



CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS ONE OF THOSE DAYS you find yourself wishing was over before you've got even ten minutes into it. It started when my eyes opened and I noticed an alarming amount of sunlight seeping in under the bedroom blinds. You know, an eight-a.m. amount of light—not a seven-a.m. amount of light. My alarm had not gone off. *That* realization was followed by twenty minutes of panicked cursing and shouting and crying (my six-year-old son did the crying) as I careened around the house, from bathroom to kitchen to front door, trying to gather all the ridiculous bits of stuff Adam and I needed for the rest of our day. As I pulled up in front of his school forty-five minutes later, Adam shot me a reproachful look.

“Mom says if you keep dropping me off late at school on Mondays, I won’t be able to stay over Sunday nights anymore.”

Oh, boy.

“Last time,” I said. “Last time, I promise.”

Adam was sliding out of the car now, a doubtful expression on his face.

“Here,” I said, holding up a bulging plastic bag. “Don’t forget your lunch.”

“Keep it,” Adam said, not looking at me. “I’m not allowed to bring peanut butter to school.”

And then he turned on his heel and raced through the deserted school playground. *Poor kid*, I thought as I watched his little legs pumping toward the front door. Nothing worse than heading into school late, everyone already in class, the national anthem blaring through the hallways. *That* and no lunch to boot.

I threw the plastic bag onto the passenger seat and sighed. Another “custodial” weekend had come to an inglorious end. I had, apparently, failed spectacularly as a husband. Now it appeared that I would fail with equal flamboyance as a separated dad. From the moment I picked Adam up, I seemed to provide an unending series of disappointments. Despite the fact that all week I felt Adam’s absence like a missing limb, I invariably arrived late on Fridays. The promised treat of pizza and a movie was dampened by the tuna sandwich that Annisha made Adam eat as his dinner hour came and went. And then there was my phone, which chirped incessantly, like it had a bad case of hiccups. It beeped during the movie, and when I was tucking Adam into bed. It beeped during our breakfast of slightly burned pancakes, and while we walked to the park. It

beeped as we picked up takeout burgers, and all through story time. Of course the beeping wasn't the real problem. The real problem was that I kept picking the thing up. I checked my messages; I sent responses; I talked on the phone. And with each interruption, Adam became a little quieter, a little more distant. It broke my heart, yet the thought of ignoring the thing, or turning it off, made my palms sweat.

As I raced to work, I brooded about the botched weekend. When Annisha had announced that she wanted a trial separation, it felt like someone had backed over me with a truck. She had been complaining for years that I never spent time with her or Adam; that I was too caught up with work, too busy with my own life to be part of theirs.

"But how," I argued, "does leaving me fix any of that? If you want to see more of me, why are you making sure that you see *less*?"

She had, after all, said she still loved me. Said she wanted me to have a good relationship with my son.

But by the time I had moved into my own apartment, I was bruised and bitter. I had promised to try to spend more time at home. I had even begged off a company golf tournament and a client dinner. But Annisha said that I was only tinkering—I wasn't committed to fixing what was wrong. Every time I thought of those words, I clenched my teeth. Couldn't Annisha see how demanding my work was? Couldn't she see how important it was for me to keep moving ahead? If I hadn't been putting in the kind of hours I was, we wouldn't have our great house, or the cars, or the awesome big-screen TVs. Well, okay, I admit it—Annisha didn't give a damn about the TVs. But, still.

I made a promise to myself then—*I will be a great “separated dad.”* I’ll lavish attention on Adam; I’ll go to all the school events; I’ll be available to drive him to swimming or karate; I’ll read him books. When he phones at night, I’ll have all the time in the world to talk with him. I’ll listen to his problems, give advice and share jokes. I’ll help him with homework, and I’ll even learn to play those annoying video games he likes. I’ll have a wonderful relationship with my son, even if I can’t have one with my wife. And I’ll show Annisha that I’m not just “tinkering.”

The first few weeks apart, I think I did pretty well. In some ways, it wasn’t so hard. But I was shocked by how much I missed both of them. I would wake up in my apartment and listen for the tiny voice I knew wasn’t there. I would pace around at night thinking, *This is the time when I might be reading a bedtime story. This is when I might give Adam his good-night hug. And This is the moment I would be crawling into bed with Annisha, the moment I would be holding her in my arms.* The weekends couldn’t come soon enough for me.

