or even beatings by Ahmad had made his life intolerable. His life in Kathmandu had been heaven compared to his existence here. He desperately wanted to go home. He had to do something.

Ahmad’s eyes widened. He picked up the remote and turned off the TV. “Why? What happened?”

“Nothing… I just want to go back.” Arjun lowered his head a little.

Ahmad frowned and pointed to the couch near him. “Sit.”

That was the first time he had asked any of his servants to sit on the couch next to him. Arjun sat on the floor.

“There must be reason,” said Ahmad.

“I miss my family. Besides, I was not expecting to work like this. I was told I would work in a restaurant.”

“You get better. Joe was like you before. He missed family too. Now look at him. He is better. He likes it here.”

*No, he doesn’t.* “Still, I want to go back.”

“Look!” Ahmad tapped Arjun’s shoulder twice. “You are like part of this family. So, I scream at you sometimes—don’t take it in your heart.”

“No, it’s not the only reason.” Arjun was determined not to change his mind.

“If you want, I can send you to my daughter’s house. Less work there.”

“No, I just don’t want to stay in Kuwait anymore. I want to go home.”

“Look at me,” Ahmad said. “You cook good food… very tasty. If you stay, I will increase your pay by three dinar a month, the most I give anybody in the house. You work here two years, then I send you to America. People need good cook there. They pay lots of money. Don’t miss this chance.” It was a lie—Arjun knew that. Why would Ahmad send him to America?

Arjun had expected Ahmad to lash out at him, but his boss would have a hard time finding a good cook with what he was paying Arjun, so instead he thought he could talk him into staying.

Arjun was not going to be enticed with his tricks. His dream of a better life in Kuwait was already like broken pieces of glass—there was no chance of putting it back together.

“No, Boss, I already made up my mind,” he said, looking at Ahmad’s face for the first time.

Ahmad was silent for a while. “Okay, but it’s a long process, and I need to pay money to Embassy to cancel visa. Tell me if you change your mind.” Ahmad put Arjun’s pay back in his pocket.

“Okay, Boss…but it’s my final decision.” Arjun stood up and walked to the kitchen.

A week later, while Arjun and Dev were setting the table for lunch, Ahmad said, “Tomorrow, Fatima and I go to Thailand for a week. Joe, you come with us.”

Dev looked at Ahmad, eyes wide. “You want me to go to Thailand with you?”

“Who else is Joe in this house? Yes, you. We need you there.”

Dev’s face brightened with a smile. “Thank you, Boss.”

*Why is he taking Dev to Thailand? Is he going to be okay?* Arjun had many more questions in his head, but he was careful not to show any reaction. I’m just thinking too much, he thought. What can they possibly do to him? They are old—they just need his help, that’s all*.* Dev had no choice but to go, so Arjun didn’t want to worry him.

Arjun and Dev went back to the kitchen. “Did you hear what he told me there?” Dev whispered, jumping with excitement.

“Yes, I did,” Arjun said. “Good for you, my friend, but don’t have high hopes about it.”

In the morning, before they left the house, Ahmad called Arjun and Julie to the living room. He said, “We are going to be away for a week. You guys behave in the house.”

Arjun and Julie just nodded. Ahmad continued, “Don’t go outside the house. I have your passports. If the police catch you without legal documents, they take you to jail. And I won’t be there to help you. Do you understand?”

They both said yes. He continued, “Naseer is in the house. He is your boss. Do what he asks you to do. If you don’t behave, he’ll tell me, and you’ll get in trouble when I come back.”

“Okay, boss,” they replied.

Ahmad, Fatima, and Dev left the house.

Arjun and Julie did not need to starve now. After Naseer went to work, they cooked whatever they wanted and ate together. They were careful to clean up the kitchen and go to their rooms well before Naseer was expected to come home from work or in case he came home early to check on them. It was the best week for them—until everything went horribly wrong.

Near the end of the week, Arjun was busy cooking lunch when he heard Naseer’s voice. Arjun peeked through the tiny glass window on the kitchen door. Naseer was lying on the couch, wearing nothing but boxer shorts.

“Julie! Honey, come here,” he called.

Julie came out of her room, and stopped suddenly, seeing Naseer like that.

“Come here, baby,” he said. “Give me a massage.”

She stood there, nervous.

Arjun felt his neck muscles tense as he wondered what Julie would do. If she didn’t do as Naseer asked, he might go crazy, and there was nobody to stop his rage. Slowly, she walked towards him.

Should I go stop that shameless bastard?He thought. No… No, that would take it to a different level. He might just want a massage.Arjun watched silently, trying to control his anger.

Julie massaged Naseer’s feet and arms. He tapped his chest, indicating that he wanted her to massage there. While she was lightly massaging his chest, he yanked her toward him. She landed on his body. She tried to free herself, but he trapped her with his feet and arms.

Arjun felt his blood boil. He held his head in his hands.

Julie cried, “Stop, Naseer! What would your parents say?”

Naseer was not ready to control his sexual desire. “Shhh, I will give you money.” He rubbed her butt with one of his hands.

“I don't want your money.” She jerked away, trying to free herself.

“Shut up, bitch!” He stood up and shoved her to the floor.

Arjun had had enough. He rushed to the living room. Naseer was already on the top of Julie. She glanced at Arjun with tearful, pleading eyes. Arjun grabbed Naseer’s shoulders, lifted him off her, and threw him to the side.

# Chapter 9

Julie leapt up, ran to her room, and locked the door. Naseer got up and grabbed his pants from the other couch. “Who the hell do you think you are, servant boy?” He took out his belt and started hitting Arjun with it. Arjun did not move an inch. He shook his head and stared into those lustful eyes, letting him know what he did is never acceptable. Finally, Naseer stopped and stomped away.

Arjun went back into the kitchen and finished preparing lunch, his mind in turmoil. He knew Naseer would be looking for revenge, and he needed to be alert all the time. *If a person is capable of rape, he is capable of assault and maybe even murder.*

Arjun pretended to act normal. He set up lunch for Naseer and stayed in the kitchen.

Later, he heard Naseer yell from the dining room, “Both of you come here, right now!”

Shaking, Arjun walked to the dining room. Julie slowly opened the door of her room and peeked out.

“Call your girlfriend too, you bastard.”

“What do you want, Naseer?” Arjun tried to stay calm.

“Don’t call me Naseer. I’m your freaking boss, you brainless animal.”

“All right, I understand.”

“Yes, you should understand,” Naseer replied. “Whatever I say matters here. You can’t imagine what I am capable of… How dare you lay a hand on me? Do you know what the law is here for people who have sex before marriage?”

Arjun stayed quiet.

“You should know. And the police believe owners, not slaves. I’m going to tell them I found you two animals having sex. Believe me, they don’t need any other proof. You two are finished. I have many police friends—I’ll make sure you rot in jail.” Naseer started laughing. “Do you know how many innocent people there are in prison these days? Uncountable… they don’t need proof, especially for animals like you.”

Arjun knew that as a foreigner and a servant he wouldn’t be believed. Naseer held all the power. His skin felt cold, but he didn’t want to look scared in front of Naseer. He controlled his panic, trying to look as strong as possible.

“I will forgive you both if she is willing to please me in front of you.”

Julie’s mouth dropped open in shock and her eyes filled with tears.

Arjun’s mouth was completely dry and he started shaking. His hands formed fists, but he took a deep breath and managed to stop shaking. He turned to go back to the kitchen.

Naseer continued, “When I come back tonight, I need to know what you decided. Discuss it with your girl. I’m a reasonable man. I’m giving you a fair choice.”

Julie hurried to her room and locked the door. Without a word, Arjun walked to the kitchen, shaken.

After Naseer finished eating lunch, Arjun went to the dining room to bring the leftover food to the kitchen and clean the table. His knees were trembling, but he tried to act normal. What if he really does what he said? What if the police believe what he tells them? What if they put us in prison? “What if…” questions kept circling his mind.

“I need your answer when I come back tonight,” Naseer said, as he walked out of the door.

Arjun pretended not to hear it. He went back to the kitchen and put the dirty dishes on the counter. Then he walked to the restroom. He washed his face with cold water. *God, why? What did I do wrong that you are punishing me this way?* He looked at his face in the mirror. He looked weak—he felt sorry for himself.

*It’s not time for me to cry. I need to be strong. I can handle this.* He wiped his face with the towel. He took a long breath and walked to the kitchen.

Julie was in there waiting for him. Her eyes were red and swollen. She hugged Arjun and started crying. “What are we going to do? He will do anything to hurt us. I don’t want to go to prison.”

“Hey, listen, he won’t be able to do anything. Don’t cry—we will figure out something.” He stroked her hair. “Eat something for now.”

She shook her head. “I’m not hungry.”

They sat at the table.

“Arjun, do you think he can lie about us and send us to prison just like that?”

“I don’t know. It feels like we are nobody here. And I can only imagine what he is capable of! What if he really has powerful connections? It’s true that a lot of innocent people get thrown in prison.” For the first time, he missed Ahmad. “I wish Ahmad was here today. Maybe he wouldn’t let Naseer do that.”

“I don’t want to go to prison and I don’t want him to...” Julie started sobbing again. “Oh God, what am I going to do?” She wiped her tears. “Maybe it’s best for both of us if I let him use me.”

“Shhh… don’t say that.” Arjun held her hands. “Maybe we should try to run away.”

“What are you talking about? Where would we go?”

“Let’s fly back to Nepal. We could escape before he comes back tonight. I know the cabinet locker where Ahmad keeps our passports. I’m sure I could find the key for it. Do you want to do this?”

Julie nodded. “Okay.”

“Only problem is, I don’t know if I have enough money for two plane tickets. Do you have some dinars?”

“Yes, I have enough to buy a ticket.”

“Okay, wait here.” Arjun went to his room and took out Dev’s expired ATM card from the wardrobe. Then he came back to the kitchen.

“Let’s eat a little,” Arjun said. “We don’t know when we will get our next proper meal.”

“Okay.”

They ate quickly and washed the dishes.

After they finished cleaning the kitchen, they went to Ahmad and Fatima’s bedroom door. It was locked. Arjun pushed the ATM card through the lock and rotated the handle. After a few attempts, the door popped open.

“Wow, where did you learn that?”

“My little sister Saanu used to lock the door all the time, and I would find ways to open it.” Arjun put the debit card in his pocket and walked into the room. Julie followed him.

They looked for the key in every possible place, but they did not find it.

“I guess this won’t work,” Julie said. “Ahmad must have taken the key with him.”

“It’s not a key for a safe. It’s just a cabinet locker. I don’t think he would take it with him.” Arjun continued looking around. He opened the closet door and started searching in the pockets of Ahmad’s clothes. Finally, he felt a key in a coat pocket.

“This must be it.” He tried the key on the locker. It popped open.

“Yes!” He opened the locker and took out their passports, then handed them to Julie. “We are only going to take one backpack each. Only carry what’s most important to you. And wear Fatima’s burqa so no one knows who you are.”

“Good idea.” She found a burqa in the closet and took it with her.

Arjun placed everything in order and closed the cabinet door. He looked around the room to make sure everything looked normal. Then he walked out and closed the door behind him.

He went to his room and quickly packed his backpack. He put on a hat and sunglasses to help disguise his face. Then he walked to the living room. Julie came out of her room carrying a bag and covered from head to toe in the black burqa.

They headed out and walked for about ten minutes before they found a cab to take them to the airport. They rode in silence.

At the airport, they walked around self-consciously. Arjun looked at the directory, trying to figure out where to buy tickets, while Julie’s eyes darted everywhere.

“Excuse me, madam.” Arjun heard a familiar voice. He turned. There was Naseer in his security uniform standing in front of Julie. Arjun’s heart lurched. He ducked behind the directory.

“You look lost. Do you need any help?” Naseer asked.

Julie moved away from him without saying anything. *Why is he asking her that? Does he know it’s Julie in the burqa?* He peeked out from behind the directory. Naseer looked at Julie’s back, then shook his head and walked away. Arjun stayed there for a few more minutes to make sure Naseer did not look back. Then he hurried to Julie.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“No, I’m freaking out. Did he know it’s me?”

“No, I don’t think so, or he wouldn’t have walked away so easily. Let’s go before he comes back.”

Arjun walked away with Julie at his side.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Somebody grabbed him by the shoulder. Arjun stopped as if he was paralyzed. He looked back. It was Dev.

He let out a breath of relief. “Where are the bosses?” he asked his friend.

“They went to the restrooms. What are you doing here?” He looked at Julie. “Who’s that? Is that Julie?”

“Long story, Dev! We are leaving the country. I wish I had time to explain it to you.”

“What? That’s crazy. It won’t work. You could get away, but they won’t let Julie go without the presence of her guardian, husband, or an employer. She would at least need a letter from her employer that she is leaving the country.” Dev looked as nervous as he sounded.

“Are you sure, Dev?”

“No, I’m not sure about anything, but what if they don’t let her go? I’m surprised Naseer didn’t see you. He was with us a few minutes ago.”

“You’re right. It’s too risky. Dev, hold them as long as you can. We’ll hurry back to the house.”

“Okay. Just go.”

Arjun looked at Julie. “Let’s get out of here.”

Arjun and Julie rushed out of the airport and took a cab home. The burqa had saved their lives today.

In the cab, they held hands, both nervous. “What if…” started circling Arjun’s mind again. When they got there, they jumped out of the cab and raced to the house. Arjun opened the door—everything looked normal. He took both of the passports and put them back in the cabinet. Julie hung up the burqa in the closet.

# Chapter 10

About twenty minutes later, Ahmad, Fatima, and Dev entered the house. Arjun’s rapid heartbeat was somewhat calmed now. He opened the kitchen door and tried to look as normal as possible.

“Thomas, cook us good food. We are hungry,” said Ahmad.

“All right, Boss.” Arjun went back to the kitchen. Dev followed him.

As soon as Dev closed the door behind him, he whispered, “What the hell happened?”

While preparing a quick meal, Arjun told him everything.

“You are courageous, brother,” Dev said. “I would never have the guts to do that.”

“Do you know if Naseer told Ahmad anything at the airport?”

“I’m not sure. I didn’t hear him say anything.” Dev picked up his suitcase. “I’ll go put my things away, then come and help you.”

“All right.” Arjun continued preparing dinner.

A short while later, Dev returned.

“Did you have fun in Thailand?”

“No, not at all,” replied Dev. “They didn’t let me go outside the motel. I had to cook food all day and massage him for hours every evening. I didn’t get to go anywhere.”

A little while later, Naseer arrived home from work. He pulled his father aside and started whispering to him. A few minutes later, Ahmad called Arjun and Julie to the living room and started smacking them both with a belt, screaming, “How dare you? This house is not for lust!” He whacked them till he was tired. Naseer stood in the corner of the room, arms crossed, smirking.

Arjun couldn’t take it silently. “We didn’t do anything. It was Naseer. He lied to you.”

That infuriated Ahmad even more. “I don’t want to hear a single word from you, you shameless buffalo.” Ahmad yanked his hair, and the beating continued.

The next morning, Ahmad called Arjun to the living room.

“You bring shame to my family. I don’t want you here anymore. Here are the expenses you need to pay to leave.” Ahmad took out a paper from his pocket. He put his glasses on. “Plane fare to your country: 175 KD. You aren’t staying two years, so, visa cancelation: 45 KD. Your medical insurance that I paid is 15 KD.” He looked up at Arjun. “Total—235 KD.”

Arjun had paid less than 75 KD for his ticket to Kuwait. He had paid the fee for the visa in Nepal. He was sure there was no such thing as a visa cancellation fee. He knew Ahmad was trying to rip him off, but what could he do? His boss held all the power.

“All right, Boss.”

“Okay, I have 100 KD, two months’ pay for you. Bring me 135 more and you are free to go.”

“Sure, I’ll bring it now.” Arjun went to his room and came back with the money. He handed it to Ahmad.

He took the money from Arjun. “Okay, get ready. You will leave in four hours.”

“Today?” asked Arjun, shocked.

“Yes, today,” Ahmad replied. “I arranged everything already.”

“Okay, Boss.” Arjun went to his room to start packing.

He told Dev about his conversation with Ahmad.

“I’m happy for you, brother… but I’m sad for myself,” Dev said. “I don’t know when I am going to see my family again. Everybody comes here, becomes friends with me, then leaves me alone here.”

“Be patient, brother, your day will come too. When you get a chance to go back, don’t hesitate. You might not make much there in India, but you will be happy with your family. This man will never send you to America for work—you need to understand that.”

Dev looked thoughtful. “You don’t think so? I guess you’re right.”

Arjun started arranging his stuff. Dev finished his kitchen work and came back to the room. He helped Arjun finish packing. After the bosses went to take an early nap, Julie came to the kitchen to have lunch.

Arjun told her about going back to Nepal. She looked at him silently, tears in her eyes.

After she finished eating, Julie cleaned her plate and looked at Arjun. “You are leaving today, but I have to stay here. Don’t know for how long.” She wiped her eyes. “Well, I should be going before they say anything.”

She gave him a tight hug. It felt like she did not want to release him from her arms. They stayed hugging for some time.

“I hope they will treat you well. I’ll pray to God for your better life,” Arjun said.

Julie smiled a little and went back to her room.

Arjun went out the back door, hoping to see the three girls for the last time. He wanted to say goodbye before he left. But they did not come to the window that day. Every now and then, he went out again to look up at the window where they’d been the other times. The breeze of his wish never reached the girls.

He wrote a letter on a small piece of paper.

Hey friends,

I’m going back to my country today. It happened all of a sudden. I hoped to see you all for the last time. I was waiting for you, but you never showed up. I guess you were busy today.

I wish for your successful and fulfilled life ahead, and you will always be in my prayers. If God is kind, I hope to see you all in future. I’ll miss you all. Thank you for your kindness and generosity.

With love,

Arjun

He folded the letter and handed it to Dev to pass to the girls when he saw them next.

Arjun waited for Ahmad to call him. Finally, the kitchen phone rang, and Ahmad told him to be ready in ten minutes.

Both husband and wife came out of their room. Arjun carried his stuff and followed them. Julie stayed at the door of her room, saying goodbye with her tearful eyes. Dev went with him to the front door and waved to him as he walked away.

As Dev had not received his new driver license yet, Ahmad drove the car. Fatima sat next to him in the passenger seat. There was silence in the car. Ahmad was listening to soft Arabic songs.

Deep inside his heart, Arjun was sad. *Is Julie going to be okay?*

The car stopped at the parking lot of the airport.

“This is it, Thomas. Here is your passport and ticket.” Ahmad handed them to Arjun. “Get your stuff from the back.”

“Okay, Boss.” He got out of the car, opened the trunk, and took out his suitcase and backpack. Both husband and wife were out of the car by then.

Ahmad pointed to the Departures sign. “You go that way. We have stuff to do on the other side.”

“Thank you for letting me go, boss. I really appreciate it.”

“You could have had a bright future ahead of you, Thomas. But you ruined it. In few years, I might have sent you to America, but you acted like a boss in the house. You had some nerve to fight my son. Who do you think you are?”

“I don’t know exactly what Naseer told you yesterday, but it wasn’t true. I’m leaving your country, so I have no reason to lie to you. You need to watch your son. He was trying to force himself on Julie yesterday, and that’s the truth,” Arjun said, looking Ahmad directly in the eye.

“What are you talking about? Are you blaming my son for what you did?” Ahmad’s face was red.

“I’m just telling you what I saw him doing and what else he would have done if I was not there. If you can’t stop your son from doing such a horrible thing, Allahwill blame you. It’s your fault, only your fault, if you can’t protect your maid from your own son,” Arjun said.

Ahmad was shaking, his hands in fists. Fatima had her head down.

“My son is not rapist!” Ahmad shoved him.

Arjun stood his ground. “Deny it as you wish, Boss, but Allah is watching. You can’t deny Him. You never treated us well, but I am not complaining about that. But if you allow your son to rape your maid, Allah will never forgive you or your son. Stop him before it’s too late.” Arjun picked up his backpack and pulled his suitcase, walking away without looking back.

On the flight back to Nepal from Kuwait, Arjun’s mind was in turmoil. He was relieved to be done with the horror in Kuwait, but what was next in life? He felt embarrassed about returning home in defeat and terrified by the thought of starting all over again. He wasn’t hopeful that he could find work. *Why am I thinking this way? If I can work in hell like that, I should be able to do anything in life.*

From the airport, he took a cab. At the thought of facing his father, his mind started racing. *What’s buba going to say about me coming back like this?* Whatever it was, he would just have to deal with it. He tried to control his overwhelming thoughts.

When the cab arrived at his father’s apartment, he took out his backpack and suitcase and started walking away, deep in thought.

“Hey… hey… what are you doing?” said the driver, stepping out of the cab.

Arjun looked back.

“You can’t just walk away like that.”

Arjun realized he had not paid the fare. “I’m sorry. My mind was somewhere else. How much is it?” He took out his wallet and paid.

Arjun rang the doorbell.

Amit opened the door, his eyes wide. “Arjun! What are you doing here?”

“Uncle Kumar tricked us. I did not get a job as a cook. Instead, I was treated like a slave,” Arjun said, embarrassed and defeated.

“What are you talking about?” Amit grabbed his arms.

His father’s grip made Arjun wince. “Ow! Sorry, but my boss beat me yesterday.”

“Oh my God! Why did he do that?”

“He didn’t need a reason. He beat us a lot. And he kept us captive in the house. I tried to stick it out there, but my life was intolerable. I was afraid you’d be angry if I came back.”

“Who says that?” Amit hugged him. “You can return to your house anytime you want. And don’t think too much about it. A man needs to have all sorts of experiences. That’s how a man learns. Do you understand?”

Arjun nodded.

“At least there is one good news for you. You passed your final course and now have your diploma.”

“Really? That’s great.”

Arjun had been waiting for this moment for so long, but now he didn’t feel the joy. His current situation took it all away.

“Now go to your room and relax. Dinner will be ready for you soon.”

Arjun was expecting anger and frustration from his father. Amit’s words melted his heart. He went to his room and lay down on the bed.

“You can’t be serious.” Arjun heard his stepmother’s voice. “Instead of telling him what he did was wrong, you told him…”

“We don’t know what he went through. He wouldn’t have returned if things were fine there.”

“But—”

Amit stopped her. “I don’t want to hear anymore. He is my son and I’m glad he was able to come back before it’s too late. Now make him dinner. He must be very hungry.”

Arjun couldn’t believe his ears. He looked up at the ceiling with glistening eyes. *Maybe he does love me after all.*

It took Arjun a few weeks to recover from the painful experiences, both physical and psychological, of his life in Kuwait. He had a few good memories of times with Julie, Dev, and the three girls from the neighbor’s house, but aside from that, his four-month stay there had been a nightmare.

He decided to go back to his village to see his family and to think about what to do next in life. He was happy to see his mother and siblings, but no longer felt comfortable in the village. When he was out walking around, the villagers he had known all his life continually peppered him with the same questions: What happened? Why did you come back so soon? He was tired of explaining what had happened in Kuwait and even more tired of their sympathy, which seemed like veiled criticism. He’d had an opportunity they didn’t have, but he’d returned home defeated. He wished his old friend Prabhat was there. Prabhat’s presence would make him stronger.

He sat alone in the shade of a tree and rested his head on the tree trunk. *Would the situation of this country still be the same if there hadn’t been a royal massacre?*

After the royal massacre of June 2nd, 2001, the political condition of the county took a different turn. The late King Birendra had been the heart and soul of many people due to his loving nature. After the death of the King, many people did not welcome King Gyanendra, and that helped the Maoists increase their power.

There was tense situation in the village and people started migrating to Kathmandu. Prabhat and his family did the same. Arjun was sad that he would hardly ever see his friend anymore, but there was nothing he could do about it.

# Chapter 11

Arjun decided to move on with his life, returning to Kathmandu in search of employment. He resumed living with his father. After knocking on a lot of doors, he finally managed to find a job as a tourist guide. The pay wasn’t good, but it kept him busy.

One evening around seven o’clock, they had finished dinner and Arjun was playing with little Saanu when the phone rang. He answered it.

“Hi, remember me? It’s Julie from Kuwait,” said the voice. “How are you?”

“Julie! What a surprise!” Arjun said. “It’s great to hear from you. I’m doing well. How about you? Are you back in Nepal?”

“No, I’m still here. I got your number from Dev. I wanted to call you to thank you. I don’t know what you told the bosses at the airport the day you left, but Naseer doesn’t come near me anymore. When they returned from the airport, Fatima asked me about the incident the day before. I was nervous and scared, but I told her everything. For the first time ever, she apologized to me. She begged me to forgive Naseer. Can you believe that?”

“Wow, that’s surprising.”

“That night, after Naseer came back from work, both of the bosses yelled at him. I heard Ahmad tell him, ‘Because of your action, I had to hear so much from that guy. If this ever happens again, you will not be forgiven.’ That’s all I understood in Arabic. But thank you again for what you did for me.”

“You’re welcome. I’m pleased that I was able to help. I’m really glad Naseer is staying away from you and you’re doing okay… And they let you make a phone call?”

“Yes, finally. As we all know, the phone was never broken. I told Fatima I missed my family, and she let me use the phone. But I wanted to call you instead.”

“I hope they don’t find out that you called me and not your family.”

“Don’t worry, they won’t. They are eating dinner right now.”

“That’s good. Tell Dev I said hello.”

“Sure, I will let him know, and I will see you when I get back to Nepal.”

“Great. I hope you make it back soon. Call me when you get here.”

Arjun hung up the phone. He smiled. He might not have done much in life, but preventing Naseer from harming Julie was definitely one of his biggest accomplishments.

*Kathmandu, Nepal, April 2008*

The civil war between the Maoists and the government continued, and even Kathmandu didn’t feel safe anymore. Finally, the government signed a peace agreement with the Maoists, and there was a general election on April 10, 2008. Arjun hoped the political situation would improve and peace would return.

The course of Nepal’s history shifted dramatically with the Maoists’ victory in the election. On May 28, 2008, during the first session of the Constituent Assembly, Nepal was officially declared a federal democratic republic.

After ruling the country for 240 years, the Shah Dynasty, established by Prithvi Narayan Shah the Great, ended, along with monarchy system in Nepal. The Constituent Assembly also decreed that King Gyanendra must leave the palace within fifteen days, along with his entire family.

As the Maoists’ demands were fulfilled, some peace was established in Nepal. With the false hope of a better life, many villagers stayed in Kathmandu. But there were not enough jobs for them, and the cost of living was rising every day.

Now that the civil war was over, Arjun was hopeful that his new “tourist guide” job might finally be worth it, but tourists were hard to be seen around in Kathmandu, due to political unrest.

# Chapter 12

*November 2009*

Arjun sat in the living room trying to fix his broken speaker. A sudden knock echoed through the air, prompting Amit to open the door. Standing outside was Sundar, a cousin and close friend of Amit, eagerly waiting. A warm embrace followed, as Sundar was one of those frequent visitors to their home. He used to work in an employment agency that provided job opportunities in foreign countries. When he left the company, he built his own agency and started taking villagers to Spain and other European countries for work. Later, he added many other nations to his list. As Sundar entered the room, Arjun brought his palms together to greet him. “Namaste, Uncle,” he said, and returned to fixing his speaker.

“What are you doing there?” Sundar asked.

“Just trying to fix my speaker, Uncle.” He glanced at Sundar and back to unscrewing a pin with a screwdriver. “My music sounds like a broken truck.”

“Just ask your father to buy a new one!” Sundar said, in a joking tone.

Arjun shrugged. Sundar sat on the couch next to Amit. Arjun went back to his project.

“He has something to say to you, son,” Amit said.

Arjun put the screwdriver down and looked up at Sundar. “What’s that, Uncle?”

“I talked to your father about a really good job opportunity for you. He said I should talk to you about it.” Sundar cleared his throat. “I’m taking people to Haiti for work—maybe you’d be interested in this.”

“Where’s Haiti?”

“It’s an island in the Caribbean Sea, in Central America.”

Arjun looked down and picked up his screwdriver again. “No, Uncle, not again. I left Nepal once for work and it was a disaster. I would rather stay poor.”

Arjun knew the tourism business was declining, due to the unpredictable political situation of the country, and he was not making much. But he didn’t want to have another bad experience in a foreign country, and he couldn’t imagine Haiti would be any different.

Amit got up and started checking out the wooden wardrobe closet.

Sundar sat on the floor next to Arjun. “I know you are not making enough money here, and you are looking for a better situation. I also know you are scared because of your past. But this time it’s me—I’m going to take you there safely, and I won’t leave there until you guys start your job. It’s not going to be anything like what you faced in Kuwait.”

“Uncle, I already went through that once. I really want to believe you, but Uncle Kumar said the same thing, and you know what happened there.”

“I know! I know you had a bad experience in Kuwait. That’s why I’m here telling you this. I’m not just doing this for you, I’m doing this for your father too. He worries about you a lot.” Sundar tapped Arjun’s back twice. “It’s the right moment—you passed your college diploma, and I received this offer to take people to Haiti. We don’t get these offers that easily. Your family trusts me, and you can do the same. I would never do anything that would be bad for you.” There was a long pause. “If you want to hear more about the job, I can tell you more. It doesn’t hurt just to listen. Then, once you hear the details, you can decide.”

Arjun thought for a while. “Okay, Uncle, tell me about it.”

“It’s an entry-level job for the United Nations as a security officer. You would work five days a week, eight hours a day. If you work more, they will pay you overtime.”

“How much do they pay?”

“They will pay you $1,000 US a month during your training. After you finish three months training, they will pay you $1,500 a month. It’s a two-year contract that can be extended longer if you do a good job. Also, you may come back and visit your family during your breaks. Besides, you get free housing. They will take care of your medical insurance as well.”

*Really?* “It sounds too good to be true,” Arjun said. “If it is as good as you say, why aren’t people fighting for this job? Why am I getting it so easily?”

“It’s because I have connections with people who can provide me this type of offer. We pay them well for giving us this opportunity. Also, you are not going there alone—there will be two other people with you.”

“So how much money do we need to pay?” asked Arjun.

“You don’t need to worry about it,” Amit cut in. “I’ll take care of it now. Pay me back when you earn some money.” Arjun didn’t realize his father had been listening to their conversation.

“I know you will help me. But it’s better to know everything now!” Arjun said.

“Your father is going to pay me Rs. 8,00,000. In American dollars, it is equal to $10,667. For other people, I charge way more,” Sundar said.

“That’s a lot of money! Uncle, are you sure I won’t have to go through anything like what I did before? If you have any doubts, please tell me now.”

“You can trust me. If anything goes wrong there, I’ll bring you back safely.”

Arjun decided to go for it. “Okay, when do we leave?”

“I’m leaving in a week. I need to complete some paperwork first. I’ll meet you on the way, probably in Ecuador,” Sundar said. “And you guys will leave in a month.”

“All right, Uncle. Thank you.”

Amit smiled at them. He was still in front of the closet pretending to fix something there.

# Chapter 13

*December 2009*

It was a special day—Arjun was leaving the country again, setting out into the world. It was ten thirty in the morning, and he was all packed. Arjun’s grandmother was not feeling well in the village, so his mother, Sunita could not come to the city this time. The flight to Delhi was at two o’clock in the afternoon. The plan was to stay in Delhi for a few days, for some unknown reason. The political condition of the country was still unstable, and there was a *Nepal bandha,* another general strike in Nepal. No vehicles were running on the streets, which made things more difficult. Amit had been trying to get a taxi to take Arjun to the airport, with no luck. Arjun paced around the living room, running his hand through his hair. *Is this strike some kind of bad luck?*

“Would you stop pacing?” Amit said.

Arjun sat down. Flashbacks of life in Kuwait surfaced in his mind, and he remembered the helplessness that he felt there. He stood up suddenly to push the thoughts away and wiped his sweaty palms on the sleeves of his shirt, then took a long breath to try to calm down. “What are we going to do with this *bandha?* I hoped a few vehicles would be running, but it’s dead out there. Nobody wants to drive, not a single taxi!”

“Nobody wants their vehicle destroyed,” Arjun’s stepmother said.She was standing at the door, leaning on it. “Protestors will trash the vehicles if they find them running on the street.”

“Why did it have to be today?” Arjun muttered.

“I’m going to call a few more drivers.” Amit took out his cell phone and started making calls.

Arjun sat down again, but his knee started bouncing up and down. After a few attempts, Amit said, “Nobody is willing to take their vehicle out on the streets. Not even for three times the regular price.”

“We’ll have to take your motorbike, Buba,” Arjun said. “I’ll hold on to my luggage.”

“Okay,” Amit said. “I guess that will work.”

A few friends and neighbors came by to see him off. At 10:55 a.m., after a simple religious ritual, Arjun was ready to leave the house. Amit started his motorbike. Arjun sat behind him with his backpack on his back and two suitcases crammed between him and his father.

After they arrived at the *Tribhuwan* International airport, Amit hugged him and left, wishing him well. Arjun waited for his two traveling companions, whom Sundar had introduced to him a few days ago. He took off his backpack and placed it on top of one of the suitcases.

Arjun knew he had a long way to go before reaching his destination. He needed to go to India first and then travel to Ecuador before going to Haiti. As he recalled his last trip out of the country, fear grew in the pit of his stomach. The time in Kuwait had been horrible, and now he was going to another strange country. *I hope this time God will be with me, or else my life will be in vain.* He did not want the humiliation of returning to Nepal again, broke and defeated.

Arjun decided to be positive. He was a man now*,* and a grown man needs to face new situations with courage. Besides, he already had experience being away from the country. He should be able to deal with anything now.

Luck should definitely favor me this time, he thought. It’s worth taking a risk, if there is chance of a life-changing opportunity.

The backpack on the top of the suitcase fell down, and he picked it up and put it back. *I am not alone- I have friends this time.*

He looked at his wristwatch. Why can’t people ever be on time?

He looked around. *Is that Mohan? Hmmm… yes, that’s him.* One of his traveling friends, Mohan Chaudhary, was coming towards him. Mohan was from the *Terai* region, the hottest part of Nepal, and the people living there have darker complexions than people living in other parts of Nepal. Mohan was a year or two older than Arjun.

“Mohan!” Arjun waved to him.

His new friend noticed Arjun and waved back. He pulled his luggage toward Arjun.

“How are you, Arjun?”

“Not bad… and you?” Arjun managed a smile.

“I’m good,” he said. “Chitra is not here yet, huh?”

“No.” Arjun shook his head.

“Should we go?” Mohan said, pointing his chin towards the entrance of the airport.

Arjun checked his watch. “It’s getting tight, but let’s give him a few more minutes.”

A little later, Chitra came rushing up. Chitra Magar was in his mid-twenties. He was a Mongolian, with typical Asian features.

“Sorry, guys,” he said. “I couldn’t find a taxi and had to walk all the way here.”

“It’s okay. We should still make it on time.” Arjun replied.

They hurried to the ticket counter. After going through customs, they entered the plane.

An hour and a half later, they arrived in New Delhi, the capital of India. As they walked out of the airport, they saw a man in his early forties holding a sign that said “Arjun, Mohan and Chitra.” Sundar had told them to look for the man. They walked to the man and greeted him, “Namaste.”

“Oh, hi there, I’m Mr. Phuri,” said the man in Hindi.

They introduced themselves as well.

“Follow me, guys,” Mr. Phuri said, and started walking toward a parking lot. They followed him to his car. He opened the door of the driver’s side and said, “I have reserved a room for you guys at a motel.”

They got in the car. Mr. Phuri drove on a busy street with cars, buses, motorbikes, and rickshaws everywhere. The street looked busier than Kathmandu. They drove for about fifteen minutes and stopped it in front of a small motel made of brick and cement.

“You’ll be staying here,” he said, getting out of the car. He checked them in to a small room with two narrow beds and a couch.

“Okay, you guys have a rest now.” Mr. Phuri took out a business card and handed it to Mohan. “Call me if you need anything.” He left.

“Looks like someone will have to sleep on the couch,” Mohan said.

“No worries, I will take it,” Chitra replied.

Arjun unpacked his suitcase. He took out his towel. “I’m going to take a shower.”

After taking a shower, Arjun came back. Chitra opened the window. “Shit man, it’s so cold out there.” He closed the window a little.

“What do you expect? It’s December.” Arjun looked out the window. Children were playing cricket in the street, and people were waiting in line for food at a small nearby restaurant, filling the room with strange noises and delicious smells. “Ah man, it smells so good. I’m hungry now.”

Chitra nodded. “Look at that long line-up. They must have the best food in the neighborhood. Let’s go check it out.”

They had Indian Rs.8,000 each. The restaurant, *Happy Da Dhaba*, had just a few tables, which weren’t enough for the crowd waiting for the food. So, people stood on the street and ate. The three guys ordered their food to go and took it back to the motel room.

Arjun tasted the chicken *tikka masala* that he had ordered. He dipped garlic *naan* bread in the spicy creamy sauce with boneless chicken and took a bite. The spicy sauce almost burnt his mouth, but the taste was so delicious he savored it with his eyes closed, smiling and nodding.

“Mmmm... This is so good.” Arjun opened his eyes and turned to Mohan. “How is your lamb curry?”

“It’s the best lamb I’ve ever had,” Mohan replied. “Do you want to taste it?”

“Sure.” Arjun scooped some lamb curry with a spoon and tasted. “Wow, it’s the best.”

