

What people are saying about

Red Dress

Having been a therapist, journalist and filmmaker for 30 years, I have had a rather demanding and hectic life and I met Bridget when she came to train with me as a hypnotherapist. Her ability to learn very quickly made it easy for her to take on the complicated issues of her clients. It was obvious from the start she had a knack for working with people's minds.

Bridget's ability not only to tell her stories but also to write with such a natural flow is a rare combination, which sets the stage for a fascinating book. Once I started reading her book, I could not put it down, as it's a compelling page-turner. I am already looking forward to her next one, as I know there will be.

We became friends over the years as I watched her intriguing life unfold. In my experience, there are a few people who have the most adventuresome lives. In fact, as an author, this is the type of person we look to interview for our own books. Bridget is definitely one of those people.

Valerie Austin, International Therapist, Journalist and Filmmaker

Engaging, light-hearted and deeply touching, this book deals with universal themes: alienation, exploration and the quest for reconciliation - with who you were, where you are and what you want to be.

Jane Bailey Bain, Author, *Lifeworks*

A story of awakening. Deeply relatable for anyone who has felt the inexorable pull of the search for greater meaning. This book explores the uncomfortable, magical journey into an expanded version of ourselves. Poignant, vulnerable and real - I was

gripped as if by the telling of my own story.

Helen Ludwig, Conscious Leadership Consultant

Bridget's book takes you on an engaging romp through the protagonist's spiritual and personal transformation. As a behavior specialist, I found her characters to be relatable and authentic. As a reader, I found myself hungry for more...

Marc Cooper-DiFrancia, CEO and Founder of Creative Self Mastery.com

Red Dress

A Novel

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Bridget Finklaire



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We operate a distinctive and ethical publishing philosophy in all areas of our business, from our global network of authors to production and worldwide distribution.

Lokah Samastah Sukhino Bhavantu

May all beings everywhere be happy and free, and may the thoughts, words and actions of my own life contribute in some way to that happiness and to that freedom for all.

Chapter 1

September 20th, 2008

Katy sat in the garden on Saturday morning, snatching five minutes to herself. The roses were fading, she noticed, wrapping her gown against the autumn chill. She didn't know then that three days later she would do something unexpected. The impulsive decision would seem like nothing, yet this one small act would set in motion a domino effect that was to change her life forever.

The weekend flew by in a flurry of chores, finishing abruptly on Sunday evening. The Stone family slept through the night to the rhythm of Richard's snoring. Katy lay awake in the darkness, listening to life. It was calm in the well-groomed suburbs of West London with its parks and leafy streets, but still there was the rumble of distant traffic, a night bus idling at the lights, revelers in the street, their loud slurs deadened by the tall, terraced buildings. Far away a late train rattled over its tracks, a fox rummaged in the bins, and a 747 followed the river as it descended towards Heathrow. London: continually alive with diverse people making their way through its veins and arteries, she thought. Her favorite place in the whole wide world.

The digital clock read 03:03 when she rolled over, catching its neon figures in the gloom. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had a decent night's rest. At this rate, she'd be tired tomorrow, and she had to get to Terry's by 11 am. Her mind raced off in another direction. If only she could sleep! It was the stress, she supposed: mother, wife, self-employed therapist and homemaker. It wasn't easy for anyone, the pressure of living in the time-starved, work-weary, money-guzzling, glorious capital.

* * *

Damn, thought Richard, wrenching himself from the thrilling dream that cleaved at him, his body aroused, nerve-endings tingling. His hand groped for the alarm before it woke everyone. Lucky cow, he thought, looking over his shoulder at his sleeping wife. He watched Katy as she let out a groan, frowned and pushed her earplugs tightly in place before rolling over. A tangle of dark auburn hair sticking out from the top of the crumpled duvet was all he could see.

Still fancy her, he thought, picturing the face he'd woken up to almost every day for seventeen years. Piercing blue eyes and full cherry lips, she was his little prize. He couldn't think exactly what was missing, apart from the obvious! He was lonely, he supposed. Empty. It had gone wrong somehow.

He shuffled into the en-suite in his dark striped pajamas. The ones she hated.

"Why don't you just go without?"

"It's cold."

"Wear a t-shirt and boxers then."

T-shirt and boxers. Who did she think he was?

After adjusting the mirror, and brushing shaving foam over his greying stubble, he let out a sigh and gritted his teeth. Another day in the jungle. He hoped he didn't end up punching someone. He'd like to wipe the smile off some of those faces, he thought, scraping the edge of the razor across his square jaw.

Richard's thoughts turned back to his dream. They'd had hardly any sex since the children were born and that was years ago. The blood was coursing through his loins, but she was always tired. Always some bloody excuse. Frigid. That was the word, she was fucking frigid. Stepping into the steamy shower, he contemplated the erection his wife didn't want and girded his tall, muscular frame against the force of the water. A while later, feeling refreshed, he stepped onto the duckboard and grabbed a thick white towel from the wooden stand.

Katy scrunched up her eyes and sighed unhappily, roused from her sleep by the noise of the pelting shower. He was doing it on purpose, she thought. He'd changed. The truth of it was, she didn't fancy him anymore. He was cold, angry and controlling. She hated the rotten smell of his morning breath, and those ridiculous 'old man' pajamas! What a city gent wears, she mocked silently.

Her mouth curled up at the corners as she thought about the cocky young man in a white t-shirt, an old guitar slung over his shoulder. The one in the photographs, the young Richard, Rick as he was then. What a contradiction, loving literature, poetry and the thuggish game of rugby! She imagined him sitting in the Student's Union reading D.H. Lawrence and wanting social justice and rock and roll. He'd have campaigned for worker's rights, and written an album of protest songs and a seminal novel. Of course, she'd missed his best years, having met him later when he joined the corporate world. But there was still a trace of the revolutionary back then.

Ambition had taken over now. He'd watched other people feather their nests with lucrative deals, and he liked what he saw. Greed, finance, and spin. The City had become his tribe. The jungle, he called it. He'd elbowed his way up the ranks to senior partner, subtly, of course, the seemingly suave advisor. Persuasion, manipulation, raw intelligence, and a dollop of charm. That's all it had taken, but he'd lost himself in the process and was losing her along the way.

Richard surveyed himself in the bathroom mirror. At least I'm not bald, he thought, slicking back his dark hair and splashing Trumper's cologne over his face. Dressing as quietly as he could, he buttoned a fresh Pink's shirt. "For fuck's sake!" he muttered, fiddling with the silver bulldog cufflinks. Adjusting the knot of his Hackett tie and smiling into the mirror, he gave himself a wink. He had to look the part if nothing else. Straightening his

suit jacket and folding a crisp, white handkerchief into the top pocket, he took another look in the mirror before examining the shine on his black leather Loakes. The deliberate clomping of his shoes across the stripped floorboards woke Katy at last.

"You off?" she murmured.

"Yes. Bye, Kittykat," he said, bending over to kiss her, the stale taste in his mouth still lingering beneath the toothpaste. "See you this evening."

He closed the bedroom door behind him before thudding down the stairs to the tiled hallway. Narrowly avoiding the clashing jangle of metal, he edged through the half-opened front door. "Wretched wind-chimes," he muttered as he hurried into the cool morning air. Bloody Feng Shui bullshit.

As he strode towards the station, he noticed curtains opening one by one as sleepy Turnham Green woke up to another grey day in the Capital. He passed row upon row of Victorian and Edwardian terraces and semis, with clipped olive bushes standing in Grecian planters like threshold guardians. Inside the sumptuously furnished houses, he imagined walls knocked through to expensive glass extensions. Neat, 'farrow cream' painted, wooden shutters covered the wide bay windows. It all stank of money and snobbery. He secretly despised what he'd become. Occasionally there was a rundown house with a badly painted door, old fashioned wallpaper, faded curtains and weeds peeping through the cracked paving. Must be old bags living in those, thought Richard, forgetting his own humble beginnings. Pop their clogs and someone'll snap the place up and make a fortune! The cynicism was rotting him from the inside out.

Men in grey suits strolled down perfectly tiled pathways, marching purposefully to their toil with hard briefcases, like worker ants seething out of the nest. He'd like to smash their smug faces.

Arriving at the station kiosk, Richard nodded at the sickly-looking man in attendance. "Financial Times and a packet of

sherbet lemons."

"Two pound sixty, mate."

He handed over the coins, folded the newspaper and thrust it under his arm. The train was packed. Barging his way through the doors onto the already heaving carriage, he squeezed his tall, sturdy frame into the crowd and bent his head to avoid the curvature of the door. Sighing, he looked down at the dandruff on the collar of the man in front and sneered.

* * *

"I don't know what's wrong with me, Terry," said Katy, looking up at the quiet, wiry man who sat in front of her that morning.

"Is it work?"

"I don't know." Katy gazed out at the elegant buildings opposite, their outlines distorted by the uneven glass of the window. "I don't think so." She pulled her manicured eyebrows together in thought. "I'm exhausted. It's a challenge, dealing with people like Seamus and everything he's been through, but it's rewarding."

"From my perspective, you're doing well!" said Terry, glancing down at his notes. "You've got most of your clients under control, and you're a good therapist." He clicked the top off his pen and made a note in the margin. "Okay, so there's one or two cases that stump you sometimes, but by and large you deal with it. Even Seamus!"

"Thank you," she said, brushing aside the compliment. "I love Harley Street and it's going well..."

"But?"

"I'm wondering if I should have a few sessions of private counselling." Katy fiddled with her left earring as she crossed her legs and leaned forward, folding her right arm in front of her. Defensive, she thought. He'll have noticed.

The consulting room was quiet and comfortable, furnished

the old-fashioned way, with buttoned leather chairs and a shiny mahogany desk. A wooden standard lamp lit a dark corner with its pale, yellow light. Outside, faded red geraniums hung from the window boxes, oblivious to their urban dwelling. Terry Slater was an experienced psychotherapist and mentor. He was her sounding board and her supervisor. He understood her clients and made helpful suggestions when the going got tough. She trusted him.

