

CHAPTER 1

ATOMS OF SUNLIGHT filter through the burgundy curtains, tinting the room with dim, atmospheric light. I'm lying naked on the wooden table. Three dark-haired women in colorful saris stand around me, holding golden pitchers shaped like Aladdin's lamp. The pitchers are filled with steaming medicated water, which the women are pouring repeatedly across my body, drizzling it back and forth in rhythmic, repetitive motion. The sensation of the hot liquid spilling onto my skin is hypnotic. My mind is hazy, hovering somewhere along the border of consciousness. Whimsical thoughts float dreamily through my head. It feels like I've been transported back in time ...a few centuries back ... into the body of an Arabian princess being prepared for a lavish royal wedding. Or would this be just a normal daily ritual for a sixteenth century Arabian princess...?

But that's not where the story starts. It starts nine months earlier, in a far away and much less sultry, less decadent setting.

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Nine Months Earlier (March 2017)

Johannesburg, South Africa

The calm silence of my hotel room is abruptly shattered by a furious yell.

"I don't want to do this anymore!!!"

The yell comes from me, and it's directed at my laptop screen. The defenseless laptop narrowly escapes being hurled across the room. But, luckily for both of us, I restrain myself from throwing anything and instead focus on the words that just came out of my mouth, which, until the moment I yelled them, I didn't realize were true. *I don't want to do this anymore.*

This startling epiphany is followed by a second one.

Nobody's making me do this. If I don't want to do this anymore, I can just stop.

As the full impact of this revelation dawns, I sit frozen in shock and awe. Invisible shackles around my wrists crack in half and shatter into a thousand pieces at my feet, as if made of glass. "*This*" referred to devoting approximately 90% of my waking hours, thoughts, and energy to my job, with its impressive but ridiculously over-inflated title of Senior Vice President of International Sales for a dermocosmetic company not large enough to respectably be handing out titles that long.

The company has exciting potential and manufactures exceptional products, but it's headed by an unstable genius and its management team consists mostly of incompetent men with oversized egos who specialize in making terrible business decisions. (Nothing against men in general, these particular incompetent egomaniacs just happen to be men.)

I've been with the company for a year and half. For the first fourteen months or so, things had gone extremely well in spite of those undesirable colleagues, and the job had been a rich, rewarding experience in many ways. But in recent months, doors had begun shutting in my face, one after another. Unrelated situations had begun plunging downhill for reasons out of my control, inside and outside the office.

It was odd. I had started to get the feeling that Life was nudging me in a different direction. But, until about ten seconds ago, I had remained committed to working towards a successful turnaround, feeling a sense of obligation to my goals, my employer, and my clients. The idea of leaving had never crossed my mind. My mind isn't wired that way. I'm not a quitter. I don't leave when things get tough.

The proverbial last straw that triggered my angry yell and apparently obliterated that internal wiring was the discovery of the three emails I found waiting at the top of my inbox when I got back to this hotel room after a long, exhausting, excruciatingly boring day with a potential

business partner who had turned out to be a complete waste of time. All three emails were from upper management and cannot be accurately described by any polite adjective so I must call them what they were: asinine. Totally void of common sense, announcing ridiculous business decisions that would undo months of work on my part. And they were only the first three. Beneath them, five hundred more unread emails sat neatly lined up, waiting for my attention. They had accumulated during my two-week South Africa vacation, even though I had been skimming emails every day for anything urgent and keeping myself available by phone at all waking hours in case of any emergencies.

Now, as my head wraps itself around the astonishing concept that I want to part ways with my job and that no one will prevent me from doing so, the next question presents itself. *If I don't want to stay here, what do I want?*

I could look for another job in my field, with a more competent management team. My resume is strong; I could probably find one. But that idea makes me feel heavy and tired. I don't want to find another job like this one. I want to leave my whole career. I want to leave life as I know it.

This is another shock.

For the past thirteen years, ever since I graduated college, my life had revolved around my job. I wasn't career-driven by nature, but I was committed to success, and success took a lot of time, energy, and focus. For a long time, I didn't mind, because I loved the job. My career over the past twelve years was my adolescent dream come true: get paid to travel the world. When I was a young and inexperienced teenager, I didn't know anyone else who got paid to travel the world and that seemed like an impossible dream. But I got a degree in International Business, and my wish came true. My job took me everywhere from Paris to Bogota to Cairo to Singapore to Sydney, and to gorgeous Caribbean islands. I loved discovering the world, and I loved the work too: it was exhilarating, interesting—and exhausting. I worked my ass off, through different time zones and airports and long airport lines, flights and taxi rides and sometimes a different country and hotel every night, meetings, store visits, keeping up with hundreds of emails a day, and occasionally three to four hours of sleep per night. “I'll sleep when I'm dead” became my motto.

