

***THE COUNCIL***

*A TRILOGY*

*Elsa Lambert*

*BOOK THREE*

*THE CAMEL'S BACK*

BOOK THREE      THE CAMEL'S BACK

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1	HALCYON
CHAPTER 2	VACLAV AND LIBUSE
CHAPTER 3	MARCUS
CHAPTER 4	THRESHOLD
CHAPTER 5	FRAGILE
CHAPTER 6	DEPRAVED INDIFFERENCE
CHAPTER 7	REVERIE
CHAPTER 8	A PENCIL A TULIP
CHAPTER 9	PERCHANCE
CHAPTER 10	SORROW
CHAPTER 11	VELVET
CHAPTER 12	CHRISTMAS

## CHAPTER ONE HALCYON

Everyone knew: children at a birthday party in Amsterdam, farmers in Kosovo, Pakistani bus passengers, train engineers in Spain, museum goers in Japan; Yemeni mine workers, Brazilian soccer players, prisoners in Cuba, doctors in Jordan, Dutch judges, pilots in Argentina, Swiss students, German stock brokers, a Japanese rock band, monks in Burma, Egyptian archaeological workers, Mexican journalists, mountaineers in Tanzania. Everyone knew. No one would forget where they were on this day.

One million, two hundred thousand people live in Prague. Last week's Film Festival had been a grand success. The Music Festival had begun, the Marathon scheduled in two days. It was late afternoon on a Tuesday, everyone talking about the Ice Hockey Season Opening game at Tesla Arena - fourteen thousand tickets sold out weeks before.

Because the zoo was only a few kilometers away, it didn't take long for the rabbits, gorillas, pigs, cats, hens, stags, ducks, lizards, birds, horses, bees, lions, tigers and elephants to make their way to the city. They sat waiting, quietly, on the bridges, lining the pathways next to the River.

Was it a power outage? Odd to happen in September, but certainly nothing to worry about.

Once inside the hotel lobby, White Crow, Marc (his rabbit ears at attention), Mal'akh (cooing oo-wa-hoo, hoo hoo) and Marcus, the Yellow Labrador with white ear tips, immediately see Asha and Emilie. "Is there somewhere private?" Asha, pointing, "A meeting room. . . it's over there." White Crow turns to Marc - "Will you find Shilli and Samuel?" At the other side of the lobby, Julian tips his head, motioning to Wayne to follow.

The Conference room was medium size, a large oval table with surrounding chairs, a video screen, small side table, a large blackboard, photographs of antique Bohemia crystal lining the walls. As White Crow and Mal'akh fly to the table, Wayne stands by the closed door, Marcus at his feet. White Crow - "It's happened all over the world. People will react differently. Each of you is a different person than you were a year ago." Emilie - "How long will it last." White Crow - "We don't know." Emilie, turning to Julian and Asha. "I forgot to tell you, Shilli's here." Mal'akh - "Samuel and Shilli are on their way."

White Crow turns to Asha. "Please go to speak with the person in charge of this territory, Marcus will go with you. Julian, please find the place where the sick are being cared for." "Julian - Is it all right for Wayne to come with me?" "Yes, Mal'akh will come too." After everyone left, White Crow and Emilie are alone in the room. White Crow - "Have you learned to fly?" Emilie - "I did my best. I'm too young to get a license." "Find whatever you need. Keep it hidden and safe. Take walks by the river. We'll need your help soon."

As Asha and Marcus walk together, a man passes by, rifle in hand, five dead doves slung over his shoulder. After a few minutes, realizing she's made a wrong turn, Asha decides to try what she and Emilie so often talked about. Stopping, standing still, closing her eyes, she asks (silently) for a sign. On the cobblestone walk, pill bugs roll into balls, moving together to form the shape of an arrow, pointing to the right. Asha and Marcus turn right at the corner.

Prague Castle is the largest castle complex in the world. Two blue uniformed Castle Guards stand watch at the main entrance gate. Asha walks with Marcus at her side. "We'd like to see who is in charge. We're here with information about what's happened." The guard is obviously taken aback but answers "Please wait here." He walks away.

In a few minutes, the guard returns. "Do you have identification, credentials?" Asha reaches into her pocket and hands him a slip of paper. He leaves. After a short wait, the guard returns. "Please follow me." Walking through the courtyards, Asha whispers to Marcus "I never dreamed anything like this could happen. I'm scared." "Do your best... like you always do."

## CHAPTER TWO VACLAV AND LIBUSE

Asha, (as always, a flower in her hair) is asked to sit on a small bench in the corridor outside the office of the President. Marcus sits on the floor beside her. On the wall is a framed quotation. “As soon as man began considering himself the source of the highest meaning in the world and the measure of everything, the world began to lose its human dimension, and man began to lose control of it.”  
Vaclav Havel

Asha and Marcus are shown into the President’s office. A woman is seated behind a large, baroque desk, one man sitting next to the desk, two men standing near the door. Marcus sits at the closed door. Asha walks to the woman behind the desk, extending her hand, introducing herself. “I am Asha Singh,” adding “this is Marcus.” The woman stands up. “I am Kveta Ceskova.” As Asha approaches the three men to shake hands, each replies. “I am Viktor Broucek, Deputy Prime Minister, Foreign Affairs.” “Jan Jelinek, Minister of Informatics.” Taking a chair from the corner, “Kvido Vrabec, Interior Minister. . . would you like to sit?” “Thank you , I prefer to stand.”

Asha begins. “We know the President, Prime Minister, the heads of the Chamber of Deputies and Senate are all out of the country.” Viktor Broucek asks “Who’s *We*?” I’m here on behalf of the animals and the natural world to explain what’s happened, to offer our help.” Kvido Vrabec’s tone of voice changes instantly. Angrily, “You gave the guard a piece of paper with numbers. How do you know those numbers?” “I was told to remember them.” “Who told you?” “I’ve been asked not to say. ”

Jan Jelinek stands, his voice trying to hide his frustration. “Is this a joke? You want us to believe that animals made this happen. . . and then let you know? That’s crazy! That’s.....” He’s interrupted, suddenly, by a loud barking and meowing at the door. Kvido opens the door. A Prague ratter, his black coat glistening, walks over to Marcus. “I’m VACLAV.” He then walks over to Jan Jelinek and jumps into his arms. A pure white Siamese cat, one eye silver, one eye gold, goes to Marcus. “I am LIBUSE.” She walks to the desk, jumps up and sits directly in front of Kveta Ceskova.

Kvido shakes his head side to side....this isn’t possible. Viktor asks....“How long will this last?” Asha - “We don’t know. The priority now is to take care of those who can’t care for themselves.. People will be afraid and frustrated. There is nothing to be afraid of.”

Will you ask your citizens to do no harm to any animal? They are here to help. Neither food nor water will be a concern. People have been sent to hospitals, schools, Tesla Arena, to explain what's happened.

Once you address the people, the runners here for the Marathon will take your message across the country. We recommend you divide the city into a grid of specific neighborhoods. Perhaps you might suggest a daily meeting in Old Town Square, Wenceslas Square and other locations?