But as the months ticked on, those thoughts began to fade. Or, more truly, they were crowded out by everything else. I would bring work home each evening or stay at work late. When Adam called, I’d be tapping away on my computer and hearing only every other sentence. Whole weeks would go by without me thinking once about what he might be doing during the days. When the school break came, I realized that I hadn’t booked any time off to spend with him. Then I scheduled a client dinner on the night of Adam’s spring school concert. I also forgot to take him for his six-month dental cleaning, even though Annisha had reminded me just the week before.

And I started to show up late on Fridays. This weekend was just another installment of “quality” time that was anything but.

I gave Danny, the security guard, a little wave as I pulled into the office parking lot. After my crazy rush to be here, I suddenly wished I wasn't. I pulled into my space, but I didn't turn off the engine right away.

In my defense, my obsession with work was completely natural. It was a highly stressful time at the company. Rumors had been flying for months that we were about to be sold. I had spent the last twelve weeks doing nothing but churning out reports: sales reports, inventory reports, staffing reports, profit-and-loss statements. When I closed my eyes at night, all I could see were the crowded grid lines of a spreadsheet. That was what awaited me inside the building, but I couldn't put it off any longer. I turned the engine off, grabbed my laptop case and headed in.

I said hello to Devin, our receptionist. His head was bent studiously over his computer screen, but I knew he was playing solitaire. As I veered right, I could see Devin smirking, but maybe I was just imagining that. The shortest route to my office is to the left, but I no longer went that way. Devin obviously thought that was because Tessa's desk was to the right. But that was only an added bonus. If I went to the right, I didn't have to go past Juan's office. *Juan*. Damn. I don't know why I should be bothered so much after all this time. It was only an unused office now. The blinds were up, the desk was clear, the chair was vacant. There were no pictures of Juan's wife and children on the filing cabinet, no coffee mugs on the credenza, no plaques on the wall. But it was as if the shadow of all those things hovered over the empty spaces.

I slowed my pace as I approached Tessa's cubicle. Tessa and I had worked together for years. We had always got along well—we shared the same sense of humor. I wasn't sure what was going to happen with Annisha, but I had to admit that I'd found myself thinking a lot about Tessa since the split.

I caught a glimpse of her dark hair, but she was on the phone. So I kept going.

Almost as soon as I was through my office door, I found myself turning around. I wondered if I should check out the new prototype before I started on more pressing work. I knew the design team would let me know about any developments, but the thought of distracting myself with a few minutes in the lab was tempting.

The design lab was where I'd started out. One of my first jobs was in the development sector of this place—an auto parts manufacturer. It was my dream job. Juan, the technical director, took me under his wing. Juan was my mentor.

But the thing is, even if you love your job, you can't stay put. That's a career killer. But no one had to *tell* me that. I was like a dog wagging my tail so hard that I'd put my back out. The people above noticed. When the next rung of the corporate ladder was offered to me, Juan took me into his office.

"You know," he said, "if you take this position, you'll be out of research and design for good. You'll be selling and managing. Is that what you want?"

"I want to move ahead, Juan," I said, laughing. "And I'm sure not going to wait for you to retire to do that!"

Juan gave me only a weak smile, but he didn't say anything else.

After that first step, I moved up through the ranks pretty

quickly. Now I was overseeing all our projects and product production for our biggest client.

I picked up my coffee mug, about to head down the hall to the lab. But then I stopped. There was no need for me to be there. I put my coffee cup down and dropped into my chair. I snapped on my computer, opened a file and turned my eyes to the maze of numbers that filled my screen.

A few hours later, I had just finished yet another profit-and-loss statement and was about to return to my overflowing inbox, when the phone rang. It took me a few seconds to recognize my mother's voice. She sounded upset. *Good lord*, I thought. *Now what?* My mother had been inordinately interested in my life in recent months. It was beginning to annoy me.

"Sorry to have bothered you at work, Jonathan, but this is important," she said. "I've just been talking with Cousin Julian, and he needs to see you right away. It's urgent."

Me? I thought. *Why on earth would Cousin Julian need to see me?*

To be frank, I didn't really know Cousin Julian. He wasn't my cousin, but my mother's. She had been close with Julian and his sister Catherine when they were all small, but I grew up on the other side of the country. Far-flung relatives were as interesting to me as last week's newspaper.

