



## CHAPTER 19

### HIDING

A voice was calling my name in the dark. I shook my head. A figure came up to my bed.

“Who is it? Can I help you?”

“It’s me stupid—Gupta.”

“Oh. Goodnight Gupta. Nice seeing you.” I roll over.

“Get up. Get up. I want to look around.”

“What? Huh?”

“Get up. Come on.”

“Are you sure?” I said.

“Hey—while you’re having fun with that villain, would you please try to remember that our friend Mindy has been kidnapped and may be in great danger and that you and I are also in great danger if she’s not back soon?”

“Wouldn’t we be more effective after a good night’s sleep? Be energetic in the morning and ready to roll?”

“Except there may be something for us to find here.

What

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if *she's* here?"

We sneaked downstairs and prowled around opening doors slowly, peeking in, using the handy compact flashlights that were thoughtfully supplied with our rooms. The only sign of life in the house was coming from the area where Sid works. We entered a back room and found two empty beds.

"What are we doing entering rooms in his house?" I asked. "Mindy wouldn't be in his house. You know who would—Fenster and his wife, Sid, or Stan, or those two guys."

There was a shed nearby without any windows. Nope—just tools. There was a garage with eight wide doors. We peeked in a window and saw a new Mercedes sedan. Next was an old racing car, the type that's cylindrical with thin front tires with spokes. The rest were hard to see. Not a place to keep someone though. We heard Joan Sutherland's voice coming from the house and sneaked over into some bushes. Through a window we saw Fenster in the computer room. Gupta's jaw dropped.

"He's wearing a dress," he whispered.

"Yes. It's one of Joan Sutherland's," I answered. "It's gorgeous too, though I don't think he quite fills it out."

"Yuck," said Gupta.

Fenster was lip-synching an aria, dramatically gesturing before an imaginary audience. Gupta nudged me, pointed to Fenster, stuck his tongue out of the side of his mouth, crossed his eyes, and twirled his finger round by his temple in the universal sign of insanity. We continued squatting in the dirt clods watching Fenster do his Joan Sutherland. Her aria ended and he walked across the room. Sid was at a computer. They talked. Interesting working relationship. We tried to hear what they were saying but couldn't—the orchestra still going in the background.

Gupta squeezed my arm tightly. I glanced up at him. With a frightened look on his face he nodded to the side. I turned to see what he was nodding at. Oh-oh. A Doberman

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was sitting on the grass staring at us from outside the bushes. We moved slowly to the side. It started to growl. We stopped. It stopped. We started to move again and it growled again.

“Just don’t move and everything will be alright,” came a voice. I looked to the side. There was a face looking straight at us. It was Shorts, his index finger pressed against his lips. Something soft was over my mouth with a hand pressing on it hard. Must be the short one, I thought as I fell into his arms and faded away.

I wake up with a headache. Ouch. I wonder where I am. Earth. Um-hmm. Uh—Australia. Francine—no. Gupta. Mindy... Mindy oh yes. Uh-oh—we’re at the gangster’s place, Fenster. Went looking around. The bushes. Doberman. My back hurts. What is this? Can’t move. Can’t speak. I’m gagged—and blindfolded—and tied up. I hurt all over. Ropes—ropes are tight. There’s someone pressing on me. It must be Gupta. Oh yeah—we were caught in the bushes looking in on Fenster and Sid. There, I’ve figured everything out. This feels awful. What can I do? Guess I should wake Gupta up. Why? Why not get some sleep even in this state. Probably won’t be able to do anything anyway. I hear voices—and footsteps. A door opens.

“They’re still out.”

“How you want to do it?”

“I want to stab them.”

“Drown ‘em.”

“Too much trouble. Lemme stab them. It’ll just take a few times each.”

“Just hold ‘em down under the water till they stop wiggling and then take them to Amenity.”

“I want to stab them. Come on.”

“Too messy. We could just put plastic bags over their heads.”

“Okay. But that’s not fair. I never get to stab anyone anymore.”

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“Are there any plastic bags in here?”

“I don’t know. Let’s look.”

I started breathing hard. I felt a shaking. It was Gupta next to me. The men were looking around for plastic bags, Gupta’s shaking got worse.

“Maybe in the car.”

“OK. Let’s look in the car.”

As soon as they’re gone Gupta and I were thrashing about rolling over each other, bruising ourselves on whatever it was we hit up against.

”God damnit! There’s no bags here either! Maybe over in the trash,” came one of the men’s voices from outside.

Gupta was rubbing on something going back and forth fast. I stayed still. I heard him suck in a lot of air and breathe in and out heavily—then his whispering voice.

“Got it! Rubbed the duct tape off. Jeez, my mouth’s bleeding like crazy. I’m gonna try to reach my hands and pull the rope or bite it—so don’t do anything. Yoga, do your thing.”