Kveta Ceskova - "How can we contact you?" "We're staying at the Halcyon. Asha goes to shake her hand, then to each of the men. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Broucek, Mr. Jelinek, Mr. Vrabec. If you will go outside, there's something for you to see. As Asha and Marcus turn to leave, they nod to VACLAV and LIBUSE. Walking out the door, Marcus nudges Asha.

Everyone is stunned, in total disbelief. "Am I dreaming?" "That she remembered our names is unusual." Kvido - "It can't hurt to walk outside ." The four walk to the nearest courtyard and stand quietly. After a minute..."Look!!!" Flying overhead are thousands of brilliantly colored birds - forming the flag of the Czech Republic.

Walking to Prague's General University Hospital, Wayne, was unusually silent. "Julian - "Are you okay?" "I'm glad to be here." Mal'akh the Mourning Dove sat on Wayne's right shoulder.

When the hospital's emergency back up generators didn't work, doctors knew the seriousness of what had happened. Rushing to put emergency protocols in place, no one noticed when an animal entered each patient's room: a butterfly, cockroach, cat, mouse, bird, lizard, spider, fly, a small dog. It happened in an instant. When doctors and nurses began checking patients, they were startled to hear: "I can move my arm," "The pain in my head is gone." I've never felt better." Since hospital machines weren't working, there was no way to know what, if any, *physical* change had taken place with anyone.

Visiting one patient after another, Julian and Wayne don't speak. Leaving the hospital, Julian turns to Wayne. "A year ago, Snug, Mal'akh and Youri talked to us about how animals communicate. I don't think they told us everything. "

## CHAPTER THREE    MARCUS

Walking back to the hotel at twilight, Julian and Wayne pass carts on the streets, children standing in line for free ice cream. Julian - "I can't believe this is happening." Wayne. "It's just begun."

Arriving at the Halcyon, going immediately to the Conference Room, Julian and Wayne join Asha, Emilie, Shilli, Neil and Samuel. White Crow and Mal'akh stand on top of the large oval table. Marcus sits by the door.

White Crow - "Mal'akh and I are leaving. Ayres the Orangutan, Wendell the Chimpanzee and Marc will be nearby in the Chuchle Forest. Marcus will watch over you and meet with you every morning. Listen to him. Turning to Julian, "Did you send the message?" "Yes." Asha - "The people in charge know where we are." Mal'akh - "Have you told your parents what happened last year?" Everyone shakes their head *No*. "Tell them now. Ask them to come to the dining room. Marcus will be there." White Crow and Mal'akh walk through the lobby to the hotel's front entrance. Fly away.

Everyone's happy to be together again. "*We're all here!*" "Shhh, Shy, Memo, Cool, Plato. . . where's Candid?" Shilli - "He's here. I saw him at the Opera House. This is my cousin, Neil. We were at a rehearsal when it happened." Asha - "Hi, Neil. I heard your birthday's on Independence Day...so's mine! How lucky are we?" Shilli - We better talk to our parents right away. Samuel - "They're going to think we're crazy!" Emilie - "We are! Haven't you heard? Our brains aren't fully developed . . . why we do the wonderfully risky and reckless things we do." A butterfly flies into the room, landing on Neil's right shoulder.

An hour later, in the dining room, Shilli, Neil, Shilli's Mother and Aunt sit at a table with Asha and her Father, the butterfly still on Neil's shoulder. Julian and his Mother sit at another table with Wayne and Samuel. Julian's Mother - "Where are you staying, Wayne?" "At a hostel." "We'd like you to stay here with us." Wayne- "Thank you, I'd like that." "How about you, Samuel?" "Thank you, I'm at the Church with a friend of my Uncle." Emilie, her mother and stepfather sit at a table with Lapis, his aunt, uncle, cousin, Irena, and new friend, Nicholas.

When Marcus walks in, jumping to the large side table, the room suddenly quiets. Addressing all the parents - “There is no reason to be afraid. We know your children; we have a history with them. Tell them your ideas; we welcome your help. I’d like to speak with them alone now.” Leaving the dining room, everyone starts talking at once, shaking their heads. “Did you hear what I did . . . in my head? “Am I crazy?” “Was a dog talking to us? ”

Once the adults have left, Shilli, Neil, Julian, Wayne, Asha, Samuel, Emilie and Lapis all move their chairs to sit around Marcus’s table. Marcus - “Your meeting each other was not a coincidence. A year ago, we asked each of you for your help.” He pauses.

“People count on things being predictable. Change can be scary. Start each day by finding a quiet place. Sit and be still for a few minutes. Don’t think of anything. Don’t let new experiences overwhelm you. You’re going to learn things about yourself that might surprise you. You can depend on each other. The first thing to remember when you’re afraid is to slow down.

You have to have a plan. The people in charge of the territory will have one. Stay together tonight. Talk about what you each do best. Find a need and fill it. We’ll meet in the Conference room early every morning.”

The next morning, when Marcus arrives, everyone is talking at once. A quotation is written on the blackboard. “To thine own self be true, and it shall follow as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man. William Shakespeare.

Marcus begins - “All of you are strong. You have each other. You’ll discover you have resources and resilience you never knew you had. Pay attention. Listen to what others are saying. Look directly at the person you’re talking with. Many will be frustrated, afraid, even angry. There’s nothing you can’t deal with together.”

Emilie - “Even though Denmark’s small, we use more candles than any other country in the world. We talked about it last night. My Mother knows a lot about honey bees and their hives, how to make candles from beeswax. She can teach everyone. That’s our plan.

Lapis - “My parents aren’t here; I’m visiting my Aunt and Uncle. They don’t think I should be involved. I don’t hear music like you do - I hear colors. It’s called Synesthesia. Hopefully, the different groups here for the Music Festival will be interested in teaching people how to communicate with color.”

Samuel - “For anyone who needs glasses, I’m going to make pinholes, show other people how easy it is to make them.

Asha - “My father’s an environmental engineer. He’s going to meet with the Minister of the Environment to exchange ideas, maybe revitalize gasometers, change the gas pressure through aerodynamic tunnels, get the gaslights working. Let’s not forget what White Crow said last year - to acknowledge our mistakes, instead of wasting time denying them. We can learn from each other’s mistakes. Julian starts laughing. “I was supposed to phone someone in a different state at an exact time. I forgot they were in another time zone. Won’t do that again!” ” Shilli - “That’s nothing! I thought it was obvious CH meant China. Who knew it means Switzerland?”

Wayne. - “I’m here for the Marathon. Lots of runners are in Prague. We can take messages to anyone outside the city, miles and miles away.”

Marcus - “I’ve noticed that humans like to play games. Have you ever played a game where your opponent was a beginner, who didn’t know all the rules and strategies? When that person made a foolish move, what did you feel - knowing you’d probably win the game, not because of your skill, but because the other player didn’t play that well? Everyone’s a beginner now, learning how to think and ask questions, not how to memorize answers. There’s nothing you can’t do!”

Every night, scratching at a different door in the hotel, Marcus curled up on the bed of one of his young friends.

