

Chapter 1

Afloat

Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 2016. Teresa sat at her desk at International Expeditions, looking down onto Franklin Street, frowning at the splendor. The red, orange, and gold leaves of the willow oak trees made the powder blue sky look more intense. College students bounced along the sidewalks, past historic homes and quaint shops, their enthusiasm energizing the town. Most years she couldn't get enough. Not now: "Blue Heaven" had no business flaunting its magic—not when International Expeditions' prospects were so dire.

The familiar rhythm of Zeb's boots pounding up the staircase drew her attention away from the window. *About time*, she thought, glancing toward the entrance of the office. They both needed to be pedaling harder, especially after the dismal sales and pipeline numbers he'd recently shared. This wasn't just about the company or their clients. They had a larger responsibility—to the public, to America even. He'd taught her that.

The door burst open, and Zeb dashed to his office without a word or nod to her. *Sweet. The potted-plant treatment.* He'd always been passionate and frenetic—more so since the downturn—but he'd dialed up his intensity another couple of notches. She shrugged. Whatever the latest crisis, it was above her pay grade—at least until he beckoned.

"I'm here if you need me," Teresa called.

To push the doubts from her mind, Teresa forced herself to "come into the present," as her shrink had advised. Eyeballing a trip proposal, she unleashed a flurry of keystrokes,

transposing the images of the Jain priest and Royal Bengal tiger. *Better!* No need to move Mount Everest or the hot-air ballooning. One of these days *she* would explore India and Nepal—not just play the hapless kid outside the candy store, forever looking in on other peoples' adventures. She moved to the pricing section and slapped 45 percent onto the net cost. No sweat: Clients understood they were getting good value, even at these prices. How could they not? Tracking tigers from the back of an elephant, glacier trekking in Patagonia—the world was one big playpen. For some.

“Did you make it to Ye Olde?” she asked.

“What do you think?”

It was a dumb question. Still, Zeb's crankiness rankled, because she knew he'd surely been the picture of joviality earlier that day as he camped out with his buddies at Ye Olde Waffle Shoppe, feasting on a western omelet, hash browns, and too much iced tea. These Wednesday mornings were sacred, his one indulgence, no matter the circumstances. It was always the same. The guys would crack jokes, charm the waitress, and obsess over Tar Heel basketball, dissecting matchups with Duke and other ACC foes. Zeb would overtip the server, then schlep his overly caffeinated self to Torah study, where, according to what she'd heard, his enthusiasm, clarity of thought, and unique viewpoints enlivened the discussion of Bible passages. When class ended, Zeb's persona would morph. Probably mindful of his secular duties, he became hyperfocused, remaining that way until the end of the workday, after which he reverted to affability. *He's always been peculiar and probably won't change*, Teresa thought.

Zeb reappeared. He dropped a sealed envelope in front of her, grabbed the mail, and turned back toward his office.

"And a hearty good morning to you, too!" she needled. "How was Bible study?"

Zeb spun around. "Not Bible—*Torah*. That's T-O-R-A-H," he enunciated with mounting volume. "Jeez, I thought *I* was the one with a learning disability."

"Must have slipped my mind," she said. "I must say, Torah's doing wonders for your spirituality. Perspective, too." Being his lone, indispensable employee had its benefits.

"Perspective this: ARC revoked our license. I got the call on the way over."

"What the hell?!" she said, her eyes bulging. "Were our sales too low?"

"No, it was bureaucratic shit. Sales reports being late, not submitting a \$60,000 bond."

She shook her head sympathetically. "Out of the blue, isn't it?"

"Yup, my reports are always late. And they jacked up my bond from \$20,000. I can't afford it. I'm behind on rent as it is."

"Awesome—a tour operator who can't issue air tickets. That's like an ice cream vendor with no chocolate. What happened?"

"Someone must've put a bug in ARC's ear," he replied. "Probably some of the big boys."

"After the conference?" Teresa finished her coffee and put the mug down.

He nodded.

"Next time you tilt at windmills, be more diplomatic."