I grunted softly. We sure didn’t want to alert the Goony Twins. I assumed it was them. Gupta struggled and twisted. I could feel it but I didn’t know if he was making any progress. My pants were wet. Our backs were pressed together and then he twisted us so I was face down on the wood floor. He was mashing me in. I didn’t complain.

“Got it!” he exclaimed but not too loud.

I lay there.

“Come on baby, come on baby, come on baby!” he encouraged himself.

I felt a loosening. “Ouch!” I talked! He tore off my duct tape.

In a moment we were free of our bindings. There was a window in back. Gupta crawled over and slowly opened it. It creaked, terrifying me. He stuck his head out and looked left and right and crawled out. I followed. It was getting light. We could see the beach behind us. We crawled across sand with splotches of grass for a ways then into and through

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bushes and were up and running as fast as we could away from the cabin. Neither of us said a word. We just ran the other way in terror—away from the beach weaving around trees and bushes. I slowed down and then we stopped.

“Not as young as you, gotta catch my breath,” I panted. “I peed in my pants.”

“I did too. At least I didn’t...”

“Me either.”

“Where the heck do you think we are?” asked Gupta.

“I don’t know but I suspect near Fenster’s place. We want to get away from that beach and that cabin and Fenster’s house.”

“Yes, yes, yes. And away from the Goony Twins. Let’s go.”

We ran again. He held back so we could stay together. We ran and ran and ran then charged through some dense bushes and went flying right into... into water! With one resounding splash after another. It was a swimming pool. Like wind-up toys we just keep moving our arms and legs till we’d swum to the other side, crawled up, and shaken ourselves off.

“Whata we do now?” asked Gupta. “Knock on the door here or keep going?”

A woman wearing a white apron stirring something in a wide green bowl came out the back door of the expansive white wood home and looked at us with astonishment. Before she could react we’re running up to her pleading for help.

“Hold on boys,” she said. “Hold on. Now what can I do for you? Oh my gosh!” she exclaimed, looking at Gupta’s mouth, “you’re bleeding terribly. Let me get something for that.”

Gupta spoke. “There are gangsters trying to kill us. We just escaped from them. Call the police.”

“No, no, don’t call the police,” I said. “Do you have a phone we can use? They’ve got our car. We’ve got to get out of here. Maybe you could give us a ride.”

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"There are gangsters who want to kill us," said Gupta. "They may come looking for us here."

"Slow down now," she said. "Why don't you just come inside and let me clean up this cut and dry your clothes. Nobody's going to find you here."

A few moments later we were sitting in warm dry robes drinking orange juice and the nice woman was taking our cloths off to a drier. She had thoroughly cleaned his lip and put a large band-aid on it.

"At least we washed the pee out of our clothes," Gupta said when she was gone.

We sat and watched the sky and surrounding area brighten up. The woman returned with a tray of plates with scrambled eggs, Canadian bacon, toast, and marmalade. After placing the tray on the table, she carefully checked Gupta's lip.

"That's most kind of you," he said.

"My husband's coming in a minute and he'll take care of you. Don't worry about a thing. He knows the police around here well. I've got to run along now."

"Thank you very much ma'am," I said with relief and wondering if they say ma'am in Australia.

She went down the spacious hallway. It looked familiar—like something in some movie I guess—or a country club I've been in.

"A pleasant change of venue," said Gupta

"Better service too," I said.

"That's uncanny," Gupta said looking out toward the backyard.

"What," I answered pouring us more coffee.

"The sun's rising from the direction we came from."

"So?"

"We came from the beach."

"The last time I was near here, in Dunsborough with Frannie, there was a bay. Fenster's home is just on the bay."

"No—While you were online last night I watched the sun go down through your bedroom window, which faced the

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beach. You saw it. Fenster's home was on the sunset beach, on the West."

"Oh yeah. Well, I don't know—we're in Australia—everything's upside down here right? Or maybe it's a sort of mass hysterical dyslexic thing where our brains are getting it backwards because we've been traumatized. I don't know—I'm confused."

"Let's see," said Gupta, "if the sun's coming up from that way, then it went down from the other..."

There was the sound of footsteps, footsteps coming down some stairs. We turned away from the back yard to face the interior. Thoughts raced. Her husband was coming. Good. Those guys are surely looking for us. Wonder what we're going to do. Our wallets are back at Fenster's along with the car keys and the car. Does this guy know Fenster or know of him? Probably don't want to call the police. Or do we?

"Let's stand up," said Gupta. "It's more polite don't you think? Especially since we're in bathrobes."

We stood up. A Doberman ran out toward us growling softly. Gupta and I tensed. The man came into view. We froze with horror. The dog kept growling.

"Don't worry about Mars," he said.