## CHAPTER FOUR THRESHOLD

It was from the top of the Old Town Hall Tower, built in 1338, that Kveta Ceskova addressed the nation, Castle Guards standing at her side. The Square was filled with people of every age, anxious and frightened.

Strangely, without any microphone, her voice carried clearly and was heard by one and all. "I am Kveta Ceskova - the Minister of Education. The President and Prime Minister are out of the country and have authorized me to speak on their behalf. The airport is closed; no flights are arriving or leaving. The metro, trams and buses are not operating.

Yesterday, a young woman, someone we do not know, came to Prague Castle to speak with us. She met with me, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Ministers of the Interior and of Informatics. She requested I ask every Czech citizen not to cause harm to any animal. Her exact words were "They are here to help." We were told that neither food nor water will be a concern. Our Ministers of Agriculture, Environment, Health, Labor and Social Affairs are assessing what has happened, putting plans in place.

We all know what the name of our capital means - Threshold. The unknown can be frightening and frustrating. We are Czechs. Our history has shown who we were in the past. How each of us behaves now, the choices we each make, will define who we are for the future.

I would like to ask everyone who owns one or more guns to turn them in to a local government authority. This is voluntary and temporary.

As you know, our first Marathon was to begin tomorrow. Runners are here from all over the world. They will take messages across the country. There will be a meeting here each morning. Tomorrow, I'll name three other locations in Prague for daily meetings."

Before she could continue, the sound of wings filled the Square. Thousands of birds flying in a formation which everyone recognized - St. Wenceslas's Eagle.

## CHAPTER FIVE FRAGILE

As Marcus walks into the Conference Room, Shilli is writing a quotation on the blackboard.

**A man who has committed a mistake and doesn't correct it is committing another mistake.** Confucius

Ever since arriving in Prague, Shilli wasn't himself. He had begun to have unsettling dreams about Matheus. Waking up, he could never remember any details, just Matheus' face.

The daily meeting begins. Marcus - "Do your best, even if you don't think it will make a difference. Don't measure yourself against anyone else. Don't worry about someone else's best. It's disarming to have your ideas challenged and questioned. Things you thought were important won't be important any more. Question your beliefs. Give yourselves permission to fail. Be honest about your fears. Be honest with yourself and, especially, be honest with each other.

Hearing a knock on the door. Samuel goes to open it. A blue uniformed Castle guard walks in. "Is Asha Singh here? I've been sent to ask her to come with me to the Castle."

Julian, Wayne, Samuel, Emilie and Lapis all look quizzically at Shilli and Neil - who've suddenly starting using sign language. Neil, used to people looking at him, smiles. All of Shilli's friends are curious about Progeria.

Marcus walks over to Asha and licks her hand over and over. Asha gets up and leaves with the Castle Guard.

Julian - "Where did you learn to sign?" Shilli - "At school last year. It really comes in handy." Neil - "We learned Morse code too! You want to hear something *really* weird? I hear clicks in my ear that actually convey messages."

Walking with the guard to the Castle, Asha was scared. Having had Marcus with her before meant everything. This was different. When she walked slowly into the President's office, only one person was there.

Kveta Ceskova walks from behind her desk to greet Asha. “Please sit down. As I’m sure you know, nothing like this has ever happened before. For anyone to believe what you’ve told us is difficult, but something has happened for which no one has an explanation. May I ask you some questions?” “Yes, of course.” “You gave us a series of numbers. What do you know about these numbers?” “Nothing. I was just asked to remember them.”

“Do you know if the timing of what has happened has any significance?” “No, I don’t ...but that doesn’t mean there isn’t one.” “Were you told anything about our Government?” “I was told there’s currently a high level secret meeting of EU members. Because of the current political climate, it was important no one knew when or where it would take place. I was told both your President and Prime Minister are at that meeting, the Head of your Senate and Chamber of Deputies are also out of the country.”

Kveta Ceskova - “I am the Minister of Education. The President has authorized me to manage the country in his absence. As you know, the President and Prime Minister lead the country, no matter where in the world they travel. Their not being able to communicate with us in any way changes that. I’m not authorized to sign any multilateral documents, any documents of any kind. Should anything happen to me, the next person authorized would be the Minister of the Interior. You met him yesterday. A woman has never been in the position I find myself. Our citizens will question this.

Asha - “ Ms. Ceskova, Like you, I’m doing my best. That I can communicate telepathically with some animals is extraordinary to me. Your speech was powerful and eloquent.” “Thank you, Miss Singh. Before you go, she hesitates. . . I have a cat. You saw her when you were last here. Her name is Libuse. She hasn’t left my side, except to go to your Hotel. Before she left, it was odd, as if she was telling me where she was going.”

Asha stands to leave. “If there is any way I can be of help, please let me know.”

## CHAPTER SIX DEPRAVED INDIFFERENCE

The blackboard quotation:

**In the universe, there are things that are known, and things that are unknown, and in between, there are doors. William Blake.**

As usual at the morning meeting, everyone is talking at once. Emilie - "Wayne and Neil need nicknames." Wayne - "Can I choose my own . . . *NoName*?" Laughter and smiles. Samuel - "Agreed? *NoName* it is!" Lapis - "I want to change mine. I know I have a temper, say things without thinking. . . Julian interrupts - "Last night you were telling me about Synesthesia. How about "*Senses*"? " Lapis - "Perfect!" Julian- "Where's your friend, Nicholas?" "He's going through a rough time, likes to stay by himself."

Asha - "We have to pick a name for Neil. Since he asked me to call him the "Old Man" how about *om*?" Neil - "I love that! He starts humming.."*Ommmm*." Shilli gets up and puts a small package in front of both Wayne and Neil. "These are for you." Shilli - "Has anyone noticed how most things in nature are circular, not square?" Julian - "Does anyone know who owns Antarctica? *The answer is*. . . No one and Everyone!" Emilie - "Ok, if we're having a trivia contest, did you know plants have DNA?" Neil jumps in - "How about this? My doctor told me that a surgical incision on a fetus still in the womb heals without a scar."

Marcus arrives for the daily meeting with a small black dog and a white Siamese cat. They all jump onto the table. Marcus - "VACLAV and LIBUSE live in this territory."

Marcus continues. "You're finding different age groups are reacting differently. Many young people have only known a life with technology. Everything for them will be counterintuitive, the opposite of what they are used to: slow not fast, listen not talk, focus not delete, share not profit. Older people know the difference between need and want - they'll be more frustrated than afraid. I'd like to spend time alone now with Vaclav and Libuse." One by one, everyone goes to Marcus. Some embrace him, others kiss him, others stroke his coat. The love they feel for him is palpable.

Following White Crow's instructions, every morning Emilie took a walk along the Vltava River, always sitting on the same bench. One morning, when a dolphin popped his head out of the water, she was not at all surprised. "I am CTIBOR. Ask Lapis to bring his family here tomorrow." In an instant, he disappeared.

The next morning, Emilie, Lapis, his Aunt and Uncle are at the River when CTIBOR appears. No one moves. Emilie kneels down. After listening for a few minutes, she looks up and begins. "You are attorneys. The animal world is considering bringing a legal action against the human species. Since this has never been done before, they'd like to know if they have grounds to do this." Emilie pauses for a few seconds. "An orangutan, chimpanzee and dolphin would like to hire you. They can communicate using both sign language and morse code."