Zeb stared down at his feet, crestfallen. Sometimes Zeb looked a bit like Bruce Springsteen in the 1970s—wiry, doleful, as if he needed the music to stop more of his hair from turning gray.

"Let's not get sidetracked," he said. "What else is going on?"

Teresa massaged her temples. *Was he serious?* The saboteurs had played him, the regulators had pounced, and now they were on life support.

What had he expected? Poking industry giants in the eye publicly, without preparing for pushback, was classic Zeb. Did he *really* think the scoundrels would forfeit their gravy train and yield to a small-fry tour operator who hadn't marshaled support for his ideas?

"Not much," she managed. "Mrs. Nazarian called to thank you for the Armenian heritage itinerary. Said it was wonderfully crafted. They look forward to doing it in the future."

"In the future?"

"They're now looking for a more conventional tour—Budapest, Vienna, and Prague. For next month."

"Sonofabitch!" Zeb said. "She told me Armenia was ninety-nine percent definite, barring an act of God. All that time down the drain." He was pacing. "We should send Mrs. Nazarian to friggin' Turkey. If she wants plain vanilla, tell her to call AAA. I'm not wasting another second on that woman."

Teresa rose to her feet, wide-eyed. "You're seriously turning down *eighteen people*? We're talking luxury hotels for thirteen nights and business-class airfare. I need my paycheck, and I don't see any leads in the hopper."

"Then do it yourself," he said, zinging a rubber band into the wall. "I'm done with them."

"Can you take over Livingstone 1866? That one's a doozy."

"Yup."

“And Zeb, that Turkey comment was beneath you. Your rabbi would be disappointed.”

A sheepish smile tugged at his lips. “Jeez, I had to hire the one high school grad in America who’s an expert on the Armenian genocide.” His grin faded. “You’re right, of course. I’m sorry . . . Now, if that’s enough contrition for you and the rabbi, I better go find an air consolidator.”

“Good idea,” she said gently. “By the way, don’t forget, your tango lesson was canceled, and I’m leaving at four-thirty. I promised Jim a home-cooked dinner—for once.”

“Smart woman. Don’t make the same mistake I did.”

Zeb left the office, eyes downcast.

Teresa opened the sealed envelope he’d given her. Two tickets—his tickets—to the UNC-Virginia football game. She felt a lump in her throat.

The same mistake. Teresa rubbed the wedding band that was still on her finger. Years of commitment to International Expeditions had taken their toll. Was there enough to show for it?

Certainly their offerings were world-class. Zeb invested countless hours—not to mention his heart and brain—into every expedition. His creations were unique masterpieces of research and artistry. Leading historians and geographers had said as much. He was no more a “travel agent” than he was a shepherd. What he had accomplished was extraordinary, starting with his upscale soft adventures and then, later, with his historical expeditions and genealogy tours. Not that she would feed his male ego by saying so.

Zeb also had vision, and it extended well beyond travel. Americans needed what he was fighting for, whether they knew it yet or not. Industry leaders and regulators were fools; all too shortsighted to see that *he* was their best chance for prospering long-term.

All of which made Zeb's obtuseness so tragic when it came to business. Obsessing over Mrs. Nazarian's change of plans—and *not* the lost ARC license—was exhibit A. Then there was the fact that he squandered market opportunities on a regular basis, even when spotting them first. He ignored signals, trusting only his own instincts on whether a product added enough value. How many times had he said it? "Whether a tour sells well or not means little compared to whether it enlightens the people who take it." His expeditions were meant to be continuing education, and, just as students couldn't be expected to formulate their own curriculums, travelers often had no clue what was best for them. They *weren't* always right.

As if that mindset weren't enough of a roadblock, Zeb went ballistic whenever he encountered unethical or discourteous behavior, apparently oblivious to his own crabbiness. He ignored administrative work to the point of gross negligence, a point that had been twice documented by the IRS and just now by the Airlines Reporting Corporation. He was allergic to making money, better suited for a think-tank job where he could analyze and create to his heart's content without the burden of financial solvency.

Yes, he was exasperating, but he needed a mother hen. *No one aside from my sweetheart son, Wylie, will ever need me as much.*

As for now—how to salvage the Nazarian booking?