The only time I ever met Julian, I was about ten. We were visiting Cousin Catherine, and she arranged a dinner at her house. I don't recall whether Julian's wife was with him, or whether he was already divorced. To tell you the truth, I don't remember anything at all about the visit, except for one thing: Julian's bright red Ferrari. I had heard Catherine mention it, so I was waiting on the front steps when he peeled up the driveway.

The car was even more fabulous than I had pictured. Julian saw my face (my chin must have been scraping the top of my shoes), and he invited me for a ride. I had never been in a car that moved so fast. It felt as if, at any moment, the wheels might leave the pavement, and we would be airborne. I don't think I said a word the whole ride. When we arrived back at the house, Julian got out of the car, but I didn't move.

"You want to hang around in the car for a while?" he asked.

I nodded. He turned to leave but before he could go, I stopped him.

"Cousin Julian?"

"Yes," he said.

"How did you get this car?" I asked. "I mean . . . does it cost a lot of money?"

"It sure does," he said. "So if you want one of these yourself, Jonathan, you're going to have to work really, really hard when you grow up."

I never forgot that.

As I remember, Julian didn't stick around long after dinner—Mom and Cousin Catherine seemed disappointed, maybe a little annoyed. Although I was only ten, I could imagine that Julian had much more exciting places to be. He was clearly living the kind of life that I wanted when I got older. I watched with envy as Julian's fabulous sports car tore down the street.

After years of saying nothing about the man, Mom had begun to invoke Julian's name every time we got together. She had recently told me the Ferrari was long gone. Cousin Julian had, apparently, gone through some sort of life-changing experience. He'd quit his extremely lucrative job as a high-powered litigator, sold the Ferrari and embraced a "simple" existence. Mom said he

had studied with a little-known group of monks who lived deep in the Himalayas and that he now often went around in a crimson robe. She said he was an utterly different man. I wasn't sure why she seemed to think this was such a good thing.

And she had been trying to get the two of us together. She had suggested that I make time to visit with him when I was in his city on business. But frankly, if I didn't have enough time for Annisha or Adam, why would I take a day off to spend with a man I hardly knew? Besides, if he'd still been a phenomenally successful lawyer with a glamorous lifestyle and a flashy sports car, I might have seen the point. But why did I need to spend time with an unemployed old man with no Ferrari? There were plenty of guys like him hanging around in my local bar.

"Mom," I said, "what are you talking about? Why does Julian need to see me?"

Mom didn't have details. She said Julian needed to talk with me. He needed my help with something.

"That's nuts," I said. "I haven't seen Cousin Julian in years. I don't know the guy. There has to be someone else who can help."

Mom didn't say anything, but I thought I could hear her crying softly. The last couple of years since my dad died had been tough on her. "Mom," I said. "Are you okay?"

She sniffled a bit, but then started talking in a steely tone that I barely recognized.

"Jonathan, if you love me, you'll do this. You'll do whatever Julian wants you to do."

"But what. . ." I didn't get a chance to finish my question.

"There will be a plane ticket waiting for you when you get home tonight." She started another sentence, but her voice began to crack. "Jonathan, I need to go," she said and then hung up.

It was hard to concentrate for the rest of the afternoon. The phone call was so unlike my mother—her forcefulness and desperation unnerved me. And then there was the whole mystery of the thing. What on earth did Julian want me to do? I wondered about this life change of his. Had he gone completely off his rocker? Was I going to meet with some old coot ranting about government conspiracies? Some wild-haired fellow who shuffled down the street in his housecoat and slippers? (I knew that's not what mom meant by "crimson robes," but I couldn't get that image out of my mind.) I was so preoccupied by these thoughts that I walked right past Juan's office as I left for the day. It wasn't until I entered the lobby that I realized what I had done. It felt like a bad omen.

When I got back to my apartment, I almost forgot to check the mailbox. I struggled with the bent key for a few minutes, and then the little metal door flew open, spitting pizza flyers and insurance offers all over the floor. As I shoveled them up, my hand settled on a thick envelope. It was from my mother. I sighed, stuffed it in my pocket and headed up the stairs to my apartment.

I opened the envelope while my frozen lasagna entrée spun around in the microwave. Inside was a short note from my mother explaining that Julian was temporarily living in Argentina, and a return airline ticket to Buenos Aires. Good lord, I thought. They want me to take a twelve-hour flight to meet up with a distant cousin for an hour or two? Over the weekend? Great. I would have to spend my entire weekend in a flying sardine tin and disappoint my son. That, or upset my mom even more than she was already disappointed.