He looked at Chitra, who was poking his chicken *biryani* with a spoon.

“What’s wrong?” Arjun said. “You don’t like your *biryani*?”

“It’s burning my tongue. It’s too spicy to eat.”

“Didn’t you tell them to make it medium spicy?” asked Mohan.

“No, I told them to make it spicy. I can usually handle spicy food, but this is too much.”

Mohan laughed. “Don’t dare to order spicy food in an Indian restaurant until you know you can handle it for sure.”

“If you knew that already, why didn’t you tell me? Smart-ass.” Chitra rolled his eyes.

“I didn’t know how spicy you eat, man,” Mohan said, smiling. “I would offer you mine, but it’s just as spicy.”

“Why don’t you just order another dish?” asked Arjun.

“I think I will.” Chitra went back to the restaurant and got in line again.

Arjun and Mohan were happy to share his food. After Chitra ordered medium spicy *biryani*, he too loved the food. Then the restaurant became their regular place.

Two days after their arrival in Delhi, Mr. Phuri came to their room in the afternoon. They were just back from lunch.

“I’m here to check your passports and documents,” Mr. Phuri said.

“Sure.” Arjun opened his suitcase and took out his passport, along with two thousand US dollars in travelers checks and plane tickets to Ecuador and Haiti. He handed them to Mr. Phuri. Mohan and Chitra did the same.

Mr. Phuri looked at the documents carefully. “It’s good. That’s all you need.” He handed them their documents back.

“Where is Ecuador exactly?” asked Mohan. “And why we have to go there anyway?”

“Ecuador is a little country on the Pacific Ocean near the north end of South America. It’s on the Equator,” replied Mr. Phuri. “Our agent named Bishnu is there. He was the one who got the job offer for you guys. He said you can’t go directly to Haiti from here. He needs to add some extra documents from Ecuador once you go there.”

“Hmm…okay,” Arjun said.

“We just came back from lunch. Would you like us to order you some food?” asked Chitra.

“No, no, I’m good. Maybe next time,” replied Mr. Phuri.

“Coke?” Chitra insisted.

“Sure, I’ll take it.”

Chitra opened the window and yelled, “Brother, one coca cola, please.”

A young kid of about thirteen called back, “Sure, sir, I’ll be right there.”

Mr. Phuri laughed. “Already familiar with the place, huh?”

“We have gone there more than five times already,” Arjun replied.

# Chapter 14

Arjun, Mohan, and Chitra were ready for the long flight across the world to Ecuador. Arjun tried to control his nervousness while they waited for Mr. Phuri to take them to the airport.

They piled in his car with all their luggage and drove erratically along a crowded road towards the airport.

“Just as a reminder, you need to keep your passports and your tickets to Ecuador handy for the airport here. When you reach immigration in Ecuador, show them your passports, travelers checks, and tickets to Haiti.”

“All right,” Arjun said. “Should we expect any unusual questions?”

“No, not really,” Mr. Phuri said. “Just tell them you will stay in Ecuador for some time, before travelling to Haiti. You will be fine. If they ask you anything here in the airport, tell them you will apply for arrival visas in Ecuador. Nobody is going to stop you.”

“Okay.” Arjun hoped the man was right.

Inside the airport, Arjun walked to a clerk and handed him the ticket and the passport. The clerk checked it and said, “Do you have enough money to stay in Ecuador for three months?”

“Yes,” replied Arjun. “I have $2,000 in travelers checks with me.”

“Okay, that should be good enough,” the man said. “You will need to show them at the immigration in Ecuador. Enjoy your time there.”

Arjun thanked the guy and moved forward.

The three of them boarded their plane for the long flight. After stopovers in Dubai and Brazil, they reached Quito, Ecuador. With very little sleep on the flight, Arjun was exhausted. As they disembarked, Arjun’s stomach knotted with fear. He walked slowly to the counter, silently praying he would get the visa.

After a few questions in English, the customs agent stamped their passports one after another. Arjun breathed a sigh of relief. They each had a visa for ninety days.

While the plane was landing, Arjun had gazed out the window. There were hills all around like he would see in Nepal, and he could see the Pacific Ocean in the distance.

As they walked out of the airport, Arjun noticed it was warmer than it had been in Nepal or India. *Must be farther south. Mr. Phuri mentioned the country is on the equator.* They looked around for a public phone or someone who could help them make a call to Bishnu, who would process their journey in Ecuador. “When you reach Ecuador, call Bishnu, he will help you guys there,” Mr. Phuri had said to Arjun, handing him Bishnu’s phone number.

“Oh man, we don’t know anybody here. Who do we ask to make a call?” Chitra said, looking around.

“Don’t worry,” Mohan said. “It looks like there are a lot of Nepalese or Indians here. I’ll ask one of them to help us make a call.”

Mohan went to a guy who looked Nepali to him, and asked him, in Nepali, “Hey brother, can I borrow your phone? We’re new here and we need to make a call.”

The man looked at him as if Mohan had just yelled at him. He said something back, that Mohan didn’t understand.

“You Nepali?” Mohan said, in English.

“No, Español,” he replied.

“Sorry…sorry!” He went back to his friends.

“What did he say?” asked Chitra.

“Shit man, that guy isn’t Nepali,” Mohan replied.

“Oh, really? He looked like it,” Chitra said. “Where is he from?”

“I don’t know, he said something like spanyole. Maybe from Spain or something.”

A cab stopped. The driver rolled down the window. He had a long mustache and beard and he was wearing a turban, so he must be Punjabi. “Son, where do youwant to go?” he said, in Hindi.

“Sir, we need to make a call first.” Arjun walked up to the cab.

“Hmmm… where are you from?” asked the driver.

“Nepal.”

“Okay, use my phone,” the driver said, passing his cell phone to Arjun.

Arjun called Bishnu.

Bishnu gave him directions to the motel where they would be staying, saying he would meet them there.

Relieved to have arrived in Ecuador, gotten visas, and contacted Bishnu successfully, they got in the cab.

Outside the motel, there was a Nepali guy with short spiky hair. He introduced himself as Bishnu.

Bishnu guided them to their motel room. “I hope you have already eaten,” he said, as they entered the room. “Everything closes here at seven.”

“Hmm… too bad. Oh well, I guess we’ll be okay for tonight,” Arjun said.

After talking for a while, Bishnu stood up. “I live nearby, so we will be seeing each other often. And don’t worry, your documentation is almost ready, so you will leave for Haiti soon.”

“Okay, thanks.”

They took out snacks from their backpacks and ate them. Afterwards, they went to bed.

The next morning, they were starving. They found a fast-food restaurant nearby. But the menu had everything written in Spanish, with no pictures. “How do we know what to order?” Mohan said. He looked around. The cashier had Asian features.

“Hey, Chitra, your brother is working there,” Mohan said, pointing his chin towards the cashier. “Go get us some food. Maybe he will help you out.”

“Just shut up!” Chitra did not like to be called the brother of the unknown guy due to his Mongolian features. But he walked towards the cashier. The cashier started talking to him in Spanish. He tried to make a conversation in English, but it did not go too well.

Chitra came back.

“So, we are getting any food here or not?” asked Mohan. Chitra shrugged. He looked sad.

“There is always a universal way,” replied Arjun. “You might not be happy with what you get, but at least we’ll fill our stomachs.” Arjun walked towards the cashier, pointed to the chicken dish that people were eating at the nearest table, and held up three fingers.

The cashier nodded and smiled. Arjun gave him a twenty-dollar bill. Handing the change back, the cashier pointed at an empty table and gestured them to sit.

Soon the waiter brought them three dishes of chicken with sauce over rice. The food was too bland for their taste, but they finished the meal. Right after they ate, Arjun said, “We need to learn some Spanish.”

“Yes, we need to… but how?” Mohan said, lighting a cigarette.

“There might be a bookstore around,” Arjun said. “We need to find a Spanish phrase book.”

“Who’s going to work that hard just to know the food?” Chitra said, yawning. “We can ask Bishnu about the food. How long are we going to stay here anyway?” With a full stomach, it was hard for him to keep his eyes open.

“I don’t care whether you guys want to learn Spanish or not,” Arjun said. “I’m going to get a phrase book. I want to understand at least some Spanish, enough to order food and ask directions.”

“Okay. Let’s find a bookstore,” Mohan said, passing his cigarette to Chitra.

They found a Spanish phrase book. For a week, they did not have much to do, so Arjun spent all day learning Spanish.

One day, they were playing cards on the floor. Chitra was smoking a cigarette, and there were cans of beers beside them and empty cans lying on the floor. Arjun had just lost a game in Nepalese poker when somebody knocked on the door.

“Who is it? The door is open…” Mohan said.

Bishnu opened the door. He had grin on his face. “Hey, you guys having fun, huh?”

“Yep!” Chitra replied.

“There’s not much to do here besides playing cards,” Arjun said, putting his cards on the floor.

“It’s good that you can smoke in here,” Bishnu said, looking at the clouds of smoke.

“That’s the only fun part in here,” replied Mohan.

“It’s not fun at all,” Arjun said. “When we move from here, I’ll ask for a non-smoking room. These two have made this place look and smell like a chimney.” He moved up to the bed, so he could talk to Bishnu face to face. “I can’t even imagine how bad their lungs are by now.”

Bishnu laughed. “Smokers know that, they just can’t accept the fact!”

“It’s actually better for digestion and—”

Before Mohan could complete his line, Arjun interrupted, “Not again. He read that stupid comment somewhere and he’s been repeating it like a parrot. Every time anybody talks about smoking, he says the same thing—smoking is better for digestion and increases your memory. When is he going to learn?”

“Whatever,” Mohan said, taking a beer from the refrigerator. He passed it to Bishnu. “Let’s not bore him with this crap!”

Bishnu opened the can of beer and took a sip. “I’m here to show you something.” He placed the beer on the nightstand. He opened his backpack and showed them their passports. “Look what I brought you—visas to Haiti.”

“Wow, that’s great,” Chitra said.

Mohan picked up his passport, looked at his visa, and said, “This was easier than I thought. What a surprise… we didn’t even need to go for interviews.” He started laughing.

“It’s not fake, is it?” Arjun asked. Before Bishnu could answer, he added, “Just kidding. So, when are we going to Haiti?”

“Your agent from Nepal, Sundar, will be here in a week. He will take you guys to Haiti.”

# Chapter 15

*Quito, Ecuador, January 12th, 2010*

“People are dying everywhere these days,” Mohan said, as he changed the television channel. There was a breaking news of an earthquake. Arjun was sitting next to him on the bed while Chitra was in the corner of the room talking on the phone.

“Go back to the news,” Arjun said.

“Come on, I just want to watch a film.”

“Go back to the freaking channel, man,” Arjun was loud, as loud as he had ever been. Chitra hung up the phone.

“What’s up, guys?” asked Chitra. Both of them ignored him.

“What’s the big deal, man? You don’t need to yell like that, okay?”

“Turn it back! That’s happening in Haiti right now!”

“What’s happening in Haiti?” asked Chitra.

Mohan switched back the channel. Houses were collapsing, people were scattering in terror, and clouds of dust were covering the sky. The news anchor said, “This is the worst earthquake in the history of Haiti. The major quake, which measured 7.0 on the Richter scale, was followed by an aftershock of 5.9 on the Richter scale. The widespread damage will likely lead to an array of social and economic catastrophes.” As they watched the continued news coverage of the disaster, it was revealed that the epicenter was only ten miles from the capital city of Port-Au-Prince, where they were supposed to be in a few days.

“Oh God! This is terrible! Why has it happened now?” Chitra said.

As the events unfolded, the three remained glued to the television. A cell phone rang on the other side of the room. They didn’t answer.

“Why does it have to be us?” Mohan said. Again, there was no answer from anybody.

Arjun sat there silently, his mind in turmoil. His dream of a prosperous life was falling apart like leaves dropping from trees in the fall—but the spring would never come. His mind reeled with the turn of events, from the initial conversation with Sundar to this moment.

“Hey, are you okay?” Mohan nudged Arjun with his elbow. Arjun shrugged, saying nothing.

“At least it didn’t happen after we got there. It’s better to watch it on T.V. than to actually be there, suffering,” Mohan said. “We can always go back home or find other work.” He did not sound as positive as he wanted to.

“Yes, that’s true,” Chitra said. “We could have died in the earthquake there. I’m glad we are still here.”

Arjun knew he should be happy for not being in Haiti right now, he should be thankful to God that Sundar took his time to come to Ecuador, but he was not ready to accept this new reality. His family had spent a lot of money for him to find work here. Now what? Bad luck seemed to be still guiding his fate. It looked like he would have to return to his country as a loser again.

Sundar arrived in Ecuador with a new proposal for them. It seemed he had discussed it with his partners before talking to them. Sundar, Arjun, Mohan and Chitra were sitting on the floor of the motel room. “Some people tried to go to Haiti anyway,” Sundar said, “but the Haitian government sent them back.” He waited for a response from the others. As nobody said anything, he continued, “Because of the current situation, it’s useless to go there. The situation there is dire. The country is in turmoil. Everything has changed. Those jobs won’t even exist now.”

There was silence in the room. “But we have a new plan,” Sundar continued. “You guys are going to apply to work in the Dominican Republic.”

“Uncle, I want go back,” Arjun said. “Everything I do ends up going wrong. Everything was going great and suddenly—a disaster. I don’t want to go to any other countries.”

“Arjun, listen to me,” Sundar said. “You can consider yourself lucky that you escaped this disaster, that it didn’t happen after you got there.” Silence again. “If we can get you guys visas to the Dominican Republic, after a short time, with the help of attorneys there, we will be able to provide you citizenships. After you receive them, you will be able to go to any European countries to work. The gate of opportunity opens just like that…”

“Wow… really?” Chitra said. “Is getting citizenship so easy there?”

“Obtaining citizenship will actually be easier than getting a visa for the Dominican Republic. Once you enter there, we will be able to get you citizenship, no doubt on that for sure. But getting a visa to go there might be a little tricky. Since you guys are already here, near the Caribbean, and we don’t have too many other choices, why not give it a try? There won’t be any extra charge for you guys. We will fix some documents, and you can apply for the visas for Dominican Republic here at the embassy.”

It sounded like a plausible option. There was nothing to lose, so Arjun nodded. Chitra and Mohan were ready for the new plan as well.

While they were waiting, Arjun, Mohan, and Chitra did not have much to do. They needed to save their money, so they moved to a new motel that had a kitchenette in the room. It was eighteen US dollars a day, three dollars more than the previous motel, but now they could cook their own food and save money by avoiding restaurants.

One day Mohan went for a walk. When he came back to the motel, Arjun was reading his phrase book, and Chitra was playing games on his phone.

“There is a Hilton casino about fifteen minutes from here, walking,” Mohan said enthusiastically, as if he had discovered a gold mine.

“The Royal Palace in Nepal was less than fifteen minutes’ walk from my father’s place. So…?” Arjun glanced at Mohan and back to his book. He knew where Mohan was heading.

Chitra put his game on pause, stood up, and said, “Wow, maybe we should give it a shot.”

“That’s what I’m talking about, man,” Mohan said. “Look at Arjun, he keeps reading that book all day as if he is going to spend his life here.”

“Whatever,” Arjun said. “We don’t have extra money to spend on something like that. We need to save our money—we don’t even know where we are going to end up.”

“Come on, man, don’t be such a spoilsport,” Mohan said. “We don’t need to worry about that shit. Let the agents worry about it. They are being well paid to look after us.”

“That’s true,” Chitra said. “We get your point, Arjun, but it won’t hurt to go to the casino once or twice. Maybe we’ll win, and we’ll have more money.”

“I know, but we are running out of money,” Arjun said, keeping the book on the nightstand.

“We’re not going to spend all the money. We’ll just take a limited amount.” Mohan took a cigarette from his pocket and lit it. He blew the smoke. “If this is not the right time, when will it be? After we start working? No man! This is the time.”

“We have no security, so we have to think ahead,” Arjun said, upset and frustrated with their childish behavior. “What if the Dominican Republic doesn’t approve our visas?”

“Like I said, it’s not our problem,” Mohan said. “Our families already paid for us to find work, and I’m not going back to Nepal. If I have to go back, I’m going to get a full refund no matter what!”

“It’s not their fault that Haiti had the earthquake,” Arjun said. “And you think that if we have to go back, they will refund our money? No way…They did their part. It’s our bad luck. We might get a little back, but it’s not going to be much.”

“Why do you always think so negative?” Chitra said, taking a drag of smoke. “Negativity brings bad luck.”

“I’m not saying we should go to the casino every day,” Mohan said. “Let’s just do it once. If we don’t like it, we won’t go there again. We can just take a total of fifty dollars with us. Let’s take a chance and have some fun. We only live once.”

Arjun didn’t want to stay stubborn. He hoped they wouldn’t get addicted to gambling. He nodded. “Okay.”

The one casino visit turned into more, then boredom sent them to bars and strip clubs. Soon their money was gone. Even though Arjun didn’t want to be a part of it, he ended up getting dragged along with them. It was too late when they realized they had only $150 left. They called Sundar, as he was the one who handled the cash transactions. He came and gave them $400 more.

“Guys, it’s not easy for me to ask your parents for more money,” he said, a little annoyed. “Be considerate and spend their money wisely.” They looked down.

Sundar also told them their paperwork was almost done, so they would go for interviews within a week.

From the money they received from Sundar, they bought enough groceries for a week and paid a week’s rent in advance. That left them $200. Putting the remaining money inside a book, Arjun said, “We don’t know how long it’s going to take us to leave this country.” He opened the drawer and put it under a pile of books. “We can’t blow this money—we will just use it when we really need it.”

“Sure!” Both of them agreed.

The next day after lunch, while Arjun and Chitra were taking a nap, Mohan went out. He came back after a few hours. Arjun was making tea.

“Do you want some tea?” asked Arjun.

“No,” Mohan replied.

Mohan went towards Chitra, who was playing solitaire with a pack of cards. He sat next to Chitra.

“Do you want to know your luck?” Chitra shuffled the cards.

“I already do,” Mohan replied, in a low voice.

“Hey, what’s up? Is everything okay with you?” Chitra said.

“I went to the casino and lost a hundred dollars.”

“What?” Arjun yelled. “You took the money? We don’t have enough money for food, and you went to the casino? How could you do that?”

“Arjun is right, man. That was stupid.” Chitra gathered the cards and put them in the box.

“I know… I thought I could win some money,” Mohan said, scrapingthe carpet to avoid eye contact.

“Every gambler thinks that,” Arjun said. “You should have at least asked us. It’s not only your money, it’s ours too, and we will all have to face trouble after it’s gone.”

“Tea?” asked Chitra trying to change the conversation.

“Go make it yourself.” Arjun went to the bed and turned on the television.

“Sorry, bro! It won’t happen again,” Mohan said.

“I hope you keep your promise,” Arjun said. “That’s all I can say.” He continued staring at the television.

“I’m making some tea. Let me know now, if you guys want any,” said Chitra again.

“I’ll have some, thanks,” Arjun said. “Let’s drink tea and start preparing for our visa interview. We can’t afford to screw it up.”

# Chapter 16

Arjun woke up early, his mind in turmoil. It was the day of the interviews to apply for visiting visas for the Dominican Republic. Arjun and his friends knew it would not be as easy as getting a visa for Haiti, where they didn’t even have to go for an interview. All the paperwork was ready. The agents had prepared bank statements to show that they each had enough money in the bank in Nepal to cover their expenses while staying in the Dominican Republic for three months. The agents had also booked a room at the Marriott Hotel there. They had even managed to get invitation letters from an environmental company to work on a brownfield restoration project to clean up land damaged by industry.

Arjun studied the documents again. They looked real enough, but he wondered who could possibly have invited them to work on an environmental project. None of them had any environmental degree or even experience. Sundar and his team had tried their best to prepare them for the interview, but still it would be hard to answer questions about something they knew nothing about.

Arjun was the first one to be called in. The room was small, with three people on the other side of the table, and a chair for the interviewee. On the table were three bottles of water, one for each of them. Each interviewer had a copy of the documents their agents had provided a few days ago.

One of the interviewers asked, “Why are you going to the Dominican Republic?”

Arjun answered as he had been coached, “I am going to work on an environmental project for brownfield restoration. I represent the environment group *Safa Nepal*, clean Nepal.”

“What type of program is it?” another interviewer asked.

“There will be people from different countries, where we exchange information on the methods we are using for brownfield restoration in our own countries.”

“How long are you going to stay there? And what’s the plan after the project is finished?” the third interviewer asked.

“I am going to stay there for three months,” Arjun replied. Sundar had told him he had to tell them that, or else they would not give him a visa. “After this project is completed, I’m going back to Nepal.”

The interviewer threw him a few unexpected questions to test his knowledge of the environmental field. Arjun stared at the gray carpet on the floor and softly tapped his forehead with his fingers till the interviewers changed the question.

“We are going to review your documents. Come back in fifteen days to check the status of your visa.”

Arjun thanked them and walked out of the room, nervous. Later, he asked Mohan and Chitra how their interviews went. They did not sound too hopeful either.

While they were waiting to be called back, they ran out of money again. They asked Sundar for more money, and he gave them another three hundred dollars. Arjun knew it was not free money—their families would have to pay the agents sooner or later—but Mohan and Chitra didn’t seem to realize that.

Frustrated and anxious, Chitra sneaked a hundred dollars and did almost the same thing as Mohan had. He told them later that he spent forty dollars on a hot Spanish girl in a room at a club and lost sixty dollars in a poker game at the Hilton Casino.

Mohan couldn’t say a word against Chitra as he was the one who had started blowing their money on gambling in the first place. People have different ways of handling stress, and they are not always the smartest ways. Arjun was angry, more frustrated than before about their stupidity and childishness, but he knew nothing would change by yelling. He controlled himself.

Fifteen days after their visa interview, they went back to check their status. Their visas had been declined and no reason was provided. Arjun’s heart was as gloomy as the dark clouds outside.

Arjun, Chitra, and Mohan trudged into their motel room and just sat there in silence. Sundar called to ask about the visas and they told him they’d been rejected. He came to see them in the motel room.

He sat down in front of the TV, which was on mute. “I thought this day might come,” Sundar said. “So, we planned for a better option. We have everything ready. There are agents out there, good friends of one of my team members—they are taking people to America. What do you guys think?”

“Are you serious?” Mohan said, enthusiastically. “Your team will be able to take us to the United States?”

“There is no reason to lie to you guys. You are like my brothers, and I want to see you all succeed in life. Did I lie about going to Haiti? Did you guys face any problems? It was the natural disaster that happened in Haiti, beyond human control, and you all know it.” Sundar said, looking at each of their faces. “About the Dominican Republic, we gave it a shot and it didn’t work. I never lied to you about it.”

“So, what’s the deal then?” Chitra said. “Why didn’t you decide to take us to America before?”

“We don’t take everybody to America,” Sundar said. “If there is a really good U.N. job in Haiti, why would we want the hassle of sneaking you into America?” Sundar’s Adam’s apple moved up and down in his throat. “Second reason, you might face some trouble on the way, not big trouble, but sometimes you might not get enough food all day. And the third reason, there would be more charges, as we need to pay different agents at different places.”

“I have heard there is even a risk of life!” Mohan said.

“There is a risk of life everywhere, Mohan. You could have died in the earthquake of Haiti. We could even die here tomorrow while walking on the street. There is no guarantee of life. Other than that, you don’t need to worry about anything. Our people are professionals and they do their jobs right. People worry about the Mexico-America border, but our people know safe routes.” Sundar coughed and continued. “One thing you all know, you’ll be illegal for a while—of course not for too long, as there are many ways to get green cards. Besides, America is a free country, nobody gives a shit about who is legal or not. There are more illegal people in America than legal ones.”

“So, who is going to take us there? Will you be traveling with us?” asked Chitra.

“No, it doesn’t work that way. You have to cross the borders of a few countries illegally, and it won’t be good for anybody if I go with you. Also, it would cost more if I went along. Instead, you will be passed from one agent to another as you cross the borders from country to country.”

“There are lots of countries in between here and the United States,” Mohan said. “It seems like it would be hard to get to America.”

“You will be able to skip lots of countries when you go by sea, so it won’t be that many. Don’t worry, our professional agents will take you guys to America safely.”

“If there is a chance, who wouldn’t?” Mohan said, excitedly. “My family can afford more.”

“Uncle, I don’t want to go anywhere,” Arjun said. “I just want to go back to Nepal. And you know my family can’t afford it.”

“I’ll talk to you later, Arjun. Let’s listen to Chitra first,” Sundar said. He looked at Chitra and waited for his response.

Chitra said, “I’m in.”

“Okay, you guys, let me talk to Arjun in private, if you don’t mind,” Sundar said.

Mohan and Chitra nodded.

Sundar took him for a short walk. On the way, he tried to persuade Arjun to continue the journey to America.

“If you are worried about the money, don’t be. I know your father very well. He will find the money, no matter what. Besides, I’m your uncle—I’ll do anything for you. You know we won’t charge you the same way as we charge those guys. I’ll tell my friends that you’re my nephew, so there would be very limited charge.”

Arjun was still quiet. Sundar put his hand on Arjun’s shoulder. “If it was that dangerous, I would not have thought to send you there. I will never risk your life—you need to understand that. If anything happens to you, it’s going to be me, just me, who has to answer your family. So why do you even worry?”

Sundar sounded pretty convincing. Was it coming from his heart? Or was he just saying that because if Arjun returned home, then Mohan and Chitra could change their minds too? Whatever the reason was, Arjun wanted to trust his uncle. He doubted his own luck though. It was a critical decision for him. He was in a dilemma whether to try to push the gate of the opportunity or push the old door of his house in Nepal. He wanted to talk to Prabhat about America—what was it like there? He had heard some scary stories about immigrants trying to sneak across the border into the States. *Was Sundar being honest about the fate of illegal immigrants in America?*

“Uncle, give me a day to think about it.”

“Okay,” Sundar said, “but don’t miss out on this opportunity. You will regret it if you go back to Nepal and those guys start sending money back to their families when they find work in America.”

He nodded.

As soon as Sundar left, Arjun took out his phone and dialed Prabhat’s number, but it didn’t go through. There was a problem with the network. He tried again and again. Finally, the phone rang, but Prabhat didn’t answer. Arjun left a voice mail to call him back immediately.

Arjun waited for Prabhat’s call all that day and the next, but Prabhat didn’t call back. In the evening, when Sundar asked about his decision, he said, “Okay, I’ll go with the group.”

# Chapter 17

*From Ecuador to Colombia, February 2010*

After staying in Ecuador for about a month and a half, a new fellow traveler from Nepal named Dipesh joined the group. He was a skinny guy in his early twenties. Arjun, Mohan, and Chitra were bored and anxious to get moving. Sundar had left after giving them an impressive, persuasive speech about the great opportunities ahead of them. Dipesh was interested in exploring Quito, but moving towards their goal—to reach the United States—had him excited like rest of his friends.

Finally, one day after lunch they started their journey. Traveling with Bishnu on a bus, they headed towards Tulcan, a town near the border of Colombia. As he looked out the window at the changing scenery around them, Arjun was both excited and nervous.

“I wish you guys could spend a day in Tulcan,” Bishnu said. “It’s so lovely there. It has beautiful hot springs and deep wells, and a big cemetery decorated with a topiary garden.”

Arjun wondered why Bishnu hadn’t told them about the place when they were sitting idly in Quito. They could have spent some time there.

At around seven in the evening, they reached Tulcan. They entered a small restaurant and waited for the agent from Colombia to arrive. The aromas coming from the kitchen were mouth-watering, and they were eager to have a decent dinner for a change.

Bishnu suggested they order *Hornado,* slow roasted pork marinated and baked in beer with ground annatto, cumin, garlic cloves and other spices. Arjun thought it was odd that Bishnu would suggest this, since he knew that two of them did not eat pork. Mohan and Chitra both ordered the dish. Arjun went for *Secos de Chivo,* a goat meat stew with thick gravy, served with rice, plantain, and avocado. Dipesh was still glancing at the menu. “So, what exactly is *Corviche*?”

“Well, it’s pretty much cooked in raw plantain made into a type of dough, stuffed with seafood and peanut paste, rolled into an oval ball and deep-fried until nice and golden brown,” Bishnu replied.

“That sounds really good. I will go with it.”

Bishnu ordered the food for all of them. Everyone seemed to enjoy their choices. Arjun and his friends were becoming accustomed to South American food, with its different spices.

It was raining outside. At about eight in the evening, somebody called Bishnu on his cell phone. He went out of the restaurant and came back with a man and woman, Hispanics in their late thirties, both short and chubby. They introduced themselves as Lucas and Rosa.

After a short introduction, Bishnu said, “Guys, my role in your journey ends now. Lucas and Rosa will help you get across the border and take care of you in Colombia. They are very professional, and you can trust them.” He shook hands with each of them.

They all left the restaurant. Outside was a small motorbike and a car. In the car were four young boys. Lucas smiled at Bishnu. “These are my nephews. I brought them so it would look like we are all in the same family. The border police aren’t as suspicious if there are kids in the car. Besides, holding kids on your laps will help block your faces.”

Bishnu laughed. “Smart!”

Lucas turned towards Dipesh. “You come with me on my bike.”

Dipesh and Lucas hurried to his motorbike in the rain, and the rest of them followed Rosa to her car. Rosa took out two big garbage bags from the trunk and gave them to Lucas to wear like ponchos to help protect them from the rain. He made a hole in the top of each garbage bag to poke their head through, and he and Dipesh put them on.

Lucas started the bike.

Arjun and Chitra sat in the back of the car with the kids on their laps. Mohan sat in the passenger seat in the front with another kid on his lap. The fourth kid sat by the window next to Arjun. The car followed the bike. Bishnu waved at them as they drove away.

It was hard to breathe inside the car, with so many people crowded together. Arjun was excited that his journey to America had finally begun. He was also nervous because, although he and Dipesh might pass for Hispanic, Mohan looked more like Indian and Chitra like Mongolian. Besides, they wouldn’t be able to understand any questions at the border or answer them in Spanish. *How would anybody believe we are all from same family? Is Lucas crazy or what?*

After driving for about fifteen minutes, they reached the border. The motorbike was waved through. Arjun tried to stay calm as a border guard glanced in the vehicle, saw all the kids, and let them through. Everybody breathed a sigh of relief. They drove for a while until they reached a small brick house.

Lucas introduced the couple in the house as his brother and sister-in-law—the kids were their children. Later in the evening, the kids ate food and went to sleep. Arjun and his three friends sat on the floor to eat. Lucas brought them plates piled with white rice, red beans, fried potatoes, ground meat, and sausage.

“Excuse me, what are these meats?” Arjun asked Lucas.

“The sausage is pork and the ground meat is beef,” he replied.

“I’m sorry, we don’t eat pork or beef,” Arjun said, gesturing to himself and Dipesh.

“No problem,” Lucas picked up their plates and went to the kitchen. When he came back, Arjun noticed that Lucas had just removed the meat, but everything else looked the same. Arjun had hoped Lucas would bring them food on new plates and might even substitute something else for the meat.

As a Hindu, he was not comfortable eating foods that had touched pork or beef, but he could not say anything. With a heavy heart, he started eating. With his fork, he separated off the food that had touched the meat and ate the rest. He looked at Dipesh, who was also picking at his food, moving things around. Mohan and Chitra were enjoying their food, meat and all.

After they finished eating, Lucas brought them thin mattresses and blankets. They lay down on them on the living room floor and tried to get comfortable. After tossing and turning for a while, Arjun finally drifted off to sleep.

The next day, after lunch, they were ready to keep moving. Lucas left the motorbike there and joined them in the car. Rosa stayed behind.

“We are heading to the Bogota bus station to get a bus to Maicao,” Lucas said, starting the car.

“Okay,” Arjun said.

Everybody was quiet in the car.

At about six thirty p.m., Lucas cursed. They looked ahead—there was a police roadblock on the road. *What do we do now? Do we get out and run?* A police officer waved the car over. Lucas stopped and rolled down the window. “*Buenas noches, señor.*” The officer came up to the driver’s side and looked inside. He asked for everybody’s passport. Lucas passed his passport to the man, with some bills sticking out of it. “Officer, they are my friends. You don’t need their passports, do you?” he said in Spanish. Arjun understood “*mis amigos*” and picked up the rest.

The officer slipped the money out of the passport, palmed it, and handed it back without even looking inside. *“Está bien. Pase.”* His hand slipped to his pocket, then waved them on.

Arjun started breathing again and relaxed his tense muscles.

At about nine p.m., they reached the Bogota bus station.

“You stay here,” Lucas said, getting off the car. “I’ll go get bus tickets for you guys.”

He came back with four tickets and handed them to Arjun. “I’m done here. At the last stop of the bus, the Maicao bus station, somebody will call you on your phone. He is going to be your guide to your next destination.”

*Another one? All these strange agents.* “All right,” Arjun replied.

“And don’t worry—there will be no police check on this bus.”

That was a relief. “Thank you.”

The four guys boarded the bus and it pulled away. Arjun saw a police van in the lane beside them, which made him tense up. *What if they’re looking for people like us?* After a few minutes, the van took a different route, but still the fear stayed deep in his mind.

Arjun and his friends whispered to each other when they needed to talk. They didn’t want anyone to hear them speak a foreign language or any of the details about what they were doing, and there was nobody to help them if they ran into trouble. It was a very long bus ride—about nineteen hours or so. They tried to sleep but it was difficult as the seats didn’t lean back. The bus stopped at a few places for quick bathroom breaks before it reached Maicao, but not long enough for them to find a café or restaurant. They had brought snacks and drinks in their backpacks, which they ate along the way. At last, around four thirty in the afternoon, the bus stopped, and they got out and went into the bus station.

Exhausted and hungry, they found a bench in the corner of the station and sat down, too tired to even talk. Arjun looked around, hoping to see their next guide, but nobody approached them. He checked the cell phone in his hand to see if he had missed a call. Nothing.

After a while, his phone rang. A guy told Arjun to look towards his right. He did. There was a small chubby guy coming towards them from a distance. He waved at Arjun. Arjun waved back.

The guy came up to them, introduced himself as Luis, and shook hands with them. Luis took them to his old car parked on a nearby street. In the front passenger seat was a lady who introduced herself as his wife, Paula.

The four guys squeezed into the back seat.

“We live in Uribia,” Luis said. “That’s where we are heading now.”

“Okay,” Arjun replied.

After driving for about fifty minutes along a paved road, Luis turned onto a narrow dirt road. There were small bushes here and there. Within a few minutes, they drove by a beach. It was a sunny day. Arjun wished he could jump into the water and relax for a while there before heading to their next destination, but he knew that was not possible. They drove past old, dilapidated huts on the beach. Luis parked his car on the side of the road and told them to get out. He started walking and they followed him to a small hut, with walls made from logs sealed with mud and a roof thatched with straw.

They went into the little hut, which was just one room, no larger than about thirteen by fifteen feet, with a dirt floor. Luis introduced them to their two daughters, who were sitting on a bed in the corner. The two little girls looked to be about aged two and six. Arjun looked around the tiny hut. There was only the one small bed in a corner. *Where do they all sleep?* Then he noticed a hammock attached to the ceiling. Another corner had belongings in boxes and bags on the floor, and there was small cupboard. Under the bed were pull-out boxes where they kept the rest of their belongings including dishes. There was no kitchen. Just outside the house, next to the door, was a small firepit where they cooked their food.

“How long are we going to be here?” asked Arjun, as he didn’t see any place for them to sleep.

“At least a week,” replied Luis. “We can’t leave here until everything is prepared for the rest of your trip. You need to cross a sea, so finding a ship you can go on and a boat will take time.”

Arjun and the guys looked at each other, then at the tiny space in front of them. *Where will the four of us fit in?*

After a meal of beans and rice, they all prepared to sleep. Paula and her daughters slept in the small bed and Luis slept in the hammock. The four guys were crammed together on a straw mat on the dirt floor beside the bed, covered with a thin blanket. Arjun tried to sleep but could hardly move. He felt suffocated—Mohan was snoring in his left ear and Dipesh was leaning on him from the right. All night he nudged them one after another. He gazed at the ceiling. *When will this journey be over?*

The next day, a teenage guy came up to Arjun. “Amigo, me Luis’s nephew. My name Johnny. What your name?”

“Arjun.”

The rest of them introduced themselves to Johnny as well.

“If need buy anything from market, tell me—I buy for you.”

“Okay, gracias,” Arjun said.

Luis and his family could provide them only a small plate each of seafood and rice once a day, so they were always hungry. *Isn’t Luis getting paid enough to feed us more? Where is our money going?* Arjun thought about asking for more food, but he decided otherwise. *He might have his reasons for this.*

Altogether, Arjun and his friends had about $650 US now. Every other day, they asked Johnny to bring food and drinks from the market as they were not allowed to go outside the house. They tipped him, so Johnny was always eager to buy them food from a store. The kids in the house never tried to come close to the strangers. They only stared at them while they were eating food. Other times, the kids completely ignored them. One day, Mohan offered the little girls some candy. They shyly accepted and sucked on it, smiling.

One night after they went to sleep, Arjun was gazing up at Luis in the hammock when he saw the threads of the hammock coming apart. Before he could do anything, Luis fell on him. Arjun felt suffocated. He screamed and flailed his hands to push Luis off him.