"With me or with another therapist?"

"With you, if that's okay? I'm not sure of the rules."

"Yes. It's fine. It's all confidential anyway," said Terry, opening his large, leather, desk diary. "I could fit you in tomorrow if you like. I had a cancellation at 12 pm."

"Perfect!" said Katy, checking her schedule, "I'll see you then." Her face softened with relief. She knew she was doing the right thing, however scary.

Rushing from the peace of Terry's room into the crowded street below, she hurried towards the tube station. Jostled by the masses squeezing themselves onto the carriage, she was surprised to find an empty seat. As the train lurched, she thought about the rest of the day that loomed ahead. A grid of rigid one-hour segments filled the pages of her diary. She'd left a gap tomorrow, around midday, to draw breath and take stock, and another at 12.30 pm for sandwiches and a cup of tea before the onslaught of clients. Funny how the gaps filled up, she thought, but lucky that Terry could see her. She'd better finish on time tomorrow, or she'd be rushed as usual. Her stop. She fought her way to the door. The underground was dirty, dusty, windy. She held her jacket around her and squinted as she trotted up the escalator, tousled hair blown backwards by the blast. She'd better get her head around this afternoon's clients if she wanted to give them her best shot.

September 23rd 2008

It was midday in the quiet comfort of Terry's consulting room and Katy sat once more in the sumptuous chair, straightening her skirt as she crossed her legs.

"So," said Terry, pouring two large glasses of water and handing one to Katy. "What made you want to see me?"

She took a deep breath. "I don't know, exactly! An inkling, I suppose."

He waited patiently.

"I feel..." She bit her bottom lip and looked up at the moldings on the ceiling. "I can't describe it. Something's not right." She paused, trying to locate what it was. "I'm worn out, I think!" She took her gaze back to Terry, who was making notes with his fountain pen, the nib scratching across the paper. "I feel empty, arid and..." She stopped.

"And?"

"I don't even know if I need therapy." Katy uncrossed her legs and re-crossed them again. She'd forgotten how uncomfortable it was to be in the patient's seat. It took courage to admit there was a problem – to see a therapist, she thought, recalling what she said to her own clients.

"After all, I lead a privileged life, don't I?" She raised her eyebrows as if awaiting an answer to the rhetorical question. "It probably looks like I've got it all." She looked down at her hands, loosely folded in her lap. Her thumb nail needed filing and she picked at it nervously. "But it feels like I'm living a lie." A lump was forming in her throat. "I can't work it out, Terry! I should be feeling on top of the world!" She composed herself and marshalled her thoughts. "Don't get me wrong, I'm grateful..." She faltered and checked herself, not wanting to cry or sound like a whining bitch. She was acutely aware of being judged – not by Terry, but by herself. She was supposed to know what she was doing, have it all under control! What would he

think? "All those clients who can't have children or struggle with an addiction or feel alone in the world." She swallowed. "Then there's the broken cases – the 'hole in the soul'. I've got nothing like that to complain about!" She shuffled in her seat and took a deep breath.

"Go on."

"I'm sorry, Terry," she said, taking a packet of paper tissues from her bag. She looked away, mortified. "People think I've got a great life, and I have!" She dabbed carefully under her eye, mopping up a stray tear before it ran dark rivulets of mascara. She didn't want people to know or to see. "I struggle to get out of bed in the mornings. Wish I could lay there all day and sleep! And I'm feeling so tearful. It's not like me." Diverting her attention away from her thoughts, she glanced back at Terry. "I can't face Richard, either. He's draining. He doesn't understand and he won't listen. I can't talk to him about anything."

"Have you tried?"

"Yes. He turns, like a mad dog, barking and snapping. Takes it all personally, thinks I'm criticizing him. He makes it all about him – just like my mum and dad did."

Terry pursed his lips slightly and made a note on the page.

"Why do you think Richard's acting like the wounded party?"

Katy wiped the end of her nose with a fresh tissue. "I don't know, but I'm the one who ends up consoling him and making it all better."

"Like the caring person you are, but what's actually going on here, Katy?"

She blushed. "He's so distant and angry, and I don't know what to do."

Terry was looking straight at her.

"I guess he's in denial and deflecting criticism by projecting."

"And where have you seen that pattern before?"

Katy ducked the question. "It's not just Richard. I feel as if I've lost something valuable. This terrible feeling of loss and

panic. I feel trapped, somehow. Like it's all closing in on me."

She didn't want to admit it to herself, let alone Terry. "It's easier to put on a brave face and pretend everything's fine. Just carry on. Stay positive. Keep passing 'go' and all that."

"What are you avoiding by pretending?"

Katy changed the subject. "One of my clients complained the other day that their life was like chewing an old piece of gum – all action and no flavor! I know that's how Richard sees it." She thought of the home she'd built, the family she'd created, the children she'd nurtured through sickness and health. "I told Rich I've got too much on my plate, but he doesn't get it. He thinks I should see fewer clients, but my career keeps me going! It's juggling everything else that's wearing me down."

Terry smiled. "Could you be mirroring each other to some extent? Has your life lost its flavor too?"

"Yes. I think it has, and I need your help to get it back." Her stomach knotted. She'd hated saying that. It was a weakness, needing support. Helping others was easy, but she was awkward when it came to being helped. "I need a safe sounding board and a place to work it through."

I want to be happy, thought Katy, smiling to herself. That's what lots of clients said. Katy would ask them "What would make you happy? How will your life look when you're fulfilled? What will you be doing differently?" The answers were usually simple. I'll have a girlfriend. I won't be fat. I won't have these panic attacks. Did that bring lasting happiness? Katy wasn't sure. Nobody's life could be happy all the time, and didn't contentment come from within? Perhaps it was *meaning* that was important in life?

"I think you're working too hard. When was the last time you had a break?" said Terry, snapping her out of her reverie.

"Recently – July!"

"What can you do to slow down, do less?"

Katy could feel the resistance pressing against her. She

couldn't possibly slow down. There was far too much to do. The last thing she wanted was for it all to come crashing down. It had taken too much to build.

"Can you take some time out for yourself? A small break in your day? That's what I'd like you to do between now and our next session."

At around 3.30 pm, Katy was barging through the front door of number eleven Sycamore Road, the wind chimes ringing out in celebration. 'Welcome home,' they seemed to be singing.

"Tea!" she said to herself, reaching up to the top shelf for the Earl Grey. Sipping at the hot liquid, she sighed contentedly as she sat back in the kitchen chair, reflecting on her session with Terry. Time out for herself? Huh! Two minutes with a cup of tea before all hell breaks loose! She savored the moment, then made a mental note of the afternoon's chores. Meet the kids in town, new rugby boots for Freddie, school blouses for Tilly and a quick dash around Waitrose. There was nothing to eat in the house.

It was seven o'clock by the time they returned. "Can you lay the table, Freddie? Dad'll be home soon." Katy was unpacking the bags and trying to take her jacket off at the same time. "I'll heat up the chicken. Tilly? Tilly? Where are you?" I'll do it myself, she thought, pulling open a packet of salad leaves.

The wind chimes rang out their warning as Richard thrust open the door. "Train stopped at Earl's Court for ages," he grumbled. "What's for tea?"

"Hello, Darling," muttered Katy, thinking – it's supper, not tea. Tea's at 4 o'clock with sandwiches and scones. He probably hadn't heard her and probably didn't care. He was rushing upstairs to change.

"It's ready!" she called a moment later, adding oil and balsamic to the salad. Katy looked across the kitchen table at her husband as he helped himself to chicken. He was good

looking, maybe that's why she'd married him? She'd loved him once: wanted to get hitched and feel settled. All those chemicals churning around, the great romance, the thrill of the chase! He'd swept her off her feet, the smooth-talking man in the dark suit.

Richard was reading the Evening Standard as he slid a finger over the plate and licked off the juices. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I'm fine."

Katy picked at her lettuce, her thoughts still rumbling around. He often said, 'I'm a good catch', and she supposed he was. He'd always provided for them. She tried to focus on the positive. The crux of Cognitive Behavior Therapy, she reminded herself, was to see things from a fresh perspective: to reframe.

Clearing the plates and packing them into the dishwasher, her thoughts rambled on. She could trust him – she knew he was reliable. Not like Adrian who was a totally irresponsible git or Nick who was a bloody alcoholic. If only she'd been trained! She could have helped Nick! Jeez! His childhood was a mess. When she thought of it now, she realized how stupid she'd been, wasting her time, trying so hard to be the one who changed him. She'd put so much love into that relationship and nothing had shifted. But you have to want to change, she thought.

Wiping the table, she looked up and smiled at Richard. He had all the qualities her parents had wanted for her in a spouse: tall, dark, handsome, with an education and a good job. They were companions alright, but the passion had fizzled long ago. And it was all her fault.

"Thanks, Mum," said Freddie, pulling back his chair with a scraping noise and heading off to his room.

"Homework?"

"Yeah. Tons of it." He groaned.

"What about you, Tilly?"

"What's it to you?" she said, slouching in the chair, kicking a foot against the floor, and giving her mother one of her withering looks.

I don't know where I went wrong with that girl, thought Katy, I've done everything to support her and this is how she repays me.

Richard paid no attention. His nose was buried in the newspaper.

There's no spark, she thought, watching her husband as he read the sports page. We keep up appearances, but inside we're chalk and cheese. I've been papering over the cracks for years. I wish we could go back to how it was in the beginning.

"Rich, can I talk to you about something?"

"What?" snapped Richard, "I've had a hard day at the office and I just want to unwind with the paper."

Katy twiddled her left earring before returning to the dishwasher, clunking the door shut and switching it on. It was never the right time, not for Richard anyway. Last weekend he'd been too tired, on holiday he'd wanted to get away from it all, and last night he'd wanted to watch *The West Wing*. No matter what moment she picked, it was wrong, and he'd have a rebuff lined up.