I ate my lukewarm lasagna in front of the TV, hoping a large

tumbler of Scotch would mask the crumminess of my dinner and the misery of my mood.

I put off phoning Annisha until I was sure Adam would be in bed. Annisha is a stickler for routine, so there was no guesswork there. When she answered the phone she sounded tired, but not unhappy. I braced myself for her mood to change when I told her about my possible weekend plans. But Annisha knew about it already.

“I’ve talked with your mom, Jonathan,” she said. “You need to do this. Adam will understand.”

So that was that.



CHAPTER TWO

THE TAXICAB HAD MOVED from the highway onto an extraordinarily wide boulevard. It looked like a typical city street, lined with trees on either side, a green island separating oncoming traffic, but it was at least ten lanes wide. I had never been to South America before and was surprised by how much Buenos Aires looked like a European city. An enormous obelisk, resembling the Washington Monument, split the scene in front of me, but the buildings and the streets reminded me a little of Paris.

Julian had booked me on a red-eye on Friday night. I had surprised myself by falling asleep on the flight, waking just as the plane was setting down. And now, here it was morning, but in another hemisphere from the one I had fallen asleep in.

The belle époque–style stone buildings, black cast-iron balconies and window boxes continued as we drove, but eventually we moved into an area that looked older, a bit tatty around the edges. There was graffiti on the walls, stucco chipping off the sides of buildings, dusty faded awnings. Although it was a cool fall day here, a number of windows were open, and I could see curtains flapping in the breeze. On one corner, musicians were gathered, playing for a small group of onlookers.

The cab was slowing now, pulling up to a storefront. The sign painted on the window announced tango lessons. Music drifted out of the half-open front door. I double-checked the address Julian had given me. This dance studio appeared to be it. I showed the piece of paper to the cabbie to make sure we were in the right part of town, that this wasn't some sort of mix-up. He nodded and then shrugged his shoulders. I paid and got out of the cab.

Wow, I thought, peering through the half-open door. When Mom said that Julian had changed his life, she wasn't kidding.

The room was long but not deep. Its walls were painted a rich red, and glass chandeliers hung from the ceiling. Men and women, holding each other closely yet with a certain formality, stepped around the room in time with the pulsing music.

As I watched, a tall, stylishly dressed man separated himself from his partner and threaded his way through the twirling dancers. When he got close to me, I could see he was smiling.

“Jonathan,” he said. “I’m so glad you made it.” He held out his hand and we shook.

It took me a minute to reconcile the man standing before me with the picture I had imagined on my way here. Julian looked far younger than he had when we met over twenty years ago.

His lean, muscular frame bore no resemblance to the pasty, bloated figure who had sat behind the wheel of that Ferrari. His face was unlined and relaxed. His bright blue eyes seemed to cut right through me.

“Please excuse me,” Julian said, waving his hand around the room. “I wasn’t sure what time your flight would arrive, so I thought I would take my Saturday lesson. But now that you’re here, let’s head upstairs.”

Julian led me to a door, which I hadn’t seen from the entranceway. Opening it, he gestured for me to head up the stairs. When I got to the top, he moved past me and opened another door. “Come in, come in,” he said as he stepped into the room.

The apartment was bright and spacious, but nothing like the kind of home I imagined Julian living in. The furniture was an odd assortment of old and new. Posters of musicians and dancers doing the tango adorned the walls, and stacks of books sat on the floor. It looked a bit like the home of a college student.

“I’m sorry to have made you travel such a distance at short notice, but I’ve been staying in this gorgeous city for the past few months. A friend was looking to sublet his apartment, and since I’ve always wanted to learn to tango, I thought this was the perfect opportunity. Let me get changed, and then I’ll make us some coffee.”

Julian disappeared down a long, narrow hallway. I sank into a chair that was covered with a cotton throw with the words “Be Extraordinary” embroidered in its center. I could hear the tango music drifting up the stairs and feel it humming under the floorboards.

As I waited for Julian, my mind began to race. *What was*

I doing? What did I know of this man? I felt a powerful sense of unease move through me. Somehow I knew that as soon as Julian walked back into the room, my life would never be the same. I sensed that what lay ahead of me was going to be difficult and exhausting. *I don't have to do this*, I thought. I looked over my shoulder to the doorway, wondering how long it would take me to find another cab. Just then Julian walked back into the room.

He was now wearing a long crimson robe. The hood draped his head.

