Chapter 1

the deep blue morning sky was clear as a bell the day my life lurched off course. It was a crisp, cold Friday, the week before Thanksgiving. I have often won- dered whether I ought to have seen it coming. How could I have missed it? How could I have failed so utterly to antici- pate such a calamitous event? Me of all people? A woman who hated surprises. Who prepared meticulously for every meeting, every trip, even a weekend excursion or a casual dinner with friends. I was never one to leave anything to chance. I found the unexpected almost intolerable. Sponta-

neity held no attraction for me.

Amy insisted that there must have been early portents, that there always are. Except that we are so engrossed in our day-to-day lives, prisoners of our own routines, that we forget to look for them.

The little details that speak volumes.

According to her we are each our own greatest mystery, and our life’s work is to solve ourselves. None of us ever

4 Jan-Philipp Sendker

succeeds, she says, but it is our duty to follow the trail. Re- gardless of how long it is or where it might lead.

I had my doubts. Amy’s beliefs and my own often di- verged. Which is not to say that I did not see her point in this case, at least to a certain extent. There may well have been the occasional incident over the past several months, things that ought to have raised an alarm. But how much time can we devote to eavesdropping on our inner selves just on the off chance that we might pick up some token or clue, the key to some puzzle or other?

I was not one to regard every physical aberration as symp- tomatic of some disturbance to my spiritual equilibrium.

Those little red pimples on my neck—the ones that developed within a few days into a painful, burning rash that no doctor could explain, the ones that vanished a few weeks later as suddenly as they had appeared—those might have been caused by anything. Likewise the occa- sional rushing in my ears. The insomnia. The increasing irritability and impatience, directed mostly at myself. I was well acquainted with both feelings, and I attributed them to the workload at the office. The price everyone in the firm had to pay, the price we were all willing to pay. I had no complaints.

The letter was sitting there in the middle of my desk. In a slightly crumpled light-blue airmail envelope, the kind one hardly uses anymore. I recognized his handwriting at once. No one else I knew lavished such care on penmanship.

*A Well - Tempered Heart* 5

He treated each correspondence as a miniature artwork. He gave each swooping line meticulous attention worthy of cal- ligraphy. Each letter of each word was a gift. Two pages, tightly packed, every sentence, every line set to paper with the devotion and passion felt only by someone for whom writing is a treasure beyond all price.

On the envelope an American stamp. He must have en- trusted it to some tourist; that was the fastest and safest way. I looked at the clock. Our next meeting was scheduled to begin in two minutes, but curiosity got the better of me. I opened the envelope and hastily scanned the first few lines. A loud knock wrenched me back. There was Mulligan standing in the door, his broad, muscular frame nearly filling the space. I would have liked to ask for a moment’s patience. A letter from my brother in Burma. A little mas- terpiece that . . . He smiled, and before I could say a word he tapped a forefinger on his chunky wristwatch. I nodded. Mulligan was one of the partners at Simon & Koons, our best attorney, but he had no appreciation for penmanship as

a gift. His own scrawl was illegible.

The rest of my colleagues were already waiting. You could smell the fresh coffee; the room grew quiet as we sat down. In the coming weeks we were going to be filing a claim on behalf of our most important client. A compli- cated story. Copyright infringement, illegal knockoffs from America and China, damages in the hundreds of millions. Time was of the essence.

6 Jan-Philipp Sendker

Mulligan spoke softly, and yet his deep voice resonated throughout every corner of the room. After only a few sen- tences I was already finding it difficult to follow him. I tried to focus on his words, but something kept distracting me, drawing me out of the room. Away from this world of charges and countercharges.

I was thinking of my brother in Burma. I saw him sud- denly before me. I thought of our first meeting in the di- lapidated teahouse in Kalaw. How he had stared at me and then suddenly approached me. In his white but yellowing shirt, his faded longyi, and his worn-out flip-flops. The half brother whose existence I had never suspected. I took him for an old beggar angling for a handout. I remembered the way he sat down at my table to ask me a question. “Do you believe in love, Julia?” I hear his voice in my head to this very day. As if time had stood still for this question. I had laughed—and it had not bothered him.

While Mulligan was droning on about the “value of intellectual property” I recalled my half brother’s first sentences. Verbatim. “I am serious,” U Ba had continued, undeterred by my laughter. “I speak of a love that brings sight to the blind. Of a love stronger than fear. I speak of a love that breathes meaning into life . . .”