“What the hell!” Chitra yelled in his ear. Arjun opened his eyes. It was early morning and Luis was still in the hammock—thankfully, it was just a nightmare. The weight on him was not Luis, but Chitra's hand. Arjun pushed Chitra’s hand so forcefully that it hit Mohan’s face, who yelled out.

“What’s going on?” Luis looked down from the hammock.

“Sorry, just a nightmare,” Arjun replied.

Luis went back to sleep.

Arjun had never been in a prison before, but he imagined it could not be any worse than this. They were crammed together day and night in this tiny, dark hut. There was no running water or shower and they all started to smell and get irritable. He had never felt so claustrophobic before. The door wasn’t locked, but they couldn’t go outside. He wanted to go for a long walk on the beach, but it was impossible. They could only go out of the house when they needed to go to the roofless, tarpaper outhouse beside the house.

After staying in the house for a few days, Arjun and his friends had it enough—they decided to go to the beach after everybody went to sleep. They sneaked out and ran to the water and jumped in. They quietly ducked under and swam around. It was a little chilly, but truly refreshing. They stayed on the beach for hours. Arjun felt like the breeze and water had some type of magic in them. They decided they would sneak out to the beach whenever they could.

During the day, Arjun and his friends played cards and just lay around most of the time. While his friends were taking naps, Arjun would read the Spanish phrase book and practice phrases for various situations. He thought that might come in handy as they made their way through Central America.

# Chapter 18

*From Colombia to Panama*

On the ninth day of staying in the house, when Arjun felt he couldn’t endure it another day, Luis said, “We need to move from here today. People are getting suspicious that I keep illegal travelers here.”

“Okay, when do we leave?” asked Mohan.

“I say now,” he replied.

It didn’t take them much time to get ready—in an hour they left the house. Luis drove his car, and Paula sat next to him. The four guys were crammed together in the back again. Luis drove for about an hour through a shrubland, and then to a small town. He stopped in front of a motel. Luis went inside, and when he came back, he said, “Bring your luggage in. We’ll stay here for the night.”

“Okay.”

They followed him and Paula to the motel room. After dropping their luggage, Luis said, “Let’s go eat. I’m starving.”

“Do you want us to go with you? asked Mohan, surprised.

“Sure, it should be okay,” Luis said. “Nobody knows us here. We will go to a restaurant, eat, and come back before anybody notices us.”

“That’s awesome,” Chitra said.

“Just one thing—we should not walk together.” Luis warned them.

“Okay.” Everybody agreed. They went out. Luis and Paula walked in front, with Arjun and Mohan behind them, followed by Chitra and Dipesh. Each group kept a little distance from each other.

All of a sudden, Mohan nudged Arjun and whispered. “They got caught. What do we do now? Do we run?”

*Who was caught?* Arjun glanced back.

Three police officers behind them were grabbing Dipesh and Chitra’s shirts. *Oh my God.* Arjun whispered, “Let’s cross the street first and then run.”

Nervous, Mohan darted across the road without looking around. A bike nearly hit him. “*Puta madre!*” a guy on a bike yelled, slamming on the brake. People stopped to look. Before he could run away, one of the officers stopped him. Arjun continued walking, pretending he didn’t know Mohan.

*“Alto!”* he heard somebody yelling from behind. He wanted to run, but he had just learned from Mohan’s mistake. He stopped and looked back, trying not to let his fear show. There was another police officer. He held out his hand. “Show me your I.D.,” he said in Spanish.

Arjun understood “*identificación.*” He replied in English. “Sorry, sir, I don’t have my passport with me right now. I left it at the motel.”

“You have visa?”

Arjun stayed quiet.

“Visa?”

Arjun shook his head, nervous.

The officers took them to a police station. It was just a few blocks away from the motel they were staying in. None of the police in the station spoke much English, and Arjun and his friends acted like they did not understand Spanish at all. Google translation rescued them. One of the policemen gestured Arjun to come close to a computer. He typed something in Spanish and the program translated it into English. The sentence read, “If you give us $1,000, we will let you go.”

He moved the keyboard in front of Arjun. Arjun typed, “Sorry, we don’t have that much money. We just have enough money for food.”

The policeman read it, then took a long breath. He typed back, “Where are you staying?”

“In a motel, a few blocks down.”

“Take us there.”

One of the officers took Chitra to the motel room. The rest of them stayed in the station waiting for them to return.

A little later, Chitra and the officer came back with their passports. The police put the passports on the table. He pointed to the pocket of Mohan’s pants and asked, “*Qué es eso*?” without bothering to use the computer translator.

Mohan took out his cell phone, a Sony Ericsson brand, and showed it to him. The officer held out his palm. Mohan hesitated, then handed it to him. The officer pointed his index finger to himself and nodded his head twice.

“Okay,” Mohan said, dejected.

“*Gracias*,” the officer said, and put the phone in his pocket. Mohan nodded in resignation.

The police did not put them in a cell. They just sat there, wondering what would happen next.

An hour passed by. Chitra pointed to the keyboard and the police passed it to him. “We are hungry. Can I go get some food?”

“Okay,”the police officer said, nodding. “*Rapido*.”

He left. They waited a while, but he didn’t return.

The officer sent two other officers to check their motel room. One of them was the same person who had brought their passports earlier. When they came back, one of them told him in Spanish, “The guy moved their stuff out the motel room. He was not there.”

Arjun pretended he did not understand.

“Your friend abandoned you. He moved your stuff from the motel already,” the policemen typed.

Arjun was scared about what the police might do to them for Chitra’s deceitful act, but on the other hand, he was glad Chitra was free—maybe he could bail them out of jail. He explained to his friends what happened. Not knowing what to do, they lowered their heads. One police officer stayed to guard them, and another was sitting in front of the computer. The rest of them returned to their work.

One more hour passed. Arjun looked at the police officer who was sitting in front of the computer, completely focused on it. Sometimes he whistled, sometimes he cursed quietly, and sometimes he smiled or even laughed. Watching him, Arjun was sure he was playing games on his computer.

“Sir,” Arjun said softly, getting his attention. The police shifted his eyes from the computer to him. Arjun pointed at the keyboard. The police passed it to him.

“Sir, our friend tricked us, and we have nothing. What would be the use of keeping us here? Please let us go.”

“Okay.” The man handed him their passports. Arjun was surprised he let them go so easily.

Arjun took their passports from the man. “All of us?” he said, pointing at his friends.

The man nodded.

“Thank you so much, sir.”

“Okay.”

After walking about a block, Mohan said, “Don’t look back, those police are following us.” Dipesh turned back, a reflex action.

“Don’t,” Arjun said.

“They let us go, so why are they following us?” Dipesh sounded nervous.

“Maybe they are trying to find our agents,” Arjun replied. “Let’s pretend not to notice them and run away when we get a chance.”

They crossed the street while the policemen were stuck on a red light. They took a turn and went around a building. “Run!” Arjun said. They started running, taking various turns. After about half an hour of darting in and out, between buildings, they stopped.

“I don’t think they will find us now,” Mohan said. “What do we do now.”

“I’m starving. Let’s find a place to eat,” Arjun said. “Then we’ll be able to think better to decide what to do next.”

“Sounds good,” Dipesh said.

They walked to a small fast-food restaurant and ordered some food. Arjun took out his phone and tried calling Luis and Paula. Their phones seemed to be switched off. Chitra did not have a phone because once when he was drunk in Ecuador, he threw his phone out of the motel window in anger after losing repeatedly in a game with Mohan.

Arjun knew Luis had three different SIM cards for his phone, depending on who he wanted to talk to, but the guys were only given one phone number. Worried Arjun, sighed. He did not know where to go or who to call. *What do we do now?*

After thinking for a while, Arjun remembered Luis using Arjun’s phone to call his nephew, Johnny, recently. He checked his phone—he still had Johnny’s number on the recent calls of his phone. He called Johnny immediately and explained their situation. Johnny told him to stay inside the restaurant and wait for him to call back. Quickly, they ate their food and waited for his call.

After ten minutes or so, Johnny called back. “Go outside and get a pedicab rickshaw.”

“Okay.”

They walked out of the restaurant and got in a rickshaw. Johnny told them the name of the place where they needed to go, but Arjun could not pronounce it right, and the driver did not understand.

“Okay, give the phone to driver,” Johnny said.

Arjun passed the phone to the driver. After talking for few seconds, the driver handed it back to Arjun. Johnny was still on the phone. He said, “Luis and Paula wait for you there. When you see them, just follow. Don’t talk to them, okay.”

“All right, thank you.”

Arjun hung up the phone. Fifteen minutes later, the driver dropped them at the assigned place.

The change back from the restaurant was enough for the rickshaw fare. Luis and Paula walked past them, and they casually turned around and followed them. After walking for about ten minutes, Luis stopped in front of the parked car and looked around. There was nobody behind them. He gestured them to get in the car. They jumped in quickly.

Arjun told him about Chitra.

“I know where he is,” Luis said. “I hid him.”

“Really?” Arjun said. “But where did you find him?”

“We met him when he came out of the police station to get food. I told him not to go back to the station. I didn’t think they would let you go so easily.”

“Hmmm… that’s smart,” Mohan said.

“And we moved your stuff from the motel to our car. It’s in the trunk. So, everything is safe.”

*Thank God.*

“That’s the good news. The bad news is that we missed the ship, so we have to return home and figure out what to do next.”

He picked Chitra up from the restaurant on the way and they drove back to Luis’s home.

Arjun was relieved that they had managed to escape today, but that seemed like just a taste of what might come on their long journey to America.

# Chapter 19

Two days after they returned to the house, Luis woke Arjun and his friends early in the morning. “*Amigos*, you leave today,” Luis said.

“Can’t wait,” Mohan said, half asleep.

“There has been change in the plan,” Luis said. He pointed at their suitcases. “You can’t take these any farther. You leave them here.”

“What? We need our stuff. Why can’t we take our suitcases?” asked Mohan, upset.

“The way you’re going to be traveling now, you won’t be able to carry anything except your backpacks. You’ll be doing a lot of walking over rough ground, and carrying heavy stuff would make it too hard.”

“What? That doesn’t make sense,” Arjun said. “We carried everything with us the other day.”

“The plan was to send you guys in a ship to Panama, so I let you carry everything, but since you missed the ship, we can’t just smuggle you onto any ship—we need to have our people in there, so you won’t be caught and thrown in jail. Without their help, it’s not possible. I tried to get another ship, but it didn’t work. So, no ship. Now you’ll need to travel on foot through remote mountainous rainforests and across marshes in a huge area called the Darién Gap. You will have to hike for a week under difficult conditions.”

The guys looked at each other with solemn faces. “When will your next ship be ready?” Chitra said. “Can’t we just wait for it?”

“We don’t know yet, but not for at least two months, so that’s not an option anymore for you guys. For your safety, we need to send you in a bigger group, so guerillas and *banditos* won’t harm you. Now I need to prepare you guys for that, so you won’t miss that group too.”

“So what can we take with us?” Arjun asked. “What’s the plan now?”

“You can only carry essentials like food, water, a toothbrush, and a few items of clothing. You’ll be traveling by car for about fifteen hours, then by speedboat for some time before you reach the rainforests of the Darién Gap. So fill half of your backpack with what you absolutely need and leave space for food and drinks. Once you reach the place called Turbo, you’ll give money to your new agent to buy more food for you. When you leave Turbo, make sure you wear old, rough clothes, so you don’t look rich.”

Luis peered at the gold necklace that Dipesh was wearing. “You can’t wear or carry anything like that. You could easily be killed or kidnapped for stuff like money, jewelry, and watches. You don’t want to attract the attention of the *banditos*. If they think you have money, they will kidnap you and demand a ransom from your family.”

Arjun’s stomach clenched at the thought of the hardships and dangers they would soon be facing. They all looked at each other nervously.

“Can’t I just wear it under my shirt?” Dipesh said, fingering his gold chain.

“No, if they search, they will find it. Look, I’m not interested in any of your stuff. I’m just doing my job to keep you safe. Eventually, you will have to throw them away anyway, so leaving your stuff here is a better option.”

*What should we do now? Is he telling the truth?*

“You need to make up your mind fast. If you lose the group I just told you about, I may not be able to help you any further. Also, my neighbors are suspecting that I keep illegal travelers here. If the police come here, we’re all going to be screwed. I can’t let that happen. Pack your stuff. I am going to be back soon.” Luis walked out of the hut.

“What are we going to do?” Mohan said, running his hand through his hair.

“We need to call Uncle Sundar and ask what’s going on here.”

They nodded.

Arjun took out his cell phone and called Sundar. He put it on speaker and explained the situation to Sundar.

“I just heard about it today. My guys called me earlier and said you missed your ship,” Sundar said. “I don’t think Luis is lying to you. The Darién Gap can be really rough if you are not in a group, so you don’t want to travel it by yourselves.”

“Uncle, you told me there would be no risk of life. I would not have started this journey if I’d known it would be like this.”

“Arjun, listen to me, there’s still no risk of life—you just have to stick with a larger group, that’s all. If you think you cannot hike like that, then don’t start it. You can come back, but you are a man now, you should not have a problem with a week-long hike. As for robbers, they won’t harm you for no reason. If they ask for your backpacks, don’t argue with them, just give them what they want, and they should leave you alone. Once you reach Panama, if you need anything, I will send it to you guys.”

“We are not worried about the hike—we are scared about robbers and gangs.”

“Then don’t worry, you should be okay. I’ve heard that hundreds of people travel that trail through the jungles and make it through safely. Just mind your business and don’t argue with anybody. Don’t give them any reason to want to hurt you.”

Arjun glanced at his friends. They shrugged, then nodded.

“Okay, Uncle, please let our families know.”

“All right, I’ll do that. Tell your friends what I told you, okay?”

“Okay, Uncle.”

Arjun hung up the phone. His friends looked as nervous as him. He tried to reassure them. “If other people have made it through safely, we can too.” They nodded.

A little later, Luis came in. “What did you decide?”

“We will continue the journey,” Arjun said.

“That’s a good decision. Pack your backpacks. We will eat something and leave soon.”

While the guys were packing their stuff, Luis left to run some errands.

Arjun looked out to make sure no one else was within earshot. “How much do you have in cash?” he asked the others.

Everyone counted their money. Altogether, they had $575 left.

“Guys, we don’t know how much money we’ll need for food and other things during the long hike,” Arjun said. “We need to hide $400 for ourselves. Who knows what’s going to happen to us once we reach Panama? It’s hard to trust anybody. In Turbo, if the agent asks for more money, we’ll tell him we only have $175 left. What do you guys think?”

“That’s a good idea,” Mohan said. “We will definitely need money after we make it to the other side of the jungle. Let’s try to save as much as possible.”

“Yes, I agree,” Dipesh said.

“Sounds good,” Arjun said. “Give me your money.”

They all handed him what they had. Arjun separated eight of the fifty-dollar bills to the side. “Guys, take out your old socks.”

They looked surprised. “Why?” Mohan asked.

Arjun took out his old pair of socks. He picked up a fifty-dollar bill and folded it into a small size, then put it inside the sock and rolled the sock up. Nobody would know there was anything inside it. “This is why.” He did the same for the other sock.

“Hmmm… very smart,” Mohan said.

Mohan, Chitra, and Dipesh took out their old socks. Arjun handed each of them the money. “Stash the socks in the bottom of your backpack.”

They nodded and packed their backpacks, then waited for Luis to come back.

A little later, Luis and Paula came inside with full plates of rice, beans, and some fish. While handing the plates to them, Luis said, “Are you done packing?”

“Yes,” Arjun replied, taking a plate from Luis.

“Guys, we leave in half hour or so,” Luis said, glancing at each of them. “You haven’t taken off your watches and jewelry yet. Don’t carry any valuable things. It’s for the best.”

“Okay.” They nodded.

“This is okay, right?” Arjun said, showing Luis his old phone.

“Old phones are fine. You can carry it with you. But if they ask for it, just give it to them. Any other questions?”

“No.” They shook their heads.

“All right then. Eat your food, then we leave.”

Paula and Luis walked out, then Paula came back with some cookies and water bottles for their backpacks.

After they ate their food, they reluctantly took off their watches and placed them on the bed. Dipesh was struggling to take off his gold chain with his nervous hands, so Mohan helped him take it off. He removed the pendant of Lord Krishna hanging on the chain, touched it to his forehead religiously, and put it in his pocket. He set the chain down next to the watches. With a heavy heart, Mohan took off his favorite silver bracelet that his girlfriend had given him for Valentine’s Day and put it next to the other things.

# Chapter 20

Arjun and his friends stood, a blend of sadness, concern, and eager anticipation etched across their faces. The prospect of the long, dangerous trek ahead worried them, yet the thought of leaving Luis's cramped hut for open spaces, sunlight, and fresh air filled them with hopeful excitement. And so, their adventure began. They piled into Luis’s car and drove along paved roads and highways for about seven hours until they arrived at a beautiful port city on the Caribbean Sea. Along the seashore, they drove past large resort hotels, then along a narrow cobblestone street with quaint, very old, two-story attached houses, painted in bright yellow, blue, orange, or white. Arjun admired the unique, colorful stone houses with their second-floor balconies overflowing with bright flowers.

“This is Cartagena, a historic city and a tourist place,” Luis said. “These old houses are all from Colombia’s colonial period, the mid-1500’s to the late 1700’s.”

“Very beautiful houses, I like them,” Dipesh said.

Luis parked the car on the street. “We’ll walk to my friend’s house. Bring your backpacks—we won’t be returning to my car.”

“Walk?” Chitra said. “Are we going to be okay here?”

“Don’t worry–this is a tourist place. You guys look like tourists. Nobody is going to ask for your IDs.”

They climbed out, grabbed their backpacks, and started walking, gazing around at the beautiful city. They were tired from the long ride, but they would rarely get an opportunity to enjoy the view of a place like this, so they relished every moment of it. There were people selling water, soda, and beer chilled in ice from carts on the street.

“If you guys want, you can even buy a beer and walk around with it here,” Luis said.

“Really?” Chitra said.

“Yes, really. It’s legal here. Don’t worry about it.”

“Great! let’s get some,” Mohan said. “Luis, do you want one too?”

“Sure.”

Mohan brought five beers and handed them to his companions. “Cheers!” They toasted with the cans.

Arjun took a long drink. The refreshing beer quenched his thirst of a month. All this seemed too good to be true, but he pushed the thought away and focused on the cool sensation of the beer going down his throat.

Arjun saw an old, sprawling, stone castle on the top of a hill. “What’s that up there?” he asked.

“It’s a fortress called Castillo San Felipe de Barajas. It was built by the Spanish government in the 1500’s to protect the city. Cartagena was the main port for trade between Spain and other overseas empires during that time, so they constantly risked being attacked by pirates and other enemies. That fort saved this land from many invasions.”

“Wow, interesting.”

They walked for about twenty minutes and stopped in front of a house. Luis took out his phone and made a call. A guy came out, opened the gate, and hugged Luis, then turned towards them. “Pablo,” he said, shaking hands with them.

They went in and Pablo took them to the living room. As they sat down on the couch, he said, “The food is ready—I am going to bring it to you, and then we leave immediately.”

*Food! Yes!* Arjun thought.

Pablo and Luis left the room. When they came back, he brought plates of rice, red beans, fried plantains, and some fish.

After the long drive, they were all ravenous. The food tasted great. When they were done eating, Pablo picked up a backpack and told them to follow him to his car. Luis said goodbye and stayed behind in the house. Chitra sat in front, and the rest of the guys got into the back.

Arjun was tired, and after that great meal, he quickly dozed off. Around midnight, they reached Turbo, another port city, still in Colombia, without any interference from the police. Pablo checked them into a motel room with two double beds in it.

He took out some packets of snacks and cookies and handed them to Dipesh. “This is your dinner for tonight.”

“Okay,” Dipesh said, taking them.

“Guys, give me $300. I need it to buy food and other necessary items for your journey through the jungle.”

“We only have $175 left,” Arjun said. “Please bring us whatever you can buy with this money.” He handed the money to Pablo.

“Hmmm… $175 might not get you enough, but I’ll see what I can do.” He took the money, counted it, and put the bills in his pocket. “Get lots of sleep tonight. You’ll need to be rested for your long journey on foot. You’ll be starting in the morning. I’ll buy the things you need and bring them to you around eight thirty or so. Be ready by then. We will leave here before nine.”

They nodded.

“Can you please bring two packets of cigarettes too?” Mohan said.

“Okay,” Pablo said. He looked down at their feet. “What size shoes do you wear? You’ll need rubber boots to wade through the marshlands and rivers.”

They told him the sizes and he wrote it on a small piece of paper, then left. After eating the snacks, Arjun and Chitra chose a bed while Mohan and Dipesh were still eating.

The next morning, they woke up early and took turns in the shower. The hot running water felt so good after no facilities at Luis’s house. By eight fifteen or so, Pablo was already there with coffee and some plastic bags. He set the coffee on the table and handed Mohan a bag. “Coffee, egg *arepas,* and chicken for your breakfast.”

“Great. Thanks.” Mohan opened the bag and took out the food. It was corn bread with egg filling and some roasted chicken. He passed the containers around and everyone dug in. It was delicious, and the coffee hit the spot.

There were a few more items in the other plastic bags. “Divide these among yourself.” He handed them to Arjun.

Arjun peeked inside the plastic bags. One bag contained sandwiches, peanuts, granola bars, protein bars, cookies, four bottles of water, energy drinks, chips, and two packs of cigarettes. Another held plastic plates, metal bowls, and utensils. Bigger bags had four hammocks and four pairs of rubber boots. A smaller one contained mosquito lotion, some medicine, and band-aids.

“Looks like we have lots of good snacks for the hike. But is this water going to be enough?” he asked.

“You don’t really need to carry too many water bottles. You will be crossing a lot of creeks and rivers on your walk. This is just for the start and to provide you with a bottle to refill at the rivers.”

“Okay,” Arjun said.

Mohan peeked inside the bags. “Looks good. Lots of snacks and other supplies. But what about meals? Don’t we need to take rice and other food to cook at suppertime?”

“Your guide will carry rice, beans, cans of meat, and stuff like that. You will be cooking once a day, probably in the evening.”

“Okay.” Mohan nodded.

They quickly divided the supplies among their backpacks. They got dressed in pants, T-shirts, and hoodies. Then they checked out of the motel.

After walking for a few minutes, they arrived at the seashore. There were many motorboats there. A boatman on one of the boats waved at Pablo. Pablo waved back and got onto the boat. They followed him, arranging themselves around it so they wouldn’t tip over.

The boatman said “Hola,” then started the motor and headed out into the Caribbean Sea. After navigating along the Gulf of Urabá for about half an hour, they approached thousands of taro plants covering the water surface ahead of them. The shore was visible, but it seemed like miles away. The motorboat slowed as it entered the area.

Arjun looked down—roots crowded the water below the green leaves. The boat slowed even more, then stopped.

*“Mierda!”* the driver yelled.

The motor blades seemed to be tangled in the plants and roots. *Oh shit! What are we going to do?* They were stuck. They looked at each other, nervous.

The boatman picked up a long wooden rod and poked the plants and roots to shove them away from the motor and the boat. They held onto the sides as the boat shook and almost tipped over.

After struggling with the plants for about five minutes, the boatman freed the motor and started it again. The journey continued. In the distance, Arjun saw a vast, hilly tropical rainforest.

After riding for another two and half hours in the motorboat, they finally headed toward the shore.

“This is Capurganá, Colombia. You can only get here by boat or air. This is where your journey on foot through the Darién Gap and into Panama begins,” Pablo said.

As they approached the shore in a secluded bay away from the town, Arjun saw a group of people waiting there, almost all men. Two of the men looked like they were from middle eastern countries, two from African countries, one from Pakistan or Afghanistan, and two Hispanics. Behind them was a Hispanic lady in her early thirties and a young girl about age nine. Arjun felt sorry for the girl, wondering how she would be able to manage.

They got out of the boat and walked to the group. One of the Hispanic men came towards them. “Fernando, I guide,” he said, pointing toward the jungle. He was carrying a machete.

“Okay.” They nodded.

“Now talk, talk,” Fernando said, pointing at the other travelers. Arjun understood he wanted them to introduce themselves to the other people before they started the hike. They started mingling. All the names were a blur—Arjun didn’t think he would remember anybody’s name except Fernando’s.

Everybody was carrying backpacks—Fernando’s looked heavier than the others. Pablo talked to Fernando for a few minutes, then said “Adios!” and went back to the boat.

“Listen, everybody,” Fernando said, grabbing their attention. “We start, going, going, no stopping. Hungry? No stopping. Tired? No stopping. Morning, start walking, all day, walking, walking. Night, eat and sleep. More travelers come, very good. Go together. *Banditos* come, no argue, just give. Okay?”

Everybody nodded. Nobody was smiling. Arjun wondered if he was ready for this.

# Chapter 21

*Darién Gap, Colombia, March 3, 2010*

Everybody had their rubber boots on, ready for the journey. They entered the vast rainforest through a narrow trail. All around, it was thick with a variety of green trees and colorful plants. Tropical birds sang around them and butterflies flitted in and out. After walking single file through the dense jungle for about half an hour, Arjun was sweating. He took off his hoody and draped it over his backpack. Everywhere around them was thick green foliage. Sometimes Fernando had to clear the path with his machete. He felt like they were wrapped up in the jungle—it was even denser than he had imagined. As they trudged farther into the forest, the heat and humidity started to get to him. Sweat ran down his face and whole body, but there was no stopping to rest. He glanced at the little girl walking with her mother. Her clothes were drenched in sweat. *It’s just the beginning—Will she be able to make it?*

The path started getting muddy—without the rubber boots, the travel would have been almost impossible. When they had first started, they talked among themselves, trying to get to know each other a little and find out what the others had been through so far. But now, nobody was talking anymore. They could only hear the squeaking of the boots.

The travelers were getting fatigued. Arjun’s feet hurt from the uncomfortable boots, but he tried to get his mind off his sore feet and aching legs and shoulders by focusing on the lush vegetation and colorful flowers and the sounds of the tropical birds.

“When are we taking a break?” Mohan asked.

“No break, just walking, walking,” Fernando said.

Mohan wiped the sweat off his face and continued to walk.

They came up to a slippery, steep hill, about thirteen feet high. Arjun and his friends grabbed onto tree roots and somehow managed to climb up the hill. Arjun glanced back at his fellow travelers. The little girl was trying to climb up by grabbing the roots, her mother pushing her up from the back. Arjun hurried towards her and held out his hand. She grabbed it and he pulled her up. Then he helped her mother climb the hill as well. The rest of them managed to get up and the journey continued.

They arrived at a river. The travelers dropped down and splashed their hot faces with the cool water, then drank and refilled their water bottles. They sank to the ground.

Fernando said, “Short rest here.” Everyone took out their snacks and quickly ate something. Arjun and his friends took out some sandwiches and peanuts and wolfed them down. Mohan quickly finished his food, drank some water, and lighted a cigarette. Chitra and a few other guys joined him.

“Time to go,” Fernando said.

“Two more minutes,” Chitra said. “We finish smoking and then we can continue.”

“Okay, finish,” Fernando said. For the first time, Arjun was glad Chitra smoked.

After the smokers were done, they all crossed the river by stepping on the big rocks protruding above the water. Fernando stayed in the front and the rest of them followed him.

On the other side, they continued through the jungle. Finally, when Arjun felt he couldn’t take another step, they came to a clearing and Fernando dropped his backpack to the ground. “Eat and sleep here.”

It must have been around five pm. Everybody dropped to the ground or sat on tree roots or rocks. As soon as Arjun sat down, he noticed a swarm of mosquitoes around him. He tried without success to swat them away. Everyone was swatting, cursing, and scratching their bodies. Fernando started gathering sticks. “Listen, everybody,” he said, showing them the sticks. “Help make fire.”

Arjun and his friends got up and started collecting wood for a campfire. A few of them helped Fernando start the fire, while others put mosquito lotion on their bodies. The little girl was lying on her mother’s lap. She was rubbing the girl’s tired leg muscles and sore feet with some kind of liniment she had brought. Arjun took off his boots and squeezed the water out of his socks, then he stared at his feet—they were soaked and covered with blisters. His heels looked the worst, with droplets of blood oozing out of them. He plucked a few leaves and wiped the wounds, then put band-aids on them.

As Fernando took two pots and some bags of dried food out of his backpack, Arjun looked around for a good spot to hang his hammock for the night. He tied his hammock and went to help Fernando cook the food. Later, rice, beans, and pork were ready. Some took out their metal bowls, others picked large green taro leaves and spooned the food onto them. The food was amazingly delicious. The rice had some good spices, and the yellow color itself made it look appetizing. The bland-looking beans were flavorful as well. He saw his friends gulp the pork greedily. With a full stomach, he was ready to collapse on his hammock.

After the meal, Arjun lay down. He saw his smoker friends smoking and talking to each other. He closed his eyes and fell asleep.

In the middle of the night, Arjun was awakened by splashes of water on this face. A few drops of water turned into a heavy rain in a matter of seconds. He glanced around and ran towards a tent where some of the travelers were sleeping. One after another, they all squished into it. The rain did not stop for hours. The tent was not big enough to cover all of them. They were all soaked and exhausted. Arjun’s tired eyes gazed at the raindrops. *When will it end?*

When the rain finally stopped, but it had completely put out the fire and it was dark outside. Nobody had the energy to start the fire again even though they were wet and cold. Arjun squeezed the water out of his clothes and went back to his wet hammock. His friends must have done the same. He could not sleep for a long time but finally dozed off.

The next morning, someone started the fire and they changed their clothes and hung the wet ones on bushes to dry out. They sat around the fire and ate their snacks, then packed their clothes and continued their journey.

Arjun was used to hiking, having grown up walking up and down the hills around his village, but those hikes were nothing compared to this one. It felt like a never-ending journey. They were all exhausted, but their energy drinks somehow pushed them further. Arjun wondered how the little girl and her mother managed to keep going. Changes in the weather—hot and humid during the day and cold at night—had already weakened their bodies. Whenever they came across a river, they would drink some water and rest for a few minutes. Even though the backpacks were getting lighter as they ate the snacks they’d brought, they felt heavier and heavier, and people started throwing stuff away to lighten their load.

They came to another river, this one deeper and faster. As they started crossing it, the little girl clutched onto her mother’s hand. Arjun was right behind them. As they neared the middle, the current got stronger and water came up to his hips. Arjun stepped forward cautiously, trying to keep his balance, his gaze fixed on each step he took. The lady in front of him suddenly screamed out loud. Arjun stopped and looked up. The little girl was no longer holding her mother’s hand. The woman lunged toward her, crying “*Mi hijita!*” but the girl was already several feet down the river, thrashing and struggling as she was being swept away. There was no time to think. Arjun threw off his backpack and jumped after her. The girl was crying, flailing her arms to keep from being sucked under. He swam forward, trying to reach her before the river took her away, but the strong current carried him along, too. It looked like both of their lives were going to be over today.

She went under and came back up, gasping for air. He reached again, and his feet touched ground. The river was wider and slower here and he was able to push himself toward her. He reached out and grabbed her arm and pulled her close. He picked her up in his arms and carried her to the other shore. The little girl was shivering and crying, “Mama!” He hugged her. “It’s okay, you’re safe now. Your mama is coming.”

As they sat on the river’s edge catching their breath, the girl’s mother came rushing towards them. She picked up her daughter and held her in her arms, rocking her back and forth, murmuring over and over, “*Mi hijita… Querida mia.*” They were both crying heavily. Then the lady came to Arjun and hugged him, still holding her daughter. “Gracias.”

As his friends came running towards them, he noticed he only had one boot on. He looked for the other one and his backpack, but the water had swept them away. While a sense of relief washed over him for saving the girl and making it out alive, the aftermath left him with nothing—no boots, no shoes, no money, and no phone. An overwhelming fatigue settled in, draining him of any remaining strength.

After that ordeal, Fernando said, “This *Rio de la Muerte*, very dangerous. Many died before. *Bueno niña* saved.”

River of death? Arjun thought. What an idiot! Why didn’t he warn us about this one before we started crossing it? We would have been more cautious.

Mohan gave Arjun some pants and a T-shirt. He changed into the dry clothes. Chitra offered him shoes and he put them on. The little girl changed her clothes as well.

“Now we go,” Fernando said, and they started the journey again.

Arjun started walking with the group, carrying his wet clothes. The little girl came up to him and took his hand. “Thank you.”

He nodded at her and smiled. “You know English. What’s your name?”

“Maria.”

“Nice to meet you, Maria. I’m Arjun.”

“Nice meet you too. You very nice man.”

“Thank you. So why are you going to America?”

“My dad in Texas. He there long, long time, before I born. My country not safe. Too much trouble for Mama.”

“Where are you from?”

“Venezuela.”

“I hope you see your dad very soon,” Arjun said. But he wondered if she would make it—she looked too weak and pale.

They walked for a few more hours before they had their break for the night. For the rest of the day, Maria stayed close to him. Arjun was glad he had survived that ordeal, but he couldn’t help worrying about what else awaited them before they reached America.

The next day, they started early. Within an hour of the journey, Dipesh yelped and jumped back in fear. There was a big snake crawling on the trail.

“Watch it, watch it,” Fernando said. “*Serpiente*—very dangerous.”

Everybody moved back, clearing the path for the snake. It crawled towards the trees, and the guys continued the journey.

It was only the third day, but Arjun felt like he had been walking for weeks now. His mouth was dry, his body was sweaty, and his feet were killing him. He wished they could sit down and rest. Suddenly, his companions stopped in front of him. He peeked ahead—seven men in khaki uniforms were pointing guns at them.

“Hola,” one of them said. “We want everything. Bags, wallets, watches, everything.”

*Oh no.* *God, please help us*. Arjun’s worst fears were coming true. He just hoped they could all get out of this alive and unhurt.

Somebody up ahead said, “Please leave us some food. We are starving. We haven’t eaten—”

“Shhh... no talk.”

Two *banditos* searched their bodies while the rest of them stayed there, pointing guns at Arjun and his companions.

One of the men kept looking at Maria and her mother.

The robbers emptied every pocket of the travelers and put their valuables in a plastic bag. Then they took all the backpacks and moved them away. The man who’d been staring at Maria and her mother came back and pulled Maria by her arm. “NO!” Her mother yanked her back. The man pulled her so hard that Maria screeched in anguish. Afraid of hurting her, Maria’s mom loosened her grip a bit, and the man kicked the mom. She screamed and let go. He looked at the guys. “Any problem with you? We kill you right here.” He raised his voice, “Any problem?”

Nobody said anything.

Arjun couldn’t just stand there and let Maria get taken away by these animals. “Please, don’t do this—she is just a kid,” he said, walking towards the guy. The man let go of Maria and punched Arjun so hard in his face that he was stunned for a few seconds. His nose felt like it might be broken and he could taste blood in his mouth.

Arjun felt Maria’s presence behind him. He feared he was going to fail today. There was no way he could save her from these men.

The man reached out to grab Maria again. “Any problem now?”

Arjun pushed the man’s hand away. “She is just a kid. Leave her alone.”

The man started laughing. “Who stop me, you?” Then he started punching and kicking him. Arjun did not try to fight back—barely able to stay on his feet, he held his arms up to avoid the blows on his face. He was sure he was going to be killed today, and he regretted he could not save the little girl.

The man stopped. Arjun noticed Maria’s mom had grabbed her and moved her farther away. He glanced back at the man, who was gesturing another guy for a gun. He grabbed it and pointed it at Arjun’s chest. “You think you hero? You have problem, now?”

Arjun prayed to God with all his heart and said what he believed to be his last words. “She is just a kid.”

“Let it go, Arjun,” he heard a voice behind him. It was one of his friends. The man flipped the gun over and whacked Arjun on the head with it. The pain was so severe that Arjun blacked out and collapsed on the ground.

# Chapter 22

Arjun heard people murmuring—he opened his eyes and looked around. He was lying on the ground, his head pounding. His friends were sitting beside him and others were hovering around, including some unfamiliar faces. *What happened to me? Who are these people?*

“Are you okay, man?” Mohan sat next to him.

Suddenly he remembered what had happened to him. He felt like his heart had just been stabbed. He wished he had never opened his eyes again—he could not save the little girl.

“Maria!” He quickly sat up. The sudden movement caused a piercing pain behind his eyes.

“Take is easy, man. She is—”

“*Aqui.* I’m here.”

Arjun saw Maria coming towards him. He got up, stood for a second to control his dizziness, then hobbled towards her and kneeled down and hugged her tightly. “You’re safe! They didn’t get you!” Tears filled his eyes and ran down his face. He let them flow. They stayed there for a long time, arms wrapped around each other.

He heard people clapping—he wiped his tears with his palm and looked around.

“You hero,” Maria’s mom said. “*Tu salvaste a mi hija.*”

Later Chitra told him what had happened. Right after Arjun got whacked on the head, another group of travelers arrived, not realizing they were walking into an unfortunate situation. While the banditos were busy robbing the newcomers at gunpoint, Maria and her mother ran away and hid in the jungle.

“Can you walk now?” the leader of the other group said. “We need to get moving. It’s not safe to stay here any longer.”

Arjun nodded. He looked around, ready to walk. There were more than twenty-five people now, but nobody had their backpacks.