"I'm feeling a bit overwhelmed," she said as Richard turned the page and took a gulp of red wine from the generous glass he'd poured. "When would be a good time to chat?"

"Don't come at me with your therapy-talk! I told you before – see fewer clients!"

"It's not the client work, Rich, we've been over this!"

"Then what the bloody hell is it?" He slammed the paper onto the table.

"It's okay. We'll talk another time, when you're not tired."

"You've disturbed me now, you may as well carry on."

"It's a big house to run, and the kids still need me, even though they're more independent, and—"

"For God's sake, Kit, get a housekeeper!" He picked up the paper and returned to the sports page.

She didn't want a housekeeper. She wanted a husband who

cared and children who appreciated her. She'd had to help out at home when she was young. She might as well be a housekeeper herself, she thought, at least she'd get paid and be able to take leave!

"But I don't want a housekeeper! I just want a bit of support. You could help me load the dishwasher or book the car in for service or organize a holiday! Anything!"

"You don't think I support you? Look at all this," he said, holding his arms up and gesturing to the large modern kitchen with its black, granite worktops and taupe-painted cupboards. "You don't get this on a therapist's salary!"

"I know, Rich," she said, "I didn't mean—"

"What the hell did you mean?" His nostrils flared as his jaw tightened, a small muscle twitching at the corner.

"Nothing, Rich. Nothing," said Katy, turning to the stove and rubbing at a spot of burnt-on food. She pushed the chairs back under the table and caught his wild, indignant eye. "We do need to talk and you're running away from it. In therapy we call that 'denial'." She backed away, thinking he might just lash out, but he restrained himself and went back to the paper, flicking it sharply as he turned the page.

"I've got a few post-session notes to sort out," said Katy, boiling the kettle and making herself a cup of mint tea. "Could you leave a small glass of that for me?" She nodded at the bottle of Valpolicella. He glared at her before taking himself and his paper off to the sofa, his eyes firmly fixed on the TV page.

He's not listening, she thought, looking over at Richard, now slumped on the couch with the remote in one hand and a refilled glass of red in the other. He never listened.

It wasn't just him. Tilly and Freddie were just as bad. At least Freddie was cheerful. At their age, Katy was already proficient in the art of domestic drudgery. It was different nowadays, she thought, and just as well: she didn't want her kids to have the life she'd had. She wanted to redress the balance, break the pattern,

help and encourage them, nurture them. But it was a one-way street.

Katy lugged her briefcase upstairs and checked in with Freddie, who was sitting at the desk in his bedroom. "How's it going?"

"Okay."

"Need any help?"

"No. I'm alright, Mum." He turned and smiled as she ruffled his hair and gave him a hug.

Tilly was reciting lines for her school play, and flashed a look of thunder as Katy approached, as if to say, 'Don't you dare disturb me!' Katy nodded and backed away, shutting the door to her daughter's room.

Another flight of stairs led to the top of the house where Katy's office overlooked a tree-lined suburban street. It was peaceful there, and walking in, she breathed a sigh of relief. She saw a few clients here, answered emails, paid bills, ran the family finances, and booked holidays online. There was a lavender-colored massage couch in the corner, where she gave the occasional healing. She'd trained as a Reiki Master some time back. It was a swap with a friend, otherwise she'd never have considered anything like that. Shanti had trained her, and in return, Katy had counselled Shanti through her divorce. It turned out that she loved Reiki. And she loved this room with its calming blues and violets and its one indigo wall. A stack of white shelving was lined with books, crystals, relaxation CDs, aromatherapy oils, candles, and a wooden statue of the Buddha. There were small pictures of sacred geometries and Indian deities. Her qualification certificates were framed and hung above a small, iron fireplace with patterned blue and white slip-tiles either side. Psychotherapist. Advanced Hypnotherapist. Reiki Master. Under the couch was a pale-blue, Zen meditation stool.

Better get this done, thought Katy, sitting at her desk and opening her leather briefcase. It was just gone 9 o'clock. She

became absorbed in each case, her analytical mind pulling together all the pieces of the jigsaw until she could see the bigger picture from the details she'd gleaned. Writing a few well-chosen words at the end of each file enabled her to remember what ground had been covered, what she'd understood of the case, and which direction to take. She was totally absorbed, giving each one her undivided attention, turning over the details in her mind so she could see every angle. Everything neat and in its place, she filed the notes and locked them safely away before tackling her emails.

A weariness tugged at her as she pondered her clients and their heart-rending stories. Staying detached was important if she wanted to help them, but it was difficult at times. She shook off the melancholy that crept around her like a ghost but couldn't shake off the analytical mind that continued to whirl.

It was almost eleven o'clock when she went downstairs to say goodnight to Tilly and Freddie. Tilly would probably push her away as usual. Richard was snoring on the sofa in front of *Newsnight*, Jeremy Paxman's voice rising into the darkness as he interviewed his prey. Gently taking the remote, she silenced him. Richard jolted himself awake. "I was listening to that!"

"You were asleep!"

He scowled at her. "I'm off to bed."

Katy crept back to the study. It had been a long day. She had too much on her plate, but nobody seemed to care. Her thoughts turned to her homework from Terry: this was the only time she had to herself, the house quiet and everyone sleeping.

Pulling out the meditation stool, she sat upright, her hands resting in her lap, right palm holding the left and facing upwards, the thumbs lightly touching. Her eyes closed but her head wouldn't stop. The point of meditating was to still the mind, but this was the only time she had to think about her life – when there were no demands, no interruptions, nothing to do.

Stop Katy! Don't get attached to the thoughts. Acknowledge

them, then let them go!

They tugged at her. There was so much to reflect upon: clients, children, life. There was no time to stop or contemplate, and no time for pleasure. Perhaps the monkey mind kept her busy so she couldn't hear the whisper of her heart. Katy thought about Terry, then Richard. She considered Tilly, then Freddie. They could do what they wanted in their spare time. Spare time, huh! She wished she had some. It was all doing, doing, doing with no time for being!

Her mind turned to the couples counselling that she'd forced Richard into a couple of years ago: it hadn't made any difference. He was stubborn, controlling and manipulative. Of course he was never going to let anyone in! She recalled him charming the pants off the woman, who'd fallen for his quick intellect.

The thoughts stopped for a brief moment. She'd made a mess of things but couldn't work out where she'd gone wrong. She'd tried her best, done everything that was expected of her. Tears rolled down her cheeks. Having fearlessly worked through her demons, she'd painstakingly rebuilt herself, and here she was, married, with two children, living in a desirable residence and excelling in a career she loved! She'd worked hard for her treasures, but they didn't seem to be glittering. Be positive, she told herself, have gratitude. Focus on the breath. Cool in the nostrils as you breathe in. Warm as you breathe out. Relaxed awareness, expectant gratitude, following the breath, focusing on the Hara, three fingers width below the navel.

The restless thoughts began to subside. The breath became shallow and slow. Her shoulders dropped.

She'd been meditating almost every night for about nine years and it had become the most important practice in her life. She couldn't imagine how she'd cope without it. Katy's mind became still. Her whole being expanded outwards and upwards into nothingness and nowhere-ness. It felt as if the sun were shining on the inside. Warm, loving, radiant. She was the silent witness.

Beyond the self: big and luminous. Peaceful and eternal.

Ooh! I'm not thinking. Bugger. That's a thought.

Breath. Hara. Silence.

It felt as if she was being held. A loving presence was there, inside her, surrounding her. She wasn't alone.

Focus. Breath.

She wondered if that might be God? Katy winced. *God?* But she wasn't religious! Maybe Shiva, Source, The Divine, or even Yahweh like the U2 song? That sounded better. God wasn't very cool, was He? Funny that. Even the spiritual people didn't like using the 'G' word! It was very old-fashioned. She squirmed. Too many negative connotations.

He was omnipotent, wasn't He? That meant all-powerful. Yes. Potent. Powerful. What were the other two? Omnipresent – everywhere at once – and omniscient; all-knowing. He knew everything. He's a 'know-all', she thought, the corners of her lips curling upwards into a smile. I wonder if He's really a She? But that would be Goddess!

Breathe. Hara.

She giggled. So, He knows I'm sitting here laughing at Him. He knows my life's a mess and He probably knows why, because He knows everything! He's got all the answers! And if He's everywhere, it means He's here with me right now! And He has the power to do anything! Or She has. Maybe She's both – beyond gender.

Breathe, Katy. Breath. Focus on the Hara, and let go of the stupid thoughts!

She should hand her life over to God! He couldn't screw it up any more than she had! She spent her life solving other people's problems but couldn't sort out her own! Maybe it took her mind off... She paused. Maybe being busy stopped her sinking. Stay positive! What was it they said? If you fake a smile you produce all the right neurotransmitters? Fake it till you make it!

Katy adopted a positive attitude. There was a solution to

every problem. Damned if she could find it, though!

"I hand my life over to God!" It just came out, unexpectedly, as if someone had pushed an invisible button. Perhaps it was her true self, the one buried beneath domesticity and keeping up appearances!

Oh well, let's see what happens, she thought, see if He does exist, if He really is omni-all those things!

Breathe. Hara. Silence.

Expanse. Stillness. No time. No thing.