Lapis' Uncle shakes his head, gets up and motions to his wife. In not exactly a friendly tone - "Lapis, we'll see you at the Hotel."

Later that night, Lapis comes to Emilie's room. "My Aunt and Uncle don't want to be involved. My cousin, Irena, overheard her parents talking about what happened. She's a law student, really smart. She's amazed you and I can communicate with animals. She wanted me to ask you if she could go with you now to the River. She wants you to tell the dolphin something."

As a light rain falls, Emilie, Lapis and Irena leave the Halcyon for the River. It isn't long before Ctibor appears. All Irena knew to do was to focus her mind on what she wanted to communicate - *depraved indifference, depraved indifference, depraved indifference*. After a few minutes of silence, Emilie touches Irena's hand. "He understands. He thanks you. He wants you to meet Marcus, something about a court."

The World Court, The International Court of Justice at the Peace Palace in the Hague, the Netherlands, immediately came to Irena's mind.

Julian writes a quotation on the blackboard.

**All people dream, but not equally  
Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their mind  
Wake in the day to find that it was vanity.  
But the dreamers of the day are dangerous people,  
For they may act their dream with open eyes to make it possible.  
T. E. Lawrence**

Marcus - "Language has limitations. It can be very confusing. Many words in one language don't have equivalent words in other languages. Julian smiles - "A little girl came up to me yesterday - "You Americans are funny. You eat paper." She'd heard someone talking about *paper jam* in the computer room. Everything's changing so fast, a good time to create some new words." Marcus - "Be careful, Julian, you'll be eponymous." Julian smiled. Another word to look up! Julian was known for his unique T shirts, a word on the front, the definition on the back. Today's shirt was "Inexorable."

Marcus - "Julian, will you and Wayne go to where people learn? Ask those who teach to meet tomorrow morning in Old Town Square." As Julian and Wayne leave, Marcus continues talking with Shilli, Neil, Emilie, Asha, Samuel and Lapis. "Pay attention. Get to know your physical surroundings. Finish what you start. What's happened will affect many people's livelihood. They will be afraid. You were each raised to believe different things. What you choose to do in the future will be your own decisions. Actions are powerful. So is humility."

Founded in 1348, Charles University is one of the world's oldest and finest universities. Julian and Wayne walk into the Rector's office to find no one there. Moments later, two men arrive, one yelling at the other. The man yelling is lecturing the other in a pedantic, condescending voice. Julian decides to step in. "Excuse me. Part of what you've said is correct, part is not. It's true a purposeful coding error can change statistics, but there can be power issues, problems with conversion and timing, system functionality. Do machines know the difference between right and wrong?"

The man not talking is obviously impressed and introduces himself. "I'm the Rector of the University." "Julian Emerson. A pleasure to meet you. This is Wayne Catori. We're here to explain what's happened, to offer our help." The Rector turns to the other man. "Will you wait outside for a moment?" The man turns, mumbling under his breath in disgust.

As Julian and Wayne leave the Rector's office, students gathering in the halls rush up to them. "Do you know something?" "Can you tell us anything?" Is this a cyber threat?" Hearing Julian's explanation of what happened, the students don't know what to think, how to react. "If you'd like to help in any way, there'll be a meeting every day in both Old Town Square and Wenceslas Square."

Walking with Wayne back to the Halcyon, Julian sees Shilli in the distance. Running to catch up, Julian puts his hand on Shilli's shoulder. "Get your hands off me!" "Shilli, what's wrong. . . it's me, Julian." Aggressive and belligerent, the young man moves to hit Julian in the face, screaming "Shut up, stay away from me, you stupid idiot" as he runs away. Julian is stunned and can't move. Turning to Wayne, "What's wrong with him...why would he act like that?" Wayne - "That wasn't Shilli." "What do you mean...of course it was!"

Knowing Emilie and Shilli had become very close friends, Julian decided to ask Emilie's advice. Emilie- "Meet me in the garden in a half hour." Surrounded by the Halcyon's giant topiaries, Julian and Emilie were alone for the first time since last year. Julian - "You've changed." "It was easier when I was shy - I don't like how judgmental I've become. My attention to detail is ridiculous! I found out I have a brother I never knew about." "No. . . Really? I found out how much I like to ask questions, and how little I like to answer them." When Julian explained what had just happened, Emilie asked - "Have you told Shilli?" "No. I'm not sure what to do." Emilie - "Maybe talk to Shilli and his parents." Julian - "Will you come with me?"

As soon as Julian and Emilie left Shilli's room, Shilli's Mother began to cry. Shilli got up from his chair, running to her. "What's wrong?" Shilli's father also got up, walked around the room, then sat down again. "Shilli, Matheus didn't go to the hospital because he was sick. . . we didn't tell you the truth. Having a difficult time talking, he continues, haltingly. "We did what we thought was best for you." "What are you talking about. . . what do you mean?" Shilli's Mother continues. "Shilli, Matheus was kidnaped. When we went to the Police, they said three other children had also disappeared." "WHY. . . why didn't you tell me?"

“Maybe we should have. We didn’t know what to do. You were so young. We didn’t want you to be afraid all the time. We thought telling you he’d gotten sick and died was easier for you to understand than a kidnaping.”

Shilli is almost screaming... “Didn’t you try to find him?” “We’ve never stopped. Never! We were told he’d probably been taken out of Namibia.” Shilli goes to sit down and starts to take some long, slow, deep breaths. Suddenly, the expression on his face changes, a look never before seen by either of his parents. Anger had turned to hope. “Do you think the person Julian saw was Matheus?” “It’s possible.” The knock on the door was Julian. “Sorry to interrupt, Mr. Louwrens, Marcus said he works at a factory. Here’s the address.” “Thanks, Julian.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT A PENCIL A TULIP

**The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.**

Eleanor Roosevelt

As Asha finished writing the quotation on the blackboard, Julian is showing everyone the game of rock, paper, scissors. Trying it over and over, Shilli and Emilie can't stop laughing. When Lapis' cousin, Irena, comes into the room, Shilli hands her a package. "This is for you." As Neil begins playing with his new harmonica, Samuel asks him - "Why do you pat your pants pocket all the time?" "It's just a habit. My Mother told me to check my pocket every time I left the house, to be sure I had my keys."

The talk about religion is in full swing. Asha - "Samuel, didn't you say your family works in the Greek Orthodox Church? Is that the same as the Catholic Church?" Samuel - "No, it's different. Your confession is not spoken to anyone. You confess inwardly. Everything is between your conscience and God. You ask yourself "Do I hold any anger in my heart?"

Emilie - "It seems most wars are started because of the world's different faiths and religions. I guess that makes sense if what's "right" and "wrong" isn't the same for different people. Irena - "Is it possible some holy texts could have been mis-translated... so many words have different meanings today." Emilie - "If you take the Bible literally, you'd kill your own disobedient children." Asha asks Emilie - "Do you go to Church?" "Only at Easter and Christmas." Asha - "Hinduism has different gods and goddesses. Brahma was the creator, Vishu the Preserver, Shiva the destroyer. Lord Vishu watched over the world and comes back in different forms when there's a crisis."