“Everybody, listen to me,” the man said. People gathered around. “If we don’t act smart, all of us may not make it out of this jungle. You should grab a stick. If we see any animals, birds, worms, anything—we kill them and wrap them in large leaves or tie them with vines or whatever you can find. If you recognize any fruit, plants, or roots that we can eat, bring it with you. If we are lucky, we will find some food to eat for tonight.”

“Okay.”

He walked to the bushes and picked up his machete. “Let’s go.”

“That’s good that you were able to hide it,” one of the guys said.

“Yeah, as soon as I saw those banditos, I threw it into the bushes. We will need it on the way.”

They started the journey. Arjun was in pain and exhausted. His head was cut and swollen, and it throbbed constantly. Somebody had put some herbs on the wound, but it was not helping much. He walked holding Mohan’s arm. Chitra and Dipesh stayed close to them.

“Mira—leaf worms. We eat,” Fernando said. Green worms were crawling all over the leaves of a plant. Arjun hadn’t even noticed them at first as they were the same color as the leaves. Other similar plants also had plenty of worms on them. Arjun didn’t feel like eating worms, but what choice did they have? The travelers all collected the worms and carried them in large leaves.

“Bueno. Mucho protein in here,” Fernando said, grabbing one of the worms and shoving it in his mouth, alive. He chewed it like he was chewing gum. Arjun’s stomach churned and he gagged a little. He had never seen anybody chew a live insect. A few of the travelers followed Fernando’s example.

“I’m sorry,” Arjun said, and walked away. Chitra followed him. “Maybe I could eat some of them cooked, but not raw.”

After a short while, Fernando said, “Let’s go. No more rest.”

Arjun’s body was shaking from lack of food. He felt weak. There was still fear in his mind. *What if the banditos come back again?*

They had been walking for a long time. His mouth was dry. He looked at his fellow travelers—they seemed to be as drained as him.

“Does anybody have water?” he asked.

“No.” One of his companions shook an empty water bottle.

“Wait,” one of the guys said. He walked off the trail to the bushes and peered around, looking for something. He picked some leaves and came back. Then he handed them to Arjun. “Rub and squeeze these. They have water in them.”

“What’s that?” Chitra asked.

“They are called Kalanchoe Pinnata. They are rich in water,” the man replied.

Arjun did what the man said. He was able to squeeze some drops of water out of them. It quenched his thirst a little. *Where are those rivers when we need them the most?*

After walking for a while, the guys in the front screamed in joy. “Look what we found!”

There was a rusted pan and some empty cans that other travelers had discarded.

“We might be able to cook something tonight,” one of them shouted.

“This is very good thing,” the leader of the other group said. “Keep your eyes open for yuca and other edible roots. The leaves of yuca or cassava look like palm leaves, with five to seven small leaves attached together.”

“Okay,” the guys replied.

On the way, the travelers found some yucas and also *camote*, wild sweet potatoes. They collected them and carried them in big leaves. It was about five in the afternoon when they reached a small river. After drinking water and washing their faces, Mohan, Chitra, and Dipesh joined the other guys to collect wood for a fire. A few of the travelers started digging a small pit with rocks and wood beside the river, while two of their friends borrowed the machete and went to cut bamboo shoots.

“What are you doing?” Arjun asked the guys digging the pit.

“Trying to collect some fish for tomorrow.”

*How are they going to do that without a fishing pole or net?* Arjun stayed there peering at them, curious. After digging the small pit, they broke the bamboo shoots into four small pieces. Then they put one end of each shoot in the river and the other end in the pit. They secured the shoots with clay and mud. The bamboos were slightly angled to the river, so water would not flow towards the pit. Arjun wondered how that was supposed to trap fish. Then the guys collected some worms and put the dead worms on the both ends of the shoots. Arjun hoped it would work—then they’d have some fish to eat.

Arjun decided to lay down on the ground. He was super exhausted, and he dozed off quickly. Later Dipesh woke him up with a can full of yuca and sweet potato soup. “Let me know if you need more. They say you and Maria can have as much as you want.”

The soup was bland—there was no salt or spices, just hot water with some cooked chopped yuca and sweet potatoes. But he was thankful to God that he was still alive to taste the food. He finished the soup and took the can back to the group, who were sitting around the big fire.

“Want more?” Fernando said.

“Sure, thank you.” Arjun handed him the can.

Fernando scooped some soup out of the pot with the can and gave it back to him. Arjun sat next to Chitra and drank it. Arjun felt energized.

After they drank the soup, they took out the leaves with the green-leaf worms in them. They skewered them on sticks and placed them over the fire. Each of them was able to get two to three of those. Arjun didn’t want to eat it. He was worried he might puke. But he needed some protein. One of the guys passed a stick with barbecued worms to Arjun. He took a worm off the stick and put it in his mouth and chewed. It was crunchy at first and then there was burst of slimy juice, making him feel icky. He pushed the feeling away and swallowed it. He finished rest of the worms quickly and gulped them down with some water.

They all found places to lie down on the ground around the fire to try to get some sleep. It was a torturous night—Arjun woke up in the middle of the night scratching his body. Mosquitoes and all sorts of bugs were tormenting him. Without mosquito repellant, there was no way to stop those bugs. He wished he had a blanket, so he could cover himself. He pulled his hands and head inside the T-shirt, but it was not helping much. On the top of that, his head was still in agony.

Besides the cracking sound of insects and bugs, Arjun heard some strange noises—he wondered if it was wild animals. They could even be blood-sucking bats. *I can handle this*, he thought. I hope they are not jaguars or herds of other wild animals though. He was scared, but he decided to stay alert in case any of those animals came close. He took his hands and head out of his T-shirt and looked around. He didn’t see anything. A little later, the noise stopped, and his heart soothed a little. He was about to put his hand in his T-shirt when something crawled on his leg. He looked down. *Oh shit!* It was a black scorpion. He grabbed it and threw it on the fire. It exploded like a firecracker. *Wow.*

He couldn’t sleep for the rest of the night, worried about scorpions or other deadly insects. He wished he had his hammock to hang above the ground. In the early morning, people started getting up. Some collected more wood and added to the fire. Chitra grabbed the pan and walked towards the river.

“Oh my God,” he screamed in joy.

“What happened?” Arjun walked to him. Chitra pointed at the pit. There were plenty of catfish in it. Others rushed over and pulled out the fish and took them to the fire. They had barbecued fish for breakfast and water from the river to drink. Refreshed from the food and drink, they crossed the river and continued their journey.

It was already past mid-day and they had not found anything to eat. The travelers went off the path in search of edible roots, fruits, or vegetables, but they were not as lucky as the day before. They all looked exhausted and disheartened. As the day wore on, the lack of sleep and no snacks took a toll on Arjun. He could barely put one foot in front of the other. And he was always thirsty. All of a sudden, Arjun heard excited voices ahead of him. Confused, he hurried to check up on them. The guys had found a plantain tree laden with green fruits. One of them cut the bunches off with the machete.

They ate plantain soup and roasted plantain for dinner.

On the afternoon of the fifth day, the group was quietly resting on the trail when they heard something rustling the bushes and grunting and snorting. One of the guys peered towards the noise and glanced back at them. “It’s a wild pig,” he whispered. He gestured to the other guys to grab their sticks. Everybody took their position as instructed, ready to run after the boar. The leader of the other group grabbed his machete. Then the guy held up three fingers and mouthed “Three, two, one.” They jumped up together and ran after the animal. Suddenly aware of the danger, it turned and charged off through the bushes. Arjun was too weak to go after it, so he stayed behind with Maria and her mother and watched them hunt the boar. The guy with the machete aimed and threw it at the animal. The sharp edge of the machete sliced one of its legs. The pig squealed and limped, slowing down. Immediately, the guys caught up with the animal and started hitting and stabbing it with the sticks. The pig didn’t give up—it tried to run away, but the guys circled the animal. Frightened and exhausted, the pig charged at one of the guys, its teeth bared. The guy jumped aside and the pig missed him and landed on the ground. All of a sudden, one of the African men grabbed the machete and swung it at the animal, slicing its neck. Blood spurted out from the wound in the neck. The wild pig dropped and took a few seconds to die.

A group of guys borrowed the machete and carried the boar to the river. They cleaned the animal and cut it into pieces and placed them on a bunch of large, round leaves. Another group went to gather twigs and branches to make a fire and also sticks to skewer the meat. The guys started a fire and everyone barbecued a piece of skewered meat for themselves. For the first time, Arjun and Dipesh ate pork. Arjun gave thanks to the pig that his body had provided strength for them to continue the journey. He wondered if they would have survived if they had not managed to catch that boar that day.

In mid-afternoon of the sixth day, they arrived at a river.

“*Rio de Tuira,*”Fernando said pointing at the river. “We wait.” Then he took out a phone from his pocket.

“You have a phone?” one of the travelers said.

“Si, I hid from banditos. It maybe work here.”

Fernando managed to make a call, then said, “Finish here. No more walking. This Panama. We wait, new agents come.” And he passed the phone to the leader of the other group.

Everybody sighed with relief and sat down on the riverbank to rest as they waited for their agents to come. In about an hour, a motorboat came with two guys in it, and more boats approached from a distance. One of the guys in the boat said, “Arjun and team, come here.”

Arjun turned and waved to the others and thanked them for saving his life. He hugged Maria. “I hope you see your dad very soon. Good luck on the rest of your trip.”

“Hurry up, guys,” the boatman said.

Maria hugged him and didn’t let go. Her mother pulled her away gently. “Amigo have to go.”

Maria loosened her arms. Her eyes were filled with tears. He gently wiped her tears, nodded at her mother, and turned and got on the boat. Chitra, Dipesh, and Mohan were already there.

The motorboat started. He looked back and waved at them. It felt like he was leaving somebody he had known his entire life. More than that, he was worried. *Is Maria going to be okay?*

# Chapter 23

*Panama*

The boat stopped around thirty minutes up the river. They saw a car waiting for them at a distance. The driver of the boat told them to jump out quickly and run to the car. They raced to the car like mice scurrying to their hole.

There was only the driver in the car. Dipesh got in the front, Arjun and the other two guys jumped in the back, and the car took off. As they were traveling along a back road, the driver handed Dipesh a cell phone, some granola bars, chips, and water bottles.

“Thanks.” Dipesh took out a bar and a bottle of water and passed the bag to the guys in the back seat. They all tore open the granola bars and wolfed them down, along with the water.

The driver said, “You’ll need that phone when you reach Panama City. Somebody will call you and give you directions.”

“Okay. Where are we now?” Mohan asked, between bites.

“This town is called Yaviza,” the driver replied.

“Okay. Thanks.” They started on the chips, passing two bags around.

After driving about ten more minutes, the car stopped at a bus depot. The driver handed Dipesh four bus tickets and then pointed at a short guy with long hair sitting on a bench. “He is your new guide. He will take you to Panama City. Don’t talk to him. Just follow him like you don’t know him. Okay?”

“All right.”

They opened the door and got out. As soon as they stepped out of the car, the driver sped away.

The guy on the bench glanced at them briefly, then stood up and climbed onto a bus. After a minute or so, Arjun and his friends climbed onto the same bus. Dipesh showed the driver the tickets and held up four fingers and pointed to the other three guys behind him.

They sat down behind the guide. The bus did not move for a long time, probably waiting for more passengers. The wait made Arjun nervous. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw two ladies on the seat across the aisle staring at them. He became self-conscious, wondering what they thought of these four guys with messy hair and dirty, wrinkled clothes.

The bus ride to Panama City took about six hours most of it through lush green countryside. They drove past beautiful hills on their way to the city. Soon the bus drove alongside a blue ocean. Arjun wondered whether it was the Atlantic or Pacific Ocean. He could see beautiful skyscrapers in the distance—tall shiny buildings brought to life by night lights. He saw a big cargo ship on a long canal-like structure. This must be the famous Panama Canal that connects the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, he thought*.* He had heard about this eighty-two-kilometer engineering wonder that was built in the late 1800s. Arjun was amazed at how diverse the Panama was. It felt like it was the most developed place he had been in this journey.

Their guide got up and walked to the exit. The bus pulled up at a bus depot and the four of them hurried to the exit and got off too. The guide walked along a street and they followed him, keeping some distance between them. Panama City was beautiful, with both old buildings and modern tall shiny ones, but Arjun was too exhausted and hungry to really appreciate the sights they passed. As they were following the guide, two guys with brush cuts came from a side street and started walking behind them. The guide took a right turn. They followed him, and the guys behind did the same. Arjun was starting to get nervous about the guys behind them. Who were they?

“Guys—don’t look back, but there are two men following us,” Arjun whispered.

“Should we run?” Mohan asked.

“No, I don’t think that’s a good idea. One of us would be caught for sure. Let’s act normal.”

They followed the guide for a few more minutes, then he crossed a street. As they crossed the street, Arjun glanced back. *God, those men are still following us.*

At the corner of the street, the guide ahead stopped in front of a hotel gate and turned back for the first time. He pointed his thumb at the hotel, then strode away and vanished around a corner.

When they stopped in front of the hotel, the phone rang. Arjun looked back again. The men behind them had stopped too and were talking to each other, while still looking at him. As soon as they saw Arjun looking at them, they looked away.

Arjun answered the phone. “Hello.”

“Are you guys doing okay?” the man on the phone said.

“I think a couple of guys are following us,” Arjun said.

The man hung up the phone immediately.

The men behind came close to them. One of them pointed at the phone and then to himself.

Without thinking, Arjun extended the phone to the guy. He took the phone. “Gracias.”

He punched in some numbers and made a call. Arjun was too nervous to pick up any words the guy was saying in rapid Spanish.

Should we run?Arjun thought. No point*.* Besides, where would we run and who would we contact later? And how, with no phone?

He stayed there, motionless.

The man passed the phone back to Arjun. “Gracias,” he said, and walked away.

Arjun and his friends looked at each other, wide-eyed. Maybe the men had just wanted to make a call?

Arjun tried to call the guy who had hung up on him, but there was no answer. Now they didn’t have any option but to wait for another call. They sat on the curb for about ten minutes, wondering what to do next. Finally, the phone rang.

Arjun answered.

“What did they say?” the man on the phone said.

“They just wanted to make a call.”

“What the hell…? Hmm…Okay, go to the hotel. Don’t hang up.”

“Okay.”

They walked towards the lobby.

“Pass it to the receptionist.”

“The phone?”

“Yes.”

“*Hola,*”Arjun said to the receptionist.

“*Hola, como estas?*” she said.

He pointed at the phone in his hand, and then passed it to her. “*No hablo español, por favor.*”

“*Bueno,*”she said, and took it from him.

After a short conversation, the receptionist handed his phone back along with keys. They went to the room assigned to them. It was beautiful—bigger and better than any other hotels they had been in on this journey.

“Wow. This is great. But why are they suddenly putting us in such a nice hotel?” Arjun said.

“The agents know we’ve been staying in shitty places and then hiking through the jungle for a week, so maybe they decided we should stay in a decent hotel so we can recover for the rest of our journey,” Dipesh said, sitting on one of the beds. He lay back. “This feels good.”

“Don’t worry, man,” Mohan said. “Sundar or his men must have paid this agent to keep us in a nice hotel this time, after all we’ve been through.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” Arjun said. “Man, I need a hot shower—right now.”

“Yeah, me too, so make it quick and don’t use up all the hot water,” Chitra said.

“Yeah, I really need a good wash too,” Mohan said. “Hey—coffee.” He went over to a coffee machine. While he tried to figure out how to brew it, Arjun went to the bathroom.

The warm water felt great on his face and body. He watched the muddy water run down his body to the white porcelain tub. He took some shampoo and massaged it through his hair. The soothing hot water and the scent of the shampoo made him feel relaxed and refreshed. He wanted to fill the tub and lay down, but he didn’t want to make his friends wait any longer. He wrapped himself in a towel and left his dirty clothes in the corner.

The aroma of the coffee had filled the entire room. He found his friends sipping on some coffee. Mohan handed him a cup. Arjun took a sip—Ahhh…he was so glad to be back to the civilized world.

# Chapter 24

After Arjun, the rest of the guys took turns taking showers. They wrapped themselves in towels, not wanting to put their dirty clothes back on.

“Maybe we should call our families, now that we have a phone?” Mohan said.

“Not sure how much balance we have on this phone. We should probably wait until an agent arrives and ask him first,” Arjun said.

“Okay.”

After little over an hour, a tall black man entered the room. He was carrying two plastic bags with some carry-out food boxes inside them.

“What’s up guys? I’m Tony, the guy on the phone.” He put the food on the table. It smelled great. They all looked at the bags ravenously.

Each of them shook hands with him and introduced themselves, self-conscious of their half naked bodies.

“So, you don’t have any stuff, huh?” Tony said, looking around the room.

“No,” Mohan said. “We were robbed!”

“Yeah, so I heard.”

After a long pause, Tony said, “I brought you some chicken tamales and fried plantains.” He pointed at the bags on the table. “I’m sure you’re hungry, so go ahead and eat.”

“Thanks.” They opened the bags and started shoving food into their mouths. It felt like it was the best food Arjun had in his entire life.

While they were eating the food, Tony sat down. “After that, you can give me your clothes. I’ll get them washed for you. Just to let you know, you guys gonna be here for a week. I rented two rooms, so two of you can stay in the one next door.”

They all said okay. Chitra took the other key from Tony while Dipesh collected their dirty clothes and put them in the plastic bags.

“And guys, please don’t make any noise,” Tony said. “If anybody complains about you, you will end up in jail. Don’t do anything to draw attention. Is that clear?”

“Yes.”

“All right, you guys must be wiped out with all that walking, so have a good sleep tonight. I’m gonna take off.” Tony took the plastic bags from Dipesh.

“Before you go, Tony, we were wondering if we could call our families? We haven’t talked to them for a long time,” Arjun said.

“All right. You have some balance on that phone. Make it short, okay?”

Arjun nodded.

Tony walked towards the door. Hand on the doorknob, he turned back. “And don’t go outside, not even to the lobby. You may just walk between the rooms. Somebody will be back with your clothes in a while. I’ll get you each another set of clothes tomorrow and some other supplies for the rest of your journey.” He looked carefully at each of them. “I think I can figure out your sizes.”

“All right. Thank you.”

They called their families to let them know they had safely arrived at Panama, sparing the details about the banditos and other dangers and hardships during the jungle trek, so they wouldn’t worry too much. The guys stayed there in the room watching television, waiting for the clothes. After about an hour and a half, a guy brought their clothes back, dry and clean. They changed and Mohan and Chitra went to the other room. Arjun climbed into one of the beds. It felt incredibly good to sleep in a nice, comfortable bed after what he had been through in the past several weeks. He felt asleep quickly and didn’t wake up until late morning.

The next day, Tony brought them more food, and also toothpaste, toothbrushes, shoes, socks, underwear, pants, a T-shirt, a long-sleeved shirt, and a backpack for each of them. As soon as he left, they changed into the new clothes. It felt so good to put those on, after wearing the same old torn, dirty pants and T-shirt for a week. Arjun remembered the days when his father would bring new clothes to him and all of his siblings during *Dashian,* the biggest Hindu festival. It was the only time in a year that they would get a new outfit. He waited for that the entire year. He would put on the new clothes and go visit all of his friends. Those were among the happiest days of his childhood. Now he had the same feeling, more than a decade later.

Since they wouldn’t be going out for a few days, they changed back into their old clothes, saving the new ones for later.

Every morning, Tony brought enough food for the whole day. Arjun and his friends all hung out in the same room during the day. They passed the time recovering their strength after the ordeal they’d been through, and just relaxing watching television and talking about the past. They all missed their phones. They never went outside the hotel for fear of being apprehended and thrown in jail.

On the fourth day, Tony stayed longer than usual to explain the details of their upcoming journey through Central America.

“I’m sure you already know, I’m just one of the agents your man hired,” Tony said. “I don’t get much for doing this. Your main agents don’t pay anybody much. That’s why people get arrested sneaking through Central and South America. You probably know that if you’re caught, you could get thrown in prison for months.” He took out a map and placed it on the table. “Look, after Panama, you still need to travel through Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico before you reach the United States.”

They studied the map while listening to him carefully, as their lives could depend on the knowledge.

He continued, “Even though I work with your agents, I do have my own connections too, good friends working with me in various places. They will be able to take you to Houston, Texas in fifteen days.”

“Our agent, Sundar, told us it would take longer than that,” Arjun said.

“Listen to me. Your agent is not paying other agents like us well, and to save money on vehicles, you guys had to be on foot most of the time. I and my team don’t worry about saving money that way. Our goal is to make our clients happy, so we get more clients in the future. I would have never let you guys travel through that forest. You could have lost your lives there. Join us and we will take you to the US soon.”

“How much will you charge us?” asked Mohan.

“$10,000 US each, so 40 K all together.”

They looked at each other, confused. After a few moments of silence, Arjun stepped in. “We need to talk to our main agent, Sundar. He handles all the cash transactions. We’ll let you know what he thinks about this.”

“No problem, you decide. Talk to your family, talk to your agent. Your agent might not be happy with you joining my group, but you can convince him it’s the best for you guys. And one more thing—you don’t need to pay me anything now. Pay me half when you reach Nicaragua and the other half after you reach Houston, Texas.”

After Tony left, Arjun locked the door. “I don’t think he can be trusted. If he can cheat on his team and get the clients to go with him instead, what else will he do for money? We hardly know this guy.”

“We are not trying to be friends with him,” Mohan said. “He is a businessman, maybe just a cunning businessman, but he seems to know what he is doing. The only thing that matters to us is to get to America soon. So, why don’t we try to fix a deal?”

“I think it makes sense to deal with him directly rather than paying multiple agents through Sundar,” Chitra added. “We stayed eleven days in Uribia for no reason. We had to go through that hell in the Darién Gap. If Tony can do better and get us there sooner and we don’t need to pay him up front, I say let’s go with him.”

Dipesh was still thinking, not ready to make a decision.

Arjun wondered if that was why Tony had put them up in such a nice hotel and brought them new clothes—to impress them. “How about talking to Uncle Sundar first?” Arjun said. “We can’t make any decisions without consulting with him, anyway, since he’s the one who handles our money.”

Everybody agreed. Arjun called Sundar on the phone they’d been given and explained the situation.

“Our additional charges for you guys would have been $9,000 each,” Sundar said, “which we are planning to request from your families in a few days. The amount your family paid us earlier will cover your expenses up to Nicaragua, which our agents have paid to Tony already.” After a short pause he continued, “If you can talk Tony into getting you there for less and you guys think he is reliable, you can go with him. I don’t have a problem with it. But if you go with him, my responsibility will be over. I will let your family know about it.”

The next morning, they bargained with Tony, letting him know that they would only be able to pay $7,000 each. After first protesting, Tony finally accepted their proposal.

# Chapter 25

*From Panama to Costa Rica*

“You guys will be leaving after this meal,” Tony said, as he handed Arjun plastic bags. It was the seventh day of the guys staying in the hotel.

Arjun picked them from Tony and set them on the table. Then they ate their supper. One of the bags had snacks for their journey. Dipesh put them in the backpacks that Tony had brought them earlier.

After packing their backpacks with clothes and snacks, they took the back stairs out of the hotel. Two cars were waiting in the dark alley. Tony got into his car and told the guys to go into the car behind it.

They got in with a new stranger, who didn’t greet them.

After several minutes of silence, Mohan tried to start a conversation with the driver. “Hey, what’s your name?”

The driver said, “You don’t need to know that.”

They looked at each other and silence settled over the car. Nobody spoke after that. It was so quiet that even their movements inside the car felt noisy. *Are we going to be okay?*

Tony’s car stopped at a bus station. Their driver pulled in after him.

The driver got out without a word and went to the ticket counter. When he came back, he pointed at a bus. “Go to that bus. Seat numbers in here.” He handed them the tickets.

They went to the bus and found their assigned seats, near the back of the bus. As they sat down, the phone rang. Arjun picked up the phone.

“You guys are safe now,” Tony said. “No need to worry about anything. What are your seat numbers?”

Arjun looked at the tickets and told him the seat numbers.

“Do not change your seats with any of the other passengers, no matter what!”

“Okay, Tony.”

He hung up the phone, wondering why that was so important.

Chitra had a window seat and Arjun sat in the aisle seat next to him. Their buddies sat behind them.

After riding for a while, a lady sitting on the other aisle seat asked Chitra if she could have his window seat. Chitra pretended not to understand, but she used hand gestures indicating that she was getting sick and might vomit.

“No, sorry!” he said.

The crowd on the bus murmured in protest, so he let her have the seat. Arjun saw his helpless face but could not do anything.

Up ahead, Arjun saw a police checkpoint. *Oh no! What now?* He tapped Chitra’s arm and pointed to it.

Chitra stood up and gestured to the lady on his seat that he was about to puke. His face, red with fear, and his anxious eyes, convinced her. The lady quickly went back to her place.

The bus stopped and two cops climbed on with a trained dog. Arjun’s heart was pounding so loud he thought everyone around him could hear it. He pretended to be asleep. His eyes were closed, but his ears were alert to every sound and movement on the bus. Chitra nearly cried out in fear when Arjun accidentally touched him.

Suddenly, the dog started barking, and Arjun heard the cops questioning some people. He opened his eyes to slits and saw one officer handcuff a guy and the other officer grab his backpack. Arjun listened to the conversation, but he couldn’t understand much except that they were looking for illegal immigrants and drug traffickers. One cop yanked the guy off the bus while the second one continued to search the bus for other illegals by asking various passengers for their paperwork. He closed his eyes again. He could hear people muttering, the dog panting, and his own heart beating. Soon he felt the presence of the cop and his dog standing near him.

Maybe if I just give myself up quietly, they’ll go easy on me, Arjun thought. He took a long breath and opened his eyes. The police officer was not in front of him anymore—he had turned back towards the door of the bus. Arjun let out a breath in relief. The officer got off the bus with his dog. The four guys looked at each other, their relief palpable. He remembered Tony telling them not to change their seats with anybody. Tony must have bribed the officers, he thought. They didn’t even ask for their I.D.

The bus started running again. They all dozed on and off. After about ten hours of riding through the night, they finally reached the last stop at around six in the morning. They got out of the bus along with all the other passengers.

They looked around the station. “What now?” The phone rang. Arjun was surprised how Tony knew they had arrived. Did he have a spy on the bus? He answered the phone.

“You made it, right?”

“Yes, we’re here. We didn’t get arrested on the bus.”

“Good. Walk towards the street now.”

“Okay.”

“Do you see a yellow taxi on the corner?”

“Yes, I do.”

“It’s waiting for you guys.”

“Okay.”

“Get in the cab. The driver will take you to another bus station.”

“All right.”

He hung up the phone.

They hurried towards the cab.

“*Rapido,*” the driver said, rolling down the window.

They jumped into the cab.

On the way, the driver said, “Dol-lar with you? For bus tickets, twenty dol-lar.”

“No money… *Nada*,” Mohan said.

This guy is trying to rip off bums like us, Arjun thought. He knew it was Tony’s responsibility to pay for all their transportation costs.

After about fifteen minutes, the driver pulled over at the corner of a bus station. He gestured for them to stay in the car and walked away. When he came back in, he brought bus tickets for them. He handed them to Arjun along with five-dollar bill. *“*Five dol-lar for *bebida*.*”*

“Gracias,” Arjun said, embarrassed. He compared himself to beggars in his hometown, who sat in front of temples begging for money. But he was neither handicapped nor crippled, just a beggar in a foreign land.

The rest of them were quiet.

The driver pointed to a bus. “*Ese.*” Then he pointed to the number on the ticket.

They got out and started walking toward the bus. The phone rang again.

“Do you see a tall skinny guy with a white shirt and red hat?”

“Umm… yes,” Arjun replied, seeing the guy in a distance. “He is standing by the bus.”

“He is gonna get on that bus. Follow him.” Tony hung up the phone.

They followed the guy onto the bus but didn’t sit with him or talk to him.

The bus left town. After about an hour and a half of driving on dirt roads, the guy got up and went to the front. They followed him. The bus stopped and they all got off. He walked off the road towards a wooded area. Nervous, they followed him at a short distance. Nobody talked to the guy. Tony had told them not to talk to any of the guides unless they really needed to.

They walked for a few minutes more until they saw a long barbwire fence beside them, with a banana field on the other side of it. The guy took out leather gloves from his pocket. He put one on and passed the other one to Chitra. He pulled up the top wire and stepped on the bottom one to make enough space for them to pass. Chitra did the same on the other side. The rest of them bent down and climbed through.

They walked through the banana field for about twenty minutes until they reached a wide river.

“Costa Rica,” the guy said, pointing at the other side.

“*Gracias,*” Arjun said. He was relieved they had made it safely across Panama—one less country to travel through. But how would they get across this wide river?

# Chapter 26

A motorboat came roaring toward Arjun and his friends from the other side, with a boatman and another guy in it. As it reached them, the guy waved them onto the boat.

“You go,” the red hat guy said. “I stay.”

They nodded and hurried towards the boat.

The current was fast and there were no life jackets, but they hung on tight and made it safely across the river to Costa Rica. They all got out and the guy gestured for them to follow him. After walking for about five minutes, they saw a few small houses in the distance.

“That’s my house,” said the guy, pointing to a house.

“Hmmm… okay,” Arjun said.

They continued walking past the house.

“I thought you said that was your house,” Arjun said, surprised.

“Yes, but we are not going there.”

“All right.” They followed him into a big banana field and made their way among the banana trees.

“Wow! The banana plantations here is huge,” Dipesh said.

“Si. Most of the bananas are shipped to the U.S. and Canada.” He kept walking and they followed him among broad-leafed green trees, hanging with huge bunches of green bananas, the bananas pointing up from the stem. Finally, he stopped in a small clearing hidden among the trees. “You wait here.”

They sat on some banana leaves that had fallen on the ground.

“I go home now,” he said, still standing. “I be back in a few hours, when it’s dark. Then we move.”

They nodded.

“Don’t make any noise.”

“All right,” Arjun said. The guy turned and walked quickly and quietly out of the field.

Arjun was exhausted from the long, stressful journey from Panama City.

“Maybe we should take a nap,” Chitra whispered, lying down on a large banana leaf.

“Good idea.” Arjun lay down on the ground.

Mohan and Dipesh were quiet. They looked tired and restless.

“Oh, shit,” Arjun started scratching his body.

“What’s wrong?” asked Mohan.

“Mosquitoes.”

Arjun, Mohan, and Dipesh could not sleep, as mosquitoes and other insects tormented them. While they kept scratching, Chitra snored away.

“*Kumbhakarna,*” Mohan said quietly, nudging Chitra. Mohan compared him with the Hindu mythological character, who is known to sleep for months. “How could anybody sleep in a place like this?”

“No, no, no… not me!” Chitra said, suddenly awake.

“What the hell!” Mohan said.

“Shhh…, be quiet,” Arjun said.

“What happened, guys? Did I say something in my sleep?”

“You yelled out.” Mohan said. “What was that about?”

“I had a bad dream—we were caught by the police.” Chitra sat up. Mohan’s expression became suddenly solemn.

“Why did you have to have a freaking dream like that? Dreams like that bring bad luck,” Mohan said, raising his voice. Arjun didn’t know whether he was joking or not. Dipesh and Arjun looked at each other uncertainly.

“Have you gone mad? Who has control over dreams anyway?” Chitra said.

“Yeah, you’re right. I’m just out of my mind. Sorry, bro,” Mohan said.

Chitra just nodded.

The mosquitoes and bugs continued tormenting them so they couldn’t sleep. There was nothing to do except kill mosquitoes, whisper to each other and try to ignore their hungry stomachs. Finally, when it got dark, the guy came back with a flashlight. “Let’s go.”

It was a long walk through the banana plantation. They crossed it in silence. On the other side of another low wired fence was a big open cattle farm. There was a road running alongside the farm, but the guy led them through the fence and into the farm. They walked silently, as silence and darkness were the only covers in the wide-open grassland. Somewhere in the farm a cow mooed, and the guys jumped.

“It’s just a cow, keep moving,” the guy said, indifferently.

After walking for about an hour and half through fields, they reached a road where two cars were waiting for them, one white and one black.

“All of you, go to the black car,” the guy said. “I’m done here.”

They hurried into the car. There was a driver and another guy beside him. As soon as they got in, the driver sped away. Arjun turned to look at the guy who’d led them here. He was already heading away on foot.

By the time he looked ahead, the white car was already out of sight.

The guy on the passenger seat turned to face them. “Hola. My name is José, and I’ll be your guide for a while.”

“All right, thank you,” Arjun said. The rest of them stayed quiet.

“No problem. It’s my job.”

It was the end of their conversation. Arjun was nervous and exhausted, but he was glad that at least they didn’t have to walk anymore.

After about a half-hour drive, the car stopped behind the white car parked along the road.

“Hurry up guys, we go to another car now,” José said, stepping out of the vehicle.

The guys quickly moved to the white one. José went to the front passenger seat, and the rest of them squeezed in the back. The black car vanished so quickly that Arjun didn’t even know which way it went.

As the car started, José looked back, and said, “We did that so if anybody saw us get into the other car and reported it to the police, they would not find us in that car.”

“Very smart,” Mohan said.

“There are rubber boots in the bag,” José said. “Change your shoes and put them in the bag.”

Everyone began removing their shoes and stowing them in the bag. Following hours of walking in the heat, the pungent odor emanating from their socks killed the pleasant fragrance of the air freshener.

The boots were a little big for Arjun, but not too uncomfortable. He noticed José changed his shoes too.

“There’s a checkpoint on the road up ahead.” José looked back again. “We need to get out of the car and walk around it. Be ready for that.”

“Okay,” Arjun said. He didn’t look forward to more walking.

A few minutes later, the car pulled over. “All right guys, let’s go,” José said. Everybody got out quickly.

It was dark. José had only one flashlight with him. With barely enough light, they entered a coffee plantation.

“No more talk now, okay?” José said. “We don’t want anyone to hear us—they patrol the road around this area.”

“All right,” Mohan said.

José moved forward with the flashlight and the guys followed him. They walked in single file, with Arjun at the end. Once in a while, José would swing the flashlight to illuminate the path for the people behind him, but it barely reached Arjun’s path. After a few minutes, Arjun’s right foot landed in a deep puddle and he lost his balance. He grabbed onto a shrub to avoid falling, and prickly thorns pierced his palm. *Ouch!* He immediately let go. He peered at his bleeding palm and tried to remove some thorns by feel. His right boot was filled with muddy water. He was falling behind the others, so he rubbed some cool mud on his palm and moved forward, his boot sloshing and squeaking. He was afraid the squeaky sounds might draw attention, so he took off his boot and poured out the water, then quickly put it back on. He hurried to catch up with the others.

After trudging through the coffee plantation for about an hour, they came out onto a road. There was the same black car, waiting for them.

They got in.

“A hell of a walk, huh?” the driver said, without looking at them.

“Yes,” Arjun replied.

At around two a.m., hungry and exhausted, they finally reached San José, Costa Rica, where they stopped at a safe house. Arjun and his friends were covered with wet dirt and mud. Arjun took off the boots—his feet were soaked.

José brought them lemonade and a pack of biscuits on a small plate. That was their only dinner for the night in their lunch-less stomachs.

“Give me your clothes,” José said. “I’ll do laundry for you.”

They took off their clothes and dirty socks and handed them to José. After he left, they finished the lemonade and biscuits.

“Is this supposed to fill us up after all that walking? They could have at least provided us a proper meal!” Mohan said.

“Yeah, this is crazy,” Chitra said.

There were only two mattresses on the floor, for the four of them. They lay down. Arjun was exhausted, but his stomach was growling so he couldn’t sleep. He thought back to their comfortable stay in the hotel. Was that just to soften them up so they’d agree to this?

The next morning, José brought them their clothes back, clean and dry, and some coffee and cookies for breakfast. Around noon, he brought them rice and chicken with some sauce.

“We are staying here today,” he said. “We will continue our journey tomorrow evening around six.”

“Okay,” Arjun said, as they wolfed down the chicken and rice. It was the best chicken ever.

They stayed in the room, sleeping all day.

# Chapter 27

*Through Costa Rica to Nicaragua*

As it was getting dark, José told Arjun and his companions that it was about time to leave the house. They got ready in five minutes. The same driver who had driven them to the house drove them to the nearest bus station, about a half-hour ride. At the bus station, José got out of the car and went to a ticket counter.

When he came back, he handed Arjun and his friends the tickets.

“We are going on a bus,” he said. “Come with me, but do not sit next to me, all right?”

“Okay.”

Arjun and his friends followed him on to the bus. José sat somewhere in the middle. They picked two rows behind him.

At the last stop of the bus, José got out and they followed him without talking to each other, just like the rest of the passengers.

José gave them hand gesture to stop, then walked towards a ticket counter. Arjun and his friends had no idea where they were heading to. Deep inside his heart, Arjun was relieved—at least they had José with them this time.

José came back. He looked around, and when nobody was looking at them, passed the tickets to Arjun and pointed to a bus. José also handed him a bag. Arjun looked inside—it had soda, water, and some snacks. José got on the bus, and they followed.

It was a long journey through Costa Rica, and hard to sleep as they were constantly jolted by the bus bumping along dirt roads. At about five o’clock in the morning, the bus stopped and they got off. José made a call, then walked to the nearest parking lot. They followed him but kept some distance. José opened the door of a car, and gave them hand gesture to get in. They jumped in quickly.

