

## Prologue

*"The Eye of Allah is upon you," they say. It stares at me, unblinking. I have pleaded with the eye for mercy, for forgiveness for whatever terrible thing I have done. I have seen myself reflected back in the static lens. But I cannot move it to tears or soften its glassy sentinel. What god is this? This watching god, who coldly peers into my cell and yet sees not my suffering?*

*They call me Amah, but this is not my name.*

*"Ash-hadu anla elaha illa-allah wa ash-hadu anna mohammadan rasul-allah," they say, over and over. I can pick out odd words only, enough to know they wish to trick me into reciting the shahada. They tell me to repeat it. I will not bear any such witness to their god or their prophet.*

*I beg them for food, water. I beg them to loosen the chords around my wrists and ankles. I plead with them not to harm my mother and sisters, if they are still here; sometimes I feel they are close by. I cover my ears when the screaming starts because I cannot bear to think it may be their turn. It will be my turn soon. I know little of my captors, but I know they are not patient men.*

## Chapter 1: Intake Two – Up the Mountain

"Welcome Westerners," the commanding voice hushes the gathered crowd. "I'm Hana and this is my husband, Khero. We will be your guides on the brave journey you are about to embark on. Now is the time to run back off home to your comfy sofa and TV box sets if you're having second thoughts." A brief pause is allowed for polite laughter and Hana makes a mental note of anyone who looks more uncomfortable than befits the situation.

One man seems far too formally dressed, he is already pulling at his tie in the dry heat. "Joking aside," Hana continues, "you've all signed up for this retreat; the website piqued your curiosity; you thought it would be good to try something new this year, something off the beaten track, less indulgent, more enriching. That's all well and good. We can all aspire to be worthy. But the idea is often more appealing than the reality. There is no shame in knowing your limitations. So, you can climb back onto the air conditioned bus with your cameras and phones; or you can climb towards enlightenment," she gestures to the mountain behind her. "Once we're up there, that's it for the duration of the retreat. There will be no guides to accompany you back down, and if it looks a little daunting from down here, trust me, it's a whole lot scarier from the top!" There are more stilted laughs and the crowd crane their necks and lift their eyes to the distant summit.

"OK. We anticipate three hours for the ascent. Don't forget to conserve your water, regular sips is best. Follow the path I take; it may *look* as if there's a quicker way, but trust me, it won't be safer. This isn't a race to the top, it's not about being a hero. Save that for the boardroom when you get back to your old lives," this she addresses to the shirt and tie. "Oh, and the more you talk, the quicker you'll tire: save your breath for the climb. I'll be up front, Khero will bring up the rear. Shout whoever is nearest if you get into difficulties. Try not to get injured people. And remember, any medical conditions you've failed to declare will not be covered by the insurance policy."

With the formalities out of the way, she finally asks, "Are we ready?"

The couples respond with varying degrees of enthusiasm, ranging from an irreverent, 'hell yeah!' from a young American newly-wed, to the pious, 'insha Allah,' of a soft spoken imam.

Khero kisses his wife's cheek and heads to the back of the line. Ten couples this time. Almost double the first intake. Those testimonials he wrote certainly seem to have done the trick. And there are more already on the waiting list. The complex is certainly big enough to scale up the experiment and staff recruitment is something Hana has so cleverly built in. This has been her dream for so long and it's fitting that he's taking this journey with her. She'd initially felt uncomfortable about heading up the project with a man at her side; concerned it would undermine the whole ethos. But he'd convinced her there was a kind of divine justice in taking him along for the ride; the little man behind the great woman. And hadn't he felt uncomfortable about certain aspects of the first retreat? Hana had helped him work through his instinctive maleness. He was growing as a person. Like Hana said, in a healthy relationship you should never get too comfortable; that was a sign things were stagnating. One should constantly challenge the other. He had to let go of the conservative mind-set that was holding him back from embracing a new reality. They were not vigilantes; they were shepherds, guiding their flock to pastures new. As for the wolves, some would learn to serve the shepherd, seeking the warmth and sustenance he offers; others would never forsake their true nature. Some wolves you had to shoot. Some would launch themselves over the cliff's edge, driven mad by the scent of their own desire. There would be casualties.

Domesticating the wolf was one step along the evolutionary journey. Hana's vision went beyond that. Hana's goal was a new natural order of things. True balance. Her will be done.

