



## Chapter 1

### Mumbai, India

A gaily-painted dump truck, covered in yellow and red swirls, drove too fast through the pounding rain. The driver held a cup of chai in his right hand along with the wheel and reached to the passenger seat to grab a pastry. He sped toward a narrow bridge over a deep gulf.

In the back seat of the family car, nine-year-old Ravi held his favorite toy, Silly Putty<sup>®</sup>, contained in a red, plastic egg. Next to him was the suitcase his mother had filled with his clothes, toys, homework and snacks. A large, leather bound astronomy book was opened to the chapter on the Horsehead Nebula. As the rain intensified, his father kicked the wipers to high.

"Are we there yet?" asked Ravi.

His father chuckled.

"No," replied his mother. "We've been driving for 15 minutes, the drive is 15 hours."

“I don’t even remember my uncle.”

“That’s OK. The last time you saw him you were only four. You will remember this trip. Your cousin Gitika is getting married.”

At that moment, Ravi dropped the egg, and it rolled under his mother’s seat. On his hands and knees, he reached for it.

“What is my uncle’s name? Where does he live?”

“It’s your father’s brother. He is also a doctor like your father—”

As the dump truck barreled across the small bridge, the cup slipped from the driver’s hand and the hot chai scalded his lap. He screamed in pain. The truck swerved into the other lane.

To avoid a head-on collision, Ravi’s father turned a hard left just before entering the bridge, and the car became airborne. It smashed on the rocks of the riverbank 40 feet below, where it was obscured from view. It hit nose first and settled right side up. The truck’s driver sped down the road unaware.

## Chapter 2

Garden Oaks, New York

Michael was absorbed in an article, *New York City Waterfront Vision and Enhancement Strategies*, when he heard Julie’s key in the front door of their flawlessly decorated Victorian home. He dropped his copy of *The Architect’s Newspaper* and sprang into action; he fanned the magazines on the coffee table, picked up Logan’s toys and tossed them into the antique basket in the corner, and scanned the room quickly to make sure nothing else was out of place.

He sunk back on the floral fainting couch just as Julie burst in the door like a whirlwind. Her shoulder length brown hair was perfectly styled. Her designer skirt and jacket were perfectly tailored to her tall, slim frame. She removed her leather sandals and gave the room a quick scan. Walking toward the couch, she pocketed the Silly Putty<sup>®</sup> egg that Michael had overlooked.

She dropped a department store bag in front of the couch, re-fanned the magazines more to her liking, and then held her hands and one foot out for her husband’s inspection.

“What do you think?”

“What do you mean, ‘what do I think?’” he asked, laying his paper aside.

“Isn’t this just the perfect color of pink? I know I was only going to get a manicure, but...pedicures just feel so good. It’s such a luxury to have someone fuss over me.” She noticed a loose hair on Michael’s shoulder and picked it off.

“Well, I don’t think I’d want anyone messing with my feet, but I’m glad you’re happy,” said Michael from his spot on the couch. “What’s in the bag?”

“I unpacked this at the store today, and it just called my name,” she said as she reached into the purple sack with the gold lettering, “Elegant Fashions by V, Perfection Is Our Standard.”

“I’ll wear it tomorrow, shopping—”

“You bought an outfit to shop in? Don’t you think that’s a bit much?” Michael crossed his arms and let out a deep breath.

“Well...” she held up the brightly colored green and yellow dress with a tag that said, “Made in India,” “it’s casual and comfortable, the colors are almost neon. It will be perfect for the train and traipsing all over New York tomorrow. Feel how light the fabric is, and of course, I took advantage of the employee discount.”

*Must count to ten. 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10. Deep breath, Michael, OK.* “Julie, we’ve been over this before. Employee discounts don’t save you money; they cost you money.”

“But I would have bought it anyway.”

“It’s the 24<sup>th</sup> of the month. Where are you with your clothing budget?”

“Under.”

But what about this shopping trip?”

“It’s exempt. I planned it before the budget was in place. It’s not frivolous; I need new clothes for work.” She plopped down on the couch next to him.

“And tell me again why you *need* more clothes. I designed you a mammoth walk-in,” he spread his arms wide, “and it’s bulging at the seams.”

Maybe *need* isn’t the right word, but you know how everyone at the store dresses perfectly. When I look good, I feel better about myself. It gives me confidence at work, and people seem to respect me more, so,” she twisted her hair around her index finger, “I just buy them, and you know we can certainly afford them. It’s my little splurge. We’ve all got our issues.”