Teresa turned onto Columbia Street, mindful of the pedestrians who always had the right of way. A placard in front of Ackland Art Museum touted a new Rembrandt exhibit. She made a mental note to visit it as she swerved to avoid a smartphone-engaged Greek crossing to Fraternity Court. She was approaching her favorite part of town. Visitors raved about Franklin, the gorgeous main drag, but for Teresa, the true heart of Chapel Hill lay here on Cameron Avenue.

The street was a feast for the eyes, lined with willow oak trees and ivy-covered brick buildings. It skirted the main quad of UNC and buzzed with activity. Backpack-toting students scurried to and from classes. Some took sun, read, or napped on the grassy expanses. Others played Frisbee, nabbing disks from frisky dogs set free by lecturing professors. Guitarists and harmonica players chilled out, practicing for evening gigs at Cat's Cradle. Megaphone-carrying activists strode toward the Pit, set to unleash their powers of persuasion. Professors held court on the lawn, shaded by magnolia, poplar, oak, and gum trees. Smartphones seemed somehow less ubiquitous.

Teresa paused at the Phillips Hall crosswalk. Memories of her own teenage years engulfed her as two coeds walked by. As a local high school student, she had dreamed of going to college here, with the goodies so tantalizingly close. What she hadn't witnessed firsthand she'd heard about from older friends who'd made it already. Beckoning her were the rollicking all-campus parties, where live bands played covers of the Police, U2, and REM, and where Miller Lite trucks dispensed free beer. She would sit courtside at Carmichael Auditorium, her face adorned with Tar Heel logos. She and the other student crazies would cheer for Michael Jordan, James Worthy, and Sam Perkins, and hurl abuse at Ralph Sampson and Christian Laettner—until Dean Smith told them to cut it out.

She would storm Franklin Street, along with 45,000 other fans, after another national championship. In winter she would attend a toga party at McIver or Alderman, cackling as a lover boy, wearing only sneakers and underwear, traipsed through the snow back to his own dorm, cussing out long-gone buddies. She would road-trip to Myrtle Beach, shag in the sand to "*Miss Grace*" and "*My Girl*," and watch dumbasses scale the walls at Crazy Zacks to avoid paying the two-dollar cover charge.

On football Saturdays she would throw on her favorite sweater and add-a-beads, feel the crisp fall air, attend tailgate parties, smuggle flasks of Jim Beam into Kenan Stadium, and watch the Tar Heels romp over conference foes. She would go to after-game parties at Fraternity Court and maybe meet a nice guy. She'd work part-time at Cat's Cradle and listen to the hottest new bands in the country for free. Late night she would devour grilled cheeses at Hector's and scarf down chicken-and-cheese biscuits at Time Out, picking on the scrappy "bones" if money was tight.

Alas, none of that was destined to be. As the Arboretum faded from view, Teresa sighed heavily. Ahead, dozens of culture freaks ambled toward Paul Green Theatre, as she should have been doing these past fifteen years. But her dreams of majoring in English and the dramatic arts, then becoming a playwright had all been extinguished. It still hurt her to see professors chatting with students over beers at Spanky's. What nuggets of wisdom had she missed?

Pulling into her driveway, Teresa expunged all negativity. She had salvaged a decent life for herself: She had an affectionate son, a doting husband, and a house in the "Southern Part of Heaven." Things could be much worse.

A friend of hers, a transplanted New Englander, had once said Chapel Hill's infamous heaven moniker was nauseating. It supposedly revealed how provincial and self-satisfied Carolinians were. "Maybe so, but heaven is heaven," she'd responded before marching off. Thousands of out-of-staters agreed, having voted with their feet. But for whatever reason, for Teresa personally, none of her life here worked without International Expeditions and her nutcase boss. They *needed* to stay afloat.

Teresa smirked. Surely, there was no harm in asking Zeb to cure her of her narrow-mindedness: A familiarization trip to Machu Picchu might just do the trick. "Professional development' has such a nice ring to it," she said, before opening the door to a slobbering Labrador and a smiling husband.