A loving, distant Voice – a male voice – spoke softly, tenderly inside Katy's head, as if just above and behind:

"The road is long and boring at times, but then a beautiful vista. It twists, turns and rises, and leads occasionally to dead ends. There are obstacles, and steep and jagged byways. It's frustrating, but the challenges are there to strengthen you. It's all there for the learning. You think you've taken a wrong turn or ended up in the wrong place, but the truth is, it's just an experience. You created it from the choices you took. You're growing. You can always let go and choose something different or respond differently. Everything happens for a reason. The soul has planned it – for your edification. That's the purpose of the adventure you call life, this schoolhouse called Earth. You face and transcend the difficulties, empowering yourself as you go – else you're stuck in the cul-de-sac you've chosen, pulling yourself in to hide in small, safe spaces. See through the illusion. Grow wise and detach from the turmoil. Advance through the maze of opportunities and learn to rise up! See the full panoply of possibility from a higher vantage point! For every steep hill there's a breath-taking view. For every arduous step there's an epiphany. For every sadness there's a joy. For every fear there's a strength. For every loss, there's a gain. Most people stay in the comfort of their own cul-de-sac. What do you choose? Safety or the courage to take flight? Limited life or limitless light? You have free will."

Chapter 2

October 2008

Sessions with Terry were going well. He'd given Katy tasks each week and she'd diligently applied herself, despite initial resistance and panic. She'd carved out ten minutes during the day, giving herself permission to do something other than client, business or domestic work. She'd started to read again, catch a program on Radio 4, or listen to a self-help CD. Sometimes she'd browse around John Lewis on the way into work, feeling guilty afterwards if she'd bought something. Some days were still too busy to find time out, but, on Terry's recommendation, she was walking in the park for twenty minutes every other day. Yoga extended to an hour at least three times a week. She was eating fresh organic meals where possible and took supplements each morning. At the weekend, she began to pursue her own interests, diving deeper into spiritual teachings and meeting new people along the way. Her mood was shifting but she was still worn down, and now feeling guilty as well.

To the chattering classes of West London, Katy was becoming an anomaly. "She's probably having a mid-life crisis," she imagined them saying. "Look what she's wearing now!" Katy was bored with the tribal uniform of Boden, White Stuff and Sweaty Betty. Never really liked it, she thought. It was like dressing up and pretending to be someone else. She'd taken to wearing chic little jackets from the high street chains, chunky ethnic jewelry and tailored trousers with sexy shoes. It was Richard who wanted to belong. It made him feel successful, donning ridiculously expensive sweatshirts and boating shoes, as if he'd gained access to some exclusive club.

The mothers in the book circle crowed as they played their obligatory game, gathering each month in plush sitting rooms designed to impress. Each host competed with the last, it seemed:

costly Persian rugs, elegant sofas, centerpiece coffee tables replete with big, arty books. There might be an extravagant scented candle burning in a glass jar, sending out sickly fumes of Oud or Bergamot. Thick feather cushions plumped to perfection stood as sentries, daring you to sink into them. "The villa in Tuscany was simply, divine," said one of the circle of ladies, taking a sip of cheap Chianti, "William and the children loved the pool and I have to tell you, the pool boy was—"

Someone interrupted, "Oh the spa at The Lensbury is an absolute *must!* There's a gorgeous hunk running the gym next door. We went last week, you should try it, darling!"

"Really? It's a bit of a schlep. We're at the Hogarth."

"This Chianti's not bad, but I prefer Merlot. Sainsbury's has a great Chilean one on offer at the mo."

Katy didn't like either very much. How could they show off their wealth then drink cheap plonk like this?

"Where did you go in Tuscany? We rented a superb house in one of the vineyards last year."

Katy rolled her eyes and interjected before the woman had chance to answer. "Did anyone read the book?" They all looked at her blankly for a hesitant moment before continuing with their conversation. "A little place near Lucca. Did Harry get into Latymer? It really is the best of the local privates." Katy sat in silence, watching the topic move from who had the most impressive holiday, to which was the best private school, to who had a booking at Nobu. She watched them scoff at the lower income families who couldn't afford private education and had never been to The River Cafe. She hadn't had time to read the book, and in any case, she didn't much care about the latest fiction. She wanted to read *Conversations with God* or *Power Versus Force* – something that might enlighten her. She'd bought *The Artist's Way* and *The Art of Happiness*, but they sat on the coffee table collecting dust while she battled with running the house, her practice, and the family. It was difficult enough

juggling life without pursuing the mystical, but it was pulling her, and she wanted more.

"Lovely to see you all again," she found herself saying, as if a small hidden part had suddenly plucked up the courage to step forward. "But I really do have to dash!" The lively banter stopped. "Sorry..." said Katy. "I've been busy and I'm tired. I'll come back at some point, I'm sure." She didn't feel sure, but the words had left her mouth before she could sensor them.

"Oh! Such a shame, Katy, we were about to get going."

"Bye, darling!"

"Send our love to the gorgeous Richard!"

A crescendo of chattering and laughter could be heard as she closed the front door behind her and walked into the crisp, clear evening. If they only knew the real Richard! Looking up at the night sky, she took a deep breath and noticed the stars seemed brighter than usual. A smile crept across her face as she walked home breathing in the cool of the night, her mind perfectly still, in awe of the expanse of velvet, inky blue above.

With the book circle and the gossiping mothers out of the picture, Katy was free to read what she pleased and connect with more open-minded people.

* * *

Tara was a friend of Shanti's that she'd met at *Alternatives* in Piccadilly. Having been a nurse, she had a sensible, grounded approach to personal and spiritual development. She'd survived cervical cancer and against all odds, and the advice of her doctor, had managed to fall pregnant. Twice. She and her husband, Ben had taken a complementary approach and it had worked. Katy had got to know her when she'd recommended her colleague, Fran, for hypno-birthing. They sat now, with a few other friends, in the lived-in kitchen of Tara's Streatham home, eating gluten-free cake and sipping yogi tea. The book circle seemed a million

miles away.

"Tara! Tell Katy about your soul contract!" said one of the bright young things, sending her child out to the sandpit to play.

"Oh yes! You must!" said another.

Katy wasn't listening. She was preoccupied with her own existential struggle and her need to fit in. I wish I'd worn something different, she thought, looking at the jeans and t-shirts. She loosened her silk scarf, slipping it covertly into her leather handbag.

"I went to see this amazing woman called Dinah," said Tara, brushing a crumb from her mouth. "She's up in North London – not far from Stoke Newington. She does soul contract readings! I think you'd like her."

Katy smiled. "Mmm?" She watched the way Tara's glossed lips moved as she spoke. It reminded her of someone, but she couldn't think who. Perhaps it was a client? Her mind began its search, and along the way lost track of what Tara was saying. She had to forcibly bring her concentration back. It was second nature to act as if she was engrossed while actually thinking about something else. Maybe she'd learned it from her mother, or perhaps it was the sheer effort of staying present with clients that gave her the self-appointed right to switch off socially? Katy felt bad and made a mental note: listen properly to friends. Often, she'd be comparing what they said with her own views, wondering what others might think, and calculating what time to leave to avoid the traffic. Her mind was so distracted these days and her friends deserved more.

"...and I'm not joking, it was so accurate," she heard Tara say. "And it'll give you the bigger picture."

What bigger picture, thought Katy? "Oh, that sounds great!" she said, hoping Tara wouldn't notice but it was obvious from her expression that Tara saw right through it. Katy blushed. "Sorry. I was miles away – too much going on in my head!"

Tara gave her an understanding smile. "No problem – been

there, done it – ticked the box! Here, I'll write down her details for you. Have a look at soul contracts on the internet, I think you'll get it."

"Thanks." Katy smiled, still lost in her thoughts. If the content of a conversation fascinated her, she would be captivated and give it proper attention, but often she dismissed things with a healthy dose of common sense. The inner sceptic would mock silently in Richard's voice, or was it Father's? Difficult to tell. 'What a load of rubbish,' she could hear them say inside. The outer persona smiled and took the slip of paper with a polite, "Thank you." Somewhere in the middle, the real Katy was caught between the two, like a rabbit in the headlights, fraught with indecision.

If a quirky idea or an offbeat book came across her path three times, Katy would take it as a sign that she should investigate further and ignore the inner critic. This was the first she'd heard of soul contracts. She made the right noises and forgot about it – until three days later, when she ran into Ben at Earl's Court tube station. "Did Tara tell you about the soul contract lady?" he said.

"Yes! She did!"

"Oh my God! It was amazing," he said, his face animated, his hands gesticulating. "We had our relationship contract read as well, and it was all there in black and white!"

"In black and white?"

"Yes. You get a chart and a recording. Didn't Tara tell you?"

The train timetable flickered as the information shifted. A platform change was announced over the Tannoy. "Yes, she did! She did indeed... That's my train, I've got to dash! Sorry! Give my love to Tara and the kids!"

It would take another chance meeting three days later before the message hit home, this time from their mutual friend, Shanti Kapoor, Reiki Master, Healer, Yogi and manager of the Rainbow Emporium in Covent Garden. "Oh my God, Katy, you've got to

have it done. I'm telling you, it's amazing!"

Soul contracts: Katy had never heard of them until six days ago. Six months prior, she'd have dismissed them as ridiculous twaddle. Now, here she was, sitting at the top of the number 93 bus with Shanti, discussing the importance of a reading.

"I think it might set you on the right path, give you direction."

"What do you mean?"

Shanti touched Katy's arm and held her gaze, "You know I'm psychic? I pick up on things. See things other people don't notice."

"Like what?"

Shanti smiled and patted Katy's arm. "It's okay. I'm not judging – just being a friend! I'm here if you need me."

"I appreciate that, Shanti, but I'm not sure what you're getting at?"

"We all need friends to tell us what we don't want to hear! Maybe it's time to let your hair down a bit? This is my stop. Get the contract done, Katy – here's her number."

Katy stared at the scrap of paper and tucked it into her handbag. It took another 30 minutes before she was home.

"I'm thinking of getting my soul contract done," said Katy over supper.

"Whatever makes you happy, Kittykat."

Richard wasn't interested. He was reading the paper and probably didn't give a damn about soul contracts. "I'm happy to let you dabble in this world of make-believe," he said. "As long as you don't end up driving an orange VW Beetle!" He turned his paper over and chortled. "You'll be hugging trees next!"