Having been repeatedly told how candid and blunt he was, Lapis hesitates, but then joins in. "I believe there have been many great teachers, Buddha, Christ, Lao-Tsu, Muhammad. For me, the God everyone talks about is a mystery."

Wayne joins in - "The Hopi Tribe believes the sun father and his nephew created the world. Humanity was created by spider woman, who was the first creature. When humanity became corrupt, the world was destroyed, and only a few stayed alive. This happened twice. Our people wandered everywhere until they reached the Mesa in Colorado."

When Marcus arrived, jumping to the center of the table, everyone took their places. Samuel - "Do animals have a religion? Is there a religion in the natural world?" Marcus - "No. There are many different cultures in the human world. In the natural world, every living thing has an essence, a value, a purpose.

You each know the importance of education, responsibility, hard work, honesty, kindness and courage. Remember, intuition is a learned skill. It can be developed. There will be times when, at a critical moment, you will find the strength you need. There will be times when you choose poorly. Any time you purposefully and maliciously deceive, it will backfire a hundred fold."

Neil runs into the room, more animated and excited than anyone had ever seen him. "Sorry, I'm late. You won't believe what I did yesterday. I went to a pencil factory. I know you all miss your tech gadgets, but I made a pencil - from scratch! Graphite and clay. We took a block of wood and cut it into slices. We stained the slices and made grooves into one side, put lead into the groove and glued another slice on top, just like a sandwich. Then we cut it into six different pencils, painted them and put an eraser into the end. I made a pencil! Let me quote myself - "Congratulations!" Next, I'm going to figure out how to make a match, *without* using any dangerous chemicals."

The first day Asha visited a home for the elderly she was instantly drawn to one woman. Vasilissa was Russian, had lived in Prague since she was a girl. Now in a wheelchair, she had a uniquely regal appearance. Noticing Asha had a flower in her hair, Vasilissa smiled, speaking with an unusual cadence, saying each word distinctly, as if it were a musical note. "You must love flowers. So do I. Have you ever watched a tulip die? It starts to stretch, very slowly, then very, very gradually it continues to stretch, beginning to lose color, until it becomes completely translucent. That's how I would like to die, like a tulip."

At the end of their visit, Asha asked - "Will you meet me tomorrow afternoon? There's something I want to show you. It's not far from here. I'll leave the address at the desk."

The next day, when Vasilissa arrived, a glistening black Labrador named TAR pushing the wheelchair, Asha realized she'd made a mistake, forgetting something very important. What she wanted Vasilissa to see was at the top of a flight of very steep stairs. "I am sorry. . . so sorry, I never thought. . . Vasilissa smiled at Asha. "Do you know you've paid me the greatest compliment anyone ever has?" Asha - "I don't understand." "You wanted me to see something. You thought about *me*, not about someone in a wheelchair. Thank you, dear Asha." Seeing the situation, two men passing by carried Vasilissa (in her wheelchair) up the steps. Asha and Tar following behind. "We'll be back in a few minutes to help you down."

As the top of the stairs was a very small courtyard. Though the area looked overgrown and wild, in fact, it had been intricately planted and pruned. At the center, on a small pedestal, was a three foot high bronze statue, a rendering of a single tulip, its petals stretching and reaching out in every direction. Vasilissa sat, quietly, for several minutes, smiling.

Arriving home, Vasilissa turned to Asha. "I'd like to ask you to remember one thing. When something is not right, speak up. You will be speaking up for many of us, many generations, that weren't able to." When Asha returned the next day, she was told that Vasilissa had died, peacefully, during the night. Asha would remember her every time she saw a tulip.

## CHAPTER NINE PERCHANCE

It was Samuel's turn to write a quotation on the blackboard. He wrote two.

**We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark. The real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light.** Plato

**Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls. The most massive characters are seared with scars.** Kahil Gibran.

Lapis is the last to arrive. Julian - "Whoa...what happened to you?" Lapis- "I dyed my hair...some girls recognized me yesterday. This should do the trick."

Marcus begins - "You all may have to unlearn some things. If one of you eats a cow, another of you eats a dog, understand it's because of how you were raised. Don't judge another culture. Take the time to understand it. When people are afraid, they're susceptible to do what someone else tells them, even if their instincts tell them it isn't right. Will you remind people, not only to talk to their animals but, equally important, to listen to them?"

He continues. "When you challenge any idea, you might be challenged in return. Emilie - "I saw something wrong yesterday but I wasn't brave enough to speak up." Marcus - "Find others who believe as you do. You can speak up together."

Neil - "I can't explain it exactly. This man came up to me yesterday, telling me he was an animal activist...how much he loves working with animals. I don't know why, but I didn't like him. Something wasn't right, I didn't trust him. You saw him too, didn't you Asha?" Asha - "I remember: medium height, dark curly hair, long thin face, heavy eyebrows, black pants, a light blue shirt, black jacket with an triangular purple emblem on the right shoulder, brown shoes. He had a scar on his right arm near the wrist. "Shilli- "You remember *all that*?" Asha - "I notice things." Lapis - "If he works with animals...he must be a nice guy." Samuel - "I usually pay attention to my instincts."

Marcus - “ As you visit and learn about different cultures, your beliefs might change. Dealing with people who behave and believe differently than you do can affect you, change who you are. Each new experience will be an opportunity to look at your own culture, at your own self. Marcus - “Lets go out to the garden. There’s someone I want you to meet.” A moose wobbles into the garden from the street, stumbling, having tremendous difficulty walking. The kids watch in amazement. “Is he drunk?” Marcus - “He ate fermented apples.” Lapis - On the tour, we had our share of problems with alcohol.” Neil - “I’m an addict” Lapis - “Neil, that’s nothing to joke about.” Neil - *I am* an addict. Lapis - “Okay then. . . what’s your drug of choice?” Neil answers, “Oxygen!” Marcus ended the meeting. “Please remember.”

At the beginning, unexpected and seemingly endless challenges were the daily norm: anxiety, frustration, impatience and anger. Cars lined up to get the remaining petrol. Markets put their goods on the street for anyone to take, making looting unnecessary. Doves and pigeons carried messages, as did Marathon runners. Horses were transportation.

When it was obvious that what had worked before wasn’t working now, every one had a choice to make. Some coped better than did others.

Everyone had a guardian, a bird, butterfly, cat, rabbit, dog, hamster. Animals were everywhere. It was not unusual to see a giraffe, lion or tiger walking the streets in Prague. People kept their distance, but there was no fear of what had previously been considered “wild” animals. A peacock’s cry was not an uncommon sound. Teams worked daily to ensure all walkways and streets were kept clean.

Those people who lived alone invited someone to stay with them. People met others living nearby they’d never known before. Strangers greeted each other in the street. Lamplighters walked the streets at twilight, their long bamboo sticks bringing gas lamps to life. Candle light flickered from each and every window.