"It's Fenster!" Letting out big whoops Gupta and I spun around and tore out toward the back door only to come sliding to a stop in front of the Goony Twins who were standing by the exit looking at us menacingly. Trapped. We turned around.

"Good morning Bobby," I said to break the silence.

"Good morning. You've finished your breakfast?"

"I think we're finished period," said Gupta.

"Oh don't worry. Sit back down. Everything's fine. I see you finally got to use the pool."

"The water was just right," I said.

"What the hell is going on?" said Gupta.

"I think I may have a clue that could lead you to Mindy." He looked at Gupta. "It's okay. Don't worry."

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“Don’t worry?!” said Gupta. “They were gonna stab us, drown us, suffocate us, kill us, turn us into lifeless corpses.”

“That’s a tautology,” I said. “Just corpses alone would do. By definition they’re lifeless.”

Gupta turned to me in anguish. “No! You’ve gotta stop doing that!”

Fenster intervened. “They were angry because you were snooping around. That’s not showing proper manners for house guests.”

Gupta just emitted frustrated pre-verbal utterances.

“It’s also not being the perfect host to murder your guests,” I offered, “even if they do break some rules of decorum.”

“Well, the boys have to have some fun.”

“Fun! I almost gagged on my—on my gag,” said Gupta. “David probably almost had a heart attack.”

“I’m sorry. It gets awfully tedious around here for them. And that’s unfortunate about your wound there,” he said looking out at the pool.

He gestured to the Goony Twins and they went away.

“We ran away from the beach,” Gupta said, “and now we’re back at your place, which is on the beach.”

“We boomeranged!” I said. “How appropriate.”

“Not quite,” said Fenster. He took us to an observation deck on his roof where there was a serious guy with binoculars. In front of us was the ocean and in back we could see the bay over the trees. We could barely see land way far off beyond through a mist.

“You’re on a little peninsula,” he said.

“I thought we were running east,” said Gupta “and we were running west.”

Little did I know I’d be tested when Francine’s Uncle James had pointed this out.

Fenster’s wife brought us our dry clothes. He invited us back down to his library if invite is the right word. We met him there correctly attired a few moments later.



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"I've got a clue," Fenster said. "Follow it and it may lead you to Mindy...eventually."

"What do you mean, 'a clue' and 'eventually?'" Gupta asked rather hotheadedly.

"You know where she is?" I said.

"Bear with me," he said. "I just want you to go on a little treasure hunt. She is a treasure isn't she?"

"What sort of friggin' game are you trying to play while Mindy's life may be at..."

"Silence!" Fenster demanded. "I'll start you off with an easy clue."

"Tell us now, right now, where..."

"If you want to see her again..." Fenster interrupted. Gupta got quiet. "Good. If... if... then you'll pay attention, close attention, to the clue I have when I'm ready to give it to you. You'll find the answer in this room and then you'll go."

"Okay—what is it?" Gupta asked resigned.

"But first, let's listen to an angel sing," Fenster said to him. He pressed "play." I motioned for Gupta to sit down drilling my eyes into him to convey to him that he must cool off and go with this guy's flow because this guy's in charge.

Joan Sutherland came on. It was rather soothing and beautiful once I gave in to it and sank back in my leather-bound overstuffed chair.

"My Doberman, Mars," Fenster said to Gupta, leaning over, "he comes in when I put on Joan Sutherland and he loves her. He sits and listens to her attentively each time." Fenster gestured and, as he said, there was Mars sitting by the door.

"Oh yes," said Gupta. "Charming dog."

"Silence. Hear that voice? Every time you hear it, it's like it was being sung for the first time. She is the best. She's the greatest there ever was and ever will be. She's got a divine gift."

It sounded familiar.

Finally Joan Sutherland's concert was over.

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“Well, thanks a lot,” said Gupta. “Can we have that information on Mindy now?”

“Did you see the sword on the wall?” Fenster asked him.

“Yes I did,” Gupta answered. “But can we...”

“I talked with your so-called Buddhist friend about it last night but he doesn’t respect it. His Buddhism is unmanly.”

“Now, now,” I said scolding him.

He ignored me. “You’re ancestors are in the great tradition of the Bhagavad-Gita, the holy scripture in which Krishna instructs Arjuna in the meaning of god, ethics, and warfare. Arjuna’s got David’s problem—he’s a namby-pamby who doesn’t think it’s right to go to war—especially against his cousins. Krishna sets him straight. Do your duty. Kill or be killed.”

“I’ve read it,” said Gupta. “It’s not quite the emphasis I’d...”

“Genghis Khan had that manly spiritual practice. He cleansed the world with that spirit and with the blood of the weak and undisciplined. He cut through delusion and he cut through those in his way. The Japanese knew Buddhism and fighting could be compatible. They could swing the sword and be Buddha.”