Tilly rolled her heavily kohl-lined eyes and left, intent on making as much noise as possible by banging down her cup and stomping up the stairs.

"Do you want yours done too?" asked Katy, studying Richard's face.

"What?" He looked up with a frown. "Go and do whatever

you want, Kit, if it keeps you out of mischief," he said, letting out a snort and returning to the sports page. Freddie grimaced and got on diligently with the business of eating the last meatball. Richard's tone would have upset her before, triggering vague childhood recollections of being teased and humiliated, but she'd grown a thicker skin and was shifting her perspective – rising above. There was a bigger picture, so she let it go, rather than let his little dig get to her. "There's more to life than our five senses, you know," she said, pushing her palms against the table and standing up.

"Yes. There's logic and critical thinking for a start!" Richard flicked over the page, absorbing himself in an article about the best places to network in the City.

"And sixth sense, Rich, even you follow your hunches and your gut instinct sometimes!" she said, clearing away the plates.

"That's different."

"But how?"

"It just is."

"I want to know more, Rich! I want to understand energies, forces, unexplained phenomena—"

"Yes, dear."

She loaded the dishwasher, secretly longing to share her fascination with the metaphysical world, wanting to discuss parapsychics, psychic channeling and miraculous healings. She filled the kettle and thought about crop circles, the Philadelphia Experiment, and the Bermuda Triangle. Nobody would be interested. "I'm going upstairs," she said, taking a mug of chamomile tea up to the office.

She was searching for something and the further she explored, the more challenging it became. With every step, her awareness expanded, forcing her to rethink how she saw the world. New levels of understanding were being integrated as she shifted perspective. Accepting what her former self would have condemned as nonsense, she picked up the office phone

and dialed.

"I'd like to book an appointment to have my soul contract read."

The lilting voice at the other end of the phone was ethereal and other-worldly.

"Yes. Three-thirty, ninth of October is fine," said Katy.

"Can you email me your date of birth, the full name on your birth certificate and any names you've had since then. Could you get those to me this evening?"

A soul contract, it seemed, was exactly what it said: A contract your soul had entered into before incarnating, detailing what you were here to do and what you had come to learn. It would give you an overview of your soul purpose and the dynamics of any key relationships with significant others. Katy had given Dinah relevant information for Richard, Tilly and Freddie.

October 9th, 2008

Dinah's North London flat was furnished with artefacts and wooden carvings from Asia and India, offset by stark, white walls and floorboards. A joss stick sent a wisp of sweet-smelling smoke into the center of the room. Dinah's caramel skin shone with health, her dark hair swept back into a perfect, thick, coiled plait, accentuating a classic oval face and almond-shaped, brown eyes. Her fine ankles tinkled with the sound of tiny bells on a silver chain. Deep red nail polish, perfect in its execution, adorned the toes of her dainty feet which danced lightly across the floor, the blood-like pools of crimson caught between the white of the floor and the brown of her feet. Katy had an urge to cry and stifled it. The scene reminded her of her past – pre-Richard, when she was single and living near Archway in a Bohemian flat. She missed it. It seemed so far away and out of reach, so at odds with her sleek new existence. She'd adopted the role of WASP wife and lost who she was. Out of place and

out of time, she'd mislaid herself. Creativity, individualism, and playfulness were missing. She'd been swallowed up by faded-grey, classic lines and metropolitan suburbia.

"Take a seat," said Dinah, bringing a jug of water and two glasses from the small kitchen. Katy took a notebook and pen from her bag. From a carved Moroccan cabinet, Dinah pulled an old tape recorder and a blank cassette. Katy stared in disbelief at the antiquated machine. Slipping the cassette into the player, Dinah pressed two of the chunky buttons and it began to hum. "Soul Contract Reading. Katy Stone. Ninth of October two thousand and eight." The session was recorded but the cassette was never to be heard. There was nothing Katy owned on which to play it.

"These are the Moses Codes," said Dinah, showing Katy a sheet of paper with strange symbols. "They're derived from your date of birth and your birth name. You also have what we call an 'overlay' name. When you married Richard, you changed your name to Katherine Alison Stone and that brought in a whole new vibration and path."

"What does that mean?" asked Katy.

"That's what I'll be explaining over the next couple of hours. See this diagram? It's like a Star of David, or two intersecting triangles. The upward pointing triangle is your physical life, the downward is your spiritual life. The center point is your ultimate soul-purpose. Think of it as a destination. You've got to work through the other six points first."

"Oh," said Katy, scribbling furiously in the notepad.

"I'll show you the karmic debts, the obstacles, the challenges, the opportunities, and we'll also talk about the implications of your name change to Stone, as well as the relationship dynamics with Richard, Matilda and Frederick."

Katy became engrossed in the symbols, signs and meanings which were based on numerology – the numbers in her date of birth and the numerical value of the letters in her name, with A

being one, *B* two and so on up to *I* which was nine, then *J* which started back at one.

"Nine is a very special number. There are only two letters of the alphabet which represent nine: *I* and *R*. Everyone wants nines! That's why Danii Minogue added that extra *I* to her name! I don't think you realize the importance of it! You've got six nines in total in your name and your birth date adds up to nine. Nine is unique, mathematically speaking – multiples of it, added together, always come to nine."

"What do you mean?"

"Well. Two nines are eighteen. Add the one and eight of eighteen together and you get nine. But it carries on like that. Let's take a random number."

"Thirty-six," said Katy.

Dinah scribbled down some calculations. "Thirty-six times nine is three hundred and twenty-four. Add together three, two and four and you get?"

"Nine!"

"It's the last of the single digit figures. Ten has two digits, so nine is the completion of things. It's a highly spiritual number and happens to be your life path. You're here for high level spiritual work and it's probably your last incarnation. By the way, your chart shows you're very psychic."

Katy was reeling with disbelief. Could this be true, or did she say this sort of thing to everyone? She couldn't take it in, wasn't it just pie in the sky? Put it down to experience, she told herself, we live and learn.

"You okay? Do you need a break?" Dinah halted recording with a clunk, resuming after a short while and taking a fresh sheet of symbols from her folder.

"When you married Richard," she said, "you changed your surname, and that brought in a whole new vibrational overlay. I can see how it must have catapulted you into motherhood and domesticity at such a rate that you barely had time to consider."

Katy stopped writing and stared at Dinah. "It would have forced you to become family-oriented and shift your values," she continued. Katy opened her mouth to speak, but hesitated, letting Dinah carry on. "It also doubled your workload and stress! See?" she said, pointing to a pair of squiggles. "It's a karmic knot."

"What does that mean?"

"There must have been karma from a past life for you to work through, a life-lesson if you like?"

"What sort of lesson?"

"I can't tell, but it has a 'doubling' effect. You'll have ended up doing twice as much as you did before."

"And getting horribly busy?" asked Katy, watching carefully for a reaction.

"Yes. You probably feel overstretched."

"That's exactly how I feel! Overwhelmed!" she said, focusing fully on Dinah now and wondering how she could possibly have known any of this. "I look after everyone – Richard, the kids, the house – not to mention my clients. I do my best, but the responsibility weighs me down. I can't break free of the mounting workload!"

"You feel trapped? Suffocated?"

She'd nailed it precisely. "It feels like it's all caving in!"

"Yes. I see that in the charts. You're so busy, you don't know who you are anymore."

Katy edged forward, leaning in towards Dinah. "Carry on!"

"Let's get to the point of it all, your soul purpose, which is at the center. I think you'll like it! See this?" She was pointing at a symbol. "It means you were born to talk!"

Katy tipped back her head, laughing. "Everyone's been telling me that for years! Even on my old school reports it used to say, 'Katherine talks too much'. I was always getting into trouble!"

A hundred and fifty pounds and a whole afternoon for something she already knew! Suddenly, she became aware of a

life-long struggle between the desire to talk and the need to keep herself in check and be quiet. A counsellor needed good listening skills, but she'd opted for approaches that involved speaking to her clients: Hypnotherapy, Cognitive Behavior Therapy, NLP.

"It's not just about talking, Katy, it's about speaking!"

Katy came from a boisterous family, most of them older than her, and all very chatty. They would talk in unison, each hoping to be heard above the din of the others. Her mother spoke the loudest, slicing through them all like a Spanish Galleon in full sail. Only her father was able to usurp her position. Katy's tactic was to gabble quickly, in the hope of fitting in what she wanted to say between everyone else's chirping. She'd always felt that nobody was listening anyway. They were thinking about themselves and the importance of their own contribution. Speaking? Who was going to listen to *her*?

"Public speaking," said Dinah, leaning forward and raising her voice slightly to get Katy's attention. "You're going to be talking to big audiences. Teaching them."

Katy stared at Dinah, her mouth slightly open, her eyebrows raised. What on earth would she be telling them?

"It's your soul's purpose! Speaking from a stage, leading by example, pioneering a new evolution in consciousness!" said Dinah, her voice rising with excitement, her words tumbling out.

"What? Me?" Katy became animated, warming to the idea yet at the same time overwhelmed by it, a thrill running down her spine. The stressed mother, wife and therapist was happy to exchange roles and bask in the limelight for once, but the thought of standing on a stage in front of all those people petrified her!

"You'll be sharing your wisdom publicly. Remember, it's the potential we're looking at. You'll have to want it, claim it, and work for it. It's a life-time goal, but what a goal!"

Katy suddenly felt small. There must be some mistake. The vision both thrilled and terrified her at the same time.

"But I'm not sure – I mean – are you certain you've got it

right?"

Dinah laughed. "Yes! I'm sure! You're likely to face a few challenges along the way, but that's what the symbols are telling me loud and clear, and they don't lie!" Her face grew more serious. "The only thing is, you're going to have to change your name."

"What?"

"You definitely can't do it with your present name."

Katy's bubble burst, her shoulders visibly slumping. "But I can't do that!"

"I used to be Diane but I tweaked my name to shift the vibration. It was a game-changer. It's all been unfolding beautifully since then."