Over the past few years, my workload has lightened. I get more sleep

now, but the years of intensity have left me drained. This life used to be my dream, but it isn't anymore. It's started to feel empty. Actually, if I'm to be honest, it started feeling empty years ago, but recently it's become increasingly, undeniably soul-starving.

So now, sitting here alone in front of my laptop in the solitude of this quiet hotel room, I ask myself: *what's my new dream?*

True love, fairytale style, has secretly always been my other lifelong dream, but I haven't found that yet, and unfortunately, I can't snap my fingers and make my personal Prince Charming appear. So, what else do I want?

I don't know. Really, I have absolutely no idea. I know only two things: One, I don't want to look back at my life when I'm eighty and see that I did nothing more interesting than sell shampoo my whole life. And two, I don't want to deal with bullshit from upper management and/or colleagues anymore. Or from anyone.

"I want a year without bullshit," I announce to the room.

The room appears unaffected. But I'm not. From the starting point of that tiny seed of clarity, an idea begins to take shape.

There is one other thing I know: I still want to travel the world, but in a different way. No longer at the high-speed pace of a day or two per country, staying in the capital, meeting with business contacts, experiencing some great restaurants and if I'm lucky a little taste of local culture, then getting on a plane back home. I want to travel slowly now. I want to go beyond capital cities. I want to stay in one place long enough to discover the culture—to learn what's beneath the surface. I want to discover other sides of life.

I know it's possible to do this kind of thing, because for years I've been meeting people who do things like quit their jobs and travel for a year, or fly to Portugal on holiday and stay forever. But I always thought I personally could never do something like that. I need to be responsible, have a job, and pay my bills, right?

But, a year ago I met Crystal from Seattle. I met her in Playa del Carmen, just a few months before she got divorced, quit her job, and took off to Asia, where she's been wandering through Laos and Thailand for the past eight months, discovering outrageously beautiful waterfalls, rock climbing, learning to weave and speak the language and selling Thai tea

and fabrics at the night markets. I'm enthralled by her Instagram photos and consumed with curiosity about her experience.

Since she could do it, I could do it. I have no children, pets, or spouse to hold me back. Savings will get me by for a little while, but I'll eventually need another job. What line of work will keep me clear of all bullshit for a full year?

A vivid memory floats back to me. When I was twenty-three, I spent a month working at a summer camp in Belgium, teaching English to cute kids. The kids were bullshit-free and impossible not to adore. I still carry my favorite ones in my heart: vibrant ten-year-old Sophie from Belgium, sweet little Charles from Germany, gentle brown-eyed Aurelie from the Netherlands who's now all grown up and in med school.

So, I could teach English for a year. Maybe in Asia somewhere. But wait. I won't start teaching right away. First, I'll take some time to be free as a bird and do whatever most pleases my heart.

And what would that be?

My mind pauses, searching. The first answer that arrives: *Go back to Bali.*

Oh yes, *Bali*. The closest thing to heaven on Planet Earth, as far as I know. I know this because I went to Bali for work a few years ago, and it was incredible. However, it was a very short trip, because I'd planned to take two weeks of vacation afterwards to stay and luxuriate in Balinese bliss, but an important buyer in Florida scheduled a meeting that thwarted those plans. Now, with no buyers to get in the way, I can go back for as long as I want. Or as long as the visa regulations will let me, however long that is. I'll figure those details out later. But definitely at least a month or two.

Now I'm starting to get excited. Next question: when will this happen?

Not immediately, that's for sure, because number one: I own a house that's an almost-completed Work In Progress. For the past three years, most of my free time and disposable income has been dedicated to transforming said house from a dated eyesore with some bizarre paint choices into a gorgeous zen sanctuary. (The movie *The Money Pit* pretty much describes my experience.) Thanks to my ex-boyfriend Ryan (and when I say "thanks," I mean it with sincere, palms-together-down-on-my-knees-bowing-forehead-to-the-floor immense gratitude), I did a lot of the

renovation work myself. That is to say, we initially did a lot of the work together, then we broke up, and I carried on alone with my specialties (painting and tiling) and hired a Peruvian contractor/savior named Miguel to do the rest. This massive project is almost done—actually the house is finished, but I'm working on the backyard now, and its transformation from untamed wild jungle into urban tropical oasis is nearly complete. Obviously, I can't leave until it's done. And then I'll need to find a tenant.