“But Julie you have so many clothes.”

“I know. I’ll donate some of them. When I wear something too many times I just feel, I don’t know, like a bag lady.”

“You are definitely the best dressed *bag lady* in the world. Why don’t you take up a hobby that’s cheaper, like keeping thoroughbred race horses?”

Julie looked wounded.

“I’ll get back on budget in August. I promise.”

“I’ve got to pay down some of these remodeling bills and new furniture you bought—”

“Those are one-time bills, Michael. I won’t have to buy a couch or bedroom suite for Logan for years.” She hugged him. “I don’t mean for you to be stressed about the finances. This will be my final splurge. I promise.”

“OK Julie. I’ll try to believe you.”

“Mommy,” shrieked nine-year-old Logan as he ran into the room.

“Hey, buddy! Give me a hug.” Julie wrapped her arms around him and squeezed.

“I missed you today. Ran some errands after work. Did you and dad eat?” She tousled his blond hair and looked into his cobalt eyes.

“Yep, my favorites. Peanut butter and jelly, macaroni and cheese, and Popsicles.”

“Well, your dad is quite the gourmet, isn’t he?” she smiled as she glanced toward Michael, who had conveniently buried his face in his trade journal.

“Did he say ‘Popsicles?’” asked Julie.

“Hey, we all have our issues.”

“Read to me, mommy,” Logan yanked her by the hand, unaware he was rescuing his dad.

“I’ll finish the new book we started yesterday, and Logan,” she tossed him the Silly Putty,<sup>®</sup> “we’ve had the conversation before—kitchen table *only*.”

Everything in Logan’s bedroom was decorated around a cowboy theme—lamp, area rug, curtains, artwork, and trinkets. Cowboy hats, lariats, and bandanas were painted on the headboard.

Logan played contentedly with his Legos<sup>®</sup> while Julie read page after page of an adventure story about a boy Logan’s age who escaped from kidnapping pirates.

“...and after the last pirate walked the plank, Mark turned the ship for home.”

Logan jumped up, gave a salute and announced, “I could do that. I’m brave!”

Julie closed the book. “Well, I think you are brave, but maybe you’d need to be a little older before you take on a vicious band of marauding pirates. Dad and I will always be here to protect you as long as you need us. Go take your bath; then come get me. Don’t forget, *all* the Legos<sup>®</sup> in the drawer.”

“Mom, at Jeffrey’s house he gets to leave them out, and we took the sheets off his bed and made a tent over chairs and then slept in it all night.” He smiled broadly at the memory.

“If Jeffrey’s mom wants to be messy, that’s up to her. I feel better when everything’s nice and neat.”

“And he doesn’t have to make his bed in the morning.”

She frowned, “Logan, you know the rules.”

Logan glanced at her with a mute appeal.

Julie sat on the couch next to Michael. He closed his trade journal again.

“Nine-years-old and he thinks he’s ready to take on the world,” said Julie, sorting the magazines from newest to oldest.”

“Huh?”

“Logan. He thinks he’s invincible. So sure he could escape from a band of pirates like the hero in the book.”

“That’s normal. Little boys are all about action and adventure and pirates’ treasure. As a former little boy, trust me. My brothers and I played pirates and cowboys and Indians. We even had intergalactic battles to save the Earth from invading Martians. If it wouldn’t run away, we’d strategize how to conquer it.”

He sighed, lost in his thoughts, “My brothers and I had so much fun together. I wish Logan had a brother to play with. Just think you could have had three raiding, looting, pillaging, plundering pirates running all over the place! Aaarrg, matey,” he said as he pulled his wife close for a kiss. Julie smiled at his antics, but he caught her sad expression.

“I can promise you, little girls are definitely more about playing dress up than saving the planet.”

He took her hand and pretended to admire her nails. “So are big girls, too. It’s just the perfect color of pink!” he squealed excitedly. Julie pulled her hands away and smiled. She prepared to whack him with the pillow, but he was saved again when Logan called.

“I’m ready.”

They both entered His bedroom.

“OK, TV off for the night,” said Julie interrupting the theme song for the Andy Griffith Show. The small, flat screen TV was part of a media center in Logan’s room that included all the latest technology.

