

Darkness clung to the morning sky and I had been driving south on US23 for nearly an hour.

Orange barrels lined the highway, but in the absence of workers, I kept pressure on the accelerator. The unease I felt when I locked my apartment this morning hadn't left. Maybe I'd forgotten something. But as always, I triple-checked every room. Coffee hadn't taken care of my headache. I couldn't stop chomping on the same conversations that had been bothering me for weeks and listening to the news didn't help. I reached for a CD. Suddenly, black feathers skidded across the windshield. A crow! Its wing struck the front window sending it into an end-over-end spiral. Geese and airplanes I'd heard of, but a crow flying into a car? I took a deep breath while checking the rearview mirror. The crow was nowhere in sight. I hoped he'd survived. Wasn't there some superstition about crows at the beginning of a journey?

Bad omen or not, I had to keep going.

Spending my twenty-ninth birthday at a spiritual retreat with my mother was not my idea of a good time, but I had wondered what Julia got herself into this time. Then came the clincher: "What would you think of me living in India for a year?" I started snooping and found references on the Internet to the Vidya Shakti Center that gave me plenty to worry about. A monk discharged for having relations with young women, a newspaper reporter claiming the promised "transformation" was hype at an expensive price. With Julia's inheritance and her everyone-knows-better-than-me outlook, she could be vulnerable.

The morning sky was still annoyingly dark. At least I could get some work done. I inserted the CD: “Lichtenwald’s Case Studies on White Collar Criminals,” swallowed the dregs of vending-machine cappuccino, merged onto the Ohio Turnpike and headed east. Nine hours to go.

Every time a crow swooped down for road kill, I flinched and my foot lifted off the gas pedal. But, within the drive time predicted by AAA, the Welcome to Pennsylvania sign greeted me, the road became steeper and the curves more frequent. After driving the countless crests and valleys of the Poconos, and passing signs for a yoga retreat and a Buddhist temple, I found it: “Vidya Shakti Center, 500 yards ahead.” I pulled over onto the shoulder, grabbed my camera, and found the ashram in the viewer. A glass steeple towered up from the middle of several low buildings. I whistled. The structure of the spire was impressive. Even in the shade, the surface mirrored the dark green of the surrounding pines. I’d never seen a glass steeple. It was exquisite, and must have cost a lot of money. The upkeep would be outrageous. But, of course, Julia would only come to an upscale place with the best amenities. I clicked the camera, backed up a few feet and got a photo of the sign, its gold letters glaring in the sunlight.

I tossed the camera onto the passenger’s seat and coasted down the empty mountain road, my sweaty palms slipping on the steering wheel, my heart pounding. I took a deep breath. A tall fence ran along the road, blocking my view of the ashram grounds. My heart clenched. The car seemed to resist as I tugged the steering wheel to the left. The entrance to the Center grounds sloped down on both sides, covered with shrubs and flowerbeds, but what I noticed most was the booth just ahead. It wasn’t one of those shacks that you see at the National Parks campgrounds. This looked like a miniature version of one that belonged to a gated community. Like Fox Hollow in Florida where Julia lived. I slowed down, stopped at the lowered barrier, and opened the car window.

A blond man in his early twenties smiled, showing white, even teeth. He leaned out and said, “Welcome. Have you been to the Vidya Shakti Center before?”

I found myself smiling back at his bright blue eyes. “Thanks, no. But I have a reservation...meeting my mother.” Why did I tell him that? I needed to really think before I spoke. I wanted people to give me information not the other way around.

“Well, I hope you have a wonderful stay,” he said, still smiling. “How long will you be here?”

“Why?”

“Different parking assignments.”

“Umm...a week.”

“Park your car around to the right, and walk to the lobby. There you can find out exactly where you’ll be staying.”

“Thanks.” I started to raise the window, but the smiling man stopped me.

“I see you have a camera. There’s no photography allowed on the grounds. You can check it here and pick it up when you leave.”

My back stiffened, but I handed over the camera.

The young man asked, “What’s your name?”

“Why?”

“I’ll tag it.”

“Oh. Katherine Sullivan.”

“Thanks, Katherine Sullivan. Have a nice day.”

Gripping the steering wheel tightly I drove away, feeling suddenly weary. From the half-empty parking lot, I walked toward the main lobby, scanning the lush green lawns—no lineup of Rolls-Royces, like at the infamous ashram in Oregon. Maybe they had been hidden. I shook my arms and stretched them overhead, trying to become more alert, to prepare for what I might find inside. I hadn’t seen Julia since Christmas: six months.

My visit here would actually help me complete a research project at a couple of prisons in upstate New York, an hour’s drive from the ashram. Given the pressure I was under from my pending departmental review coming up in September, the timing would be

tight. The review was crucial to the tenure process. A small step, but an important one. I convinced myself I could pull it off, though, with my close friend Whitney's help. A post-doc at Columbia, she would handle some of the interviews and manage the data entry.

Now that I was at the Center, I felt even more uneasy. The single-story white building had seemed plain, but as I walked toward it and turned the corner, I saw a courtyard with a fire pit in the center encircled by a marble patio. A rich man's version of a campfire? Or were rituals performed here? A woman with a dreamy smile sat on the marble, staring up at a stone statue of a goddess with four arms, two of them extended with hands overflowing with coins and jewels. I started to squirm. I checked my watch: three fifteen. Perfect. Julia should be waiting in the lobby. I took a winding path that led to the sliding glass entrance of the sprawling white stucco building. The windows that ran the full length of the courtyard were darkly tinted. I squinted, but couldn't see inside. The doors parted automatically. I took a long breath as if preparing to dive into the deep end of a pool and fortified myself: *I will not become a vegetarian. I will not give up sex, chocolate, or rock and roll.*