Jose closed the door and stood next to the back window and said, “This is Marcos. You will be staying in one of his places. Adios, amigos.”

They all said, “Adios, gracias.”

As the car took off, Marcos glanced at them in the rearview mirror. “Hola.”

“Hola,” they said.

They left the town and turned off the highway to follow a narrow dirt road through another tropical jungle. Arjun looked out the window at the lush, beautiful greenery, wishing he could be here in happier circumstances. In similar jungles not too long ago, Arjun had been running carefree with his friends.

In the middle of the jungle, they came upon a lone house that was secured by barbed wire around the perimeter. The car stopped in front of the house. As soon as they got out of the car, a foul smell surrounded them, and the grounds were full of chickens pecking and squawking. The sights and smells brought back memories of a day on the congested streets of Kathmandu. Arjun was on a motorbike, and he unsuccessfully attempted to overtake a truck full of chickens that were being transported to a slaughterhouse.

He had hoped that they would arrive at a comfortable house and sleep in comfortable beds, since they were exhausted after such a long travel. But it didn’t look like it here. At least five dogs barked at them, coming close. The guys tensed. Marcos told them to be quiet, so they stopped.

Everybody cupped their hands to cover their noses and mouths as they went into the house. To their disappointment, the inside of the house smelled almost as bad. Arjun soon discovered that whoever said that our noses get quickly accustomed to surrounding smells was totally wrong.

There were seven other guys in the house already, also illegal aliens on a similar journey to America. They introduced themselves.

One of them said in English, “Just a few days ago, we were released from a jail in Costa Rica.” Those guys must have gone through a lot, but the thought of reaching America and starting a better life there kept them going. Arjun felt like his life was a scripted drama and he was in a never-ending rehearsal.

Now, the four of them joined the crowd, making the place even more congested. But Arjun and his friends were lucky to get their own room. Arjun was happy—the room was better than some of the places they had been so far on this trip. There were two mattresses on the floor. Each mattress could fit two of them, with no room to spare.

The house had two more bedrooms, plus a kitchen and a tiny living room. Marcos brought them some food. After eating a quick supper, they stretched out on the beds and fell asleep quickly.

The next day, Marcos brought them groceries and they cooked their own food. It was a blessing for Arjun. Since his travel from Ecuador, he had never gotten a chance to eat what he wanted. So, during the next days, Arjun spent most of his time cooking rice, vegetables, and chicken dishes with the South American spices that Marcos had provided. Even though he did not have Nepali or Indian spices such as turmeric and cumin to season the dishes, the food still tasted better than a lot of what they’d eaten so far during their journey.

Arjun found out from one of the guys that Marcos handled most of the cases regarding illegal immigrants. There were different agents who would take people to America from different countries, and Marcos had links with most of them. Many agents had their clients stay here along their journey. He provided people with a comfortable environment, and for agents, he charged less than other safe houses. Besides, he had good connections with the police, so he could get the travelers out of jail more quickly than others.

# Chapter 28

“You think this is a joke? Why don’t I have your money yet, Arjun? Your three buddies managed to come up with the cash already, so why didn’t you? This ain’t cool. I can’t wait any longer.”

Arjun’s heart sank and his skin went cold. He just held the phone, not knowing what to say to Tony.

“Why aren’t you talkin’? What’s the problem?”

“I’m sorry, Tony. My father is getting it set up, it’s just taking longer than he thought. Please give us some more time,” Arjun managed to reply.

“You guys’ve been in the house for a week. You knew the deal when you got there. I told you before that I needed thirty-five hundred dollars from each of you when you got here and another thirty-five hundred when you reach Houston. If you can’t even come up with your first payment, how can I expect to get the rest of the money from you? America is not for you! You can just go back to your country.”

“Please don’t say that. My family will find the money. We have paid everybody on time before. It’s just taking little longer this time. Please understand that.”

“I don’t need to understand anything. I just need the money. I’ve got everything set up, but because of you, my business is stuck. I’m sure the balance in your phone is enough to call your family again. Do it, and make sure I receive the money by tomorrow. If not, I’m gonna send your buddies on and put you on the street.”

Before Arjun could say anything, Tony hung up the phone.

Arjun took a long breath. Then he glanced at the clock on the wall— 9:45 am. It’s almost twelve hours’ time difference in Nepal. It’s 9:30 pm there, he thought. If I call Buba now, he will have time to get the money by tomorrow. He took out his phone and called Amit.

“Buba, how long is it going to take for you to send the money?” he said, in a weak voice.

“Son, I have been trying to borrow money from friends and families, but I don’t have enough yet. Tell Tony I will be able to wire him in a few days.”

“Everybody else got the money already,” Arjun said, disheartened. “The other group left yesterday. We are stuck here because of me.”

“Trust me, I understand… I have been trying to borrow money from my friends. A few of them are ready to lend me money at a high- interest rate of thirty-six percent. As soon as I receive it, I'll transfer it to him.”

Arjun felt guilty that his father had to resort to high-interest loans. That would cause hardship for him, paying them back. “Buba, I’m so sorry for what you are going through right now. I don’t want to add any more pressure, but Tony told me today that he will send the other three guys on and put me on the street if he doesn’t receive the money tomorrow. If he does that, I’ll get caught and thrown in jail, and there will be nobody to help me.”

There was silence on the phone for a few moments.

“Son, he is just scaring you—he won’t do that. He is a businessman. Just explain our situation to him and he will understand. He seems like a nice man.”

“We thought he was too, but he doesn’t sound nice anymore. Please try to send it soon.”

“I will.”

“Thank you, Buba. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.” He hung up the phone.

The next day, when Tony found out that the money was still not ready, he ordered Arjun to conference Amit in, then started ranting. “Okay, listen to me, dude, I waited long enough to get the payment from you. I can’t wait any longer. I’m sending the other three tomorrow. Arjun won’t be going.”

Amit said, “I’m really sorry that I could not send it on time. Please wait for a few more days.”

Arjun listened silently to their conversation.

“You’re not listening. I just told you I can’t wait anymore. You didn’t get the money, so it’s your problem, not mine. Why would you want to send your son to America if you didn’t have the freaking money?”

“Please try to understand, we were not told about all the extra charges before he left. We were not expecting all these added expenses, that’s all. I will be able to get you the money for sure—it’s just delayed by a few days.”

“I’m tired of hearing your excuses. Sell your farm or house or yourself, I don’t give a shit. I need my money soon. I’ve heard enough excuses from Arjun.”

“Okay, but—”

Tony cut in, yelling, “If I don’t get the money by the day after tomorrow, your freaking son is dead. I’ll cut his body into pieces and trash him on the street. Don’t think I won’t do it. Nobody here cares about the dead body of a freaking illegal immigrant.”

Arjun’s skin went cold with shock—his lips dried. *Is he really going to kill me?*

Amit begged, “Please don’t harm him. I’ll send you the money.”

“Do as you are told, otherwise you ain’t gonna see your son. And Arjun, don’t think I’m just saying this—I will do it, I’ll kill you, if I don’t get the money. You tell your dad I mean it.”

He hung up the phone.

“Buba, what am I going to do?” Arjun could hardly hold the phone in his shaking hand. “What if he really hurts me?” His eyes were filled with tears.

“I’m sorry, son, that I couldn’t find the money on time and you had to face this situation.” Amit sounded like he was sobbing. Arjun felt bad—he had never seen his father cry before. “I will do everything I can to send it to you soon. But be strong for now and stay with your friends all the time. Can you do that for me?”

“Okay, I will, Buba.”

He hung up the phone. *What now?*

Arjun’s mind started racing. He couldn’t sit still. He roamed around the little room aimlessly. Tony sounded serious. He might kill me, he thought. I can’t even run away—I don’t know anybody here who could help me.

“Are you okay, man?” Mohan said, concerned. Chitra and Dipesh followed him into the room.

He told them about the conversation with Tony. They looked worried.

“I’m sure he is just threatening to get money soon,” Dipesh said. “How can he harm you, just because your payment is delayed a little?”

Arjun wanted to believe it too, but he was convinced that Tony was capable of harming him.

The following day, a man came and told them he was there to take three of them to their next destination.

“What about him?” Mohan said, pointing at Arjun.

“He can’t leave. His payment is not here yet. Tony told me you guys knew that already.”

“He told us about it, but we didn’t think he would really do that,” Chitra replied. “We want to wait for Arjun and leave together.”

“It doesn’t work that way. All the journey ahead is planned already. I am just here to do my part. Don’t make it hard for me.”

“Please let us talk to Tony one more time,” Dipesh said. “Maybe we can convince him to wait a few more days.”

“Guys, you are not listening,” the man said, annoyed. “What did I just say? Nothing is going to change. I don’t understand why you are giving me a hard time. Now get ready and come out in ten minutes. Don’t be late.” He turned and left, slamming the door behind him.

The three guys looked at Arjun, sympathy in their eyes. They each hugged him tightly. None of them said anything. Arjun controlled himself and said, “Guys, get ready. Don’t make him come back again.”

Before walking out of the door, Chitra glanced at him. “We will miss you, bro.”

Arjun nodded, his eyes glistening with tears. “I’ll miss you guys, too.”

They started their journey, leaving Arjun alone in the house. He slumped into a chair and leaned over, holding his head. He’d never felt lonelier in his life. *What’s going to happen to me now?*

He started to realize that he no longer had any control over his life. He was all alone now. He needed to figure out how to survive on his own.

He was sure his father would do his best to send the money to Tony, but he feared what would happen if his father could not manage to get it. If Tony or someone else wanted to harm him, there was no one there to protect him. And could he even trust Tony if his father did send the money?

As the days passed, worry started eating him up. He couldn’t eat or sleep. Threatening calls from Tony every morning and again in the evening increased his anxiety. He did not cook much. His stomach did not desire for food when his mind was starving for peace and safety.

He started checking his luck every day using playing cards. He had learned the game from his grandfather when he was young. Along with many other card games, this one was used as entertainment and relaxation before television and radios were available in the villages. For this game, you place twelve cards face up, and the goal is to get rid of all your cards by adding two cards together to make eleven, for example, three and eight. If you get rid of all your cards, it’s considered a good omen. If there are cards left in your hand and no pairs that add up to eleven, you will have a bad luck. To distract himself from his worries, he played the cards again and again until it tired him out. He knew the chances of showing good luck in this game were low, but he kept on playing anyway.

He had a nap, then looked around the empty house. The place was a mess—nobody had come to clean it after the travelers left. Before his anxiety drove him crazy, he decided to distract himself by cleaning the house. It took him all day to clean the whole place, but it was totally worth it. It looked nicer than he’d ever seen it. While he was gathering all the bedsheets, towels, blankets, etc. to send out for laundry, a piece of paper fell out of one of the sheets. Arjun looked at it. It was not just a piece of paper—it was a twenty-dollar bill. He could definitely use that. He picked it up and put it in the inner sneaky pocket of his pants. *That must be a sign of good luck.*

# Chapter 29

On the tenth day of confinement in the house, Arjun's father called him early in the morning, informing him that the money had been sent directly to Tony. Arjun felt a mixture of relief and excitement, eager to resume his journey and reunite with his friends. The following morning, a stout middle-aged man paid him a visit.

“Hello, my name is Danny,” he said with a strong accent. “Get ready, I take you to another place now.”

“Okay,” Arjun said, and got ready in no time.

They set off walking from there. There was a road in the distance, but Danny avoided it, taking Arjun along a narrow trail in the shrubland. After following the trail for a while, there came to a point where they needed to travel along a road for a while. As they were walking on it, Arjun saw a guy in the distance, coming toward them.

“Quick! Hide somewhere before he see us,” Danny said.

Arjun hurried behind some big bushes. He remembered playing hide-and-seek with his youngest sister in his village. How fun it was to hide from her! How different from this situation! He would have fun disappearing into flowering bushes and other plants in their garden and jump out to scare his sister. He wished his sister would find him this time. He would tell her how much he loved her, how much he missed her.

Sounds of Danny talking to the guy brought him back to the present. He listened hard but couldn’t understand what they were talking about. After a few minutes, the stranger walked away. There was no mumbling on the road anymore. He could only hear the crackling sounds of insects.

He heard footsteps coming close to him.

“It’s okay, you can come out now. He is gone.”

Arjun came out of the bushes, and they continued walking along the road a short way, then turned off it and went down a hill to a narrow trail made by villagers.

At the bottom of a hill, they reached a river. Danny was wearing water-resistant boots.

“You don’t have boots on,” he said, “so get on my back—I’ll carry you.”

“Carry me?”

“Yes, the water will come up to your hips, so you’ll get wet. You have a long journey ahead of you, and it will be harder with wet clothes.”

“You sure you can carry me?”

“I have carried lots of people who go this way, and some of them were double your size,” Danny said proudly, in a dismissive tone.

Not wanting to insult him, Arjun agreed. Besides, he was right, it would be hard to walk in wet clothes, and Arjun had no idea how far he had to walk today. Danny bent forward a little and Arjun got on his back. He was amazed at the strength of the five-foot-tall guy. Arjun was almost a foot taller than him. He wondered if he had lost a lot of weight since he left home. He had not thought about his weight till now. Danny carried Arjun as if he was carrying a school backpack. Arjun knew that Danny did not have to do that. He could have just let Arjun continue his journey in wet clothes and shoes. He wished to return his generosity with a gift, but Arjun had nothing to give. They were almost on the other side of the river when something dropped from Arjun’s pocket. He looked down to see his phone sink into the water.Before he could do anything, the running water took it away. *Oh no!* His heart sank as he wondered how he would survive without his phone. Could things get any worse?

When they reached the other side, they walked up another hill along a hidden trail and came out on the highway.

“We just avoided the checkpoint on the road by taking this trail,” Danny said.

“Hmmm… Okay.”

They continued along another trail and finally stopped at a house that had a car in front of it. A guy was waiting in the car. They both got in and the driver took them to a bus station.

“*Amigo,* you can get off here,” the driver said. “That’s the bus.” He pointed at a bus in front of them.

“All right.” Arjun opened the door and climbed out. He was waiting for Danny to come out too.

“Oh shit,” the driver yelled, pointing at a police van in the distance. *“Rapido.”*

Before Arjun could get back in the car or say anything, the driver drove away.

He hurried to the bus and got on. He looked around at the other passengers, hoping to see someone gesturing to him, but nobody was even looking his way. He looked out the window, but the car was gone. His whole body tensed up. *What do I do now?* He didn’t even have a phone to call for help. He headed to the back of the bus, thinking, it’s better to get lost than to get arrested. As he found a seat near the back, the bus pulled away and started driving north along the highway.

A few minutes later, the ticket collector came close to him. He took out the twenty-dollar bill that he had found in the house. Thank god I found the money, he thought, or else the conductor would throw me out of the bus in the middle of nowhere, and no guides would ever find me*.* He still hoped that if he could get off the bus at the last stop, agents would find him. The conductor handed him a ticket but did not take his money. *“Ya esta pagado.”*

*Who could have paid for it?* Arjun asked, “*Quien pago por mi?*”

The conductor turned and walked away without replying. Arjun felt as if somebody had just saved him from drowning. The relief he felt from having his ticket paid for was inexpressible. He hoped it meant somebody was there on the bus to guide him on this part of his journey.

The bus stopped at the next town. People started getting off. Arjun looked around. Nobody came to talk to him. What if the conductor had just confused me for somebody else?Only a few people were still on the bus. Doubt surfaced in his mind again and his heart started beating fast. He stood up and walked toward the front, looking at each face, hoping to get some response. When he got to the front, he saw two men sitting in the front row seats. He looked down at them questioningly. One of them nodded at him and gestured to him to stay. He felt relieved. He sat on the seat behind them. After the guys made sure the bus was empty, one of them looked at Arjun and said, “We will take you to Honduras on another bus. On the way, always keep a little distance while following us and never talk to us unless we ask you something, okay?”

He nodded.

“Okay, let’s go.” The men got off the bus. Arjun followed them.

# Chapter 30

*From Nicaragua to Honduras*

Arjun followed the guides to another bus, keeping a distance. On the bus, the men sat at the front and he moved to a seat near the back. Knowing that he had people there to help him, his heart felt calm, and exhausted from the stress and lulled by the movement of the bus, he drifted off to sleep.

After about four hours or so, the bus stopped at the last stop. The men got off and he followed them to a cab like before, silently. In the cab, the two men were quiet. They didn’t even talk to each other much. After a short ride, the cab stopped in front of a house and they got out. The house looked nice from outside, better than the other houses around it. None of these details really mattered to him, but focusing on these types of things kept him from worrying about what would happen next.

One of the men told him to sit outside on a chair on the porch, and they went inside. After a few minutes, one of them came with a glass of soda and a small bowl of chips for him. When you are starving, anything tastes good. He felt as if he got the best chips ever and the soda was just made to quench his thirst. He was all refreshed again.

After he finished eating, one of the men took out a motorbike from the garage. “You ready?”

“Yes.”

Arjun sat on the motorbike behind him. The other man stayed at the house. The driver stayed off the roads, driving recklessly along a man-made trail in the bush.

“This trail is like the ones we have in our village in Nepal,” Arjun said, close to the man’s ear. “I used to ride a motorbike there not long ago. Only a few years before that, we didn’t have roads good enough for motorbikes.”

“Hmmm… really?”

“Yes.”

Arjun’s thoughts flashed back to when he was about sixteen. He was riding a motorbike with Prabhat on a trail like this one. All of a sudden, Prabhat slammed on the brakes. Arjun went flying like Superman, and his body skidded on the mud, making scratches all over him.

After the incident, his friends called him Superman, mockingly. He smiled. He was surprised that even an accident in his hometown brought a smile on his face. The man suddenly braked, and the bike nearly slipped. Arjun stepped his long feet on the ground and the bike was spared from falling over. *This doesn’t feel the same.*

“Sorry, I didn’t see the rock.”

“It’s okay.”

After riding for about an hour, the man stopped in front of a house that was surrounded by trees, isolated from the neighborhood.

“This area is on the border to Honduras,” the man said, taking the keys from the ignition. “We’re going to stay here tonight. Tomorrow, you will cross into Honduras.”

“Okay.”

They went in and the man guided him to a small room. “Let me know if you need anything. This room is for you. I’ll be back with food later.”

“Okay, thank you.”

When the guy came back with food, Arjun ate it ravenously, then, exhausted, dropped off to sleep.

The next morning, the second man who had stayed in the last house came with food and water for him. Arjun was surprised to see him. “You?”

“Yes, I came later last night,” the man said, handing him the food. “Here is some *gallo pinto* for you.”

“Gracias.”

“De nada.”

Arjun looked at the food. It was rice and red beans cooked with fried onions. He ate the meal—it was simple, but flavorful. He was grateful to have an actual meal before another long day began.

At about one pm, the man who had brought Arjun on the motorbike came back to guide him on the next leg of his journey. They walked along trails in the jungle until they reached a coffee plantation. They entered the coffee fields. The plants were close together, with young green coffee beans hanging in long, thin clusters. The farm was on a mild slope, and there was a narrow trail, barely visible, just wide enough for a single person to enter. After about forty minutes of walking single file through the coffee plantation, they reached the other side, where the other man who had stayed in the house was waiting for them in a car. The guide told Arjun they were now in Honduras.

They all got into the car.

“Can I ask you a question?” Arjun said, after the car pulled away.

“Yeah, what’s up?” the driver said, glancing at him in the rearview mirror.

“Are you guys from Nicaragua or Honduras?”

“We’re from Honduras. Why?”

“I was just wondering whether you need visas to travel back and forth.”

“No, we don’t need a visa to go back and forth,” the other man said. “There is this thing called a CA-4 agreement, which allows citizens from Central American countries like El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua to travel among these four countries without a visa.”

“Hmmm… that’s interesting,” Arjun said. “It’s like crossing the border between India and Nepal for us.”

Probably it was just in the nature of these guys to be quiet—after that conversation was over, there was silence in the car. Arjun compared them with himself—he wasn’t very talkative, either. At about six pm, they reached a small town and stopped their car in front of a house. A teenage guy came out and waved at them. He introduced himself as Kevin to Arjun and shook hands with all of them.

One of the men said, “All right, we need to get back. Good luck with the rest of the journey. He will take care of you. Adios.”

“Gracias. Adios.”

Kevin took him into the living room. There were three old men in the house. Nobody talked to him. Arjun noticed that when he was not looking at anybody, they looked at him, and when he looked at them, they pretended that they were busy talking to each other.

“Amigo, I bring you some food. You sit,” Kevin said, pointing at a couch.

“Okay.” Arjun sat on it.

Kevin went to the kitchen and brought him a plate piled with rice, beans, a piece of chorizo, and salad. Arjun noticed that Kevin had brought him pork, but he did not comment. He realized he needed to eat whatever was offered to him in order to survive. Arjun was grateful for the food and ate it quickly.

After that, Arjun lay down on the couch and rested. The old men had gone to bed. As he fell asleep, he compared himself with Kevin. He knew that when he was Kevin’s age, he was as confident and efficient as Kevin in doing stuff in the village—the villagers would request him to do chores for them when he was around. The only thing he was not confident in was his studies—he never got good grades. He barely managed to get passing marks and he was always getting into trouble with the teachers.

Arjun woke up with Kevin shaking his body. “Amigo, wake up.”

He looked outside the window—it was still dark. “What time is it now?”

“Four o’clock in the morning. If we start now, nobody see us.”

“Okay.”

It took them fifteen minutes to walk to the bus station. Kevin got two tickets to Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras. When the bus arrived, they got on and sat together. Arjun was surprised at that—nobody had done that in the entire journey. *Is he naïve or just too confident? Or does he think nobody will question him because he’s so young?* Whatever the reason, he liked Kevin and his company.

Kevin didn’t talk a lot, but whenever he did, he stammered a bit, self-conscious about his English. Arjun found his English amusing. Arjun tried some Spanish words, thinking he would definitely learn more Spanish if he stayed with Kevin longer.

Kevin reminded Arjun of his younger brother. He wanted to give Kevin a big hug and say, “I love you, brother,” but it would be weird. People often tend to misinterpret love. Kevin might pull back from him. He controlled his impulse.

Kevin had snacks and drinks in his backpack that he shared with Arjun. He was glad he wouldn’t be hungry in this part of his journey, at least.

At around nine o’clock in the morning, they reached Tegucigalpa. The city reminded him of Kathmandu. There were old houses attached to each other and all kinds of electrical wires hanging between poles. There were metal bars on doors and windows and barbed wires securing houses. It must have been the busiest time of the day—the street was packed with cars, buses, motorbikes, and taxis blaring their horns. Then they approached a more modern area with tall buildings and new houses under construction. He could see hills not too far from them.

Finally, the bus stopped, and they changed to a second bus to San Pedro Sula. This bus, like the other one, was old and rickety, and they bounced along on the potholed roads.

They reached San Pedro Sula at five o’ clock in the afternoon. Kevin took him to a nearby motel.

Just before they entered the motel, Kevin asked, “You want something to drink? The store *Mucho Grande* is just a minute walk. They have everything.”

Arjun was glad Kevin knew the area so well. “Do you think they have lychee juice?”

“Sure, they do. You want it?”

“Yes, Kevin. Thank you.”

“Wait here, I be right back.”

When he came back, he had a quart of milk in his hands.

“Here you go,” Kevin said, handing it to Arjun. He looked at the milk and started laughing.

“What’s up? Why you laugh?” Kevin said, a little upset.

Arjun explained the difference between *leche,* milk, and lychee juice. Kevin laughed and Arjun joined in.

They walked to the motel room. “I go my *casa*. You stay here, okay!”

“Sure.”

Before Kevin walked out of the room, Arjun said, “I have a personal question to ask, if you don’t mind.”

“No, ask anything.”

“Why is your name Kevin? It’s not a Hispanic name, is it?”

“Sure, it’s also Hispanic name,” replied Kevin with a grin on his face. “In our neighborhood, it’s just my *padre* who speak English. He tell me he met American named Kevin a long time ago. He think whites are smart, so he named me after him. *Bueno* for both countries.In future, me go America too. So, no need to change name later.”

Arjun nodded.

For two days, Arjun stayed alone in the motel, watching T.V. all day. Kevin would bring him food and talk to him for a while. He missed his travel companions and his family. He had a chance to think about everybody back home, not just his father and mother and brother and sisters and grandparents, but even a street dog that used to come to his house all the time. He thought his life now was worse than that of the street dog—at least the dog could walk freely, wherever it wanted to go. He had two things in common with the street dog: First, the dog only got food when somebody had extra food and gave it to him—he could not get food on his own. Right now in his life, Arjun could not get what he wanted by himself, either. Secondly, some stupid people might beat the dog when it walked on the streets. Arjun might also get arrested or beaten or even tortured if he walked freely on the streets. He did not feel good comparing himself with the street dog.

*I have a destiny, an important goal which, if I reach it, will transform my life. How can I be the same as the street dog?* He tried to calm his heart, even though he wasn’t sure if he would achieve his destiny. Anything could happen on the way—he was alone now and there was still a long way to go. He had checked the atlas when he was in Nicaragua.

# Chapter 31

One day, Kevin brought Arjun rice and fried chicken. Kevin stayed with him while he was eating. He had finished the rice and was eating the chicken when a question from Kevin astonished him. “What’s your name, Arjun?”

“You said it right. It’s Arjun.”

“No no…me know your name.” Kevin said, holding a fork in front of Arjun’s face, “What’s your name?”

“Oh! This one?” Arjun laughed. “It’s a fork.”

“Yes, fork. I forgot to bring fork, so went back to get it.”

“Hmmm…, okay.” Arjun smiled. “When you want to know the name of something, you say, ‘What is this called?’”

“Okay, gracias.” Kevin repeated it, then pointed to himself and said, “You speak no good English, amigo.”

The next day, Kevin came to the motel without food. “No *comida* for you today. I hear you behaving bad.”

*What? What did I do?*

“Me kidding, *amigo*. I take you my casa.” Kevin laughed at his own joke and Arjun laughed too.

Kevin checked him out of the motel. It was getting dark outside. They walked to Kevin’s house.

“When am I leaving this place to continue my journey to America?” asked Arjun.

“Me don’t know. Mi padre say Tony no give enough *dinero* to take you farther. He said it’s *mucho* pesos keep you in motel.” He rubbed his fingers together.

“What? My father paid Tony the full amount he asked for. What’s going on?

“No idea, buddy. *No se que pasa.* Tony call *mañana*. He want talk to you.”

“Okay.”

The house was about a thirty-five-minute walk from the motel. On the rest of the walk, Arjun was quiet. *What’s going on with Tony? Is he trying to cheat me?* Arjun’s anger, frustration, and fear grew with every step he took.

They reached Kevin’s home. It reminded Arjun of his house in the village—it was located in a hilly area, and even the design of the brick house and the tin roof were the same as his family home. This place was little smaller than his house, though. There was a short guy with a heavily built body in the house. Kevin introduced him as his dad.

“Carlos,” the man said, shaking his hand with Arjun.

“Arjun. Nice to meet you.”

“Same here buddy, same here.”

Arjun found it hard to believe that such a short man could have a son as tall as Kevin, but obviously he could not ask anything. He did not want to offend them. The mind is a strange thing—the less one talks, the more one starts to think. Arjun had been talking less since his journey started, and he was learning to keep some thoughts to himself.

Then Kevin introduced Arjun to his mother and two younger sisters, aged twelve and fourteen.

Kevin took him to his room, which had a single bed, a bedside table, and a mattress on the floor.

“It’s our room now. Me share it with you,” Kevin said, excitedly.

“That’s great.” Arjun smiled.

Carlos moved a small color TV from the living room to Kevin’s room.

“You don’t need to do that,” Arjun said, a little embarrassed with the hospitality.

“It’s okay. If we want to watch TV, we will come to your room.”

The words ‘your room’ touched Arjun’s heart. He felt like he was in his hometown with his relatives. It’s hard to find people treating you nice while you are down and out, but if anybody does, even a small favor means a lot. For the first time, he did not miss anybody back home.

“Thank you, Carlos, but please keep it in the living room. If I want to watch it, I’ll come there.”

“Don’t worry about it. You enjoy your stay here.”

They ate dinner together like a family. As they talked among themselves, Arjun listened hard to pick up Spanish words he knew and piece together what they were saying. Arjun felt safe in the house. He slept overnight on the mattress in Kevin’s room. The next day Tony called from Panama. Carlos handed him the phone.

“Arjun, everybody increased their rates now. So, I need $4000 more from you. The total charge for you is 11K now, not seven.”

Arjun’s heart sank. “Please don’t break your word, Tony. The deal was fixed.”

“Things ain’t the same now. Everybody increased their charge. For 7K I get nothing, and I can’t work for no money.”

“But my family cannot afford more.”

“If they can’t, you stay there. It’s not my problem, I can’t take you any farther.” His tone clearly indicated he had done this before, and everyone must have paid the extra when they were asked. They had no choice.

“You can’t do that.”

“Of course, I can— Everything costs more because now you’re traveling alone, not with a group. Did you think about that?”

Yes, Arjun thought about the expenses all the time, and he didn’t think it could be that much.

“Please, Tony, don’t do this.”

“Sorry, but I can’t work for free. If you want to talk to your family, tell Carlos, he will arrange that. It’s up to you whether you want to go to America or screw up your life in jail. I’ll call you in a few days.” Tony hung up the phone.

Arjun was in shock. He cursed Tony for his greed and cruelty. He didn’t eat all day. Hopeless, he stayed in his room, trying to decide whether he should go back to his country or go farther towards an unknown future. He had already spent too much of his family’s money to return home empty-handed, and he couldn’t ask them for more to continue on. Besides, Tony could just keep doing that again and again, taking advantage of his situation. He wanted to scream loud so that his rage could come out or bang his head on the wall so the pain would calm his anger. But he was not in his own house. He was a grown man and he needed to take control of himself and make the right decisions.

He went back and forth in his mind all day. Maybe I should just continue on my own, he thought. But how could I do that? I don’t know the route, I don’t speak the language well enough, and I don’t have any money for food or buses. Where would I sleep? How would I survive? Finally, he came to a difficult decision—he needed to go to America anyway. After spending so much money, it was too late to return home. Since he could not go on his own and it might be too late to change his agent, he needed to take the risk. A life is not a life without risk. He finally decided to talk to his father and ask for more money.

With a heavy heart, Arjun called his father and explained the situation to him. Arjun was sure Amit was going through a great deal of difficulty borrowing money from different people, and a lot of money had been spent on his behalf. At first Amit was shocked, but then he told Arjun not to worry—he would talk to Tony and try to resolve the situation. Arjun was not too hopeful—he knew Tony by now. If Tony were a kind man who would change his decision, he would not have asked for more money in the first place.

Later, Amit called back and told Arjun that Tony had not changed his mind, so he had told Tony he would find more money and send it. Arjun stayed at Kevin’s house while he waited for the money to go through and his journey to begin again.

Kevin’s sisters attended school, and when they were in the house, they spent most of their time in their room. Kevin told him he had finished high school and had no plans to go to college. He made more money helping his father by working as an agent for travelers like Arjun. When he wasn’t working, he either stayed at home or hung out with his friends outside the house. When Kevin was at home, he taught Arjun Spanish, and Arjun taught him English. Arjun also taught him some tricks with cards. Kevin, like a typical teenager, got astonished easily and was impressed by the card tricks. Sometimes Kevin brought his friends in the house, and they played cards for hours with Arjun. He picked up more Spanish from listening to them talk.

Kevin’s mother cooked food for them every day, and the family always shared whatever they ate with Arjun. When Kevin was out, Arjun mostly stay in the room sleeping or watching TV. Sometimes he came out to the living room and sat with the family, and occasionally, when it was dark, sat out on the porch. Kevin’s mother did not understand English and she tried to teach Arjun Spanish with gestures and sign language. He was learning more every day, which he knew would help him on the rest of his journey. She also did laundry for Arjun, the same way his mother did back home, in a big metal tub with her bare hands.

Carlos gave him clothes that other travelers like Arjun had left behind when they stayed in his house. Now he had enough clothes to change and he stayed clean in the house.

One evening, while Arjun and Kevin were watching television, Arjun said, “Did you get to meet three Nepali guys a few days before you saw me?”

“No, why?”

“They are my friends. We started out together. Because my money arrived late, I was left behind.”

“Maybe my padre saw them. I just help once in while.”

Arjun wondered where his friends were now. *I hope Tony didn’t trick them the way he did me.*

Finally, Amit was able to send Tony the latest $4,000 he had demanded. Arjun was ready for the rest of his journey. He wondered when Tony would set that up. If things happened as planned, life would be much easier. But after receiving the money, Tony ignored Arjun’s calls. When Arjun called him, he made various excuses. At first, he said he was sick, and then that he had an accident. Arjun waited a week, and when he called back, Tony’s cell phone was switched off. He tried to call all day and the next. At last, Arjun understood Tony’s scam. Whether Tony took him to America or not, he had already received $7,500, which was more than the initial amount he wanted. The only thing that mattered to Tony was money, and he had it now.

Arjun asked Carlos to try to find out about Tony through his friends, and when he did, one of his friends informed him that Tony hadn’t been sick or had an accident. Arjun’s trying to call Tony was just like throwing a rock to the moon—it never got to its destination.

Arjun stayed quiet, hating himself and his bad luck. For the first time, he hated Sundar, who had convinced him to start this journey. He had never wanted to go anywhere—he wanted to stay in his own country, even if he was rather poor. Staying in Kuwait for four months had taught him that the pleasure of staying in his own country and town was incomparable to anything. He wished he could turn back time and had never started this journey. After a long day of painful introspection, Arjun controlled his heart. A strong man shows courage and looks ahead, rather than staying dull and blaming the past.

He went to talk to Carlos, for he was also an agent. Carlos offered to take him to Houston, Texas for $5,500. Arjun had to pay $2,000 before they left the house, $1,500 when Arjun got to Mexico, and the rest of the money when he reached Houston. Arjun liked the deal. He blamed himself for not talking to Carlos before he paid Tony the $4,000.

He called his father and explained how Tony had tricked him, and how trustworthy Carlos was. Going back to Nepal was not an option anymore—the sooner Arjun got to America, the faster he could pay back the loan. The next day, Amit sent Carlos the money on his behalf. After Tony threatened to kill Arjun in Nicaragua, Amit had sold his biggest farm, and he had saved some of the money in the bank for dealing with whatever situation might arise. He also sent fifty dollars pocket money to Arjun.

Arjun started to feel more relaxed—the hope of being in America returned to his heart again.

# Chapter 32

*From Honduras to Guatemala, May 2010*

“When you get to America, send me message on Facebook, and maybe I see you there in a few years,” Kevin said as he hugged Arjun. It was around four a.m., and Arjun was finally departing from Kevin’s house, about three weeks after he’d arrived.

“For sure, Kevin. Thanks for all your help. I really hope I’ll see you again. I might be settled by then and be able to help you out a bit.”

Arjun walked towards Kevin’s mother. “*Gracias por toda tu ayuda.*” He had been practicing this to thank her for all her help.

“*De nada,*”she said, handing him a plastic bag.

“Gracias,” he said and peeked inside.

“They are *macheteadas,* our version ofdonuts,” Kevin said.

“Okay, thanks.” Arjun then turned towards Kevin’s sisters and smiled and waved.

Kevin followed him to the car and said, “Adios, mi amigo.” Carlos started the car and as they drove off, Arjun turned back—Kevin was still on the road staring at the vehicle.

“He is going to miss you,” Carlos said.

“I’ll miss you all too—it felt like home here.”

In about fifteen minutes, they reached the San Pedro Sula bus station.

“You will meet my cousin here,” Carlos said as he parked the car on the street.

“Okay.” They got out and headed toward the station.

Carlos handed him five hundred Honduran lempiras, about twenty US dollars. “If police catch you on the way to Guatemala, give this to them. They should let you go.”

Arjun put the money in his pocket. “Thank you.”

Carlos took out his phone and made a call. Then he walked towards one of the buses. Arjun followed him.

“We wait here,” Carlos said, standing next to a bus.

“Okay.”

Two men walked up, one of whom resembled Carlos. Carlos introduced him as his cousin, Juan. Arjun shook hands with him.

The second guy was in his early thirties. Juan pointed at the guy and said, “He is from Nepal too.”

“Wow, really?” Arjun had missed Mohan, Chitra, and Dipesh, and the guy being a Nepali, Arjun felt like one of his friends just came back.

“Pradip,” the guy said in Nepali, extending his hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“Arjun, nice to meet you too.”

Carlos told Arjun to follow Juan, then he turned and left without saying goodbye. Arjun was shocked. He was expecting a hug like Kevin did or at least a handshake. He was scared—and worried. What if Carlos cheated him too, like Tony did?

Juan and Pradip were already climbing onto the bus, so he stopped thinking and hurried after them. He sat beside Pradip. The bus pulled out of the station and headed along the highway. After about twenty minutes, he saw a long lineup of traffic. There were police vans. It looked like police were searching the vehicles. *What if they catch me here?* A heavy stone of fear hit him in his chest.

An officer approached their bus, then waved the driver on. *Thank God!*  He realized this was probably the spot Carlos was thinking of when he gave him the five hundred lempiras.