Up front the newly-weds are hot on Hana's heels. "You're sure setting one helluva pace there Hana," Kurt observes. "Not that we're complaining, are we sweetie?" Hana

keeps her eyes on the track. "We love to keep trim. Well, Kate's the real gym enthusiast; I just tag along."

"Don't put yourself down, honey," Kate says, popping her gum. "Tell her about your idea."

"Oh yeah, well... it seems kinda dumb now."

"What? It's all you talked about on the plane."

"Yeah, well, I'm not so sure now."

"OK then, Mr. Modest, I'll tell her. Kurt thinks you should cater more specifically for honeymooners. Believe me, the market is literally huge. And what with everyone wanting a unique – "

"Did you two hear what I said back there? About saving your breath?" Hana doesn't bother to turn round and address them face to face. She doesn't especially care if they hear her or not.

Behind Kurt and Kate are Dan and Bonnie. They don't need telling twice to pipe down. Over the past four or five years, silence has become a sort of replacement pet for them. Bonnie cherishes it, feeds it, cuddles up to it at night. Dan eyes it guardedly, resenting the incremental space it's taking up in his house. At times he lashes out at it in frustration, only for Bonnie to cling to it even tighter for protection. This trip is supposed to be a final attempt to get their marriage back on track; the fact he needed a final liaison with a stranger just hours before they left has given Bonnie serious reservations. If it wasn't for the thought of him suffering a little, she would have taken up the offer to get back on the bus.

Also towards the front of the pack are Harvey and Magda. He is studying for a PhD in Gender and Women's studies. Somehow he's convinced the University of Stockholm to fund this little excursion, promising them exclusive research. She runs boutique 'modelling' agency, *'Magda's Sideshow'*. Her husband hopes the retreat will prick her conscience where he has so often failed.

When he uses the word exploitation, she cringes, "feminism's so passé now! Women using sex to gain control or wealth is doubly empowering: they get what they want without having to do very much; and men are paying for it! If anything, it's the guys who are exploited!"

In the middle of the group, which has now dispersed considerably, are the imam, Aamil, and his wife Malika. They are courteously sharing a canister of water, sipping obediently and passing it back and forth. They are both devout, but the need to pray

is pressing a little more on Aamil's mind than Malika's. He has to assure himself, and his god, that the sacrifice is honourable.

Prayers couldn't be further from the minds of Stu and Martin, a gay couple who run a spa for abused women. It had started out as a support group which gained the attention of a few notable celebrities. The spa treatments are now included courtesy of '*A-List Auctions*.'

"I can't see Vernon buying into this," Stu complains.

"He might. But Tess wouldn't last five minutes," Martin halts abruptly and leans on Stu so that he can rid his brogue of yet another pebble.

They are overtaken by Jacob and Mags, ordinarily an easy going pair, but in this heat, the constant stops and starts are becoming a little waring. Jacob is worrying how the girls are. Mags is feeling guilty that she didn't just book him onto a golfing holiday with his brother again.

The path widens a little and there are trees here that offer some much needed shade. "D'you need a breather hon?" Asks Mags.

"No, I'm fine. Stop worrying. Do I sound the slightest bit wheezy to you?"

"You sound fine," Mags has to admit, the air and exercise seem to be doing the trick.

"There, you see. Fine, just fine. Would *you* like to stop?"

"Here's not such a good a place," Mags grabs his sleeve and tugs him with her.

"Someone's seen," Juliet tells Claude, matter-of-factly. "I said it was too public here, but you had to go ahead. What kind of man can't go an hour without needing to pee-pee? Honestly, I don't know how you lasted inside."

Claude zips up and returns to his wife back on the track. She barely waits for him before picking up the pace.

"All they saw was my *back!*" Claude tells her. "I don't see what's so alarming about that. Since when did you become such a prude? You were practically a naturist when we first met. You used to want to do a whole lot more than just *peeing* in the bushes back then. Boy, you have a short memory!"

"*Used to*, Claude, *used to*. Precisely! Most people grow up. Take on responsibilities. You have a family for Christ's sake!"

"I have a family! Thanks for reminding me. Because I'm obviously not the one who looks after them twenty-four-seven while their grown-up, responsible mother climbs the ladder of success. Only you could make a competition out of therapy." He spins

her around to face him, adding, "I'm not one of the guys at work whose balls you have to add to your collection," before walking off in front.