No, I had eventually answered. No, I don’t believe in anything of the kind.

Over the next few days U Ba had shown me the error of my ways. And now? Almost ten years later? Did I believe in a power that brought sight to the blind? Would I be able to

*A Well - Tempered Heart* 7

convince a single person in this company that a person can triumph over selfishness? They would die laughing.

Mulligan was still rattling on about “the most important case of the year . . . so that we have to . . .” I was doing my best to concentrate, but my thoughts kept drifting, aimless, like scraps of wood tossed by the waves.

“Julia.” Mulligan brought me abruptly back to Manhat- tan. “It’s all you.”

I nodded at him, cast a desperate glance at my notes, and was planning to lead in with a few standard openings when a faint whisper interrupted me.

I faltered.

*Who are you?*

A mere breath, and yet unmistakable.

*Who are you?*

A woman’s voice. Still quiet, but clear and distinct.

I looked over my right shoulder to see who was inter- rupting me with a question like that at a moment like this. No one.

Where else would it come from?

*Who are you?*

I looked instinctively to the left. Nothing. A whisper from nowhere.

*What do these men want from you?*

Tense silence on all sides. I took a deep breath and ex- haled slowly. I felt flushed. I sat tongue-tied, eyes down. Someone cleared his throat.

*Be on your guard.*

“Julia?”

8 Jan-Philipp Sendker

Not a word. Not one. Shortness of breath. Where was this voice coming from? Who was that talking to me? What did she want? What did I have to fear from my colleagues?

“Feel free to jump right in. We’re all ears.” Mulligan’s growing impatience. Disapproving coughs.

*Take great care. Watch what you say. Be careful who you look at.*

I raised my head and glanced cautiously around. Upper bodies rocking uneasily. Marc’s worried expression; he felt my pain. I imagine. A smirk flitted across Frank’s broad face. As if he’d always known the day would come when I would crumble pathetically under the pressure.

*You mustn’t trust them, no matter what they say.*

That voice cinched my throat shut. I was paralyzed. Their faces ran together. Sweaty palms. My heart beat faster.

“Julia. Are you okay?”

*No one will help you.*

“If I may . . .” I began.

Utter silence once again. It had sounded louder than necessary. More of a cry than a polite request for atten- tion. Their glances. The ensuing silence. I felt dizzy. On the brink of collapse.

“Would you like some water?”

It sounded sincere. Or was I fooling myself? Did I need to be on my guard?

*Not a word, now. Hold your tongue.*

*A Well - Tempered Heart* 9

A dark chasm opened before me, yawning wider by the second. I wanted to hide, to crawl off somewhere. What in the world was happening to me? I was hearing a voice, plain as day. A voice I had no control over. A stranger. Inside me. I felt myself getting smaller and smaller. Smaller and needier. I would not be able to say another word until it was quiet again in my head. I pressed on my ears a couple of times, quickly and sharply, the way I did when the occa- sional rushing got too loud. I tried another deep breath and knew right away it was pointless.

*They mean you no good. Their smiles are false. They are dangerous.*

Scream. Drown her out with my own real voice. LEAVE ME ALONE. STOP TALKING. STOP. STOP.

Not a word. Not one.

Mulligan and I exchanged looks. I realized it was true that no one in this room could help me. I had to get out. Im- mediately. I would go to the restroom, to my office, home, it didn’t matter, as long as it was away from here. They were here for a presentation. They were expecting ideas and pro- posals, and if I wasn’t up to the job, at least I owed them an explanation for my behavior. An apology. I was in no posi- tion to give them either one. I didn’t have the strength. I had nothing to say. A brief hesitation, then I slowly straight- ened up, pushing back my chair and rising. My legs were quivering.

*What are you doing?*

“What the hell is going on here, Julia?”

I gathered my papers, turned away, and headed for the

10 Jan-Philipp Sendker

door. Mulligan was shouting something, but I could no lon- ger understand a word he was saying.

I opened the door, stepped out, and closed it quietly be- hind me.

*Now what?*

I walked down the hall past the restrooms to my office, set the documents on my desk, took my coat, tucked U Ba’s letter into my handbag, and left the office calmly and with- out another word.

I had as yet no idea that I had unwittingly set off on my journey. On that fall day, icy cold and clear as a bell, in the week before Thanksgiving.