The fall harvest was plentiful. After crops were picked, new fruit and vegetables appeared overnight. Water was readily available. Teams were set up to harvest and transport food. Community kitchens were everywhere. Daily farmers markets in Prague neighborhoods, and every village and town, were alive with conversation and laughter. Barter was the currency. The banks hadn’t reopened..

Schools continued with one difference. Every student brought an older person with them to class. Teachers and libraries became invaluable. With no computers, what other resource did anyone have to answer their questions?

Medical professionals explored new ways to spend their days. For reasons no one understood, suddenly their services weren't needed.

There were many attempted thefts. Was it a coincidence an animal was always at the scene to "correct" what was happening?

As things slowed down, alternative, inventive, unconventional solutions were the expectation. Carriages from a local museum were refitted, circling the city daily to deal with any emergency. People did with less and didn't seem to mind. With no mail delivery or refrigeration came an odd sense of relief. Suddenly, faster didn't seem better. Craftsmanship and calligraphy took time. Community murals began appearing in different neighborhoods. Amateur astronomers watched the night skies. Cycling enjoyed a renaissance.

With the beautiful fall weather, no one was in a hurry; spending time outdoors, playing cards, chess, backgammon, inventing new games. Neighbors worked together to build tree houses. Young and old learned to dance, draw, paint and play a musical instrument, violin to harmonica.

In Prague for the Music Festival, singing groups went from neighborhood to neighborhood, a performance every evening. People who had never seen a working farm left the city on horseback. Chalk festivals delighted adults and children alike. Everyone, not just the young, learned, for the first time, how to make a kite, to knit, sew, make butter, candles and paper lanterns. Children as young as five began to read and perform Shakespeare. Puppet shows entranced children as they had a hundred years past. Stages were set up all over the city, the largest in Old Town Square.

Shilli, Neil, Emilie, Asha, Julian did things they never imagined they'd do. One family needed unusually small sized tiles for a new roof. Using their legs as molds, everyone wanted to help. They shaped the newly made clay over their legs, rounding it, setting the tiles to dry in the sun. Because no one's height and weight was the same, each tile was different. The owners of the house were delighted - "You've given us a new charmed roof."

Everyone met with Marcus every morning, sharing ideas and stories, spending their days doing what they loved, working hard and learning like they'd never learned before.

When St. Wenceslas Day, September 28<sup>th</sup>, arrived, nearly a month has passed. The Seasons were about to change.

## CHAPTER TEN SORROW

The quotation on the blackboard.

**Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks about changing himself. Leo Tolstoy**

Everyone is talking about the lawsuit. Neil - "Aren't we a part of Nature; aren't we animals too?" Lapis - "My cousin, Irena, has been working with other law students from the University . . ." Shilli interrupts - "Neil and I went to the Chuchle Forest with her to meet Ayres and Wendell, an Orangutan and a Chimpanzee. It was wonderful. . . using sign language we could communicate with them both!" Julian - "I wonder if animals know what kind of a person a human is, if that's even important to them."

When Marcus walks in, everyone immediately notices something different about him. Sadness. "You each played a role in why you were chosen to be here. There will be times when you'll be at a place where there are no signposts. No one will be there to help you decide the right thing to do. All you can do is your best. Tell the truth. Have the courage to speak up about things that are not right. But, when you do, know there will be consequences. Fear is a weapon many use for dominance and control. When you're afraid, it's hard to make good decisions, you do things you'd never do otherwise... and might regret later.

Don't underestimate yourselves. Remember what it feels like to love, to be home, to be strong. Consider other people's feelings. People who are mean, unkind, and selfish are that way because they're afraid. Sometimes it hurts to feel. Telling each other how you feel can be hard. If you're angry with someone, tell them. If you love someone, tell them. I love you all."

After a long pause, Marcus says something that surprises everyone. "Competition for power is at the heart of violence. Be prepared for the unexpected"

The man who said he loved animals suddenly comes into the room. Pulling a gun from his pocket, he shoots Marcus, turns and walks out.

At the center of a large clearing in the forest is a giant, gnarled Prometheus stump. A whistling flock of mourning doves swoops in, creating a closed circle around the stump. As far as an eye can see, the forest is crowded with animals, tree branches filled with birds. Three horses, neighing, stand under the trees. A large white crow sits, cawing, on a high branch. Shilli, Neil, Emilie, Julian, Wayne, Asha, Samuel, Lapis and Irena stand together; Vaclew, Lebuse, Marc, Ayres and Wendell in the background.

As Shilli walks toward the circle, doves move to open an entrance for him. He walks to the tree stump, placing a carved wooden piece in the center. Crying, "I never thanked you. I heard everything you said. I promise to find out who I am. You taught me how to play. I love you, Marcus." Emilie, trying not to cry, isn't succeeding. She walks to Shilli, taking his hand. "I never thanked you. I loved being with you, Marcus. I promise to speak up for myself." She places her lucky piece on the stump.

Samuel is overwhelmed with emotion. "I love you, Marcus. I never thanked you. I promise to be as good as my word." He adds his lucky carving. The always mischievous Neil, shaking his head left to right, is sobbing. . . "No. . . No. . ." his vulnerability obvious to everyone. "Marcus, I never thanked you. I promise to find out what I stand for. You listened, you were always gentle and sweet. I love you." When Neil isn't able to move, Shilli goes to him, putting a protective arm around his shoulder as they walk to the side.

Asha is crying. "You are the best teacher I ever had. I promise to always do my best. I love you." She walks away, remembers and turns back, putting her lucky piece with the others. Julian - Putting down his lucky piece, "Thank you, Marcus. I will remember everything. I love you."

Lapis - "I never thanked you. I promise not to take myself too seriously. I love you." Irena - "I promise to remember. Slow and steady wins the race. Thank you, Marcus." Wayne walks quietly to the tree stump, adding his lucky piece.

When a yellow Labrador puppy runs into the clearing, jumping onto the Prometheus stump, the carved pieces all fall to the ground, fitting together in a shape everyone instantly recognizes.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN VELVET

Friday, November 17, 1989, the day for Freedom and Celebration of the Velvet Revolution.

The anniversary celebration had been in the planning stages for weeks. University students had decided it was important not only to celebrate their pride in the Czech Republic, but also to educate others about non violent revolutions in history: Chile, Poland, South Africa, Hawaii, Samoa, Egypt, India.

After days of stimulating conversations, different perceptions, discussions about logic and intuition, new insights, it was decided. In addition to stalls exhibiting everything under the sun, the principal booths, one for each country, would be in Old Town Square directly facing the Astronomical Clock. Each would have its own musical group and original songs.

When Julian heard the name of one of the bands representing the Czech Republic, he took his first step in not believing in coincidences. HIPS. A name picked at random, or something else? Hidden In Plain Sight. The second band, KAPR, was named after the national fish.

For Julian, to be without technology was a definite adjustment. Johannes Gutenberg was top of his hero list; his invention of the printing press in 1440, introducing the concept of mass production, had changed the world. Setting up a press at the University, Julian and Neil were both thrilled with their first printing - artistic and unconventional posters detailing each country's unique history and non violent revolution.