“Yeah, brainwashed kids—and they killed a bunch of you guys,” I said.

“That’s beside the point now. They could take life or give their own as easily as the petals of a dandelion are blown into the wind. Now they may have lost that spirit.”

“And they lost two million people to that spirit,” I said. “They had propaganda like that in the thirties and forties. I think you should read Brian Victoria’s *Zen at War* to balance your philosophy.”

“It’s not just the Japanese Buddhists who can cut off heads without breaking their vows,” Fenster went on ignoring me. “Three Tibetan monks were found beheaded in Dharam-

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sala at the Dalai Lama's temple as part of an ongoing argument over whether a particular deity should be recognized."

"That's not Buddhism to me. It's just violence," I said.

"You have a lot to learn young man."

"Well, that's half-flattering."

"You may have to learn it the hard way—the hard steel way," he said, gritting his teeth on the metallic word. "You didn't seem to learn anything last night. You squandered your opportunity and so you must pay."

"You certainly have some interesting opinions about Buddhism," I said.

"They aren't opinions. They're the immutable truth."

"Jeez man," said Gupta, "How about the information on Mindy please? You guys are driving me crazy."

"You're hopeless," said Fenster looking at Gupta. "It would not be bad karma to slice a sword through your neck."

"Fine," said Gupta. "But how about telling us about Mindy first?"

"Yes. It's time for the clue," Fenster said, pulling out an envelope from his jacket's inside pocket and placing it on the table. "I'm going away now. It's been a mixed pleasure meeting you both. If you have any spine and any sense you'll find your precious darling. If you don't, I fear you'll never see her again. It's alright either way. Nothing is born and nothing dies. We are living in a cosmic dream in which the fittest survive a moment longer and the fools are cut to pieces a moment earlier. Good day gentlemen."

With that, Fenster departed through the bookshelf door.

"I think he's getting his Buddhism mixed up with his Darwin," I said. "His understanding of karma—well that's the type that gets you turned into a fox. He's mixing his levels."

"A fox?"

"Yes, there's an old Chinese story of a priest named Hyakujo—in Japanese that is—who thought he was beyond karma and so he turned into a fox. You see, one day..."

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“David! Shut up! Don’t think about foxes! It doesn’t matter! He’s crazy! Hell, you’re crazy too!” Gupta stammered as he opened the envelope. “This is what matters!”

There was a piece of paper inside. Gupta held it up to the light. I crowded in. It read:

*An uninhabited place is one without greed, anger, or delusion.*

A moment of silence.

“Now what the hell does that mean?” asked Gupta.

“Let’s see,” I said, “let’s see. Well, he’s got these themes here at the house—Phar Lap, Joan Sutherland, Robina, and Genghis Khan and the Japanese sword. Maybe it’s something to do with one of them.”

“My mind’s a blank,” Gupta said.

I sat down. Gupta sat down. I looked at the chess set for a connection. Gupta looked at the crocodile. A clock on the wall ticked. We kept turning to the piece of paper.

*An uninhabited place is one without greed, anger, or delusion.*

“It’s Buddhism,” I said after some thought. “Maybe Zen. It could mean a hermit’s hut, a place where one meditates. The uninhabited place means a place or a person with no self—realizing emptiness—when you drop an idea of self you are free of the three poisons—greed, anger, and delusion.”

“That’s too philosophical. Uninhabited. Uninhabited. Where is there a place that no one lives?”

“I think it may be early Chinese.” I looked at the shelves.

Gupta started to look around. “Where is it no one lives? Where no one goes? How about the WC? Nobody lives in there.” He went in.

I looked around for a book that might have that sort of message. Gupta came back out.

“I searched thoroughly.”

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We thought and thought and looked and looked and sat and sat and looked and looked again.

“I don’t like this,” said Gupta. “We’re getting nowhere. Look how much time has passed.”

“Where is it that nobody goes at all?” I said.

“Like in the fire?” he said walking to the fireplace and looking on the stone shelf above.

“No body, no being, no sentient being.”

“No Buddha,” Gupta said perfunctorily.

“No Buddha! That’s it!”

I rush to the Islamic altar near the fireplace and pick up a book right next to it. “Red Pine’s *The Zen Teaching of Bodhidharma!*” I exclaim. “Right next to the Islamic altar with no Buddha, no Allah, no Mohammed, no idols, no icons—where no one lives! He didn’t even want to put the book on the altar out of respect so he put it on the shelf right next to it. Here’s an envelope! On page fifty-three. And look—here’s that quote: *An uninhabited place is one without greed, anger, or delusion.* And he said it was easy. Interesting that he chose that particular...”

“We don’t need to think about that damn quote anymore!” shouted Gupta. “Let’s get on with it! What’s next? Read what’s in the envelope! Let’s find Mindy!”