“Tea or coffee?” he asked as he moved into a small kitchen at the far end of the living room.

“Coffee, please,” I said.

I felt awkward sitting in the living room alone; I got up and followed Julian into the kitchen. As Julian prepared the coffee-maker, I looked out of the window, down to the narrow cobblestoned street. The dance class must have broken up because couples were pouring out onto the sidewalk below. The syncopated music had been replaced with the sound of talking and laughing.

Finally I turned to Julian. “What. . .” I hesitated, trying not to be too indelicate. I started again, “What do you need from me? Why did you want to see me?”

“Jonathan,” said Julian, as he leaned against the counter. “Do you know my story?”

I wasn't sure what Julian was getting at. I told him that I knew he had been a litigation lawyer who had made a fortune and had lived a lavish lifestyle. I told him that I heard he'd had a change of heart and left his practice. I wasn't clear about the details.

“It’s true,” said Julian. “At one point, I was more successful than I had ever dreamed I could be—as far as fame and money go. But I was destroying my life. When I wasn’t consumed by work, I was smoking cigars and drinking expensive cognac, having a wild time with young models and new friends. It ruined my marriage, and my lifestyle began to take a toll on my career. I was in a downward spiral, but I didn’t know how to stop. One day, in the middle of arguing a big case, I crashed to the floor of the courtroom. A heart attack.”

That rang a bell. Mom had probably told me something about this, but I obviously hadn’t been paying too much attention.

Julian shook the hood from his head and then reached up to a shelf above the sink to pull down two mugs.

“I spent months recovering my health. During that time, I made a decision.”

I sighed. This is where that lovely Ferrari got tossed.

“I sold my mansion, my car, all my possessions. And I headed to India, hoping to learn what I could of the wisdom of the world. You see, building my net worth had become less interesting to me than discovering my self-worth. And chasing beautiful women had given way to pursuing enduring happiness.”

I stifled a sigh. It sounded as if this was the beginning of a long story. I was impatient to hear what any of it had to do with me.

“During my travels deep in the Himalayas, I had the great good fortune of coming upon an exceptional man. He was a monk, one of the Sages of Sivana. He took me high into the mountains, to the village where the sages lived, studied and worked. The sages taught me many remarkable lessons that I would love to share with you.”

Julian paused and looked down toward my feet. I realized with embarrassment that I had been tapping my foot like some impatient customer in a shop line.

Julian smiled. "But I sense that now is not the time."

"Sorry," I said. "I guess I'm just a little anxious to get back home."

"Not to worry," Julian said gently. "A story should be told only when a listener is ready to hear it."

"You want to know why I asked you here today?" Julian said. I nodded.

The coffee was ready. Julian poured two mugs. "Milk? Sugar?" I shook my head. Julian handed me a mug and then headed into the living room. Once we had both settled in chairs, he continued his story.

"One of the things that the monks taught me was the power of the talismans."

"Talismans?" I said.

"Small statues or amulets. There are nine of them. Each holds a piece of essential wisdom for happiness and a life beautifully lived. Individually, they are just symbolic tokens, but together they hold extraordinary transformative powers. They can, in effect, be lifesaving."

"You need to save a life?" I asked. It sounded a little melodramatic. Or a little crazy.

"Yes. There is someone I know who is in desperate trouble. Others have tried to help, but with no success. This is our last resort."

"Does this have something to do with my mother?" I asked. She had been very upset on the phone.

"It does," said Julian. "But I am not at liberty to explain how."

“Listen, if my mother is sick or something, I have a right to know.” I felt my chest get tight, my breathing shallow.

“Your mother is in no danger,” said Julian. “That’s all I can say.”

I was about to press him, to ask more questions, but Julian had drawn his lips together, put his coffee cup down on the table in front of me. It looked as if he was ready to end the conversation. I sighed and looked down at the floor for a minute.

“Okay,” I said, “but where do I fit in? What do you need me for?”

Julian had left his chair and moved over to the window. He looked out toward the street below, but his eyes seemed to be focused much farther in the distance.

“When I left the village,” Julian said, “the monks gave me the talismans in a leather pouch and asked me to be their new keeper.

“But after I left the Himalayas, I traveled for a while. One night a fire broke out in the small hotel I was staying in. I was out at the time, but my room was destroyed. I was carrying the talismans on me, so the only thing I lost was a pair of sandals. At another inn, I heard a fellow traveler talk of being mugged on a side street in Rome. It occurred to me that while the talismans were being held by the monks in the village, they had been safe. I was the only visitor who had reached that remote place in a very long time. But now that I had these treasures, they were at risk. At any time, they could be stolen, lost or destroyed.”