"I'd feel like a fraud."

"Have a think about it. Tree used to be called Simon. He's my mentor and heads up the UK. Went out to California to study, changed his name and his whole life turned around! I promise you! It's magic!"

Katy suppressed the urge to laugh and blurt out something sarcastic. She could hear her cynical self, mocking in Richard's tone. What sort of person calls themselves Tree? It's not even a proper name. She can't be serious.

"But I don't want to change my name. There's no way I could be called Cloud or Kali or whatever, it would be ridiculous! I'm Katy or Katherine. Even Kittykat drives me nuts!"

"You could change your surname? Think about it. I'm sure you'll find a way," said Dinah, sipping at her water. "And it would be a pity not to fulfil your role... otherwise you'll have to come back again."

"For another reading?"

"No. For another incarnation."

Sitting on the train home, Katy kept going over the session in her mind. She looked at her notes and the charts that Dinah had given

her and wondered how she was going to listen to that cassette! It was easier to think about something small and technical than to contemplate the bigger picture. She reflected on how marrying Richard and taking his name had thrown her into domestic chaos and overwhelm. She pondered the significance of the number nine. Her lucky number was three, she remembered, and three threes were nine! The train lurched into Turnham Green. The sun emerged from a tiny hole in the dense, drizzling cloud and cast a brief rainbow over the grey. What was she going to give them for supper? They'd be hungry.

Katy's evening meditation extended to almost two hours. It was the thoughts – they wouldn't stop: the unwelcome suggestion of changing her name, and the concern that she'd wasted her money on an elaborate ruse. Behind that was the worry that the reading might be true, and that she might not be able to fulfil her soul purpose. What if she wasn't up to it? Then there were the doubts about the purpose itself. What if Dinah was mistaken? Toying with the idea of linking her name with Richard's, she muttered them aloud, as if trying them on for size. "Katherine Fralinski-Stone," then "Stone-Fralinski." No, it sounded like a firm of accountants. She sheepishly whispered out into the night. "God? Are you there? Can you hear me? Do you exist?"

What the hell would people think? What would Richard say? It had gotten out of hand and gone too far now! The therapist within pronounced it a fantasy, an escape from the stresses of reality.

Breath. Hara. Focus, for fudge sake!

The thoughts cranked up again. It had been fun, this spiritual odyssey. It had injected some excitement into her life, and for a while she'd thought she knew who she was, thought she belonged. Well it was time to stop! It had run its course.

Breath. Watch the breath and focus on the Hara.

A minute or two of silence, then a distant, gentle Voice. Was

it inside her head, or just above and behind?

“This Stone isn’t rolling, it’s gathering moss.”

If she remained a Stone, she’d be anchored where she was. To continue along the course she’d set, she’d have to change her name. Straining towards the soft Voice, she breathed, “Give me a name I can live with that fits the bill. I don’t want to sound phony or be humiliated.” Sitting motionless, hardly daring to breathe, she waited. Nothing came. Perhaps it wasn’t meant to be, she thought, with a sigh of relief.

An uneventful weekend passed and still there was no inspiration. By Monday morning, she’d given up. On Monday evening, as she flicked through her emails, she noticed a message from Dinah:

I’ve got good news! Called Tree on Friday after our session. Knew you wouldn’t mind! Sent him the charts and he says your maiden name is perfect! Go with that. At least it won’t be too much of a change for you! Om Shanti, Dinah x

Katy’s heart was racing. Her answer had come, and it was real! A name that she could live with that fulfilled the criteria. Should she call a halt now or plunge headlong into it? Do or die? Fralinski was reminiscent of the care-free boho girl she desperately wanted to revive. It could work, but she’d have to float it past Richard first. Her insides knotted and her mouth went dry. It would be okay, she told herself, he loved her, didn’t he? She’d been Fralinski when they met and at least it wasn’t a total name change! She sighed with relief, then froze at the next thought: Telling him wasn’t going to be easy. She’d have to choose her moment, and she’d better get her argument straight.

Freddie and Tilly were out the following Friday, and Katy seized her opportunity. “Fancy a glass of decent red?” she asked. A bottle of Brunello and two expensive glasses sat on the granite counter.

“What are you up to? Not another one of your expensive

courses?"

She poured the dark liquid, her hand steady so as not to disturb the sediment.

"No, not a course," she said, smiling and handing a glass to Richard. "I thought I'd take the weekend off. Go for a walk along the river with you, maybe go to the cinema, if you like?"

"Cut to the chase, Kittykat. What do you want?"

"Don't be cross, Rich."

"What is it?"

"I need to change my name."

Richard furrowed his brow, turning to her with a quizzical look.

"It's okay, I'm not changing it to anything daft," she said, swallowing a mouthful of aged Brunello. "I thought I'd change it back to Fralinski."

Richard stood up, walked over to the French windows and stared into the garden. The day was fading. Katy sensed his thoughts before he did – anger, confusion, rejection.

"What the hell's got into you, Kit? All this so-called 'spiritual' stuff?" he said, spitting flecks of wine in his frustration. "It's gone too far. We've been married for sixteen years, for God's sake! Hasn't Stone been good enough for you?"

She took a step towards him, instinctively reaching out, but withdrawing her hand before it made contact. "I was Katy Fralinski when we first met and it was all fresh and exciting, then, remember?" She let the thought take root, watching him as he fixed his attention on the gloom outside. "It might rekindle what we had!" It was a long shot, but she had to think of something to convince him. "Come on, Rich, it might inject some life into our marriage? Resuscitate it."

"So, you think it's moribund?" said Richard, his face slackening as he turned back towards her.

"We're still us! We're still married, aren't we?" said Katy, gesturing with open palms, her eyes widening. She held his

gaze and his face softened as he swilled the ruby nectar around his mouth and swallowed. "Fine, but I don't really understand why!"

"I think it would be good for Harley Street, too, having an unusual name that stands out."

"I don't get you, Kit. I don't understand what's happening... or how changing your name's going to solve anything." He stepped towards her, placing an outstretched hand on her shoulder and looking into her piercing eyes.

She flung her arms around his neck, nearly spilling the Brunello in the process. His body was shaking almost as much as hers. "Thank you, Richard. It's important to me... To us."

"Go on then, but you've got to tell the kids first, then your bloody parents, and our friends. What are they going to think, Kit? Have you factored that into your equation?"

She had, and it filled her with horror.

The task of telling everyone and reverting to her maiden name was less problematic than she'd thought. The kids didn't seem to care, her parents disapproved of whatever she did anyway, her old friends thought she was going off the rails so what did it matter, and her new friends were fully behind her!

The first opportunity to make an official change came the following week at the bank. She'd been waiting in the queue for some time, agitated by how languorous the service was. She'd have gone under as a therapist if she'd had that attitude! Shuffling her feet, she checked her watch for the umpteenth time.

The problem, she thought, was that nobody was motivated! Coughing loudly, then tapping her fingers against her handbag, she drew attention to herself and looked away. Her jaw clenched as she dug her stiletto into the logo on the carpet. "For God's sake," she muttered, visibly rattled by having to wait. She wanted to shriek 'You're wasting my time!' at the top of her voice. Her heart was pumping and her limbs trembling. She was

going to be late. A muscle twitched on her temple. This level of stress was out of all proportion, she realized. It must have been the pressure taking its toll. She'd crammed her days so full there was no room for maneuver. Agh. Now the teller was chatting to that woman, and she was in a hurry, for God's sake! She held herself back from causing a scene, wincing at the thought of losing control. That's what mother used to do – manipulate with drama. Inside, Katy felt like crying, or running down the street screaming and shouting.

Collecting herself, she noticed the utter tiredness behind the impatience. Perhaps she'd leave it till another day? But then she'd have wasted the last fifteen minutes. The guy in front left. It was her turn next. It would be a muesli bar on the train for lunch, at this rate!

"Oh, are you getting divorced?" said the young assistant in the sing-song voice of a nine-year-old. "Because you've got a joint account and it'd be better to separate it now, before proceedings." She pushed her spectacles up with a chubby finger, and peered at Katy, who, by now, was losing her composure.

"No, I'm not getting divorced!" she said, the force of her voice taking them both by surprise. Katy clenched her fists inside her jacket pockets, digging her nails into the palms of her hands. "I'm changing my name because—" she gritted her teeth as the thought hit her. *Because I've had my soul contract read and a woman in Stoke Newington says I've got to change it if I want to be a leader for a new evolution in consciousness.* Her face reddened as she looked down at the floor. "For professional reasons," she said, smiling weakly at the assistant.

Katy told everyone the same story. "I want a more unusual name than Stone. Something that'll stand out in Harley Street." It was a convincing lie that she hid behind as she tried to forget the original impulse.

Katy felt out of kilter, unbalanced, as if she wasn't there. Was this madness? It felt as if she was witnessing her life at a distance

and through a haze. "I feel like I don't have a body sometimes!" she told Terry. "Like I'm drunk or stoned. The world's gone a bit fuzzy and I'm living in my head."

"And why do you think that is?"

"I don't know! I'm not myself. I'm usually so in control!"

"Perhaps it's a good thing to be less controlling?"

"I don't mean it like that. I'm not as efficient as I was. I can't make decisions like I did."

"That could be adrenal fatigue – you're always on the go and your mind's never at rest."

"Yes it is! When I meditate!"

"For half an hour a day?"

"But I've always been like that. It makes for a good therapist, having an analytical mind!" Katy's voice was rising as her body tensed. She was gripping the arms of the chair with her hands.

"You'd be even better if you could switch off and let things percolate," said Terry, leaning back in his chair and steeping his hands.

"I can't make up my mind – about ordinary things, like whether to buy lamb or chicken."

"Is that important?"

"I get easily swayed by other people's opinions and I'm thinking things through too much," she said, picking at her nails. "I need to make instinctive decisions, but I can't!" She furiously fiddled with her earring, then ran her fingers through her well-groomed hair. "My mind's elsewhere, as if I'm absent from my own life!"