Claude isn't the only one who feels the call of nature on the hike. But when Greene asks her life partner, Blue, to keep watch, he's more than happy to oblige. Greene and Blue met on a demo for world peace and they knew, there and then that they were meant for each other. Together they made sense, like the green and blue of the earth.

Bringing up the rear are the older couples, the overweight and otherwise unfit. Among them are Tammy and her partner Ross. Tammy is in the latter stages of gender realignment. She's still getting used to the weight of her breasts and they are particularly tender today. And she's wearing the wrong shoes. The cute little pumps seemed fairly practical when she'd put together her outfit, but now she just wishes she'd packed her Sketchers.

Khero has been keeping an eye on this duo. Hana had put a star against certain couples on the guest list, including Ross and Tammy. Tammy's dedication to the cause wasn't in doubt. It was Ross they were keen to observe.

And, right at the back, Brad and Wendy. Brad's tie had alerted Hana. If she'd had to put money on which couple would be shadowing her, she'd have said Brad and Wendy, hands down.

Yet here they were, right at the very back. Being held up by the old and infirm.

And at a safe distance from Hana.

And in prime position to observe the rest of the group.

"Can't see *that* lasting long up there," Brad nods to Tammy.

"She seems to have gone through a lot already," Wendy replies. "And besides, didn't you hear what Hana said? Once we're up there, there's no quitting."

"That's just what they say to put the scares on us. They can't hold us against our will, if someone wants out, they'll have to get them out."

"I suppose it does sound a little extreme. I mean what if someone got really ill or injured?"

"Exactly. It all just adds to the drama. And there's some drama *queens* along for the ride, I'll say."

"Sh! He-*she*'ll hear you."

"See! You don't even know what to call it!"

"Brad! Enough already. Yes I do: *her* name's Tammy."

Accustomed as they have become to whispers, nudges, gestures, raised eyebrows and general ignorance, Tammy and Ross turn to Brad and Wendy and give a sassy little wave.

"Subtle as a brick, that one," Tammy mutters.

"Did you say *brick* or *prick*?" Ross blurts.

Tammy stifles her amusement and glares at Ross with mock annoyance.

"Oh, well, either or just about sums it up I s'pose."

Khero smiles on from behind.

It takes the lead group just over three hours to reach the peak. Even the fittest among them are subdued by the effort it has taken and by the spectacular view that greets them. Funny to think that they were down there a short while ago, totally unimpressed by their surroundings. Now, looking at them from this vantage point, they are transformed.

The retreat itself is far less inviting. A prefabricated complex of squat grey boxes set just a few metres back from the path. No ornate wrought iron gates or sign. No winding driveway lined with trees. No foliage at all.

Hana commits to memory the first reactions written on the faces of her charges: disappointment, shock, bafflement. Kurt thinks it's some mind trick, that the *real* retreat is hidden behind the monstrosity; they are merely being tested he tells the others. Bonnie looks positively triumphant; Mags, guilt ridden. Acceptance exudes from Aamil and Malika; they hold hands and smile inwardly, unwilling to pass judgement just yet.

With no more of the party in sight, Hana switches from rec. mode to hostess mode, "respect, westerners! You have passed the first test!" Kurt nudges Kate, but she ignores him, not wishing to encourage his conspiracy theory. "Allow me to introduce some of our volunteers," she motions to four men in beige tunics. "They'll take you in, get you settled in the lounge while we wait for the others... and of course, point you to the nearest bathroom! Feel free to ask questions, but there will be some information we'd rather give *ourselves*, with *everyone* present."

Once inside, it is soon apparent that any expectations of luxury are misplaced. Some of the guests remind themselves that this is not a holiday; the website made no pretence of any such thing. The walls are uniform magnolia and the carpets grey

cord. The toilets are unisex, clean and mirrorless. Perhaps due to the unconventional layout, or just the sudden proximity of strangers after the imposed silence of the hike, conversation is laboured, limited to polite exchanges: "after you... is that one taken?... that's a relief... whoops, sorry... no problem..."

Back in the lounge, the tunics wheel around trollies, offering tea, coffee, juice and plain biscuits.

"They give me the creeps," Kate tells Kurt.

"Well, you didn't seem too scared when you were telling him how to make your coffee!" Kurt points out.

"I was being polite!" She whispers. "Seriously, look at the way they mill around. It's like they're on wheels, not just the trollies. When they smile, it's just their mouth moving a certain way, like they had to be shown how to do it. Their eyes are like glass."