Then there's factor number two: my job. A lot of people around the world have significant time, money, and potential invested in projects that I'm responsible for. I'll need to make sure they'll be left in a new pair of good hands.

Clearly, my leap into freedom won't happen tomorrow. According to my calculations, I'll need about four months to wrap up the house and job situation.

The details will take a while to come together, but from this moment, my mind is made up. There will be no wavering or second guessing. And just so you know, this bold, unwavering decisiveness is not exactly the typical me. I can be found more often hanging out noncommittally on the indecisive side of the spectrum. But there are times in life when what you want is so crystal clear that there is no room for doubt, hesitation, or second-guessing. This was one of those times.

In the months that follow, many people will tell me, "You're so brave for doing this!" That will surprise me every time, because a) I thought everyone would tell me I was crazy. And b) it wasn't brave. Bravery is a quality I respect enormously, because it's admirable, it's heroic, and it's hard. Bravery is when you are afraid to do something and you do it anyway.

In making this choice, I didn't feel any fear. I just suddenly realized what I wanted, and chose that. And you could say this was a selfish choice, because I made it entirely, 100 percent, for me. Because it's what I wanted to do, not because it was what anyone else wanted or expected me to do. I chose this because it was what my whole heart wanted. It wasn't the hard, scary road. It was the sparkling, enticing, irresistible road.

I didn't realize this at the time, but later it occurred to me that it's often at moments like these in life that things start to happen. Put into a formula, it would look like this: A (your whole heart intensely wants

something with zero doubts, resistance or reservations—and often you have to get shaken forcefully to get to this stage) + B (your mind taps you on the shoulder and presents you a preview of What Other People Will Probably Think About This and you pause to look at it, shrug your shoulders, and with one dismissive swoop of your hand brush that scenario out of your mind and return to focus on What You Want) + C (you take some form of action in the direction of what you want, even if just one tiny step) = BOOM! As the magic starts showing up in your life in sometimes small and sometimes mindboggling ways, you, in starry-eyed wonder, ride the flow in the direction of the course your heart set for you.

But it's not all magic, rainbows, and butterflies. Oh no. This is real life. There will be curveballs.

CHAPTER 2

And you? When will you begin that long journey into yourself?

—RUMI

April 2017, Delray Beach, Florida

PREPARATIONS FOR MY DEPARTURE are unfolding. I'm wrapping up work and house projects and making my way through an online TEFL English teaching certification course. I have not, however, started looking for teaching jobs, because I've realized there are several other things I want to do with my free time first, even before going to Bali.

This realization was mainly thanks to a recent phone call from my friend Kim from Tampa. She called to ask if I was interested in doing a yoga teacher training in Key West. Kim, by the way, is the one who got me into yoga in the first place, a little more than a decade ago, when I was in my mid-twenties. I had recently tried yoga for the first time: by renting an advanced yoga DVD from the library and attempting to follow along with it in my living room. The only thing I remember about that experience is that I fell over a bunch of times.

Next, I tried a yoga class at the gym. When Kim heard about that, she scoffed. "Don't go there for yoga! I'll bring you to a real yoga class."

Shortly afterward, she brought me to my first real yoga class. It was at the home of the teacher, Tony, an Eastern European with a thick accent who could gracefully mold his body into postures requiring incredible strength, balance, and flexibility. The room fit a max of five students plus Tony, and the classes were physically challenging. We held each posture

for a long time while breathing deeply. Once, I unexpectedly started crying in the middle of the class and had to leave the room. I didn't know where the grief came from, but suddenly it was there. And then the tears came, and when they stopped, the grief was gone too.

Over the years, I tried other studios and other teachers, and gradually I was hooked. I didn't do yoga every day, but I couldn't not do it for long. I had thought about taking a yoga teacher training course, not to become a teacher, just to deepen my personal understanding of this practice that had such a profound effect on my mental and emotional state. But I never had had enough free time.

Now, finally, I do. But, in Key West?

"Why don't we take one in India?" I asked Kim. "That's where yoga started, and everything's cheaper over there."

That's not a viable option for Kim, because she can't take that much time off work. But I have no such constraints.