Arjun and Pradip both stayed quiet. Pradip looked as nervous as Arjun felt. After about twenty-five minutes, the bus stopped again and Juan got off. Arjun and Pradip followed him.

On the street, Arjun saw the same car Carlos was driving earlier. *What?* There was Carlos waiting for them in the car. Arjun smiled—he was happy to see Carlos again*.*

“It’s good that you guys didn’t get caught there,” Carlos said, as they climbed in the car. “We always cross that area in the dark, either in the early morning or in the evening, so the cops won’t see your face closely. Also, they focus more on private vehicles than public ones.”

“Thanks—it worked,” Arjun said.

After driving for about two hours along a dirt road, they passed an old building with a faded police station sign, which looked unoccupied.

“This used to be bad spot for us,” Carlos said, with grin on his face. “Those pigs would give us too much trouble. Thank God, they are gone now.”

“Why did they leave?” Pradip said.

“I don’t know. Maybe they thought one checkpoint was enough to catch all the illegals.”

On the way, Carlos and Juan chatted in Spanish about their families and other personal stuff, so Arjun didn’t pay attention to their conversation. Pradip leaned back and closed his eyes, and Arjun decided to do the same as he didn’t know how long the journey ahead was going to be.

Around one o’clock in the afternoon, Carlos stopped the car in front of a small restaurant.

“It’s our friend’s place. We are going to spend some time here, then you’ll continue your journey in the evening.”

“Okay,” Arjun said. By now, he knew that night was safer than daytime for illegal traveling.

They entered the restaurant. There were just a few people in it.“*Buenas tardes, amigos,*” the man behind the counter said, hugging Carlos and Juan. Carlos whispered something to the man. He looked at Arjun and Pradip. “Come with me, my friends.”

They followed him to a small room with one bed in it. “You rest here, okay?”

They nodded. The delicious scents of food cooking made Arjun’s stomach growl. He hoped they’d get some food soon.

The man closed the door and left. They lay down on the bed.

Later Carlos came into the room with two big plates of rice, beans, tortillas, grilled chicken, and salad. “Eat this and rest for a while. You will start in an hour or so.”

They took the heaping plates from Carlos. “Gracias.”

They eagerly ate the delicious food, then napped for about an hour until Carlos and Juan came into the room.

“Guys, you go with Juan now,” Carlos said. “I’m done here. Good luck on the rest of your trip.” He shook hands with them and left. Since the restaurant was busier now, they sneaked out the back door.

They traveled toward Guatemala by bus again, changing to different buses. Like the other agents they’d had, Juan stayed in the front, while Arjun and Pradip moved to the back, without talking to each other. They were scared others would hear them talk in a foreign language and might alert the authorities. Arjun and Pradip took turns napping, so they wouldn’t miss Juan getting off the bus. Arjun really wanted to catch a nap, but the buses were too bumpy and smelly. His eyes were tired and sleepy, but he couldn’t doze off.

Finally, the brakes screeched and the jolting stopped as the bus arrived at their current destination. They got up and followed Juan off the bus.

Arjun looked around and saw a sign that said El Naranjo, Guatemala. From what he remembered, El Naranjo was close to the border of Mexico. He was getting nearer to his destination, but the rest of the journey was still uncertain. Mexico was huge, and the scariest border to cross would be the one between Mexico and the U.S. He had heard a lot of frightening stories about people trying to get across that one. He really hoped crossing the remaining two borders would be as easy as the last one they’d crossed, but that was probably wishful thinking.

From the bus station, Juan grabbed a cab for them, and they stopped at a two-story building surrounded by a tall metal fence with a big gate in the front. Juan walked around to the back of the house, and Arjun and Pradip followed him. There was a tall gate there too, which was hardly visible as it blended with the green fence. It was locked from inside. He called somebody on the phone and a tall guy came to open the door for them. The guy laughed like the monster in the Hindu mythological series, and hugged Juan. He waved at Arjun and Pradip. “Hola, amigos.”

The house was surrounded by grounds on all four sides. As they entered the house, a short woman in her early forties introduced herself, saying it was her home. “*Soy la dueña de la casa.*”

“*Mucho gusto,*” Arjun said.

Juan smiled at him. “Nice! You know how to say, ‘Nice to meet you.’”

Arjun nodded and smiled.

The women took them to their room, which was clean and had two beds. Arjun was happy they could get a decent rest now. “There are two other men like you here,” she said in Spanish, knocking on the next door. Arjun understood “*dos hombres*”and “*tu*.” An Indian-looking guy opened the door.

She gestured them to talk to each other and turned away.

As she left, one guy said in Hindi, “Where are you from?”

“Nepal,” Pradip replied.

“We are from India,” said the guy. “My name is Laxman and this is Raj.”

Arjun and Pradip shook hands with them and introduced themselves.

“Are you going to the United States too?” Pradip asked.

“Yes, we are going to America,” Laxman said.

After a little while, Juan came into the room. “I need to go back now. Good luck on the rest of your journey.”

“Thank you.”

Arjun and Pradip went back to their room and took a nap. Later in the evening, somebody knocked on the door. Pradip opened it. It was Raj.

“Guys, I made rice and curry—come and have some food,” he said.

“Curry? Really? Thank you.” Pradip and Arjun went to the kitchen.

It was a real treat to eat curry cooked with the proper spices, after so many months. It was the best vegetable curry Arjun had tasted in a long time.

“Wow, this is so good. Where did you find the *masala* for this curry?”

“We brought it with us from India,” Raj said. “We knew the journey would be long, so we made sure we had enough curry *masala*.”

“What a great idea,” Arjun said.

“Did you guys come from Ecuador too?” Pradip asked.

“No, our port of entry was Brazil,” Laxman said. “I hear people come to these two countries because it’s easier to get a visa there.”

As they ate, they shared their stories about their travels. Arjun was relaxed in the house. The next day, the owner brought them groceries, so they cooked various types of curries and enjoyed their own style of foods. Since the fence was high, they were able to go out and sit in the garden most of the time, even during the day.

# Chapter 33

*From Guatemala to Mexico*

For six days, Arjun, Pradip, Laxman, and Raj found solace in the house. On the seventh day, after they ate lunch, the owner revealed that someone would soon arrive to help them continue their journey. The news hung in the air, marking the beginning of the next chapter in their expedition. Raj quickly made some bean curry and *roti* flatbread and packed them for the trip. They filled their water bottles and waited for the person to come.

Finally, a car arrived with just a driver in it. Laxman got into the front and rest of them climbed in the back. The driver nodded at them and they nodded back. “Hola.”

Afterward, the driver was quiet, so they also stayed silent in the car. They left the city and drove for about three hours along a smooth paved road surrounded by low green hills until they reached the bank of a river.

“*Rio Usumacinta,*”the driver said pointing at the river. “*Separa Guatemala y Mexico.*”

*What? It separates Guatemala and Mexico!* Arjun scanned around the place through the car window. “No checkpoint here?”

“*Aqui no,*” the driver said. He pointed to the right. “*Es de ese modo.*”

“Oh, it’s that way? Okay.”

“*Si*,” the driver said, and gestured for them to get out of the car.

The guys climbed out. There was a motorboat on the bank of the river, with a man standing beside it. He waved at them. Arjun glanced back at the driver. He nodded.

“Gracias,” Arjun said, and ran towards the boatman, signaling to his friends to come along. Pradip, Laxman and Raj followed him.

“Hola,” they said and got into the boat. The driver started the motor and they crossed the river. Within a few minutes, they were in Mexico. What a relief! They only needed to cross this country and one more border before they reached the United States. Arjun thought about how far he’d traveled since Ecuador and began to feel he might actually make it to America and have the opportunity to make a new life there.

The boatman pulled the boat onto the bank and indicated to them to follow him. Arjun couldn’t believe that they were crossing the border between two countries in broad daylight. Within a short walk, they arrived at four pickup trucks full of people crammed into the truck beds. A man was standing next to one of the trucks smoking a cigarette. He looked at them. “Get on the back.” While he kept enjoying his smoke, Arjun and his friends climbed up onto the truck bed, which already held fourteen people.

The boatman headed back across the river.

The other three trucks started up, one after another, and the guy tossed down his cigarette and jumped into the driver’s side of the truck that Arjun and his friends were on.

*The checkpoint might not be too far. What if—?* Arjun stopped himself. *Negative thoughts bring bad luck.*

His mind started floating along the air of thoughts. *Maybe the police at the checkpoint have been bribed to let us go.* The back of the truck was like a world of mute. Nobody was talking to each other.

The truck was moving slow, but since they were driving on a dusty road, the dust filled the air, making it hard to breathe for the travelers. The cloud of dusttook his memory back to his past, when he would go back to his village from Kathmandu. The path was similar, but that destination was different and secure. This dust didn’t feel the same. For him, the dust from his hometown was welcoming. How could this dust feel so different? he thought. Maybe it’s not just dust but love for our country that matters!

Suddenly, the truck tilted to one side and bumped along, then it stopped. The driver got out and said, “It has a flat tire. Everybody out.”

All the travelers got out of the vehicle. The trucks ahead stopped too. People started gathering to fix the flat tire. They fixed it within twenty minutes, and the journey continued. After driving about four hours, the truck drove off the road towards the top of a hill. There was no neighborhood around, just barren land. In a short while, the truck stopped again. The way forward was blocked by a long barbed-wire fence.

The agents talked to each other for a few minutes and then separated the travelers into four groups. Each group had about fourteen people in it, guided by two men. The groups crossed the barbed-wire fence at intervals of about ten to fifteen minutes. Arjun, Pradip, Laxman and Raj stayed with the fourth group. By the time they made it across the fence, the rest of the people were already out of the sight.

After walking for fifteen minutes or so, the agents gathered the group. One of them said, “I’m Rodrigo. Half of you come with me, and the others go with him.” He pointed at the other agent. Arjun, Pradip, and the two Indian friends along with three more people walked towards Rodrigo. He took them to a quiet road where a van was waiting. They climbed into the van without talking to each other. Rodrigo went into the front, next to the driver.

After driving for a few miles, the van stopped in a village. They got out and followed Rodrigo to a narrow trail through the woods.

*Probably another checkpoint*. Arjun was used to the routine now. They walked about thirty more minutes along the trail, then rejoined the same van, which was waiting for them on a road. They drove through a village with small huts made of bamboo and wood. The roofs were covered with either tin or straw. He didn’t see a single car in the village. There were horses at almost every home, and chickens roamed around in the front yards, pecking and clucking. At the edge of the village, they stopped in front of a quiet hut that was much bigger than others. They got out of the van.

“You can go clean yourselves,” Rodrigo said, pointing to a tap next to an outhouse without a roof. The travelers washed their hands and faces and wiped off their dusty clothes and muddy shoes while Rodrigo chatted with the couple in the house.

Arjun heard the woman tell Rodrigo that she had already cooked food for them. He was exhausted. He sat down next to Pradip on a mat inside the hut. The place was way bigger than Luis’s home in Uribia. The kitchen was set in one corner, with a fireplace and a wooden shelf with some dishes. Aromas of the food filled the room, making him even hungrier. One lone big bed was laid in the other corner. Two hammocks were hung almost in the middle. He also saw a half-woven hammock next to the bed.

Somebody from the group asked in Spanish if she made hammocks there. She said she had been making hammocks her entire life. Arjun listened to their conversation to see how much he could understand. To his surprise, he picked up a lot of words and figured out what they were talking about. The woman was saying that she made and sold hammocks and nets. In the summer, it got so hot and humid that it was cooler to sleep in a hammock. Also, they got a lot of mosquitoes and bugs, and the nets kept them away at night. Now Arjun understood why hammocks were so popular in South and Central America.

The woman set out food for Arjun and his travelling companions. It was beef, rice, and beans. Disappointed, Arjun picked out the beef and passed it to Pradip. He was still not used to eating his sacred animal.

After eating, they wondered where they would sleep that night. “Lie down wherever you can,” Rodrigo said. “We will start early in the morning.”

The man of the house brought a thin blanket for Rodrigo, and he lay down in one of the hammocks. The couple did not provide any blankets or mats for the travelers.

Thank God, it’s warm now. If it were winter, it would be harder*,* Arjun thought.

Pradip went outside to smoke, and Arjun followed him.

“Man, I was hoping we would get mattresses to sleep on. I’m so tired of this traveling,” Pradip said, lighting a cigarette.

“Yeah, me too,” Arjun said.

“Can’t wait till we get to America—this is taking too long already.” Pradip blew the smoke out. “But from what I hear, the most difficult part is still ahead.”

“I sure hope not. Try to stay positive. We’ve managed to get this far, so hopefully we’ll make it safely through the rest.”

“That’s true.” Pradip took another drag of the cigarette. “We have survived a lot so far. I don’t want to think about it anymore. I get nightmares sometimes, bro. It’s crazy.”

After talking for a few more minutes, Pradip took a final drag of his cigarette, dropped it on the ground, and crushed it with his foot. “Let’s go inside. Everybody’s wiped out, and who knows how much farther we need to go tomorrow. We need some rest.”

Arjun nodded. They went inside. The travelers were whispering to each other, but it looked like Rodrigo was already asleep. His whole body was completely covered with a blanket. Arjun and Pradip adjusted themselves next to Laxman.

Arjun woke up with somebody jolting his body. He opened his eyes—it was the owner of the house.

“Is everything okay?” Arjun said, rubbing his eyes. He looked around—the rest of them were staring at the owner anxiously, waiting for his reply.

“Si. Nothing wrong. We leave now,” the man said. “Need to leave while still dark.”

Everybody got ready fast. When they went out, the owner of the house was mounted on a horse. He pointed out across the bare land. “You go straight that way on foot. I’ll meet you guys on the way.”

Rodrigo nodded and they all started walking towards the bare land, while the horse rider turned towards the dirt road.

After they had walked for about fifteen minutes through a barren field, the horse rider appeared. He pointed out southeast. “Now go straight that way. I see you in forty minutes. There is a half-built house. You go inside.”

Again, the horse rider disappeared. They continued to walk on the bare land, and finally reached the house he had described. It was in the middle of nowhere. The walls were up and there were openings for windows and a doorway, but otherwise, the house was unfinished. It had no roof, and in place of glass on the windows, black garbage bags were stapled onto the frames.

The horse rider met them in front of the house. Without dismounting, he said, “Stay inside the house for now. Nobody come out. If you stay inside, you safe.”

“Okay,” they said. The rider turned his horse around and rode away.

“Why would anybody leave the house incomplete like this?” Arjun said, following Pradip into the house.

Pradip laughed. “Whatever the reason, looks like the agents have been using it since.”

It smelled bad. Arjun covered his nose with his hand. Garbage was tossed into the corners.

Some of them sat on wooden blocks, while others lay down on the floor, since they hadn’t had enough sleep the night before. Rodrigo sat in one corner, put headphones on and leaned on the wall. Arjun sat on the floor staring at the mosquito flying around him.

*It has plenty of options to pick from!* His stomach started rumbling. He put his backpack under his belly and lay down.

“Are you all right?” Raj said.

“Yeah, a little hungry. That’s all.”

He closed his eyes, trying to take a nap. After a long time, he was able to doze off.

Heavy footsteps woke him from a deep sleep. *Who’s that?* He looked around the room. Everybody else was still sleeping. Laxman was snoring like a lion in the corner.

# Chapter 34

Arjun pushed up from the floor to stand on his trembling legs, then crept to a window and peeked through a small hole in the garbage bag attached on the window frame. It was the horse rider, with shopping bags in both hands. Arjun smiled with relief and sat back down on the floor.

The horse rider walked in.

“Not sleeping?” he asked.

“I just woke up,” said Arjun. Pradip opened his eyes, listening to their conversation.

“I brought food,” said the man. “Give it to your friends, too.”

He set the bag on the floor in front of Arjun and turned to leave.

“One question,” said Arjun before the horse rider walked out the door.

The man looked back.

“When do we leave this place?”

“Don’t worry about it,” the man said, then walked away.

Arjun and Pradip looked at each other.

“Did he hear me right?” asked Arjun.

“What kind of answer is that, anyway?” Pradip shook his head.

Pradip took out a cigarette and lit it. That was the thing about Pradip—as soon as he woke up, he needed a smoke.

“How can you smoke as soon as you wake up?”

“It’s a smoker's thing, you wouldn’t understand,” Pradip said, putting the lighter back in his pocket. “That smells good.” He pointed at the plastic bags. “What is it today?”

Arjun opened the bags. “Pork and rice.” His stomach growled in hunger.

Arjun and Pradip could not wait any longer. They woke everybody up and all of them sat on the floor and wolfed down the food.

It was a long wait. They used a makeshift outhouse out back. The dusk started covering the daylight and still the horse rider had not returned. Three of the new travelers spent the time chatting in Spanish. The two Indian friends had gone back to napping after their stomachs were full, and they were still sleeping.

Arjun had been scraping the same spot on the dusty floor with a small rock for more than ten minutes, wondering what was next. *We have travelled so long, and the destination is still nowhere close.* His uncontrollable thoughts had been shaking his mind like a terrifying earthquake.

“Hey, you all right?” Pradip said, lightly shaking him.

Arjun was jolted back to reality.

“Ummm… I’m okay. Just been thinking a lot, I guess.”

“Don’t worry, we will be fine,”

“You think?” Arjun shook his head and took out his water bottle. “Water?”

Pradip shook his head. “No.”

Arjun drank the entire bottle as if he had been thirsty for days.

There was nothing to do but wait. The heat and dusk made the mosquitoes more aggressive than earlier. Their deep sleep did not win the war against mosquito bites, and Laxman and Raj started waking up, scratching their bodies.

Finally, the man on the horse showed up and they started their journey again. The horse rider took the lead, riding slowly in the dark. Rodrigo was next, and everybody followed him on foot along a rough trail.

Finally, they reached a road where a van was waiting. They got in the van, and the horse rider turned his horse away and left. After riding in the van for about an hour, they stopped, and Rodrigo told them to get out.

*There must be a checkpoint up ahead*.

The van continued along the road, while Rodrigo, using a flashlight, took the group across some barren land to avoid the checkpoint. After a few minutes, they came across two wires securing the field.

“Be careful! If you touch them, you can get electrocuted,” said Rodrigo.

They were used to crossing fences, but these were different. They all looked at the strange electric wires nervously. Rodrigo asked Pradip for his backpack. Pradip gave it to him. Rodrigo stepped his shoe on the bottom wire, then lifted the upper wire with the backpack. He asked Raj to do the same with his shoe and backpack. That created enough space for one person to cross between them. The rest of them entered through the gap very carefully, one at a time.

“Ouch!” screamed Arjun. His left leg had touched the wire.

“Shh…,” Rodrigo said. “I told you to be careful.”

After everyone was through, Arjun and one of the new guys held the wires from the inside so Rodrigo and Raj could enter. They slogged across the field for about forty-five minutes until they reached another fence, which they crossed the same way. The van was waiting for them on the road.

They all got in the van. At about three a.m., the van stopped in front of a small house near Campeche Beach so they could get cleaned up. Their clothes and shoes were dirty from the muddy path. If they continued without cleaning up, people could notice them, and that could bring trouble. They didn’t stay long in the house—they still had a long journey ahead of them.

On the beach, a motorboat was waiting for them. They got on the boat and rode for about half an hour on the Gulf of Mexico, around the Campeche Beach area. Afterwards, the boat dropped them at the shore. There was a van waiting for them on the road about two minutes away. They ran to the van and got in. The van took them to the bus station, where they boarded the bus to Veracruz, Mexico.

Everybody was exhausted and dozed on the bus. At about two in the afternoon, Arjun was taking a nap when somebody shook his arm. Wary, Arjun opened his eyes just a little. A middle-aged man in a police uniform asked Arjun for his identification card. Seeing the uniform jolted Arjun awake, worse than the electric shock from the fence. He had no ID. His pulse quickened and the hair on his arms stood on end. His chest felt tight and he couldn’t think. Fighting panic, he closed his eyes again.

The policeman jerked his arm this time. “I said ID!” he yelled.

Without opening his eyes, Arjun took the bus ticket from the front pocket of his shirt and passed it to the policeman, hoping the officer would think he was in a deep sleep and let him go.

“Wake up.” the man shook him harder. “I’m not a ticket collector.”

Arjun decided to surrender—he did not have much choice. He slowly stood up, rubbing his eyes, and looked at the officer.

“Get off the bus.”

Arjun nodded, picked up his backpack, and walked towards the door to get out, avoiding eye contact with his fellow travelers so they might escape getting arrested. Another officer continued searching the bus for other illegal immigrants like him. A police van and a few more officers waited outside.

*What if I am the only one to get arrested?* The thought brought a terrible fear in him. His trembling legs had a hard time keeping his body stable. He wanted to cry out his heart. *My life is over.* Slowly, he got out of the bus. One of the officers standing outside told him to stand close to the van. Then he searched Arjun’s body. The police did not take out anything from his pockets. He stayed close to Arjun. One after another, all of his traveling companions got out, except Rodrigo. There were two more guys Arjun had never seen before. Arjun heard them tell the officers they were from Costa Rica. All of the illegal immigrants were asked to stand close to each other and the police searched their bodies.

The officers handcuffed them in a chain—the left hand of one person was tied to the right hand of another. Arjun, Pradip, Laxman, and Raj were cuffed together in one line, and the rest of them in another. The cops ordered them to climb into the van. Arjun was scared and nervous for what he might be facing in the jail. But he felt a little better thinking he was not the only one—pain in a group hurts less than when you are alone.

The driver started the van.

Five Hispanic people, three from Arjun’s group and two new ones, were sitting on one side of the van. Two policemen sat close to them. After the vehicle had driven a few miles, the cops started talking to the Hispanic people in Spanish. Arjun understood that the officers were asking for money. After a short conversation, the guys reached in their pockets and handed the officers some money. One of the officers tapped on the wall of the van and the driver stopped it. The same man opened the door and let them go. Then he locked it again.

As they drove off, one of the officers said, “If you give us one hundred fifty dollars each, we let you go too.”

Arjun, Pradip, Laxman and Raj looked at each other. “Can I please talk to my friends for a second?” Pradip said.

“Okay,” the man replied.

“How much do you guys have? If we have enough, let’s get out of here. I have heard that terrible things happen in Mexican jails.”

Arjun swallowed, and checked his pockets. He only had about seventy dollars. The other guys took out their money from their pockets. The officers watched them while they counted it.

“We have roughly two hundred fifty dollars. We’ll give you all of it. Please let us go,” Pradip said.

“That’s not enough to let you go. We have too many people to split this money.”

“I am sorry, but that’s all we have. If we had more, we would give it to you.”

“You have any friends around here who can give us some?”

“No, we don’t.”

“Then you go to jail.”

“Please—”

The officer cut in. “No money, no release. You go to jail now.”

Everybody stayed quiet. *There is no escape.*

The van didn’t stop anywhere, and at around four o’clock in the afternoon, it reached the jail.

# 

# Chapter 35

*Veracruz Jail, Mexico, May 16, 2010*

Three officers unlocked a huge gate and took Arjun, Pradip, Laxman, and Raj inside. Guards walked around an open space, barely glancing their way, as if new inmates were arriving all the time. The guards opened a door, which led to a corridor. On the right, they opened another door and entered a small room with a window.

A staff member uncuffed them, then took their fingerprints and pictures. Arjun felt humiliated, like a criminal. Not for the first time, he wished he had never left Nepal.

The staff handed them some forms. “Print your name, then sign it at the bottom.”

“Can we please read it?” Pradip said.

“It’s just a record that you are here. Just do it.”

Pradip didn’t argue. The guys wrote their names and signed the papers.

“Now come with us,” the second officer said. The guys followed them along the corridor to another big door.

The space ahead had lockers on the right wall and some benches on the left. The officers patted them down.

“Listen up, guys,” the second officer said. “We provide you a locker to keep your stuff. You keep your bags there. Just take your toothbrush and leave everything else in the lockers. Also take off your shoes and belts.”

“Shoes and belts?” Laxman said.

“Yes, we don’t want you to use them as weapons.”

They stayed quiet and walked to the assigned lockers to store their stuff, then returned back barefoot towards the officers. The floor was cold and rough. The policemen checked their bodies one more time to make sure they weren’t concealing anything.

“Tell me your sizes and I bring you shoes,” the first officer said.

The guys told him, and the man went to get the shoes while the other two stayed with them. After a few minutes, he came back and handed them black slip-on shoes. They put them on.

The third officer gestured them to enter the big door at the end of the corridor. As he walked in, Arjun saw many thick iron gates with small windows on them.

The officer opened the first gate. *“Ve adentro*.*”*

They nodded and went inside. The metal door clanged shut behind them. Arjun felt a sudden chill run through his body. He was scared and nervous. Pradip had told him before that he should not show his fear to anybody inside the jail— inmates sense weakness and pounce on it.

Arjun took a deep breath and glanced around. A few guys were already inside. They stared at the new arrivals without any expression. *They must be other illegals.*

The long, narrow cell had about nine bunk beds along one side and a narrow space to walk on the other side. At the end were restrooms and showers. The windowless room was lit by bright lights. Arjun and Pradip picked two beds next to each other. Laxman and Raj reserved the ones above them.

Arjun had never been in a jail, and now being an inmate in a foreign land was a cold reality, not just a scary thought. But having his traveling companions with him gave him some courage to cope with the uncertainty of their situation.

After a long time, a guard opened the door, and shouted to come get their food. Arjun picked out the word *comida*. Arjun and his friends followed the other inmates out the door and along a narrow cement corridor to the dining room. Arjun looked around—guards were closely observing the prisoners and cameras were placed high in the corners. The guys stood in a long line to get to the serving station.

They each picked up a tray and were served plates with rice, beans, and beef. They managed to find four seats together at a long table. Arjun didn’t separate the beef this time but just started shoveling down the food. He didn’t know what kind of food he would be getting here, so now he needed to be ready to eat anything. The food smelled weird and was bland, without enough salt or spices. He felt bad that he was going against his religion by eating beef, but decided that to survive, he had to think of it as just another meat. He needed the protein.

After they ate, the guys followed others to stack their trays on the side. Arjun was surprised on how disciplined all the prisoners were. *Must be because of the tight security—and maybe harsh consequences.* They all went back to their cell and a guard locked the door.

At around ten, the lights were dimmed. The guys lay down on their bunks. Arjun could not sleep for a long time as he worried about his uncertain future. He finally dozed off late at night. Later, he woke up and the lights seemed super bright. *It must be* *morning already.* They all lined up for breakfast, then were herded back to their long cell, where they sat back down on their beds. There was nothing to do but await their fate. The anxiety and mental torture seemed worse than physical beatings. Maybe that’s how the police were going to kill their inner hearts. There were only bright tube lights, a big room, and boredom—no work, no play. They had no idea how long they would have to live without seeing daylight.

The days blurred together. Arjun lay on the bed, thinking about the hardships he’d endured since leaving Nepal and wondering what fate awaited them. How long would he be here in this prison? What had he done wrong in his life that he had to suffer this way? Why was he so unlucky? *Everybody wants to have a better life. Is it a sin that I want that too?* He hated everything about his life.

“Wake up, man. Why are you sleeping so much?” Laxman jolted his body.

“None of your freaking business,” Arjun snapped. “Leave me alone.”

“Wow.” Laxman shook his head and walked away.

Pradip was right there on his bed listening to their conversation. He got off and sat next to Arjun, gripping his arm. “Listen to me, bro, everything will be all right. Trust me, we will be fine. This is just temporary.”

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me.” Arjun glanced at Pradip. “I’m very scared. I want to get out of here.”

“We all do. I don’t want to stay like this either, but we don’t have much choice right now. Carlos or Juan should be here to bail us out soon.”

“What if they don’t?”

“If they don’t come, I’ll find a way to get us out of here. Don’t worry, I’m here for you. Don’t ever think you are alone, all right?

“All right, thank you.” Arjun felt a little better.

“You’re welcome. We need each other. We’re brothers now. Everything we do, we do together, okay?”

Arjun nodded.

When Pradip was not with him, Arjun saw him mingling with other groups. People seemed to like him. “Never be a loner in jail, that’s the biggest drawback,” Pradip said. “Always keep good relationships with people, so they don’t come after you.”

“Okay,” Arjun said, but unlike Pradip, he had a reserved personality.

“And the only good thing about this place is that we are all here with the same goal—getting to America. I’ve started getting contact info for different agents. You never know when we might need them.”

Two days later, five new guys about their age were led into the cell. Arjun stayed with Laxman and Raj while Pradip went to talk to the new inmates. Pradip glanced at Arjun and gestured to him to come. He walked towards them.

“Mi amigo*,* Arjun,” he said, and introduced him to the group.

He shook hands with them and sat next to Pradip. Pradip looked at him. “Bro, this guy was saying he has been here before, and he told us that there are better cells here. They can watch TV, use a cell phone, and drink and smoke whenever they want. They can even have girls whenever they like. Can you believe that shit?”

“Wow!” Arjun shook his head. *That can’t be true. He must be lying.*

“Such a corrupt place, bro. Money can buy anything here. We can’t even get to see sunlight, and other people are having a vacation here.”

Arjun sat there listening to their conversation. One guy said he was from Guatemala. He said in Spanish, “I am going to pay bail and get out of here soon.” Arjun understood *salir de prisión*. He wished Carlos would come soon to get them out too.

The same janitor came to clean the cell all the time. Whenever he got a chance, Pradip talked to him.

“Keep good relationships with guards and janitors,” Pradip said. “They are like your guardians, they have a lot to offer you.”

Arjun felt like he had learned so much about communication skills from Pradip, but he was not quite ready to apply them himself.

One day, as the janitor was cleaning the cell, Pradip went to whisper something to him. After a short conversation, he shook hands with the janitor. It felt like there was more than a handshake. *Did he just give him money? How did he get it? And what for?*

After the janitor left, Arjun asked, “What’s going on?”

“I had some business with the guy,” Pradip said smiling. “Didn’t I tell you, these guys can come in handy. You need to be on good terms with everybody.”

“What business did you have?”

“I asked him to buy a deck of cards and a book for you.”

“How did you get the money?”

“I hid two ten-dollar bills in my mouth when we put our stuff in the lockers.”

“What if the officers had caught you?”

“Sometimes, you need to take a risk, bro. That’s part of life.”

“What if the janitor tells the police officers about it?”

“You think too much, my friend. I know he won’t. Why do you think I waited this long just to ask for those things? I wanted to make sure he can be trusted. I’m sure he’ll do it.”

When the janitor came the next day, he brought Pradip cards and a Spanish novel. Now they could play card games. Besides cards, Arjun stuffed an old sock with a rag and made a ball, like he used to do in his village. All day, they played cards, tossed the ball, or just talked about their uncertain future. Arjun started reading the novel. He picked up more Spanish words just from the context of the story.

On the tenth day or so, Arjun and his friends were sitting on their beds, talking to each other when the door opened. *“Todos salen,”* the guard said.

“Did he just tell us to go outside?” Arjun said.

“Yes, let’s go.” Pradip jumped off the bed. The guys followed him to the door.

There were five policemen outside. One of them said, “We take you to the yard. From now on, you get a few hours of break outside, once a week. And if you need to get a change of clothes, you can go to your lockers. Do you understand?”

Arjun and his friends said, “Yes.”

The second officer repeated the same thing in Spanish. Then the policemen guided them outside to the grounds. As they walked out of the building, Arjun’s eyes hurt from the bright sunlight. He immediately closed them.

After a few seconds, he opened his eyes slowly to get accustomed to the daylight. Even though he was surrounded by tall walls with barbed wires on them, he felt a bit freer out here. The air smelled so much better than inside the cell.

The four guys walked around the grounds for a long time. It felt good to be able to move.

# Chapter 36

A sudden scream woke Arjun up. He peeked through the blanket towards the noise. Three officers were forcefully taking a guy out the door. *What are they going to do with him?* His blood ran cold. After they closed the door and left, Arjun whispered to Pradip. “Are you awake?”

“Yes, I am, and I saw that.”

“What’s going on?”

“I’ve heard they do this in Mexican jails,” Pradip said. “This really sucks, but it could happen to any of us. You never know who they’ll pick next.”

“What are they going to do to him?”

“They question prisoners and torture them to extract information about the agents.”

Arjun tried to go back to sleep, but his fear wouldn’t let him relax. After about two hours, he heard the door opening up. He peeked through his blanket. The three officers were dragging the guy back in. They brought him to his bed and threw him down onto it. Then they closed the door and left. The guy lay there groaning. A few other inmates went to check on him. Arjun and his friends stayed where they were, unsure of how they could help the guy.

The incidents started happening frequently, with cellmates being dragged off and coming back in pain. Arjun kept a low profile, hoping he would not be a victim. Anxiety kept him awake at night.

One night, Arjun had dozed off on his bed when something hit his head hard. When he came to his senses, he found himself lying on his back, tied to a table. Two policemen were standing at the foot of the table. One of them had a thin stick in his hand. The third officer standing next to him grabbed his hair. “Who is your agent and what’s his number?”

Arjun was still in shock—he didn’t say anything.

The officer with the stick in his hand whipped the soles of Arjun’s feet. “Give us the name and contact number of your agent or you won’t leave this place alive.”

The pain was excruciating. “Please stop,” he said. “There is a guy from Panama. He goes by the name Tony.” Arjun didn’t want to give away Carlos’s information.

“That’s no good—we need the name and number of somebody in Mexico who helped you cross the border.” The officer whacked him again with the stick on the soles of his feet. The pain jolted through Arjun’s body. It felt a lot worse than his schoolteachers’ punishment back home.

“Name and number.”

“I don’t know. They don’t give us their information.”

“We can do this all night—it will be fun for us.” Another sharp smack with the stick.

Arjun’s feet jerked and he flinched. “I don’t know.”

The beating continued. He had no idea how much more of this torture his body could take. The rest of the night was a nightmare as he went in and out of consciousness. He could only register bits and pieces of it. Slaps…suffocating water on his face…his hair being pulled…

He woke up on his bed, his whole body in pain. He needed to go to the restroom. He stood up, but the soles of his feet screamed, and his legs were too weak to bear his weight—he collapsed on the floor. Pradip jumped out of bed and helped him get to the restroom.

Time passed, and every day brought more illegal travelers to their cell, until there were not enough beds for all the prisoners. The guards dragged in more mattresses and laid them on the space they had used for playing ball and walking. It was hard to walk to the toilets or sinks without stepping on inmates.

There was a new group of six rough-looking guys in the jail. Pradip had been hanging out with them a lot lately. They were always loud and didn’t seem to be worried about the police or the guards. One day, Pradip introduced Arjun to the group.

“Hola, amigos,”Arjun said, extending his hand for a handshake.

“We speak English, my friend. You can talk in English. We are not stupid like these people,” one of the guys said, pointing at the other inmates around them.

Arjun didn’t know how to react. He glanced at the people he pointed at, but they just looked away.

“My name is Julio, and these are my guys,” he said, pointing at his friends.

“Nice to meet you guys.”

The guys gave lukewarm responses like nods and shrugs and the odd “Sure” or “Yeah.”

“Pradip tells me you are like his brother. If you need anything, let me know.”

“Okay, thank you.”

Arjun wanted to get away from them, but he didn’t want to upset Julio. He stayed there beside Pradip, listening to their conversation.

After Pradip and Arjun came back to their beds, Arjun said, “Why do you hang out with those guys? They are troublemakers. I don’t want you to get in trouble because of those guys.”

“Don’t worry, bro, I’ll stay out of trouble,” Pradip said. “We need to be on good terms with people like them. You never know when you might need them. They are friends with officers out there.”

Arjun shook his head. “I hope you know what you are doing, my friend. I don’t feel good about it.”

Arguments over beds, toilets, and showers started to be common now. Two new inmates named Amado and Hector arrived in the cell at the same time. Amado luckily found an empty bed, but Hector had to sleep on a thin mattress. The situation on the floor started getting worse with the growing number of inmates. One day when Amado came back from the restroom, Hector was on his bed.

“We came at the same time, so we need to take turns using the bed,” Hector said.

“I got the bed first, so it’s mine.,” Amado replied. “If you were me, you’d do the same.”

“Yeah? Try and take it,” Hector said.

“I chop your body and wrap it in a burrito, bitch,” Amado said.

“Nah nah, I chop your body and grill it like a steak.”

The inmates hardly found any source of entertainment in there and watching a good fight would be their biggest amusement. Arjun didn’t want any part of this, but he couldn’t avoid watching.

“Why the hell do you even want go to America?” Hector said.

“I lived in America for fifteen years, you telling me why I wanna go? Why the hell you wanna go?”

“You look fifteen—how on earth did you live there for that long?”

The other prisoners were egging them on to fight. One of the inmates shouted, “Are you guys going to start or just talk like little girls?

Hector punched Amado’s face, but unfortunately the punch fell on Amado’s forehead. He fell down on the ground, unconscious. The noise of inmates yelling brought a group of officers, and both of them were moved out of there.

Too bad those guys weren’t thinking and they let themselves lose control. Now they’d pay for it. He remembered the night he was tortured for doing nothing wrong, and he felt sorry for them for what they might get for fighting.

Almost a month passed in the jail. The guy from Guatemala, who had said he would get bailed out, had gone about ten days ago, then got arrested and brought back in after an unsuccessful attempt to cross Mexico the second time.

“Never give up!” he said with a twinkle in his eyes, leaving no doubt that he would try again.