Two days before the Celebration, everyone heard the news. The man who killed Marcus had finally been caught. That night the Labrador puppy who appeared at Marcus' funeral, scratched at Julian's door. "Will you tell the others there won't be a meeting tomorrow morning - I'd like to be alone with Lapis and Nicholas." Julian - "Lapis told me what happened. I'll help any way I can."

When Lapis and Nicholas walked into the conference room, they saw the Labrador puppy and a grey kitten sitting on top the table. Seeing Nicholas, the kitten jumped into his arms. Watching this, the dark haired woman seated at the table smiled. Lapis and Nicholas sat down, facing the woman. Looking fondly at Nicholas - "Hello, Nicholas. I am your Aunt, Katherine Lereimiya. I'm your Father's sister."

Nicholas, continually petting the kitten who has settled into his lap, is clearly confused and turns to Lapis for support. "We've been looking for you for nearly three months. There was a terrible accident. You're home now. You're safe." Nicholas looks at her, a total stranger. Haltingly. . . "Is something wrong with me. . . why don't I remember anything?" "Because something awful happened. Will you come and live with me? We'll take everything very slowly." She repeats "Very, very slowly." "Can Lapis come...can I bring my kitten?" Certainly, Lapis can visit every day, stay with you as long as you like." Lapis watched as Nicholas started to flex his shoulders, shake his head, his whole body, the tension in his face, beginning to let go, to relax. Looking directly at his Aunt, Nicholas had an expression of relief that, finally, turned to tears.

Later that day, the Labrador puppy walked up to Julian in the lobby. "Nicholas witnessed a horrible accident that killed his parents. It will take some time for him to remember, and to heal." Not everyone heals at the same pace, physically or emotionally. Julian - "Let me know if there's anything I can do."

The morning after the Velvet Revolution Celebration, there was, for the first time, a question, not a quotation, on the Conference Room blackboard. *Which is more important, reason or emotion?* Shilli and Neil were the first to arrive. It was obvious neither had slept more than a few hours. "Who wrote that?" "I have no idea." That was some Celebration. Did you see the booth with loaves of bread shaped like different animals and . . . butter swans?" "No, missed that one. Couldn't believe the bands, the one from South Africa was fantastic!"

Julian comes in, sits down and immediately starts writing in his notebook. Shilli walks over. "So...what are you doing?" Julian snaps back - "I'm really busy." "Why are you mad? I'm not mad. Shilli repeats his question. "So, what are you doing?" Julian's patience is running thin. "Don't ask me...it's complicated." "Aren't you the one always asking questions?" "Julian - I'm better at asking than answering." Raising his voice, "Do you even know what an aggregator is, or an algorithm?" Shilli walks away, shaking his head.

Lapis and Emilie walk in together. Everyone knew the plan. Emilie would fly a plane (for the first time, without any professional training or license) to take Ayres and Wendall to the Netherlands. Lapis has been trying to talk her out of it. “You’re crazy to do that...you’re not flying a kite, it’s a plane! Don’t you understand how dangerous it would be?” Emilie answers, angrily, I’ve thought about nothing else. Have you ever heard of the word “conscience?” Lapis - obviously hurt by her comment. . . “That’s pretty harsh.” Emilie - “What’s happened to you....where did the real you go? Suddenly you’re . . . oh. . . never mind . . . I really miss Elske.” Lapis - “Who’s Elske?” Emilie- “That’s the name of the animal I belong to.” Asha walks into the room, staring and nodding at the question on the blackboard before sitting down. Samuel comes in and sits down.

Shilli - “If Marcus were here, what would he do?” Asha - “We’re probably supposed to answer the question. Who wants to go first?”

Neil raises his hand. “I nominate myself! I have Progeria. That’s a fact. I know I will die before any of you. That’s a fact. Everything that’s mattered to me since I remember being able to think and feel, is emotional. What I feel for my parents, my friends, everything that’s happened in the past year, the kindness and love shown me by so many, what the animals have taught me. . . I vote for emotion.”

Julian - “Words. . . language. . . technology. . . are rational. It’s rational to try sometimes to control our emotions. Who would we be without what we feel? Aren’t reason and emotion equally important?”

Lapis is agitated. “You’re all at the mercy of what you don’t know. I hear colors. Julian, you have a blue voice; Neil, yours is yellow. What’s reasonable about senses being joined together?”

Asha - “Naturally you’re emotional about it. We’re all affected by our emotions. Why can’t we also be affected by facts?”

When Shilli and Neil start tapping on the table. Lapis explodes. “I know I have a temper, but STOP THAT! Do you do that, morse code, sign language, whatever it is, on purpose. . . just to make everyone else angry? If you don’t want to say something to all of us, don’t play games.”

Emilie turns to Lapis , making her annoyance know - “Are you finished?” Lapis - “Make your point.” Emilie - “ Don’t try to talk me out of what I’m feeling. I’m feeling it. I don’t like you right now. You just like to argue!” Lapis, getting more and more agitated, stands up . “I’m leaving.” As Lapis starts to walk to the door, everyone in the room is shouting. “Come on, Lapis, don’t leave.” “Lapis, please stay.” Julian stands up, pretending to cast a fishing line, pulling back his right arm, aiming the imaginary pole, then slowly starting to reel it in. Lapis turns around, sits back down at the table, crossing his arms.

Asha - “ When I was at the Velvet Celebration, something strange happened. I smelled something. It was weird, as if I was in a time capsule. It took me back to my first day at school, standing in our kitchen, something my Mother was cooking, every detail was there. It’s a fact that smell is one of our senses, so that’s rational. But what that smell did to me was emotional, wasn’t it? Maybe there’s no answer.”

Shilli turns to Asha - “Are you the middle woman in this argument?” Lapis - “What’s a middle woman?” Shilli - same as a middle man, but a woman. Maybe this is a gender issue. . . you know, females and their emotions.” Asha instantly reacts - “What’s *that* supposed to mean?” Shilli - “Just that!” Julian - Whoa. Not a good idea, don’t go there. . . this isn’t “water on the witch.” Emilie - “Meaning?” Julian - “Never mind.” Neil, frustrated, gets up and starts walking around the room. “Here we go again.”

Within minutes everyone is yelling. “We apologize.” “Did you just wink at me?” “No, I have something in my eye.” “I didn’t say that, don’t apologize for me.” “How can you be so certain?” “I know because I feel it? “What’s your excuse?” You said . . . “No I didn’t.” “Yes you did.” “That’s unfair, I never said that.”

Since the meeting began, No one had noticed the Labrador puppy sitting quietly in the corner of the room. As the argument gets more and more heated, he gets up, jumping onto the table. Suddenly, everyone is quiet. “I am GENTIL.” Emilie - “John T, what does the T stand for?” “It’s pronounced *John T* but it’s one word, Gentil. I’m French.”

Gentil sits down. “Discussions are good. Anger isn’t a bad thing. It’s what we do with it that counts. All of you aren’t angry with each other, you’re angry because of what happened to Marcus. Humans often don’t listen to themselves, don’t hear what they’re saying. I was in the corner and heard everything you each said.”