That night at home, I google "yoga teacher training India." The first option the search engine presents me is a yoga school in Dharamsala. Their website is well done; the school looks good. Perfect, actually. The photos, the videos, the description, the testimonials, all of it. It seems like a perfect balance of traditional Indian and modern-day Western culture. And the price is a quarter of Key West's.

I know nothing about Dharamsala, so I google it next. To my pleasant surprise, Google reveals that Dharamsala is home to the Dalai Lama. I know essentially nothing about the Dalai Lama either, except that he is widely revered for reasons unknown to me, and his name (or is it a title?) has an exotic allure. A couple weeks earlier, I happened to see a YouTube video of him speaking and I liked his vibe. I had instantly decided he was someone I'd like to meet.

Google also reveals that Dharamsala is in the Himalayas of North India. Normally I'm drawn to beaches and the tropics, but for some reason lately I've been craving mountains. In the photos on my screen, the town of Dharamsala itself looks a little drab, but the panoramic mountain views around it are breathtaking. And, as it so happens, the Dalai Lama will be leading four days of teachings in Dharamsala at the end of August. They're free and open to all, and they'll end two days before the start of the teacher training.

I feel that rare and exceptional click of: *This is it. This is meant for me.* I never look at another school. I register for that September yoga teacher training.

What is strange about this is that normally I am the girl who looks at every single available option and spends hours—or sometimes days—evaluating and comparing before selecting the best one, whether we're talking about hotels, shampoo, jars of peanut butter, anything. But not this time.

There's one other thing I want to do before the teacher training: a ten-day Vipassana silent retreat. There are fourteen Vipassana centers in the US, but since I'm going to India, I might as well do it there. I already have a business visa that will give me four months in that country.

I find a Vipassana center near Delhi offering a ten-day retreat whose dates fit perfectly in the three-week window between my other plans: my friend Carolyn's wedding August 4th in San Francisco, and the Dalai Lama's teachings. I apply and they accept me.

Everything has all come together so conveniently ... except for one problematic detail.

My beloved house.

I've decided to rent it furnished, because I have no idea when I'll be back. Everyone is telling me it will be snapped up immediately, but months pass, and every interested tenant falls through. I'm not sure what this means. Am I going to hate India and come home after a month? In any case, my realtor is fantastic, and if anyone can get it rented, she will.

People ask if I'll sell it. "Never!" I say. After all the years of work and love I poured into that house, I never want to part with it.

* * *

It's my last week of work. Carlos, who's the head of the Mexico division and one of my favorite people in the company, comes into my office to say goodbye. On his way out, he pauses and looks back at me to say, "*Este es el momento, el cielo te está hablando.*"

"This is the time; heaven is speaking to you."

Carlos doesn't seem like a spiritual, metaphysical person, and I don't know why he said those words, but they make me feel that he knows

something I don't and that some kind of magic is brewing under the surface. I smile and reflexively glance at my computer screen as he walks out the door. It's 4:44.

Goosebumps cover my arms, because for a little while now, repeating numbers on the clock have been showing up at significant moments in my life like winks from the universe.

Later that week, I'm in Bogota for a trade show. The last night of the show, we host a dinner for some of my favorite colleagues and clients, and it's a night that will forever stand out in my memory like a sparkling diamond. A night of cheer and well-being with the undercurrent of a celebration of life—the perfect ending to this corporate chapter of my life.

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In the final weeks before I leave Florida, I get two readings. The first is a tarot card reading from a woman named Kim Kennedy. I met Kim through a mutual friend, and the first moment I saw her I felt that I was looking at my higher self in human form. She was in her early fifties I think, bright and beautiful, with sky blue eyes, a cascade of wavy blond hair, and a fairy-like energy of lightness, warmth, and wisdom. She glowed with a radiance that seemed more than human. From the instant we met, I felt that I already knew her.

When I learned she does tarot readings, I decided to get one from her, even though I didn't know much about tarot. I'd once had a reading from a woman sitting behind a folding table in a New Orleans plaza. The cards told the woman I was highly organized, which didn't give me a strong faith in tarot cards. But Kim inspires faith.

Kim does my reading over the phone. Everything she says resonates as spot on. While describing my near future, she tells me, "Trust your intuition, go with the flow...you won't be able to see the path ahead, but you will be guided, one step at a time. It will feel like you're blindfolded and being led by spirits."

It will feel like you're blindfolded and being led by spirits. Those words will come back to me many times during the journey to come.