"You sound lost."

"And I keep losing my temper, which isn't like me! I got angry with the woman in the bank the other day. She was only doing her job, but I could feel this aggression spiraling from nowhere."

"Adrenal fatigue. You know the score – fight or flight. You're either going to get angry or jittery or both," said Terry, his warm eyes searching for signs of recognition. "Tiredness is tracking

you down, isn't it?"

Katy's eyes began to well up. She was cross with him for being right and she felt like a fool. Fighting to get a grip on her emotions, she realized it was useless trying to control them. For God's sake, Katherine, this is so unprofessional, she told herself, looking furtively at Terry with his kind eyes and open face.

"You don't need to feel bad, Katy. Guilt demands punishment but what have you got to feel guilty about? Being human? Showing emotions? It's only adding to your already stressful load!"

"I know. It's just that everything seemed so fixed and solid and now it's giving way."

"And how does that make you feel?"

"Uncertain. Disoriented. Like I'm sliding on a slippery surface."

"And you hide it stoically?"

"Yes," she said, her head bowed, her body curled forward. "I suppose I'm keeping up appearances."

"Maintaining a shiny veneer?"

She nodded.

"What about the real you? What's happening on the inside, Katy?"

"I don't know." She lifted her head, her pursed lips smiling, her watering eyes betraying her.

Meditation was keeping her sane, bringing down her rocketing stress levels, and giving her time to reflect. It was almost a week later, around midnight that she sent a message to Dinah.

"Is it possible the name change is disrupting my life? I can't concentrate and I'm feeling angry and anxious. I'm not myself. Just want to burst into tears. Do you think I've made a mistake? Could you double check the details? You did get the spelling of my name right?"

Dinah's answer came back:

"All the details are correct. It's usual for people to experience

disruption when they change their name. You're altering the vibration and energy of who you are. If you want to transform your life, you have to let go of the old way of doing things. You have to release who you've become, so you can be who you're destined to be. The old has to break up to give way to the new.

Ground the vibration of your new name. It's tipping you off-balance as the energies come in. Bring them through and root them. You're drifting in no-man's land between Stone and Fralinski. Be gentle with yourself."

How the hell was she going to do that!

Chapter 3

It was a clear night as the first chill of autumn descended over the fields. A waxing moon cast an eerie glow across a long gravel drive, at the end of which stood a lonely house with gabled roof and leaded lights. Apart from a distant car and a soft rustling in a hedgerow, everything was deathly quiet. Red roses had faded long ago as summer slipped away, their desiccated petals lifeless along the path to the front door. Heavy curtains, designed to shut out prying eyes, hung at each window. A child dreamed sweetly in her bedroom, pretty in pink, while the lady of the house, slept deeply under a sumptuous duvet, her long dark hair splayed over the pillow, the capacious sleigh bed dwarfing her tall, rangy figure.

A single flickering light shone from the attic window where a balding man was silhouetted, a bead of sweat catching the moonlight on his pate. Glassy eyed, he stared at the screen, trawling the internet, one hand on the mouse, the other in his lap. He'd locked the door and plugged in the earphones, but his heart was racing nonetheless. He took a generous gulp of brandy from a crystal cut glass. His breathing quickened, his prey was in sight. Almost there, tracking it down, this one thing that numbed his miserable existence. He watched the naked bodies writhe on the screen as he fumbled with his right hand – the only relief from a life in which he felt so trapped.

He fretted, mopping his brow with his handkerchief then casting a worried look at his watch. Burying his face in his hands he leaned forward, his elbows on the desk, his torso bent over. Tomorrow he'd be in London. Maybe he should see someone – a professional who could help. He just wanted a relationship that worked. Recovering his composure, he punched 'psychotherapist central London' into Google.

At number 11 Sycamore Road, Richard was already snoring when Katy tip-toed her way upstairs with a cup of cocoa. Passing the large mirror at the top of the landing, something caught her eye. Must have been a shadow, she thought, glancing back at it. "I'm sure I saw something – a flash?" She scrutinized her reflection.

A soft Voice made her jump. "Good Evening!" it said.

Holding her breath, her eyes widening, she gingerly looked around. Nothing. The Voice, gentle, loving, spoke again. "It's okay – you're perfectly safe." She had the crazy feeling it was coming from the mirror. Turning, she observed her image gazing back at her, looking quite normal. But wait! There...something glimpsed from the corner of her eye. When she looked straight at herself, she saw only her own striking features staring back. And another thing, she sensed it in the mirror, but it sounded as if it came from behind her, or maybe above. It's in my head, she realized.

"Hello, Katherine!"

The Voice filled her now with a mixture of fear and warmth. It seemed strangely familiar as she listened, lifting and comforting as it rose and fell with easy, confident intonation. "I'm here to help you. Are you ready?"

"Ready for what?" asked Katy, trying to keep her wavering voice calm. "And who are you?"

"Are you ready to learn what I've come to impart?"

"Depends on what you're imparting!"

"Wisdom."

"But who are you? And where are you?" she said, her eyes darting from side to side.

"I am that I am, but that matters not. I'm here with you. I'm part of you, as you're part of me. I exist but not as you would understand existence."

"Good God! Are you going to carry on talking in riddles with that 1930s accent?"

"Does it displease you?"

"No... It's just odd!" said Katy quietly, not wanting to be overheard. "This could be dangerous – what in God's Name is happening?"

"Quite the contrary. It's perfectly safe and most definitely in God's Name. Would you like me to continue?"

Katy's eyebrows shot up as she instinctively took a step back. A therapist hearing voices in her head – what if it got out?

"It won't."

"How did you –?"

"Thought communication. That's how I'm talking to you."

What if it's all nonsense?

"It's not nonsense. It's very real."

Hearing the voice of Wisdom? This was madness!

"Not at all," the Voice replied patiently. "I'm communicating with you directly from a Higher Plane."

"I see."

"I don't think you do. Can I begin?"

"How long's it going to take? I was about to meditate!"

"Oh! Meditation! That's wonderful. I'll talk to you while you're meditating."

"But..."

"It's okay, there's no such thing as time where I come from, so you'll still have plenty of earth time to meditate and get to bed before midnight."

"Oh."

Katy walked uncertainly into her office, not daring to look back. Fishing out her meditation stool from beneath the couch, she positioned it in front of the window. Kneeling down in the thin, pale moonlight, she drew her cardigan against the chill of the autumn evening. Her eyes closed, her breathing steadied.

"You know you're a powerful creator, don't you?"

"I can create a hell of a scene with Richard, if that's what you mean?"

"You were made in the Image and Likeness of God!"

"So, He's up there in heaven, trying to stick to his low-carb diet and get to yoga three times a week?"

"He?"

"Does He sneak off on Friday evenings for a naughty cigarette and a glass of vino with the girls?"

"God is beyond gender – He, She, It, They – because the Godhead is collective too – the many and the one – the different facets of the same diamond, so to speak. We'll call Him 'Father' because of the fathering principle in creation – the yang – the 'doing', the 'externalizing', the 'administering'. 'He' is more useful in conversation don't you think? But He's by no means limited to the masculine. He's Supreme, Ultimate and Absolute. Three-in-One."

"What do you mean?"

"He's not some old fogey with a long white beard, sitting on a fluffy cloud like a saintly Santa, giving presents to the ones who've been good."

"Richard's told me about the Catholic God of hell and damnation – thinking up penances for people who've broken the speed limit or coveted their neighbor's ox or diddled their tax return. No thank you, that's not my idea of a Divine Being!"

"Nor is it mine."

"Cut to the chase, will you?"

"God's a powerful creator and made you in His Likeness."

"I get it. He's just like me."

"No. You're like Him. You create everything in your life – the good bits, the bad bits, the things you know about, the things you don't know about."

"What do you mean?"

"You're a powerful creator, just like the One who created you."

"I thought God was a light within?"

"In a way He is, but that's not the entire picture. He's everywhere and everything, inside, outside and beyond. In fact,

He's more of a verb than a noun!"

"Huh?"

"He's a Divine Creative Eternal Force, constantly creating and re-creating. A Thinking Intelligence, powered by Love and Light. He's beyond gender, beyond time, and beyond explanation."

"Why are you saying it like that? *Love* and *Light*?"

"Because it's not just the love you feel for your children, or your dog, or dark chocolate, it's a much Higher Force in the Cosmos. The Light is way beyond the limited spectrum of the light you have here, so I'm trying to distinguish..."

"Oh... I've got to meditate now. I'll be tired in the morning."

"Time is suspended while we're having our little chat, but if you'd rather I stopped..."

"Just finish your point, then let me be."

"God is beyond description – ineffable – you can't really comprehend! But what I can tell you is that humans are part of a vast, never-ending, Divine, Intelligent, Creative Energy. A Divine Mind, if you like. A Higher Thought Process. The Godhead, or more precisely, Elohim, created you humans from itself, from its own emanated coding of Love-Light-Life. You're made of God's Thought Forms, made of Love, made of generative Light – everything is. And your minds are connected to a much Greater Mind Force than you can possibly imagine."

"I see."

"I doubt it. Think of what you can do! You're plugged into it all like a laptop on the internet, only you can do a great deal more and it's infinite."

"Really," said Katy, with a rather flat tone she hadn't intended.

"Whatever name you give The Most High and all His myriad emanations – masculine, feminine, plural – whatever your religion, whatever your Word – the Truth remains."

"What truth?"

"God is a cosmic, ever-present, all-powerful, all-knowing, ever-evolving, loving intelligence. He formed all things and

is in all things and connects all things – known and unknown – including you. And the unknown is far, far greater than the known. Think of it – no beginning, no end, infinity, everywhere, always was, always is, always shall be – can do anything, and you can access it! Makes the human mind boggle, doesn't it?"