The other guys in the jail had told Arjun and his friends that there would be an automatic release of prisoners without bond, but day after day went by without that happening. So, one day, Pradip gathered his three friends. He said, “It doesn’t seem like our agents will release us anytime soon—give me all the money you have so I can get out of here. Once I’m out, I’ll bail you guys out.”

“How can we get our money and give it to you?” Raj said.

“The next time they take us out of the cell, we’ll ask if we can access our lockers for a change of clothes. You take out your money and hand it to me and I’ll put it in my locker. Later, I’ll talk to them about bailing myself out of the jail.”

Everybody agreed to his idea. What choice did they have? Arjun trusted his friend. Laxman and Raj weren’t so confident in him, but they had to take the risk—risk was part of their lives now.

Everything went as planned and Pradip bailed himself out of the jail.

Two days passed, but Pradip did not return. Laxman and Raj started getting worried—Arjun could see that on their faces.

“He’s probably busy getting together the money to bail us out,” Arjun said.

“I guess,” Raj said.

The following day, they waited all day for Pradip, but he still didn’t show up. Arjun asked one of the Hispanic guys, “What’s the deal after you get released from here?”

“You get a week to get the hell out of this country,” the guy said. *Oh no.* *What if he never shows up?* Arjun really hoped this wouldn’t be another betrayal by someone he trusted.

Deep in thought, Arjun walked towards his bed from the restroom. His feet stopped—Julio and his friends were blocking his way.

“You think you too pretty to talk to us?” Julio said.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me right. I treated Pradip and you like my friends. He was all right, but you thought you were above us. After he left, you didn’t even come and say hi to us.”

“I’m sorry, I was too—”

Julio cut him off. “Too late now.” He looked at his friends and nodded. The guys grabbed Arjun’s arms and dragged him to the shower room.

“Please—let me go!” Arjun screamed in fear.

Julio took out his knife and touched the blade to Arjun’s neck. “Shut the hell up. If I can get a knife in here, I can chop off your balls and shove them in your mouth. Nobody will say anything to me.”

Arjun peered at Laxman and Raj with pleading eyes, but they stayed behind, nervous.

In the shower room, they tied his hands behind his back with a cloth and stuffed a sock in his mouth, then tied another cloth around it.

Shocked and terrified, Arjun jerked wildly, trying to free himself, but he was powerless. He tried to scream, but with his mouth gagged, there was no sound. He started trembling uncontrollably.

The guys shoved him against the wall, face-first, then Julio grabbed his pants and yanked them down.

# Chapter 37

“Shhh… I think I hear somebody.” Julio turned towards his guys. One of them peeked towards the door.

“Oh shit. The pigs are coming,” he said. They quickly untied Arjun.

“If you tell them anything, we’ll chop your balls off next time,” Julio said, and walked out of the room.

Arjun pulled his pants up, yanked the gag from his mouth, and gasped for air. Then he slowly headed towards his bed, his legs trembling. He was terrified. He was saved for today, but who would protect him the next time?

There were three policemen waiting for him. One of them said, “Grab your stuff. You’re getting out of here.”

Pradip must have come through. It was the best thing he had ever heard in his life. He quickly followed them out.

“Sorry guys, I couldn’t manage to get the money earlier, So I didn’t want to come here to raise your hopes. Our agents didn’t answer their phones and it took time to receive the money from Nepal.”

Arjun hugged him. “You came at the perfect time. Thanks a lot.” He was still shaking from his narrow escape but decided not to talk about the incident for now. Laxman and Raj looked relieved. They didn’t bring up what had happened either.

Arjun was holding the paper the police had given him during his release, which allowed him to stay in Mexico for ten days. He folded it and put it deep into his pocket. He was free again, and he now realized how precious freedom was. He felt like everything was beautiful outside and nobody was going to harm him. He didn’t have to live in fear, at least for ten days. The air smelled better, and he was hungry. He wanted to eat some decent food now.

“Let’s go to a restaurant,” Pradip said.

“That’s exactly what I was thinking,” Arjun said. They were all excited to eat.

Pradip took them to a restaurant. They ordered burritos, tacos, and quesadillas.

While waiting for the food, Pradip said, “If our agents had made an effort, we would have been across the border by now.” He sounded irritated. “They didn’t even try to get us out of jail. The bond was only $200 each. If they don’t give a shit about us in our hard times, why would we bother paying them to take us to the US? We’ve still got a hard path ahead of us.” He shook his head. “We don’t have to stick with them—why don’t we find somebody reliable, who might take us across the border for a cheaper price?”

“We already paid our agent a hundred percent in advance in India,” Laxman said. “They won’t return our money. We don’t have an option.”

Arjun had lost his faith in Carlos for not bailing him out of jail, so he agreed with Pradip.

“But who would take us to America?” Arjun said.

“Don’t worry about it,” Pradip said. “When we were in the jail, I collected a bunch of phone numbers of people who would charge us less to take us there.”

“But how do we know we can trust them?”

“We’ll talk to several people and go with the one who seems to be the best. That’s all we can do at this point.”

A waiter brought their food. The burritos were cut in half and the fried chicken inside looked and smelled delicious. The melted cheese oozing out of the quesadilla made it look even more mouthwatering. The tacos came with complementary nachos and salsa on the side. The delightful sight overwhelmed Arjun’s heart. He took a taco, poured some green sauce on it, and took a big bite. The spicy food melted in his mouth. His friends were obviously enjoying their meal as well. After they ate, they fearlessly walked around the city before heading to a cheap motel, where they all shared a room.

The next day the Indian friends left with their agent. Pradip and Arjun stayed one more night there. They decided to try to get to Mexico City on their own and search for a suitable agent after reaching the city.

They rode on a bus and it took them about seven hours to get to the city. Arjun had thought Cartagena, Colombia, was colorful, but it was nothing compared to the what he saw in Mexico City. The houses were painted all sorts of colors—blue, green, yellow, red, and more. Not just the houses, the souvenir items for sale such as clothing, shoes, pottery, woven mats, shawls, and keychains were vibrant with colors. Arjun was surprised to see pink taxis driving around. The streets were crowded and everybody seemed to be busy. After roaming around for about an hour and a half, they stopped at a street cart, grabbed a couple of giant quesadillas, and headed to a motel.

Later in the evening, Pradip started making calls to various agents to help them with the rest of their journey to America. Arjun listened closely to the conversation.

“This guy is going to be the best for us,” Pradip said when he hung up from the last phone call. “His name is Pedro. He said he will charge us $2500 each to take us to Houston, Texas. As an advance, we need to pay him $1,000 each before we cross the border.”

Arjun hated the idea of asking his father for another $2500, but this was better deal than what Carlos had offered him. “Where do we meet this guy?”

“He is in Reynosa, a city in Mexico on the US border. We need to leave here early in the morning so we can reach there by evening.”

“Okay.”

“Also, he said not to walk around that city. Since it’s right on the border, it’s not safe there. I will let him know the motel we will be staying at, so he can come and pick us there.”

“All right.”

The next morning, they took a bus to Reynosa. Arjun and Pradip reached the city late in the evening. In sharp contrast to the bustling Mexico City, Reynosa was quiet and rundown. Many of the houses were old and crumbling, and some of them looked like slums with no electricity. They didn’t feel safe to walk around, so they checked in at a motel close to the bus station. Before they went to bed, Pradip made a call to Pedro to let him know they had arrived in the city.

In the morning, Pedro came to pick them up in his car. He was in his late forties, and bald in the front while the rest of his hair was tied in a ponytail. He took them to his house. Pedro showed them to a big room with six mattresses on the floor and said, “Make yourselves comfortable here. There is a restroom in there, so you don’t have to go outside. I have things to manage, so we won’t leave for a few days.”

They said, “Okay.”

“And I need to get your money by tomorrow. Once things are ready, we’ll have to leave quickly,” Pedro said. “For now, you stay in the room. If you need anything, knock on the door. Here is my information to transfer me money.” He handed Pradip a piece of paper.

“All right.”

They heard door locking from the outside. Pradip and Arjun looked at each other, eyes wide.

“Did he just lock us in?” Arjun said.

“Looks like it.” Pradip pulled the handle. “Yes, he did.”

Arjun was shocked. “Why would he do that? We have a legal pass to stay in Mexico.”

“Maybe he has a lot of things to get done.”

“Like what?” Arjun said.

“I don’t know, bro, maybe gathering a crew...? Till then, maybe he didn’t want to lose us by letting us go outside the house, you know!”

Arjun ran his hand through his hair. He was perspiring. “Was this a good idea? We might have ended up in the wrong hands.”

“Look, bro, our journey was never easy—we have gone through worse things. Now we are in a safe house. Why are you thinking like this? I don’t see any evil signs. If we feel we are being tricked, we will figure out something.” Pradip flopped down on one of the mattresses.

Arjun looked at the other mattresses. They didn’t look clean. He wondered if they had bedbugs. He chose one without stains and sat down on it. They waited for somebody to open the door. After a few hours, they heard the door being unlocked. Immediately, they both had their eyes fixed at the door. It opened and a huge, burly man entered the room with two big plates of roasted chicken with rice, salad, and sauce.

He handed them the food and walked out, closing the door behind him. They didn’t hear the door being locked this time, which was a relief. They were hungry so they dug into the food. After they finished eating, Arjun picked up the plates and carried them to the door. When he opened it, he almost bumped into the huge guy, who was guarding it.

“Where should we put these?”

“No worries, I got it,” the man said.

A little later, Arjun and Pradip called their families to ask them to wire $1,000 each to Pedro, so they could start the journey. After talking to each other for a long time, they fell asleep.

# Chapter 38

Arjun woke up with somebody unlocking the door from outside. It must be ten in the morning by now. Arjun noticed Pradip was already awake. They stared at the door. To their surprise, the same two Indian friends, Laxman and Raj, who had left them a few days back, were standing at the door. Behind them were Pedro and the guard.

Arjun had never thought they would meet again, especially within such a short time. *I hope I get to see Mohan, Dipesh, and Chitra too!*

Meeting their friends lessened their fear of losing their money. Now they were more confident that Pedro would help them cross the border into the United States. They all stayed four more days in the same room with less worry, even though Pedro locked the door and kept it guarded.

One evening, the guard opened the door. “Come with me. Pedro want to see you.”

The four guys followed him to the living room. Pedro was standing there, holding pieces of paper. “All right, guys, you going to start tonight.”

They said, “Okay.”

He passed a small piece of paper to each of them. Arjun glanced at the paper—it had a phone number. “This is my number. Memorize this phone number, then tear the paper up and throw it away. If you get lost or if you get separated from your group, call me.”

They nodded.

“The area we travel through will be searched regularly by helicopters. If you see one, lay down on the ground and cover your head with your hands. Find a ditch or some brush or woods if you can. No matter how close the helicopter sounds, don’t move. If you stay still, it will be harder for them to spot you and you’ll be safer. Is it understood?”

“Yes,” they said.

“There is a place—a small bridge, where people get caught the most. If your guide tells you to run, just run. Don’t think twice. All right?”

Hearing all this made Arjun nervous, but he tried to stay calm. “All right.”

“Now bring your backpacks.”

The guys brought their backpacks to the table where Pedro had food spread out.

Pedro picked up some water bottles, packets of peanuts, power bars, cookies, and a few other snacks from a table and handed them to the guys. “Good luck with your journey.”

They all said, “Thanks.”

A car was waiting for them outside. Pedro stayed at the house while the guard got in the front of the car and the four guys climbed in the back. As the car started, Arjun saw a cat crossing the road in front of them. In his culture, a cat crossing a road while starting a journey indicates obstacles ahead. Fear of encountering more trouble during his travels made his heart beat faster. Before he could think any further, he tried to soothe his heart. *There is no place for superstition right now.* But he was not ready to accept a new-fangled thought. He pinched his left arm to cancel this bad luck. That was his way of comforting himself when he saw a bad omen.

The car drove along a highway for about fifteen minutes, then turned onto a quiet road. After driving on it for a few minutes, the driver slowed down and turned off the headlights. They were in a remote area, but luckily the sky was clear and there was a moon to provide some light. The guard, sitting next to the driver, poked his head out the window and watched the road in front of them through binoculars.

“We are looking for police or cartel,” the guard said, without looking back.

“Okay,” Pradip said.

The car stopped at the bank of a river. There was a group of people there—two of them walked towards them.

“Who are these people?” Raj said.

“I’m not sure,” the guard replied, “but we will find out soon.”

*What if they are cartels?* Arjun would rather encounter police than cartels, as he had heard many stories of people who were shot by them because of miscommunication between the agents. *Living in a cage is better than dying.*

The guys reached their car and the driver rolled down the window. “Hola. Como estas?”

One of the guys looked at Arjun and his friends and then to the driver. “Why you here? I need everybody’s ID.”

The world inside the car stopped. *We’re done!*

“Don’t scare these poor guys,” the guard said, laughing.

The guy pulled his head inside the car, and said, “No worry, homies, we are your buddies.” The guy had a tattoo on his neck which looked like a plant coming out of his body. All of a sudden, there was a sunrise in Arjun’s heart.

Everybody laughed the laughter of relief.

The driver parked the car and opened the door. “*Vamonos,*” he said.

The guys climbed out and followed the driver and the guard. The guard pointed to the wide river, and said, “That’s the Rio Grande, and the other side of the river is American land.”

Arjun smiled. The infinite distance of his destination was now reduced to the width of the river in front of him.

The other group had twelve people, of which seven guys looked like illegal travelers. One of the agents was carrying a backpack. He unzipped it and took out some small packets. Each packet was just large enough to fit in a pocket nicely. He handed one packet to each traveler. “You need to give it to the guy in Houston. He’ll ask for it. Don’t lose it. It’s very important. If you lose it, you pay for it.”

Arjun felt the packet softly. He felt like it was salt or sugar or something. Arjun glanced at Pradip. His face was red like an apple. Just seeing his face, Arjun knew something was not right.

“What is it?” Arjun asked the agent.

“Cocaine,” Pradip shouted before the agent could say anything. “We didn’t pay for this. I don’t give a shit about other people, but my friend and I refuse to carry this.” Pradip’s words ended with his eyes landing on Arjun.

“There’s no way we’re going to carry drugs with us. What if we get busted?” Arjun added.

“You guys worry for no reason. Nothing going to happen to you guys. That’s why—"

Pradip cut in. “Look man, we are not going to carry this shit.”

“If you don’t carry this, you are not going there,” the man said, pointing his finger to the American land.

“That’s fine. Give us our money back, we’ll find somebody else to take us.” Pradip looked straight to his eyes.

“Too bad—no refunds,” the man said. “This is how it works—if you take this, you go. If not, you stay. We’re not a big store or business where if you don’t like what you paid for, you get your money back. That’s not how it works with us.”

“I want to talk to Pedro,” Pradip said.

“Go ahead. Do it. He’s the one who plans all this.”

“Fine, we’ll carry it,” Pradip said. “But once we reach the other side, we’ll trash it and tell your guy in Houston that we lost it on the way.”

“What did you just say?” the man took out a handgun from his pocket and pointed it at Pradip. “I’ll trash you right here, and nobody will give shit, you son of a bitch.”

# Chapter 39

Arjun was freaking out, but he knew he had to do something. He stepped between the man and Pradip. “Calm down, my friend. We are not here to fight. We paid money to Pedro because we heard good things about him. We didn’t want this. We just got out of jail recently, and we know how bad that sucks. Carrying drugs would be a disaster for us. If we get busted, we’ll spend the rest of our lives in jail. Maybe you too, because if we get caught, we might end up telling them everything we know.”

The man shifted his gun to Arjun. “You are trying to ruin my business, you piece of shit. I’ll kill you both.”

Arjun’s skin went cold but he knew he couldn’t back down. “Do you think killing us will solve this problem? You think any of these people won’t trade your name for theirs, if they have to pick one?” Arjun said. “At this point, I’m not even scared of dying. If we’re caught, our fate could be worse than death.”

The other man stepped in. “This is not the time or place for this.” He took the man’s gun and said, “Come with me, I need to talk to you.” Then he glanced at Arjun and Pradip. “You too.”

They followed him.

When they were away from the group, he turned around. “Look, you guys, you can’t start arguing with us like this in front of the others. If you have a problem, you talk to us in private. He’s right.” He pointed to his friend. “If we want, we can end your goddamn life right here. If we take your life here, nobody gives a shit. But we aren’t going to do that. Just don’t create drama ever again. If anybody asks, you say you have the package, okay?”

“Okay,” Pradip said. Arjun nodded.

They headed back to the group. The same man went up to another guide, pointed at a tall tree, and said, “Start now.”

The guide started climbing the tree, carrying a small backpack with binoculars and a walkie-talkie in it. He climbed the tree like a squirrel. Within a minute or two, he was already at the top of the tree and was invisible from the bottom. The branches and leaves provided the necessary cover. The boatman and a guide on the ground both had walkie-talkies. He pointed at four of the travelers. “Vamonos.” Then he dragged a rubber raft out to the water. A guide and four of the guys sat on the boat, maintaining the balance as instructed by the boatman.

They took off, and about twenty minutes later, the boatman came back with the empty raft. The same process repeated with four more people on it, including Arjun and Pradip. Laxman and Raj stayed for the last trip.

The boat reached the other side, and Arjun and his travelling companions got off. He looked around. All he could see were just tall grasses and bushes. There was a small trail through the grasses, and the other guys were sitting there on the ground.

The boatman was about to return when a voice on the walkie-talkie said in Spanish, “Come back, police van is approaching.” Survival instinct set in and the travelers all started jumping on the boat, every man for himself.

“Stop! Stay here and hide in the grass! I come back. Policía no find you here,” the boatman yelled.

Arjun and Pradip were already on the boat with four other guys. The rest of them stayed behind. Arjun was at the edge. As the boat turned back, Arjun tumbled off. When he got up, the water came up to his chest. He panicked and grabbed the boat.

“No,” the boatman yelled. “Go back to land!”

Arjun released his hand and let the boat go. He swam back to the land and waded out, completely drenched. *How far are the police? What should I do now?* He peered around to see his traveling companions hiding in the tall grasses. He rushed to join them.

It was a chilly night, and the water was cold, but he didn’t feel any of it. The fear created fire inside him, and for the first time, fear worked in his favor.

They crouched in the tall grasses, waiting, but the police didn’t show up. It felt like the longest wait of his life. After about thirty-five minutes, the boatman came back with more travelers.

The guys crept out of the grasses and waited for the remaining people to cross. Everybody sat on the ground, quietly. The water rushing past and the wind blowing were the only sounds he could hear. What should have been a calm, welcoming environment was far from that for Arjun and his team.

Before the last group arrived, Arjun checked his backpack to see if he had any clothes that he could wear. They were all damp, but not soaked like the ones he was wearing. He changed into a hoodie, a T-shirt, and pants, and squeezed the water out of the ones he had been wearing.

The next crossing of the boat brought all the travelers to the American side of the Rio Grande.

They all got up and started along the trail. After walking for a few minutes, they crossed the grassland and entered a desert with only a few bushes, shrubs and cactuses here and there. They followed the guide for about a half hour until they reached a barbed wire fence. The guide and one of the other guys made a gap so they could pass through. They were used to this by now.

The walk through the desert seemed to take forever. Arjun’s heavy, damp pants chafed him, creating a rash on his thighs and between his legs. It was painful, but there was no way of backing out or even resting—Pradip, Laxman, Raj and the rest of the group were ahead of him. Worried about being left behind, he started rushing to reach his group, ignoring the rashes. He didn’t see a stump on the ground and he tripped over it. He got up. *Ouch!* He couldn’t put weight on one foot. He had sprained his ankle.

There was another barbed wire fence ahead, so he limped along and managed to catch up with the group.

“What happened to your leg?” Pradip said, after he crossed through the wire.

“I tripped,” he said. “I think my ankle is sprained.”

“Oh my God. I’m sorry to hear that, bro.” Pradip kneeled down on the ground. “Take off your shoe.”

Arjun did, and Pradip lightly massaged his ankle. “Better now?”

“A little. Thanks.”

As they tried to catch up with the others, Pradip walked by him to offer support. They crossed three more barbed wire fences that night.

At about two thirty in the morning, they were walking across a small bridge. With a little moonlight, Arjun saw that the other side was a junction of two roads and the landscape was mostly barren. As everybody reached the road, they saw headlights of vehicles approaching from the left.

The guide yelled, “Police, run!”

# Chapter 40

The guide started running toward the barren land, and the rest of the illegal travelers followed him in the dim moonlight. Arjun was falling behind, limping because of his sprained ankle. He heard a van skidding to a stop behind him, then a sliding door opening and slamming shut. The sound of the police officers’ boots got louder as they gained on them.There was no place to hide and no way to escape from them. Arjun knew he would be the first one to be caught, so he veered away from the group toward some bushes in the distance. As he ran toward cover, he listened for footsteps behind him, but he didn’t hear anything. He glanced back. Nobody was following him. The police officers all ran after the group.

*Thank God!* He took a long breath and stopped. *What now?*

He didn’t want to run any farther. His ankle hurt and he had no idea where he was going anyway. He sat down behind a bush. He was wearing a black hoodie—he covered his head with it. He took off his backpack and placed it on his chest. He hoped nobody would notice him in the dark, even if the officers happened to come this way.

He stayed there for about twenty minutes, listening, then stood up and started walking farther into the brush. Soon he found a narrow trail and started following it. As he walked, he listened carefully, hoping to hear his fellow travelers up ahead, but he didn’t see or hear anybody. *What if everybody was caught? What am I going to do alone here?* All of a sudden, he thought he heard a motorbike approaching in the distance. He jumped into a bush. *Ouch!* That hurt his ankle*.* He controlled himself so he wouldn’t cry out from the pain. He listened for the sound, but he didn’t hear anything. He poked his head out of the bushes and looked around—there was no motor bike. It was just an illusion.

No wonder people believe in ghosts,he thought. Their beliefs create one. He remembered the evening when he was twelve years old. He and Prabhat had scared their neighbor, Harka, who became severely ill. Arjun had never gotten a chance to confess to his neighbor that it was just a trick. Now he wished Harka was there. He would say, “Please forgive me, Harka *dai*—those weren’t ghosts who were standing in front of your house, but Prabhat and me.” He was ready to accept whatever punishment Harka would declare against him.

He controlled his emotions—he had to concentrate on surviving this ordeal. He came out of the bush and walked along the trail for a long time, hoping to see his friends again.

Soon, dawn was breaking, it must be about five in the morning. He lost all hope of seeing his friends again. They were probably lying on a cold prison floor by now, waiting for somebody to rescue them. He felt sorry for them. *But is this situation any better?*

He continued limping along the trail, favoring his sprained ankle, until he finally emerged from the brush onto a narrow dirt road. Beside the road was a creek. On the other side of the water was flat land with tall grasses, with only a few trees here and there. At the other end of the land were some small houses.

*How do I get across the creek?* He took a right and continued on it. After walking for about ten minutes, he saw a bridge.

Maybe I could go to one of the houses and ask to use a phone to call Pedro, he thought. He’d heard Americans are some of the nicest people in the world. They might help him. But what if they don’t? What if they call the police? His heart sank. He had been betrayed by his own people before. How could he trust strangers?

He crossed the bridge to the other side. He was terrified and exhausted. Maybe I should rest now for the day and start again when it gets dark, he thought. Less people will see me that way. There must be a store around there. I can call then.

He walked to the grassland and sat under a tree. The tall grasses acted as curtains. He realized his pants were still wet. He pulled them off and put them aside to dry. He took out other clothes from his backpack and spread them around as well. Then he started massaging his foot. Afterwards, he took out his water bottle and drank some water, then wolfed down two power bars.

He hadn’t slept for almost twenty-four hours and was drained both physically and mentally. He lay down on the ground, hidden by the grasses and the tree, and fell asleep. For a few hours, he forgot his pain, sorrow, and fear, and the difficulties and dangers that lay in wait for him.

Later he woke up, and the pain, sorrow, and fear came right back. He felt his pants lying next to him. They were dry. He put them on, then folded the rest of his clothes and put them in his backpack. It was still light out so he couldn’t move yet. He was hungry. He had nothing to do except agonize about his future.

Oh God, when is this going to end? I just want to live like a normal human being, he thought. He took a long breath and condemned God for giving him the life of a tortoise. *The tortoise carries its weight on its back—I’m carrying it in my mind.* Isn’t mental and emotional weight worse than a physical burden?He tried to push away those negative thoughts. He took out some cookies and bottle of water. He started eating.

He sat there for hours, thinking and rethinking, then dozed off again. No one came to bother him. When he woke up again, it was dusk. He picked up his backpack and slowly walked towards the houses.

There was a man sitting on his porch drinking a beer.

“Excuse me, sir,” Arjun said.

“Yeah?” the man said, frowning.

“Can you please let me make a call to—”

The man cut in. “No.”

Arjun walked away without saying anything. He didn’t see any other people. They seemed to be staying inside the houses. After walking for about twenty minutes. He saw a group of people drinking and barbecuing.

“Excuse me,” he said.

They glanced at him.

“Can you please let me make a call to Mexico? I’ll pay for it.”

“Sorry, we can’t,” one of the ladies said, and took a sip of her beer. Arjun peered at the other people, hoping to get a positive response. One of the men stared at him. “You heard what she said.”

“Sorry.” He walked away. *So much for Americans being nice.*

Repellant warning signs were posted on many fences. Some read that they had a guard dog that bites, some simply read No Trespassing. One of them had a picture of a gun, and the sign said, “The average response time of a 911 call is 23 minutes. The response time of an A-357 is 1400 feet per second.” It scared him.

*They must be fed up with illegal aliens.*

He limped along, keeping an eye out for anywhere that might have international phone service, but he didn’t see any. He saw a small bar and restaurant. He peered through a glass window—a beautiful barmaid was working. He hobbled inside and asked her if he could make a call to Mexico.

“Sorry, honey, we don’t have an international phone service. If you want to make a local call, I’ll be more than happy to let you use it,” she replied. Her voice was sweet as a melody, but it didn’t solve his problem. He didn’t know anybody in Texas.

“Do you know where I could make a call to Mexico?”

“It will take you forever to walk to the place, but I’ll write down the directions for you.”

She wrote something on a piece of paper and handed it to him.

He peeked at it. She had drawn a little map and had written down the name of a supermarket.

“Thank you so much,” he said, and stepped out of the place.

He walked for more than an hour looking for the place. It was hot and humid, and he was sweating bad. He remembered he was holding the paper on his hand. *Oh shit!* The paper was wet, and the ink was smudged.

He was worn-out—he hadn’t had a proper meal since he left Pedro’s house. *All the stores must be closed by now.* He wanted to rest that night and continue in search of the supermarket the next day. He saw the sign of a motel up ahead. He had a five-dollar bill and four hundred fifty pesos, which he thought must be equal to about twenty-five US dollars. He and Pradip had paid about ten dollars for a motel room in Mexico. The rate here might be a little higher, but surely not more than fifteen dollars. *They might even let me make a call there.*

He walked to the motel and then went inside the lobby. The girl at the reception was working on a computer.

“Excuse me, miss,” he said.

The girl looked at him and her expression quickly changed to disgust. She was obviously not used to seeing a homeless-looking guy there.

“How can I help you, sir?” asked the girl. He did not feel any respect with the word “sir” as her first reaction had ruined everything.

“How much is a room for the night?”

“$79 plus tax,” replied the girl, shattering his desire of a comfortable rest at the motel.

“Thank you.” He turned and walked away. *How can anybody charge so much for a place to sleep for one night?*

He continued to walk as he didn’t know what to do besides walking.

After limping along for almost an hour, he heard the sound of a vehicle stopping behind him. He looked back but immediately wished he hadn’t. It was a police car. One officer stepped out of the car and the second remained inside. He wanted to run as fast as he could, but his exhausted body and sprained ankle would not let him do that. *Besides, what’s the point of running, anyway?*

It would have been better to be arrested with his friends. Now nobody would have any idea where he was. His agents would probably think he was killed by cartels or wild animals and forget about him. He stood without moving, waiting for the police to arrest him.

# Chapter 41

“Show me your ID,” the officer said.

Arjun didn’t have any identification except for the document they had given him in the Mexican jail. He took it out of his pocket and handed it to him.

“Do you have any other form of identification?” the officer asked.

He shook his head. “No sir.”

“Stay here.” The officer went back to the car with Arjun’s document. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the other officer checking something on the computer, but he didn’t have the courage to look at them. Instead, he kept his eyes on the ground—the ground would never get mad for staring at it.

A few minutes later, the officer came back and handed Arjun his document. “It’s not safe to walk here this late.”

Arjun couldn’t believe what he’d just heard. *He’s not going to arrest me?*

“Thank you.” He nodded and took the paper from the police. *What a nice guy!* Arjun wanted to ask him if he could make a call to Mexico for him, but that would be too much—he decided not to test his patience.

“Do you know if there’s a motel near here?” he said.

The police officer gave him directions and drove away.

The incident boosted Arjun’s courage to deal with his situation in the daylight tomorrow. But for now, all he wanted to do was sleep. So, he kept walking in search of shelter for the night. He reached a hospital. A tiny ray of hope emerged inside him. *Maybe I could go inside the hospital and sleep on a bench*. Then, he saw two guards at the entrance. He changed his mind, as he didn’t want to worsen the situation. The guards will ask me too many questions, he thought. And if they aren’t happy with my answers, they will call the police, and that officer from earlier—or someone not as nice—will come to arrest me. *Not a good idea.*

He crossed the road and continued to walk. There was a church in the corner. He sat on a chair beside the door of the church. Within a few minutes, he fell asleep. He woke up in the middle of the night, but there was no point in leaving as he wouldn’t be able to find a place to make a call at that time. He decided to spend the night on the chair.

“Hey, who are you?” Arjun heard a voice. He opened his eyes. It was morning already. He muttered something, half awake.

“You can’t sleep here,” the man said and walked inside the church.

Arjun sat there, wondering what to do next. A huge man came up and pointed at him. “You! Go away! You can’t stay here!”

Arjun thought everybody was welcome at God’s door. God was probably not happy with the man’s action, but He always stays quiet. And people take advantage of His silence and make decisions for Him.

Arjun picked up his backpack and started walking, without saying a word. He didn’t look back at the man. After hobbling along for about forty-five minutes, he saw a gas station. He went in.

“Could I please make a call to Mexico,” he said.

“Sorry, we’re not allowed to let anybody use our phone,” the man at the counter said.

“Can I use your restroom?”

“Sure, go ahead. It’s on your right.”

“Thank you.”

He used the restroom and cleaned himself.

Then he bought a coffee and a chicken sandwich. He didn’t want to leave the store and continue to walk, not quite yet. He sat on a chair and ate his food. Then he leaned his head on the table to relax and fell asleep in no time.

When he woke up, the clock on the wall had already hit ten thirty. He wondered why nobody had disturbed his nap. He wanted to sleep on the chair for a little longer, but he didn’t want to push his luck. He had a long way to go and had no idea how to get there. He left the store and continued to walk. After wandering for an hour, he saw a supermarket—probably the one the barmaid was talking about. On the street outside of it, a Hispanic man was selling fresh roasted corn on a small cart.

*Maybe he can help me.*

“Hi, can I get one corn, please?” Arjun said.

“Sure, no problem,” the man said and started turning around one of the corns on the fire.

“Is there any way you can let me make a call to Mexico?” he asked. “I can pay for it.”

“Why do you need to call Mexico?”

Arjun told him what happened to him and how he had ended up here.

The corn looked properly roasted. He handed the skewered corn to Arjun. “Three dollars.”

*Three dollars for one corn!*

Arjun took out the five-dollar bill and handed to the man.

While handing two dollars back, the man said, “Do you speak Spanish?”

*Why is he asking me this now?* “No,” he said, even though he did understand a little.

“Wait, let me make a call first,” he said and pulled out his phone. He tapped in a number and started talking to the person on the phone.

*Is he talking about me?* Arjun looked around, pretending not to understand as he listened carefully to the conversation.

“There’s a young guy here who crossed the border illegally and is looking for help. He’s alone and wants to call somebody in Mexico,” he said. Arjun was glad he had learned some Spanish so he could understand most of what the man was saying. After listening for a minute, the man continued, “No, he doesn’t seem to know anybody here.” The man paused for a few seconds, then said, “Okay, I’ll do that.” He hung up the phone.

“How much money do you have?”

“Just enough to make a phone call.”

“Give me the phone number of your family back home. I’ll take you to wherever you want to go.”

“But I already paid the guy who was going to take me to Houston, full in advance.”

“You don’t have to pay me right away,” the man said. “And it's not going to be much. Besides, they will throw you in a jail if they find you here.”

“I understand, but can you let me make a call first?”

“My phone does not have an international call service. Sorry.”

Arjun was worried the man might belong to one of those cartels who abduct people and demand a ransom from their families*.* He didn’t want to argue with the man. “Sounds fair enough. Let me get a drink and I’ll come back.”

“All right. Don’t go far, okay?”

“Okay.” He nodded, then quickly finished the corn and walked inside the supermarket.

He picked up a bottle of orange juice and walked to the counter.

“One dollar fifty cents, please,” the cashier girl said.

“Do you have a phone service to make a call to Mexico?”

“There’s a payphone out there on the wall on your right. It should let you call Mexico. It only takes quarters, though.”

“Do you take pesos?”

“Yes, we take both dollars and pesos.”

“Okay. Can I please get all the change in quarters?” He handed two hundred pesos to the girl.

“Sure.”

After getting a bunch of quarters, he went out, found the pay phone, and dialed Pedro’s number. After two rings, Pedro picked up the phone. But as soon as he said ‘hola’, the phone got disconnected.

He tried it twice and the same process repeated. *God, what’s wrong with this phone?*

He went back into the store to talk to the cashier. He explained the situation.

“It's not part of this supermarket, so we don’t know how to fix it. They have a customer service number there on the phone, you can talk to them.”

*Can things get any worse?* He walked out of the store, disheartened. *What should I do now?*

# Chapter 42

Arjun didn’t have much money left and there was no point in losing any more of it. Besides, he had to get out of this place as soon as possible, before the man out there or his friends grabbed him. He took a sip of the orange juice and hurried towards the street. He was almost out of the parking lot when somebody pulled his arm. He turned back—it was the same Hispanic guy.

“Where you going?” the guy asked.

“I'm just walking around, there is nothing to do, you know!”

“Don’t go too far, my guys will be here very soon. You are not safe here. If the police see you, you’ll go to jail.”

“Okay, I understand. I’ll be around.”

The guy went back to his place. Arjun crossed the road and picked up his pace. He needed to get as far away as possible before the guy’s friends showed up. Nobody else was walking there, so the people in the vehicles looked at him as if he was an alien.

He kept walking, looking for a place to make a call. He had never imagined it would be this hard just to make a phone call, even when he had money to pay for it. If he were in his own country, someone would have let him use their phone hours ago.

At around noon, he saw a phone store that had an AT&T sign on it. There was a gas station and more shops and restaurants nearby. *It should provide that service!* He smiled. He had almost forgotten what hope felt like.

He hurried into the store. A guy in his early twenties stood at the counter. Arjun looked around—there were different types of mobile phones, headphones, and other electronic gadgets that he didn’t recognize. He didn’t see a phone booth. He felt sad again. *What if they don’t have a phone service to Mexico?*

“Hi, how are you?” the guy said, smiling. The smile touched his heart. He had not gotten such a friendly smile from anybody for a while. He walked to the counter and told him a short version of what he’d been through recently and how he ended up in the store.

The guy took out his cell phone. “What’s the number?”

Arjun told it to him. He punched in the numbers and handed it to Arjun.

“Hola,” Pedro said.

Arjun let out a breath of relief. *Finally!* “Hello Pedro, it’s Arjun. The police caught our group. I’m alone. I don’t know where to go. I’ve had hardly anything to eat for two days and haven’t had a decent sleep. I’m scared. Please—”

“Where are you?”

“In Texas in a phone place. There are stores and restaurants here—”

Pedro interrupted. “Pass it to the guy.”

“Can you please talk to him?” Arjun said, handing the phone to the clerk.

He talked to Pedro and gave him directions to the place. Then he hung up the phone. “He will send somebody for you. They are going to be here in half an hour or so. Till then, you can sit on the couch.”

“Thank you so much,” he said. “I want to pay you. How much is it?

“Don’t worry about it. I don’t need the money. Go relax on the couch.”

“You are such a kind man,” Arjun said.

The guy just smiled in response.

Arjun sat on the couch.

“Do you want a burger or something? I’ll buy it for you,” the guy said.

“No, I can’t accept anything more from you. You have already saved my life. It might just be a phone call, but it made a huge difference to me. I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t made that call. I was exhausted and ready to give up. Besides, they will come and get me soon.”

“Okay.”

A customer came in and the guy got busy with him while Arjun relaxed on the couch. For him, it was the most comfortable thing he had ever sat on.

After about half an hour, the guy said, “They will be here soon—you might want to stand by the door, so they can see you.”

Arjun nodded and got up and stood close to the door.

A little later, a car came to the gas station next to the shop. After filling the gas, the driver waved his hand at Arjun.

“That must be your man,” the guy said.

Arjun turned back at him and nodded. “You’re my savior! I’ll never forget your kindness. Thank you again for letting me call.”