Going to the heart of the matter, when Gentil begins to repeat, word for word (with the accuracy of a tape recorder) what was said, everyone is shocked. Gentil - “Listen to yourselves. Saying you didn’t say what you did is foolish.”

Throughout the meeting, Samuel has been quiet. Neil had the greatest respect for Samuel. They had become good friends. Neil - “What’s your opinion, o’silent one?” Samuel smiles. “I often know about things before they happen.” Neil - “What’s going to happen here?” “I’m not the one to ask.” Neil - “You seem sad.” Samuel - “I took someone at their word. Their word wasn’t good.”

Neil asks - “Gentil, what do you think. Which is more important, Reason or Emotion?” Gentil - “I think emotion is more important. What does your species do better, think or feel?”

The meeting over, Emilie and Asha walk out together. Emilie - Last year, when you blew out the candles on your Birthday cake, what did you wish for?” Asha - “I wished for the animals to help us. I got my wish.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE CHRISTMAS

After Marcus died, the puppy who first appeared at the funeral never left Emilie's side. The bond between everyone grew stronger. They trusted each other. Differing points of view and opinions led to daily rousing arguments, the meeting always ending in laughter with different language idioms: "Bite your tongue." "Bite your elbow." "He's an ant milker." "I stepped in the spinach." "You're the apple of my eye." "You're a squeezer of limes." "That's my neck of the woods" One morning, there was a knock on the door. An elderly Czech woman stood at the door. "I am shocked at the badness of what one man did. Many of us could not fight our tears back." Quietly, she walked away.

It was December. The seasons hadn't changed. It wasn't cold, it hadn't snowed. No clouds covered the sun.

Shilli and his family were consumed by having found Matheus. Who they found was not the person they remembered. The man who had kidnaped Matheus had sold him to a factory owner in Prague. Since that time, Matheus had worked at night, sleeping during the day in the factory basement. He was told that, if he said anything to anyone, his mother, father and twin brother would be killed.

Emilie spent her time studying all the written information she could find, knowing it would never be a substitute for the real thing. Both the plane and fuel had been carefully hidden since September. Asha continued to study plants and flowers. Everyone who spent time with her seemed comfortable sharing any and all of their problems and concerns, always asking for her advice.

After their first interview for the documentary on Progeria, Emilie's stepfather and Neil felt an instant kinship.

Lapis and Samuel shared a love of music. When Lapis explained the details of Synesthesia's dual sensory experience, Samuel understood, conceptually, that something affecting one sense could cause a response from another sense. Samuel - "Remember when Snug, Youri and Mal'eck taught us what they know about communication. Music can be communicated telepathically. I tried it and it worked!" Thinking of a color response from a sound, something clicked for Samuel. At that instant, he knew what he wanted to do. He would be a teacher.

Wayne spent most of his days exploring Prague. Asha often joined him. One day, they saw a small girl fall off her bike, hitting her head on the stone walkway. Rushing to help, Wayne picked her up to find a two inch gash on the top of her head. Sitting down, holding her in his lap, he asks “What’s your name?” The child, seeing blood everywhere, crying and terrified, answered “Beth.” “You have a cut on your head. I’m going to fix it.” Taking a napkin from his pocket Wayne cleaned the blood away from the cut, taking a hair on one side of the cut with one hand, a hair on the other side with the other, knotting them, gently pulling the skin together. “Does that hurt?” “Just a little.” Asha reaches into her pocket for a small piece of candy. “I have something that will help. Put this on your tongue and all the pain will be gone.” Hopi wisdom and a placebo.

Irena had never been as enthusiastic about the practice of law. Working on a legal action, a Chimpanzee and Orangutan as Plaintiffs, the Human Race as Defendant was an extraordinary challenge. Who would defend the Human Race? It hadn’t taken her long to learn sign language. Since communicating with Ayres and Wendell was vital to the case, she made many trips to Chuchle forest.

There was only one disagreement between all the law students working together doing research. Was it best to begin in the United States, where Ayres and Wendell would have a jury of their peers, or better to go directly to the Hague, with two dolphins, Eisely and Ctibor, as principal witnesses? Though the International Criminal Court had only reached one verdict in its ten year history, it was finally agreed that would be the best venue. The research gathered on the specifics of how, as a species, the human race had affected the Earth shocked more than illuminated.

Would the concept of “Never interfere with your adversary when he’s in the process of destroying himself” be relevant for this case?

The Christmas marketplace booths were festive with hand made wares. Barter was still the currency of the day.

The Halcyon's lobby buzzed with activity. A nine foot tree in the lobby was decorated with colored paper chains, glass ornaments and sparkling lead tinsel. Waiting for Christmas Eve, baskets of hand made "surprise balls" sat under the tree. For weeks, people had been at work for that moment when different colored strips of papers would be unraveled to reveal tiny surprises, until the center of the paper ball was reached... for the best surprise of all!

Every small table in the hotel lobby was filled with ribbon candy and Hold to the Light postcards. When lit from behind by a small candle, the cards' different images were illuminated through hundreds of cut outs.

Many foreigners lived in Prague. Adding the number of international tourists visiting the city when things had changed to the city's population guaranteed this would be a multinational celebration: Sinterklass, St. Nicholas, Black Peter, Krampus, Befana, Santa Claus, Pere Noel, the Tomtem, Grandfather Frost, Ded Moroz and the Snow Maiden.

When the Winter Solstice began (the 21<sup>st</sup> of December) the large bronze statue in the Halcyon lobby became the center of attention, everyone talking about the legend of the Kingfisher. Children decided to make their own nests, tucking in their personal message, setting them to sail down the Vlatna River.

The morning of the 24<sup>th</sup>, a messenger was sent to the Halcyon to invite Shilli, Neil, Emilie, Asha, Julian, Samuel, Wayne, Lapis and Irena to the Castle for a Christmas Eve Celebration. On his way, the messenger had an accident and never delivered the message. Having made extensive preparations, the government officials were not at all pleased when no one arrived.

During the day, Gentil had sought out everyone separately. Approaching each, he put his head near their ear to communicate his message.

Christmas Eve. The Czech Philharmonic had just finished a concert in Old Town Square when Irena arrived back at the Halcyon, a small cat draped around her shoulders like a stole. “This is Solace. She and I just found each other.” It was time to light the huge two hundred year old brass chandelier, its curved arms filled with holly branches. The lobby was full. The moment the 32th candle was lit, the dry leaves caught fire. As it spread, everyone was transfixed by the beauty of the brass orb surrounded by blazing holly branches. For several seconds, no one moved. Rational minds soon sprang to action.

For the past four months, hospitals had emptied. No one had become ill. No one had died. No one knew why.

It was twilight. New Year’s Eve. In a clear, cloudless sky, the last image many would see for the year was a World War II biplane circling the city. Emilie in the cockpit, Gentil at her side, Ayres the Orangutan and Wendall the Chimpanzee in the rear, were leaving for the Netherlands.

A New Year. Power was restored. Hopeful snowflakes, no two alike, blanketed the city.