Katy opened her eyes and stared out at the moon in silence. A small, golden spanner had been deftly lodged in the workings of her mind, causing it to seize for a second.

"Big, isn't it?"

Katy took a deep breath, blinked, and closed her eyes, hardly daring to think, let alone speak.

"That's the thing," continued the Voice, "I'm not telling you anything new. But people don't take these Truths on board. They hear them, dismiss them, and think about something much easier like, 'when are we going shopping' and 'what are we having for supper'."

"Those things are important!"

"They seem important."

There was a long pause before the Voice started tentatively again. "All this wisdom is lost on humankind. The Words fall like autumn leaves then turn to dust, only ever skimming the edge of the intellect. They aren't experienced or embodied. There's no true knowing. Humans log the mysteries, file them in their minds under 'things – useful to know' then carry on with what's pressing. You're not listening, are you?"

"I'm trying to, but it's not easy listening to a disembodied Voice at the end of a long day, when all you want to do is slip between the sheets and drift into nod land."

"I understand. Should I go?"

"Finish. I get the feeling there's more," said Katy, sighing.

"Humans don't experience themselves as embryo gods. It all seems too bonkers, too abstract, too unreal – *unrealized*. It's simply not scientific, not logical. You think it's all a metaphor – the scriptures, I mean – a little story for Sunday School. It seems

to me you mostly think church is a quaint old-fashioned thing for getting married and naming your babies. And perhaps it is!" The Voice chuckled. "You don't realize the power that you hold. You carry on living your modern lives, struggling for control, and trying to grab what you can in the process." There was another pause. "I don't know where we went wrong," the Voice said, a sad dismay replacing the jovial tone. "Humanity's fallen asleep! Completely unaware of what they're capable of! Forgotten who they are, what they're here to do!"

"I'm sorry," whispered Katy and with that the Voice was gone.

Climbing quietly into bed after her meditation, Katy glanced at Richard, a shallow scowl was etched across his slack features. Even in sleep he wasn't at peace, she thought, lying on her back and staring at the thin sliver of moonlight that made its way through the gap in the curtains. She was pondering the experience with the Voice before she drifted into a fitful sleep. Vivid images roused her at around 3.30 am. Still haunted by the lingering dream, she got up and shuffled to the bathroom. She needed to write it down – it would be useful for Terry. Retrieving a notebook and pen from the desk drawer upstairs, she put them on her bedside cabinet and scribbled down a few notes. Richard rolled over, half-opening one eye with a frown on his face. "I had the weirdest dream," she explained. "Just writing it down before I forget!"

* * *

Three days later, in the easy surroundings of Terry's consulting room, Katy took out her notebook. "I've been having some vivid dreams," she said. "Unusual ones."

"Interesting." Terry nodded.

"Shall I share them with you? I noted them down."

"Please do."

"I dreamt the world was a big training ground for people to come and learn things, except we weren't learning – we were just copying."

Terry raised his eyebrows as he stared straight at Katy.

"Children were copying from their mums and dads and the people around them – mimicking them – and we know that's true from therapy, don't we?"

Terry smiled and bobbed his head in confirmation.

"Then they went to school and copied what the teachers said and what the books said..."

"Go on."

"In the dream it didn't stop. People carried on copying all their lives! They copied the professors at university, the bosses at work, their colleagues, their predecessors."

"With no variation?"

"Personal tweaks, but nothing fundamental."

"What sort of tweaks?"

"Sometimes they stumbled on something useful or better, and there were a few bright people thinking up fresh ideas, but mostly it was just the same old same old," said Katy, a frown on her face as she pieced it all together. "So, the personal tweaks were just peripheral things. Superficial. Like changing the color or moving the furniture in a room. It makes it look different but really it's the same furniture and the same room."

"And what do you think it all means?"

"I was hoping you'd tell me!" said Katy, letting out a short burst of nervous laughter. "I don't think we're supposed to just copy and move the furniture around – metaphorically speaking – I think we're meant to work things out for ourselves, progress, conjure up new ideas."

"Like Leonardo da Vinci or Picasso?"

"Yes! They thought outside the box, didn't they?"

"They were geniuses."

"I suppose," said Katy, troubled somehow by the response.

"But don't we all have the potential inside us?"

"Carry on telling me about the dream," said Terry, making notes on his pad of crisp, lined paper.

"It was like a big sausage machine."

"What was?"

"The world. Humanity. We were all just learning from the last person, so we knew how to perform – like circus animals being trained to jump through hoops to rapturous applause," she continued, grappling with the ideas that were forming in her head. "We were training ourselves to do what was expected – it was like a people factory."

"And who was doing the expecting?"

"Society. The authorities. Our elders. 'Them'."

"Anything else?"

"Yes. It went a bit weird, you know, how dreams do?" said Katy, the glow in her cheeks reddening. "Everyone was copying and doing what they were supposed to do, so they could earn money and afford to live a sort of mechanized life like everybody else!"

"Carry on." Terry was scribbling.

"It went into a thing about boxes," she said, pausing to look at her notes and gather her thoughts. "I realized, in the dream, that all of our lives are lived through boxes. All compartmentalized."

Terry nodded. "Just like the psyche. We compartmentalize. The furniture is the same unless we dig into the shadow – into the deep subconscious – then integrate."

Sitting up straight and with new vigor, Katy continued. "In the dream people did what they had to, so they could earn money to buy a big box in a safe area, then decorate it the way they wanted – well not really how they wanted, but how the interior design magazines dictated. Everyone in the dream had some sort of box – their home – and it was like watching ants marching to and fro. All regimented and organized. All overseen by the Queen."

Terry raised his eyebrows, dragging the nib of his fountain pen across the page.

"They all left their boxes to get into shiny, smaller ones – cars or buses – to go to another, much bigger box."

"Work?"

"Yes. You get the drift," said Katy, dropping the explanations. "If they were lucky, they got to meet another person from another box and share a new box and have a couple of lovely kids. At the weekends they all went to big, bright boxes, full of little boxes filled with trinkets. They could buy things they didn't really need, then maybe go to another big, dark box to watch a flickering screen of somebody else's life that was better than theirs."

"Sounds like a dystopia!" said Terry.

"I know. But we do watch feel-good movies about people living the lives we'd like to live, don't we? It's part of the escapism from the drudgery of life."

"That's quite a dim view, Katy."

"I know. It's reflecting the state of my mind isn't it? All drudge and no thrill. I saw people living out this 'box' life: Restaurant boxes for special occasions, pub boxes for drinking. Kid's telly boxes to keep them quiet, Xboxes, or whatever they're called, to keep them entertained. Everyone was trapped by their little mobile phone boxes. They were all disconnected, living a grey, mechanized life, on treadmills they weren't even aware of!"

"Sounds like The Matrix." Terry smiled. "Do you feel boxed in?"

"Yes," she said, her heart thumping with the admission. She'd been trying to avoid that one.

"The subconscious always finds a way to let you know," said Terry, frowning.

"It was a box structure for guaranteed achievement!" said Katy, wondering where that revelation had come from. "If they stayed inside the box formula, they had a tried and tested road

to success which could be measured by the size and luxury of the boxes. Except it doesn't always work in real life does it?"

Terry nodded as he leaned back in the chair and replaced the lid of his pen with a click.

"I could see in the dream it was more about control than achievement!" She was on a roll now, ideas flooding in and joining the dots. "We measure success by how well we're doing in the maze of boxes and what sort of boxes we have! There's no freedom of movement, no freedom of expression! It's impossible to do things differently!"

"Are you talking about the dream or your own life?"

"The dream...but it's a reflection of my real life, isn't it?"

"Yes." His gaze met hers. "What about the people who've opted out?"

"Tramps, gurus, self-sufficient-off-the-grid types? They're outside the system, aren't they? But they're shunned by society. If you're inside the system you can't fully express yourself. Actually, you don't even know yourself properly!"

"It was a dream, Katy – you don't have to live it – you have the power to change it!"

"It felt so real, so suffocating."

"Tell me more about what you felt."

"Squashed by the system. Insignificant. I couldn't be me. I couldn't be authentic or do what I really wanted to do. I felt hemmed in."

"Be with the feeling. Just allow it. Carry on."

"We're all on a treadmill. Pacing forward but going nowhere."

"YOU are on a treadmill?"

"Yes. And it's going too fast. I'm trying to catch up but the schedule's too tight. There's not enough time or space for me. I feel pinched off."

"From what?"

"Real life, living, me. I don't feel alive!"

"And?"

"I'm trapped in my fur-lined, gilded box. The door's unlocked but I stay inside."

"Why?"

"Because it's safe."

Terry nodded and gestured with his pen for her to continue.

"I don't know what's beyond the boxes."

"Many people fear the unknown, Katy, that's why so few opt for therapy! But the subconscious will find a way to nudge you into it. That's how we grow!"

"I'm scared."

"It's okay to be scared and brave at the same time," said Terry, his voice measured and confident. "They say the magic happens outside of your comfort zone – outside of the box!"

"I'm fed up with the box, Terry, it's stifling me! I feel like a wild animal trapped in a small cage. A cheetah, say! First, she was angry and spat and clawed, then she got anxious in case she couldn't escape, and eventually she calmed down and surrendered. I guess that's where the listlessness began. There's more, but I think we've run out of time."

"Yes. Time waits for no man – or woman."

"I'm always running out of time."

"I'd like you to carry on with your dream diary this week and take a look at what's draining your time. Start to become aware of where it's going."

As Katy left the consulting room, she heard the old-fashioned telephone ringing from Terry's desk, his quiet but confident voice answering.

"Yes, this is Doctor Slater... No...I'm sorry but I can't take on any more clients at the moment. But I can recommend someone else?"

Another pause, then, "If money's no object, I can highly recommend The Priory Clinic in West London for addictions. I'll give you the number. I recommend you talk to Dr. Erasmus Watkins or his secretary, if you can."