The guy smiled. “Good luck,” he said, and waved him a goodbye.

Arjun limped to the car. As soon as he stepped inside, the guy drove away and sped up without saying anything. Arjun hoped it was the right car. The driver looked in the rearview mirror and side mirrors more than he looked at the front.

There were no cars behind. Finally, the guy glanced at him. “Arjun, right?”

Arjun let out a sigh of relief. “Yes.”

“I’m Franco. Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too.”

“What happened to your leg?”

“I sprained my ankle and it has been hurting since then.”

“No worries. I will give you ointment and some bandages when we get home.”

“Thank you. I would really appreciate that.”

“So how did it happen?” Franco said. “I mean how you ended up alone?”

Arjun told him what had happened.

“Wow,” Franco said, raising his eyebrows when Arjun told him about running in a different direction from the rest of them when he was sure he would be arrested.

“You are lucky,” he said. “We were waiting for you guys to get here. There are five more guys in our house. You will be starting at eight tonight.”

“That’s great,” Arjun said, relieved, although he wished he could have a day of rest before continuing his journey.

“Did you hear from the other guys yet?” Arjun was worried about his friends.

“No, nada.”

*I hope they are doing okay!*

“How far are we from Houston?” asked Arjun.

“Not that far. For us, it’s just a few hours’ drive, but since you have to walk, it will take about three days.”

“Where are we now?”

“Roma, Texas.”

“Hmm…okay.”

The guy pulled into the drive-through of a Burger King. “What would you like to eat?”

“Anything is fine.”

Franco ordered a burger, large fries, and a coke for him. Arjun devoured them in no time. He didn’t even ask what type of burger it was.

After driving for about ten more minutes, they reached a house.

“Okay, buddy, you go rest for a while. We will start tonight,” Franco said, pushing open the door of a room. There were five people inside. Two of them looked like they were from Europe.

“Talk to each other,” he said and went to the other room.

Arjun said, “Hola,” and sat on an empty mattress. A little later, Franco came back with some ointment and bandages for Arjun.

Arjun felt a lot better after tending to his ankle, but he was too exhausted to chat with the others. He collapsed onto the mattress. As he dozed off, he felt the softness and warmth of the mattress welcoming him. He embraced the compassion of sleep.

# Chapter 43

Arjun woke up in the late afternoon and went to take a long shower. He felt refreshed again. When he came back, there were a few cans of food, bread, cookies, water bottles, and power bars on the floor. Franco was there in the room too.

“We were waiting for you. Come sit,” Franco said.

“Okay.” Arjun sat on one of the mattresses.

Franco divided the stuff among all the travelers in the room. They stashed the food and water in their backpacks.

“All right, amigos, I’m going to bring some hot food for you, okay?’

“Okay.”

Franco stood up and left the room.

After some time, he came back. He was holding three large boxes of pizza and some chicken wings. He handed them to Arjun. “All right, guys, eat your food and get ready.”

“Okay,” Arjun said, and placed the boxes on the floor. They gathered around to eat, and Franco left the room.

A little later, Franco opened the door. There were two more guys with him. “Are you all ready?”

“Yes.”

“Great. These are your guides for your journey,” he said. “Miguel and Javier.” He pointed at the men. Miguel was probably in his late forties, while Javier looked way younger.

Both of them waved. “Hola.”

Two cars were waiting outside. Arjun and two more guys followed Miguel to one of the cars, and the rest of them went to the other one. The ride lasted for about forty-five minutes.

Both of the cars stopped on a quiet road in a desert-like open land with bushes scattered here and there.

“We get out here,” Miguel said.

They climbed out of the car. Javier and the guys from the other car stepped out too, and the cars drove away.

Arjun felt like an owl whose real day starts at night. They trudged all night in the desert-like rugged land. Miguel led the way and Javier took up the rear, both with small flashlights. Arjun walked close to Miguel—he didn’t want to be left behind again.

Around midnight, Miguel said, “We’ll take a short break here.”

All of them sat on the ground and took out their snacks.

Arjun opened a packet of cookies and gobbled them down, then drank some water.

“Guys, keep in mind that you have a long way to go. Don’t finish it all, especially the water,” Miguel said.

After fifteen minutes, they got up and started off again.

Every once in a while, Miguel and Javier checked a magnetic compass and varied their course according to it. Arjun was amazed at how such a small manual device could help them find their way through a huge desert.

They came upon small dusty road.

“Stop,” Miguel said. “Give me some clothes.”

The guys offered him their jackets.

Miguel put them on the road, then crossed it, stepping only on them. When he reached the other side of the road, he said, “Come across. Make sure you walk only on the clothes.”

They did what they were told. Javier came last. He picked up each item of clothing after him and swept the road to make sure there were no footprints.

“Leaving footsteps behind means inviting trouble,” Javier said.

They followed the same procedure to cross other dusty roads that night. Finally, in the early morning, they reached a wooded area. “We rest here for the day,” Miguel said. “We start in the evening again.”

“Where are we now?” one of the guys said.

“We are in Falfurrias, Brooks County, Texas,” Miguel said. “This is a private ranch and is the safest place for us. Every other place has tight checking.”

“Okay, thanks.”

Arjun sat under the shade of a tree. He was sure it was going to be crazy hot and humid later in the afternoon.

The guys took out their snacks and popped open the cans and stuffed food into their mouths. Arjun’s was chili with meat and beans.

Miguel crushed his can and said, “Guys, make sure you do this.” He dug a hole in the ground with sticks and buried his can.

After eating, Arjun dug into the ground. There, he found more cans and plastic bottles. If cans were seeds, he thought, there would be a forest of cans here.

The day was super humid, but at least they had trees to block the direct sunlight now, and they didn’t have to seek shelter on the open desert. *It could’ve been worse.*

He lay down on the ground like the rest of his travelers and fell asleep.

He was awakened by a nudge. It was starting to get dark outside, and Miguel and Javier were waking everybody up. They all had a quick snack, then their journey continued on the desert. It was not an easy hike, but Arjun reminded himself of the long, dangerous trek through Darién Gap, and somehow, he felt better. He took inventory of his food and drinks, so he would not run out. There was still one more day to go after this one.

On the second morning, they found another wooded area and rested for the day. Arjun was weak and exhausted after not having a proper meal for two days. Everybody seemed to be sleeping. Arjun sat up and gazed around. In the distance, he saw a crowd coming towards them. *Who are those people?*

He peeked out from behind a bush. The crowd was getting closer. He didn’t have time to wake everybody and run, but he didn’t want to run alone—he knew the suffering of being alone on the journey better than anybody in the group. He crawled towards Miguel and nudged him. “There’s a group of people coming here.”

“What?” He sat up abruptly and peeked at the crowd. Then he let out a sigh of relief. “Don’t worry, I know that guide. They are like you guys—travelers.”

“Umm… okay.” Arjun crawled back to his place.

Soon the group of twelve people reached there. It looked like they only had one guide. Arjun smiled at them without saying anything. He wondered why his group had two guides. Javier might be in training, he thought. Miguel is the one who does all the stuff.

Miguel and the other guide talked to each other for a few minutes, and then the other guys continued their journey. The larger the group, the greater the risk, Arjun thought. Maybe that’s why they don’t want to rest here.

By late afternoon, most of the guys were awake. “Does anybody have water?” one of the guys said. Arjun glanced at the half-full water bottle in his backpack. He was sure he would need it for the night, but he decided to share it. “Here you go. This is the last bottle, so please leave a little for me.”

“Okay, thank you.” He took it from Arjun and drank. Then the other guys asked for it, and Arjun couldn’t say no. By the time Arjun got the bottle back, there were only a few drops left. He put it in his bag.

About a half hour later, the remaining two guys woke up. One of them was sweating a lot. “Can I please get some water. I don’t have any left.”

“Everybody is out already,” Javier said.

Arjun felt bad, but there was nothing he could do about it.

At about five in the afternoon, Miguel said, “Let’s go. Once we meet the other group, we will get some water.”

They started the journey. The thirst made it difficult for them to walk, but they didn’t have any other choice. Arjun’s inner body was dried up and it felt like the longest walk ever. He had never imagined that not having water for a night could be this difficult. At least, he’d had some water in the afternoon. How was the guy, who was asking for water feeling now? Was he going to make it?

At around six in the morning, Miguel turned on his phone and made a call. After he hung up, he said, “We made it. We have people waiting for us.”

Arjun felt relieved. “That’s great.”

The travelers followed Miguel to a road, where two cars were parked. They all got in the cars. The driver passed each of them a water bottle. Arjun opened it and gulped it all at once. Who says water doesn’t have a taste? Arjun felt like it was the most delicious water ever. He felt totally refreshed.

They drove for about twenty minutes, then stopped in the middle of a desert. One side of it had a tall, long stone wall. Arjun saw two black pickup trucks parked just off the road. There were a few people standing there.

Miguel turned to them. “We get out here and you all continue on trucks.”

Arjun and other guys followed Miguel out of the car to the parked vehicles.

*Wait, what?* There were people in the back of the trucks, laying down. They lay down in such a way that head of one ended on the foot of other. There was no space between them. One of the truck beds was completely full and the other one was almost half-filled.

“All of you throw your bags across the wall to the other side,” a tall, chubby man with a beard and mustache said. “We don’t have much space and you don’t need them anyway. Our next stop will be Houston, Texas.”

*I’ll be in Houston today?* Arjun’s uncertain dream of reaching a safe place in America was finally only one stop away. He had heard that once he reached Houston, he would be a free man. There would be no hiding and running from police. As Sundar had said, “Nobody gives a shit there if you’re legal or not.”

*What if we’re stopped by police before we reach Houston?* Arjun controlled himself. He didn’t need any negative thoughts right before he reached his destiny.

It’s just a small backpack, he thought. How about I take out my things and trash them and keep my backpack? I might need it later.

He took out his clothes and threw them over the wall. A few of them didn’t reach the other side and fell close to him. There were some clothes here and there on the ground.

“What the hell did I just say?” the man yelled. “Collect all that shit and put it in your bag and throw it over the fence. Do it before I leave your ass here!”

Arjun didn’t want to aggravate the already annoyed man. He started collecting all the clothes on the ground while the rest of the travelers threw their backpacks over.

By the time Arjun got back, almost all the travelers were on the truck. There were just a few guys standing there, probably guides or agents. Arjun saw Miguel and Javier in one of the cars.

He peered at the trucks—both of the truck beds were completely packed with men lying there, jammed together like sardines. *How am I supposed to fit in there?*

# Chapter 44

“No room here,” one of the guys said. “You go sit in the front of this truck.” He pointed at the vehicle.

*Thank God. It might be better there.* He nodded.

A couple of guys closed the back gates of the trucks and locked them. As if that wasn’t bad enough, they covered each of them with a long black truck bed cover with tiny holes in it. It was no different than chickens getting transferred to a slaughterhouse back home. Arjun could only imagine the feelings of suffocation in there.

A skinny guy and the man with the beard and mustache who had yelled at Arjun earlier sat next to the driver. Behind them were three women. One looked pale and exhausted. She moved a little to make space for Arjun and he sat there.

As everybody settled in the vehicles, one car drove away. After about five minutes, both of the trucks hit the road.

The skinny guy turned to Arjun. “The car in the front will look out for any checking or obstacles on the way, and the same with the other car behind us. If they see any danger, they let us know, so we have time to hide.”

“Okay. Thanks for letting me know,” Arjun said.

After about twenty minutes, Arjun saw the lady next to him sweating really bad. Her clothes were wet.

“Estas bien?” Arjun said.

She shook her head.

“Can you please open a window a little, she needs fresh air,” Arjun said.

“AC is on. I can’t do that,” the driver said.

“Do you have water? Please give it to her. She really needs it.”

The skinny guy passed a water bottle to Arjun. He spread some on her face and poured some into her mouth, but it didn’t help much. All of a sudden, she leaned her head on his arm and collapsed.

“She passed out,” Arjun said, nervously. “What are we going to do?”

“Give her some water, she’ll be fine,” the guy with beard and mustache said. “We’ll be in Houston in a few hours.” He didn’t even look back.

“She can’t drink.”

“Open window,” said the lady sitting on the other side. The lady sounded like that was the only sentence she knew in English. She had a weird accent. Arjun couldn’t figure out where she was from.

“Can we stop the truck?” said the other lady half-heartedly, for she already knew the answer.

“No, we can’t,” replied the driver, “I’m not authorized to stop, even if somebody dies in here. I can’t take a chance.” He opened the window a little. Fresh air entered the truck, but that didn’t seem to help the lady. Arjun was still supporting her in his arms. Her body felt limp. *Is she dead?* He felt for a pulse on her neck—he didn’t feel anything. Arjun started breathing rapidly. He checked it again. Nothing.

“Somebody help her! Oh no… She is gone. She is dead.” Arjun started shaking.

“Control yourself, dude. She will be fine,” the guy with the beard and mustache said.

“No, she won’t, she’s dead!” said the other lady, crying.

The guy turned around and felt her wrist for a pulse.

He looked at the other guide and said, “*Mierda! Ella esta muerta.*”

What now?

The skinny guy punched in some numbers on his phone and made a call, probably to the other agents. He talked too fast, so Arjun couldn’t figure out what they were talking about. By now, the driver had already started slowing down the truck. The other guide pulled out three pairs of gloves from the glove box.

He passed one pair to Arjun. “Help us carry her body.”

“What are you going do with her body?”

“What do you think? We can’t keep her here too long. We need to get rid of her body—and fast.” The truck stopped completely.

“No, I can’t … sorry.” Arjun was still in shock.

“Don’t waste our freaking time, dude. What would be the use of keeping her here anyway? She won’t come back to life.”

“I know. I know. Okay, I’ll help you.”

“Call husband. He in the back,” said one of the ladies.

“No, we don’t have time for that,” said the guide, unlocking the door.

“She said he’s right there in the back. Didn’t you hear her?” Arjun said.

“I heard what she said. We don’t have time for that.”

“He needs to know what happened to his wife.”

“He will find out in Houston.”

“I won’t let that happen.”

“Shut your mouth right now, or I’ll kill you and throw you beside her. You think it’s fun arguing with you here in the middle of the road? We don’t have time for this shit. We need to trash her body and get back in the truck. We can’t waste a single second. If anybody sees us, we’ll get arrested before we reach Houston. A case like this would lock us all up for rest of our lives. If we call her husband now, he will create complications, and we won’t make it to Houston. If it had happened to one of us, we would do the same thing.”

The guide was right, and Arjun needed to accept the fact that she was gone. He didn’t know why his heart was so gloomy. He didn’t even know the lady, but she was one of his companions, a fellow traveler. She wouldn’t have left her country if she’d had a choice, he thought. She didn’t have to die this way.

The driver stayed in the vehicle while Arjun helped the guides carry her body. They walked a few minutes off the road towards some brush.

“We leave her here,” the skinny guy said.

They rested her body on the ground. The other guide put his hand in her bra and took out the package of cocaine. They just left the body there on the ground in the bush and ran back to the truck.

As soon as they were in, the driver started the truck, and they were back on the road again as if nothing had ever happened, as if she didn’t even exist. Everything was done without anybody in the back knowing about it. As they continued, Arjun was haunted by the thought of her flesh being ripped apart by a pack of coyotes.

The truck stopped in the afternoon, in the middle of nowhere. Arjun couldn’t see any houses for a long distance. A car stopped in front of them.

The guy with the beard and mustache received a call. After he hung up, he asked Arjun, “What’s your name?”

“Arjun,” he replied.

“You get out and go to that car.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

Arjun got out of the truck and entered the car.

“Hi, I’m Roberto,” the driver said.

“Hi, nice to meet you. I’m Arjun.”

Roberto passed him two power bars and a bottle of water.

“Thanks.” He gulped the water and wolfed down the bars. Afterwards he stayed quiet—he was exhausted and emotionally drained. He knew the incident would haunt him for the rest of his life. He closed his eyes and rested. A little later, three more guys from the same truck got in the car and they took off.

After about twenty-five minutes, the car stopped at the driveway of a house.

“Where are we?” Arjun asked.

“We’re in Houston. Let’s go, guys,” Roberto said, and climbed out of the vehicle. They went around and entered the house through the back door. A huge man stood in front of them.

“Hi guys, I’m your guard,” the guy said. “Come with me. I’ll take you to your room.” They followed him to the basement. He opened a door and switched on a light. “Go inside.”

The open space ahead had mattresses all around the floor. “You stay here for now. I’ll be back with food later. You can hand me the packets that they give you in Mexico.”

Three of the guys took out baggies and passed them to him.

“I don’t have one,” Arjun said.

“Yeah, I heard that,” he said. Then he looked at the other guys. “Make yourselves comfortable and don’t make any noise, okay?”

They nodded. He walked out of the room and locked the door from the outside.

They all lay down.

Arjun had finally reached the destination that had been decided for him by the agents. *But now what? Where do I go from here?*

# Chapter 45

*Houston, Texas, July 8, 2010*

The next morning, after breakfast, somebody opened the door. They all glanced at it. The guard walked inside. “Which one of you is Arjun?”

“Me,” Arjun said.

“Boss want to see you.”

“Okay.” He stood up and walked behind the guard. *Why does he only want to see me?*

In the living room, Roberto was sitting on the couch. He looked at Arjun. “Sit.”

Arjun sat in front of him.

“Pedro tells me you paid $1,000 already. Now you need to call your family to transfer the remaining $1,500. Once I receive the money, you are free to leave the house.”

“Okay. Can I use your phone?”

“Sure, go ahead,” Roberto handed him his phone. “You might want to ask your family to send you some extra money, so you can start up here. If you want to go anywhere in Houston, we will drop you there. But if you are going farther away, you need money to travel. Here is my business card.” He handed it to Arjun. “They can send me the money through Western Union. Once I receive the payment, I’ll give the extra money to you.”

Arjun took the business card from him. “Okay.” He called Amit and told him he had safely reached Houston.

“That’s a big relief, after all you’ve been through. Now that you finally reached America, call Kiran. He lives in New York City. I talked to him recently. He told me he will help you out once you get there. I talked to some other people too, but they were afraid to help an illegal immigrant,” Amit said.

Kiran was Arjun’s old neighbor. Five years ago, he had moved to America with his family on a Diversity Visa. He seemed to be well settled in the country.

After asking Amit for the last payment of $1,500 and some extra and receiving Kiran’s contact information, Arjun hung up and called Kiran.

Kiran picked up the phone. “Hello.”

“Hello, Uncle, this is Arjun. Buba told me to call you. I’m in Houston now. Would you be able to help me get a job in New York?”

“Hello, Arjun. It’s good that you finally arrived there safely. I didn’t think you would ever get to the United States,” Kiran said. “I have two kids at home who need a babysitter as my wife and I both work. If you take care of the kids and the house, I’ll pay you $500 a month for a year. After that, I am planning to open a restaurant, and your father told me that you are a good cook. I’ll give you a job there. Then you’ll get more money. If that setup works for you, you can come anytime. If not, I’m sorry, I can’t help you. There’s a lot going on in my life right now.”

*$500 a month? How could I pay back the money Buba borrowed on that?* Arjun was expecting some real help from Kiran, like a better-paying job. He knew this deal was not in his favor. He thought about Prabhat, but Prabhat was just a student and he didn’t want to be a burden to him. And he was afraid that his lifelong friendship might be ruined along with his expectations. He was in a dilemma—should he take this deal or not?

“Arjun, you there?”

“Yes…”

“You’re not going to get a better deal in your situation, you know! It’s really hard to get a job these days, especially when you are illegal. If you say no to this, you’ll probably end up being homeless. I wish I could do better for you, but it’s all I can do right now.”

Arjun didn’t have much choice. “Okay, I’ll come there. What’s your address?”

Arjun wrote it down, then handed Roberto’s phone back to him. “Thank you. Looks like I’m going to New York City.”

“You have two options to go there. Option number one— I drop you off at a Greyhound bus station here and you travel there on your own. Option number two—there are more people coming tomorrow. Most of them are going to New York, Maryland, and Boston. We have a big van, and our driver will take them there in two days. We charge $400 each and we will drop each of them to their addresses. You can go either way—we are cool with it. Just let me know.”

“I will go in the van with the rest of the people. My father will send you $2,500 tomorrow.”

“Sounds good. I’ll pay the driver $400 and give you the remaining $600 once I receive it. For now, you can go back to your room.”

“Okay, thanks.”

The next day, in the late afternoon, seven more people arrived at the house. The following morning, the guard and Roberto brought them scrambled eggs, bacon, hash browns, toast, and coffee.

“Guys, eat your breakfast, then get ready. You’ll be leaving in an hour,” Roberto said.

Later the guard came back. “Whoever is going to New York, Maryland, and Boston, come with me.”

Arjun and eight more guys followed him to a van in the garage. They all got in.

After driving for about ten minutes, Arjun noticed the driver looking in his rearview mirror and frowning. Arjun glanced back—two police cars were following them. *Oh no.* He tried to reassure himself. *We should be okay. As Uncle Sundar told me—nobody gives a shit about illegal people here.* The red light on top of the police cars lit up and started rotating.

*What’s that for?*

“Oh shit! Oh shit,” the driver said. “Somebody must have complained… Holy shit, what am I going to do?”

“Can’t you drive faster than them?” a guy sitting next to the driver said.

“No no no… can’t do that.” The driver pulled over and stopped the van. Without turning back at the guys, he said, “Listen all of you, I’ll do the talking. All of you be quiet. Everything will be fine.”

*I hope he is right.*

Both of the police cars stopped behind them. Two officers, one from each car, walked toward the van while the others stayed behind. The driver opened the window. “Hello, officer. Is there a problem?”

“We received a complaint about this vehicle,” the officer said. Show me your driver’s license and registration.”

“Sure, sure.” The driver took out the documents and handed them to the officer, who passed them to the other policeman without even glancing at them.

“Where are you guys going?” he said, looking back at the driver.

“New York.”

“Who are those people on the back?”

“Friends.”

“Okay guys, take out your IDs.” The officer peered at the travelers. *Is he going to arrest us now?* Arjun’s heart sank—he didn’t know what to say to the man.

“Officer, they forgot their IDs at home,” the driver said.

“All of them?”

“Yes, all of them forgot. We had them in a bag, and we forgot the bag.”

“Okay, that’s ridiculous. Everybody should be carrying their own ID on them. All of you, get out of the van,” the officer said. Then he gestured to the other officers to come there.

One after another, the guys stepped out of the van.

The other cops came towards them. The travelers were instructed to face the van with feet apart and hands on the vehicle. They were checked for weapons. One of the officers said, “You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law.”

Before the policemen had cuffed them all, more police cars arrived.

“You three, come with me,” one of the officers said, pointing at Arjun and two other guys.

Arjun’s chest felt tight as he followed the officer. The man opened the door and three of them got in the back.

# Chapter 46

The police car stopped at a detention center. One of the officers opened the door for Arjun and the two other guys. “Get out of the car.”

The guys climbed out and the officers guided them inside the building. They entered a common area with some chairs. A television was hung on the wall. Two guards stood in front of them.

“Are there more?” one of the guards said.

“Yes, they should be here soon.”

“Okay, follow me, guys,” the guard said. They walked behind him.

He led them to a windowless, vacant room and closed the door. Then the officers unlocked their handcuffs.

“We’ll be back,” the guard said, as he and the policemen exited the room.

Arjun heard the door being locked from outside.

*What are they going to do with us?* *How could this happen?”* Sundar is my uncle, why didn’t he tell me this might happen? He thought. He remembered Sundar telling him, “Nobody in America gives a shit about who is legal or not.” *He lied to me.*

Arjun heard the two guys talking in Spanish. “They are going to deport us.”

*Oh no. How will I be able to repay the loan?* He felt panic-stricken and his chest was tight. He paced around the room without talking to anybody.

A little later, the door opened, and the rest of his traveling companions entered, except the driver. They all looked scared.

About an hour passed by, and the guard came in again. “Come out one at a time.”

A guy close to the door followed him. The rest of them stayed inside, nervously waiting for their turn.

The guy came back to the room and another one was called in.

“What did they say?” one of them said in Spanish.

“They asked me where I’m from, why I came to America, how I got here, and so on.”

Arjun stayed quiet, listening to their conversation. After a while, it was his turn and Arjun followed the guard to a room where a man sat on a chair. In front of the man was a computer and a bunch of papers. He took Arjun’s fingerprints and mug shots, then told him to take a seat.

“What’s your name?”

“Arjun Sharma.”

“Do you have anybody to represent you?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Okay, answer my questions to the best of your knowledge, all right?”

Arjun nodded.

The man asked him about his travels—who were his agents, how did they travel to the United States, why did he come? Where were they staying in Houston? And so on. Arjun told him what he knew.

“Did you flee your country because of your safety? Is there any danger if you were to go back?’

“I left my country looking for opportunity to have a better life. I never intended to come here when I first left, but because of the earthquake in Haiti, my agent redirected us to come here. My family has borrowed a lot of money to pay for my safe passage. With the current political situation of Nepal, there are no jobs there. If I even find one there, I might never be able to repay the loan no matter how hard I work. And the people who lent us money could harm me when I can’t pay them back. I would like to request your government please let me stay here.”

“Go back to the room for now. The court will decide that for you.”

“Thank you.” Arjun followed the guard back to the room.

All day and night, the guys were kept in there. There were no beds or even mattresses or pallets. They all sat on the concrete floor. Late in the evening, the guards brought them plates of mashed potatoes with gravy and tiny pieces of chicken. The food was cold and salty, but at this point, Arjun was just grateful for food to fill his belly.

The next day, the guard opened the door. “Come outside, one at a time.”

Arjun stepped out of the room where many police officers were present. One of them put handcuffs on him. Then he put a thick chain and fixed it on his waist like a belt and attached it to the cuffs. Arjun could hardly move his wrists.

The officer was not done. He then shackled Arjun’s leg with another heavy iron chain. Arjun had once seen a buffalo being chained and dragged into a slaughterhouse. The incident turned him to vegetarianism for years. Now he felt like he knew the real trauma the animal had gone through. When the boss in Kuwait had called him a buffalo, it had hurt him. But that was just a word—this was reality. He tried to summon a positive thought, but he didn’t have any left. *I wish I had died in the Darién Gap. I’m really a worthless animal.*

“Stand over by the wall,” the officer said, jolting him to reality.

He nodded and stood on the side.

One after another, the rest of them were chained.

“Where are we going?” one of the guys said.

“Some of you are being transferred to a penitentiary. Others will be sent back to their countries.”

*Where are they going to send me? Both are equally scary.* Cold sweat trickled down his neck.

“You three are coming with us,” one of the officers pointed at Arjun and two more guys. They walked behind the officer and his partner to a car. The policemen opened the back doors. “Get in.”

With great effort, the guys dragged their chains into the car and they drove away.

# Chapter 47

“Take off your clothes and put them in these baskets,” an officer said. Arjun and two of his companions were standing by the three officers in the processing room of the new jail.

Arjun took off his clothes and shoes and placed them in the basket, then stood in front of the officer in his underpants.

“Everything!”

It was awkward and embarrassing, but there was nothing he could do about it. He took off his underwear and placed it over his clothes.

While the third officer was examining the clothes in the basket, the second officer placed a square mirror about a foot square on the bench. He pointed at Arjun. “You get up here and squat over the mirror!”

Conscious of his naked body, he looked at the officer, confused.

“Sit on it like you want to take a shit and cough.”

It felt like he had lost all his dignity.

He squatted over the mirror and tried to take his mind off the situation. He thought about his young days when there were no toilets in the school in his remote village. He would go into the bushes under the open sky with his friends, chatting with them while taking a poop.

*What’s he doing?* The officer pointed a flashlight on his rectum. “Now cough.”

Arjun coughed multiple times while the officer observed him on the mirror.

“Okay, I don’t see anything up there. You’re good. Go stand on the side.”

*Wait, what? People carry stuff up their butt?*

He climbed down and stood by the wall, still naked. The third officer came up to him. “Open your mouth.” The man turned on a flashlight and looked inside his mouth. “You good.”

After the searching of all the guys was over, the first officer handed them each an orange inmate uniform and a towel and sent them to a shower room.

When they came back, showered and in the uniforms, the first officer said, “Follow me.”

They followed him to their unit. The prisoners in other cells started shouting and yelling at them. Arjun wasn’t sure whether they were welcoming their new neighbors or were just happy they had some new guys to bully. Either way, Arjun did not feel good.

The officer opened a cell and told Arjun to get in. As he walked inside, the door was shut behind.

A huge guy was lying on the top bunk bed. He was so tall that his feet were sticking out of the bed. He saw Arjun and jumped down.

“Why you here?” the man barked.

“Illegal crossing,” he replied.

“You guys don’t understand, do you?”

“I guess not.”

“Jealous of the American life.” The man laughed out loud.

Arjun stayed quiet.

“I came the same route, fifteen years ago. Jealous of the American life.” He laughed again. “It was easier back then, but still took me a second try. I was hiding behind a big rock, but because of my huge body, I was busted. Actually, whole group got busted.” He laughed again. “They weren’t too happy with me, but what can they do to me? What can anybody do to me?” He laughed again.

“So, why are you here?” Arjun said. He wanted to continue the conversation—as Pradip had said, he needed to keep good relations with everybody while being locked inside.

“Here in the jail?” asked the man.

“Yes.”

“Business…supply and demand.” He laughed again. “I deal marijuana.” The man stretched his body. “The same cops who begged me for it the week before, busted my house. Sons of bitches. Put me down in front of my kids. Not good…not good.” He shook his head.

Arjun was relieved the guy wasn’t threatening him. He sat on the bottom bunk and stared at the walls for a while. Later, some food came and then it was lights out.

The days passed slower than ever. He had a lot to think about. After all he’d been through, he’d finally reached his destination, but then his dream fell apart. He didn’t see any way out. His life was ruined now.

His cell mate was harmless, which was a huge relief. But there were other disadvantages to sharing a cell with a giant man, especially when he used the restroom. The guy’s craps were huge, and the cell smelled like a septic tank. Then there was trying to sleep with the noises the guy made at night. His snoring was louder than a lion’s roar, and probably the whole building could hear him fart. *Chitra’s snoring was a melody compared to his.*

A week had passed by. Arjun was staring at the wall, his mind in turmoil. A guard came and opened the cell door. “You come out,” he said pointing his chin towards Arjun.

*Where is he taking me?*

“Okay.” He stood up and glanced at his cellmate. “In case I don’t come back—goodbye.”

“Take care of yourself, my man.”

“You too.” Arjun walked out of the cell.

“Where am I going?” he said, as they exited the door.

“To court.”

“Oh.”

Before getting out of the building, two officers chained him the same way they had done before he was brought into the jail.

The car stopped in front of a stone building, and one of the officers opened the door for him. He climbed out of the vehicle, his chains weighing him down. People passing by stopped and looked at him. *They must be thinking I’m some kind of murderer or psychopath.* He felt embarrassed and humiliated. He had never imagined he would be chained like a wild animal in a foreign land. He lowered his head.

On the top of that, his fate would be decided in court today, but he didn’t know what to wish for. Was it better to be deported back to his country or stay in the prison? It would be better if I could just end my life, he thought. But do I even have the liberty to die freely? What’s going to happen to my family? *Oh God, what am I going to do?*

In the crowded courtroom, it was finally his turn. An elderly judge called his name and the officers led him to the stand.

“I have read your file. Do you have anybody to represent you today?” the judge said.

*How do I address him?* “No, sir.”

“Do you wish to get an attorney? I strongly recommend you do.”

“Yes sir, I do.”

“Here is a list of government immigration attorneys. They can represent you for free. Or you can have your own lawyer if you decide to do so.” The judge handed the paper to a guard and he passed it to Arjun.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Do you have any question?”

“Yes. What happens now?”

“I see in your file that you want to stay here in this country. This is a free country. You can fight for your rights. You will get to tell your side of the story. If it’s plausible, you might be allowed to stay here, and if it’s not, you will be deported. Any more questions?”

“Would I be able to make a phone call?”

“Certainly, you may call any person living in this country.” The judge then glanced at the officers. “Gentlemen, let him make a call today.”

“All right, your honor.”

Back at the jail, the officers took him to a prison phone.

“Make it quick,” one of them said.

Arjun nodded and dialed in Kiran’s number.

“Hello.”

“Hello, Uncle, it’s me, Arjun.”

“Arjun, where are you? It says you are calling from a correctional facility.”

Arjun explained his situation to him.

“Don’t call here again,” Kiran said. “I tried to help you, but I don’t want any trouble. Helping an illegal immigrant could ruin my life.”

His glimmer of hope of getting out of the prison and starting a new life just disappeared. Arjun didn’t know what to do now. He stayed there for a minute, phone in hand, then mumbled, “This is why we need friends.” He dialed Prabhat’s number.

When Prabhat realized it was Arjun, he asked, “Hey, buddy. Are you all right? What’s going on? I got to talk to your father a few days ago. Everybody’s worried about you. Tell me you’re okay.”

“No, I’m not okay. I was headed to Kiran’s place in New York and on the way, I got busted. I’m in jail and I can’t do anything to get out of here. I called Kiran just now and he said even talking to me could ruin his life.” Arjun had difficulty saying more words. He paused for a few seconds and continued, “He tried to help me, you know, but it’s all over now. I should have asked more people about life in America for illegal immigrants. I should have realized they treat illegals like animals. I shouldn’t have left Nepal. My greediness for a better life brought me here! I’m living in a prison, where murderers, rapists, and the worst people live. It looks like I am part of it now. Wherever I go, they chain me like a wild animal, like I’m some kind of terrorist. I just want to get out of here. Maybe talking to me might cause you problems, but you’re my only chance. I’m sorry, so sorry...”

“Hey buddy, I’m glad you called me. It’s going to be all right. I will do everything in my power to help you. Don’t worry, we’ll figure it out together. Tell me exactly where you are and give me a few days. I’ll consult with immigration lawyers here and bail you out as soon as possible.”

Arjun told him where he was. “Thanks a lot, my friend. I hope you won’t have to go through a lot of trouble.”

“Anything for you, buddy. Just stay strong for a couple of days.”

# Chapter 48

*Penn Station, New York City, July 23, 2010*

“Hey buddy, you finally made it!” Prabhat came running towards Arjun.

Arjun had dreamed about this moment—to meet his best friend in the country of opportunities. But he didn’t feel the joy he had been expecting. Everything looks like it’s going to be okay, he thought. But why am I not happy? *Am I depressed?*

He forced a smile and hugged Prabhat. “Good to see you. Thanks so much for helping me.”

“Good to see you too, buddy. Our childhood is back. We are going to have a blast.”

*Is it even possible?* “Do you know how long I can stay in this country?”

“You don’t need to worry about that right now. The lawyer told me a case like this takes years to get to court. During that time, you are a free man.” Prabhat glanced at Arjun for a few seconds. “Where’s your bag? You can’t leave it and walk around. You can get in trouble for that.”

“I don’t have anything.”

“Hmmm… okay.” Prabhat looked shocked, but he immediately changed the topic. “So, how was your journey?”

“Long. Very long. And very difficult. It took me more than seven months to get here. I don’t recommend anybody to travel this way. I received a death threat by an agent for not paying him on time. I was also tortured in a jail in Mexico, barely escaped getting raped by another cellmate, and nearly got killed in the Darién Gap. I went through so much I don’t even know where to start.”

Prabhat looked at him, his eyes filled with concern. “I’m so sorry to hear that, buddy. We don’t need to talk about it now—you can tell me about it some other time.”

As Arjun followed Prabhat out on the street to a parking lot, he looked up at the skyscrapers with their bright lights. The sidewalks were crowded with pedestrians, and horns blared as yellow taxis roared past.

Prabhat opened the door of a car. “Let’s go.”

“Wow, this is a nice car. You must be well settled here.”

“Yes, it’s a nice car, but it’s not mine. I borrowed it from a friend to pick you up. I’m still struggling a bit. I haven’t gone through anything near what you’ve experienced, but I’ve had my own struggles to survive in this country. I’ll tell you about it some other time.”

“Okay.”

Prabhat drove across the Queensboro Bridge. Arjun looked out the window and saw a huge river. A beautiful red cable car was passing over it. The magnificent New York City was even bigger, busier, and more exciting than he’d heard. A light breeze was passing through the window, and Arjun felt like it was whispering to him.

Although he was relieved to finally be here with his friend, his recent painful experiences and the uncertainty of his future made him a bit dizzy. He remembered how the bright city of Kuwait had treated him and was scared. *What if this city does the same?* He was drained and exhausted. He didn’t have the courage to bear any more suffering. As Prabhat drove through the city, the faces of all of Arjun’s travel companions flashed in front of his eyes like a slide show. There was the face of the dead lady staring at him from the bush, the poor, sick lady who had died in his arms. And the little girl he had helped. *Will Maria ever see her dad again?* His heart felt cold. *Poor girl.* He thought of his fellow travelers, Mohan, Chitra, Dipesh, and Pradip. He wondered if he would ever see any of them, or if that would be a closed chapter of his life, just like the friends he’d made in Kuwait. He missed all of them, especially Pradip, without whom he probably would not have made it this far. He tried to free himself of the recurring unpleasant memories of his journey, but a question constantly haunted him: *Will this journey through hell, which so far has only led me to the title of “illegal,” be worth it?*

A map of the world with a route

Description automatically generated