“Look at you; you’re wearing your cowboy pajamas. Maybe you’ll dream about riding horses tonight. Jump in, partner,” she said as Michael folded back the down comforter exposing the cowboy sheets. After tucking him in and a little more chitchat, she folded her hands. “Let’s pray. Now I lay me down to sleep I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. Amen”

“Amen,” he repeated.

“Amen,” said Michael.

She sat on the bed next to him.

“I get extra kisses tonight because I’ll be gone when you get up. I’m meeting grandpa for breakfast, and then I’m going to New York. Remember?” Logan nodded.

“You and dad will have a fun weekend. He has all kinds of things planned for you two. And,” she said scanning the room, “you did a great job picking up your toys!” She covered his face with kisses and he grinned.

“Sleep well,” said Michael giving his son a kiss. “Don’t forget, it’s just you and me,” he lowered his voice, “and Popsicles the whole weekend!” Logan gave him a high-five. Julie gave Michael a look that implied, *Well, maybe I need to talk to you about that.*

Julie and Michael headed for the kitchen. While washing her hands with anti-bacterial soap, Julie said, “I have a surprise. Look in the freezer. Crab and brie quiche!”

While the quiche heated in the microwave, she wiped the fingerprints off the door and quickly wiped the sink and the toaster. Then she washed her hands again.

“Michael, how soon do you think you’ll be able to get the mud room painted?”

*Please, not with the paint again!* he thought. “Not this weekend. I’ll be stay-at-home dad for the next two days. Got a lot of things planned to keep us busy.” The microwave beeped, and she handed him one of the plates.

“Now that I’ve finalized the decision on the paint color, I just can’t wait to see it on the walls.”

“Just like the other *two* colors I painted in there?” He crossed his arms.

She was oblivious to his irritation.

“This color will be perfect; the others were close. This is it.”

“I’ve got so much leftover paint in the carriage house I could start a business, Julie.”

“Trust me.”

“That’s what you said about Oyster Shell Grey and Amber Fields,” his volume was rising.

“Michael, after living through a major renovation for the last 18 months, the end is finally in sight. Let’s try to finish as friends.”

He let out a sigh. “A worthy endeavor.” He toasted her with his plate.

“I know this paint will be perfect. Lisa painted her living room Mocha Toffee Coffee, and it’s beautiful. I looked at the paint swatch while she was out of the room.” *At least I hope it will look perfect in my mudroom.*

Michael sat his empty plate on the massive island, and Julie quickly moved it to the dishwasher.

“Ever since Lisa had her home featured in *Victorian Living* magazine, all you girls are trying to out decorate each other—”

“I know, but my house is just as nice as hers. I sent photos to *Victorian Homes* and *Country Victorian*. I just know they’ll call.” Julie wiped down the counter tops as she spoke.

“Honey, it’s really alright if they don’t. I’ll still love you.”

“It has to get painted right away. Everything has to be finished when they call. I don’t have a lot of free time with my work schedule.”

“Honey, the way it’s going, I don’t think the house will ever be totally done. Just relax and enjoy the fruits of your labor. You’ve worked so hard all these months and done an amazing job.”

She paused from her cleaning and beamed.

“Julie, the house is awesome. It’s authentic right down to the bedpans! I just want you to enjoy it. Remember what you read the other day? ‘Work without striving, rest without guilt’?”

Julie’s eyes scanned the custom-made oak cabinetry with leaded glass insets, the reproduction 1850 cook stove with nickel trim, and the antique pie safe.

“Do you really like it; are you really satisfied?”

He gave her a big hug. “Honey, since meeting you, I have a whole new appreciation for the beauty of a plinth block and the elegance of a corbel. I’m more than satisfied. You are awesome.”

She let out a deep sigh and reveled in his compliment.

After her 20-minute routine of skin care, body lotion, and essential oils, Julie climbed in bed next to Michael.

“Smells good. What is that?” Michael snuggled next to her. She relaxed into his arms.

“It’s Himalayan geranium and pomegranate oil. It combats premature aging.”

“That was going to be my first guess.”

“It’s imported.”

“Yea, the Himalayan part tipped me off.”

Julie sat up and set the alarm clock. “Meeting dad at 7:15 right across from the train station.”

“You looking forward to that?” Michael raised his eyebrows.

“Not really. You know how he is.”

“Like trying to hug a porcupine.”

“Exactly,” she said, setting the clock back on the nightstand.

“Well, don’t let it ruin your sleep.”

“I’ll try.”

“Something strange happened today,” said Michael. “Coming home, I stopped by the book store to get my journal, and there was a homeless woman—”

“A homeless person in Garden Oaks? Oh, my gosh.”

“Not a person, a family. She had two kids. One about Logan’s age. They were so dirty. I just kept wondering how someone ends up like that.”

“They end up like that because they don’t want to work.” She rolled to her side and put her arm around her husband.

“The kids just, well, they seemed so sad. It was like there was no hope or life in their eyes. They should be carefree. Where are they sleeping tonight?”

“They’re resourceful. They’ll be fine. There are shelters for people like them in other cities.”

“I gave them \$10 so they could eat.”

She kissed him. “You’re a soft touch Michael. Good night.”

Julie dozed. She dreamed she shopped in an exclusive New York department store wearing her new, multi-colored dress. The store was chic and glitzy.

*I love this blue sequined jacket. She slipped it on in front of the mirror. It looks even better on. I have to have this. The girls at the store will be so jealous. She flipped the price tag over. Yikes, I can’t spend that—\$1200? She reluctantly returned it to the rack.*

*Look at this—perfect for fall. These yummy colors, burnt orange, brown—\$1325? I love it, but I can’t afford that for one dress. Each highly desirable garment was more expensive than the last. A disappointed Julie continued looking and longing for the clothes she could not afford. Why am I tormenting myself? I just can’t afford these clothes today. The immaculately dressed sales person strolled by Julie, eyeing her as if she was a cockroach needing to be stepped on.*

“If you see anything you can afford, let me know!” She turned to the other sales person, and they both cackled. Julie caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror, and her eyes narrowed. Her new dress was dirty and torn. She looked at her hands; there was dirt under her fingernails. Her nose wrinkled in disgust. She looked back at the sales lady, who flashed her a superior grin.

Her cheeks flushed and she fled from the store.

She found herself standing in front of the bookstore back in Garden Oaks. Logan tapped her arm. He wore old clothes and dirt smudged his face. His tired tennis shoes had a rip across the toe.

“Mom, I’m really hungry. I haven’t eaten since yesterday. Can I have some macaroni and cheese or a peanut butter and jelly sandwich?”

“I have to get some money first.” A businessman walked by, chatting on his cell. Julie took a deep breath and stepped forward.

“Excuse me. My son hasn’t eaten. Could you please—”

The man looked irritated and hurried past, dismissing her with a wave of his hand.

She stepped forward approaching a 20-ish guy walking his dog.

“Excuse me. Can you spare a dollar for a burger? For my son, he hasn’t eaten—”

The man cast a pitiful glance and held up his hand as he walked by. “Sorry.”

“Mom, I’m really hungry.”

“I know sweetie. I’m working on it.” She hugged him as she choked back tears. The next pedestrian was Aunt Bea, from the Andy Griffith Show, who was smiling broadly carrying an embroidered handkerchief. Julie hurried to her side.

“Please, can you help—” blurted Julie, feeling strangely disembodied.

As Aunt Bea smiled, her eyes seemed to dance.

“Of course I’ll help you Julie.” She laid her arm on Julie’s shoulder. “You look a little down on your luck today.”

“Yes, I don’t even know what happened, but, yes, I need help.”

“Well, let me see what I have in my bag.” She rummaged around and pulled out a live baby bird. “I guess this would taste good on the barbeque grill,” said Aunt Bea, her face suddenly contorting into a crazed look.

*That’s totally disgusting!*

“Fly away little birdie,” Aunt Bea tossed it into the air. It flapped its wings and was gone.

“What else do I have in here? I know, this could be quite helpful.” She pulled out a hand full of Legos<sup>®</sup> and shouted, “Happy New Year,” while tossing them like confetti over Logan. Her face flushed with happiness. “Pick them up! Pick them all up!” she shrieked, flinging her arms above her head and dancing the watusi.

“Don’t you have anything that can help us?” pleaded Julie.

“Well I suppose I do. Where is it?” She rummaged in her bag and pulled out the newest issue of *Victorian Living Magazine*. “Here on page 37,” she said, flipping the pages. “Have you seen Lisa’s living room? It’s Mocha Toffee Coffee, and it’s absolutely gorgeous. It’s the cover story, you know?”