Julian went on to explain that he had decided it would be safer if he sent each talisman to a different trusted safekeeper who would turn it over when Julian had need of it. With each object, he had sent a letter with some descriptions about what he understood the talisman to mean. Now it was clear that he needed these talismans back. He said he wanted me to go and get them.

“What?” I sputtered. “I mean, isn’t that what FedEx is for?”

Julian smiled. “I don’t think you understand the importance of these talismans. I can’t entrust them to a courier or to the mail. They are scattered all over the world, and I need someone I know to pick them up in person.”

“And you can’t go?” I asked. I knew I was being a little rude, but the image of Julian tangoing across the floor downstairs was still in my mind.

Julian chuckled. “I know that I may not appear to be terribly busy,” he said, his tone getting more serious now. “But it is really not possible for me to do this.”

I was silent for a few seconds. How could I put this?

“Cousin Julian,” I said. “No offense, but you said you need someone you know to pick these things up. You don’t *really* know me. I met you once—when I was ten.”

“I know you better than you think,” said Julian. His pleasant smile had vanished. His eyes were dark, and there was a gravity in his expression that was disconcerting.

“Listen to me, Jonathan,” he said quietly. “I can’t tell you how I know this, but I do. The *only* person who can collect those talismans is *you*.”

He paused and then added, “I know that my answers aren’t very satisfying. But trust me, Jonathan, when I say that this is a matter of life and death.”

We sat for a long while in silence. I was thinking about the sound of my mother crying on the phone. The feel of the empty space on Annisha’s side of the bed. The look in Adam’s eyes when I disappointed him. It isn’t very often when you are the “only” one—the only son, the only husband, the only father.

Finally I broke the silence.

“How long will this take?” I asked.

“I’ve written to all the safekeepers,” Julian said. “I haven’t heard back from everyone. But I’ve got a place for you to start—a friend of mine in Istanbul. As far as time goes, well, getting all the talismans will take a few weeks. Maybe a month.”

Good lord. That was all my vacation time and then some. I took a deep breath. Julian looked at me and cocked his head.

“Jonathan?” he said.

I looked back at Julian. There was such kindness in his eyes. For a moment, he reminded me of my father, and I realized how much I missed my dad. I also realized that I had made a decision. Words caught in my throat, so I only nodded.

Julian smiled. Then he stood up and ran his hands along the side of his red robe.

“And now,” said Julian, “since we have concluded our business, I shall make you some lunch, and then perhaps we should check out the neighborhood. It’s called San Telmo. And it’s become one of my favorite places on the planet.”

I SPENT A PLEASANT, if odd, afternoon with Julian. He took me to a ballroom a few streets away where seasoned tango dancers were giving a show. As the music thumped through my body like a second heartbeat, I noticed Julian’s feet tapping, his legs moving slightly as if he were imagining himself doing the moves. Then we walked through the winding alleys until it was time for me to head back for another red-eye flight home. As we stood on the sidewalk outside Julian’s apartment, music wafting out of the studio and filling the air around us, Julian turned to me.

“One more thing, Jonathan,” he said. From a pocket in his robe, he pulled a small leather-bound notebook. “I’d like you to keep a journal while you are away.”

“A diary?” I asked. “What for?”

“Not a diary, Jonathan. A journal. The talismans lend power to those who hold them. But those who have them give these tokens power as well. It is important for me to know your thoughts and feelings about this journey—and about what the talismans mean to you once you are in their presence.”

My shoulders slumped. I didn’t know what was worse—taking weeks out of my life to travel around the world collecting someone else’s stuff, or having to write about it. Self-reflection has never been my forte.

“I think once you are on your own, once you have these incredible talismans in your hands, recording what’s in your heart won’t be as onerous as it sounds,” said Julian.

I was about to say, *sure, whatever*, but I stopped myself. What did it matter? If I was going to do this crazy thing, I might as well do it the way Julian wanted.

Just then the cab pulled up in front of us. As I climbed in, my resolve was nicked by small points of fear. It had been a very long time since I had started something new, begun any sort of adventure. I shut the door and looked back at Julian as the taxi began to edge away from the sidewalk. Julian raised his hand to wave, and then called out to me.

“Jonathan,” he said, “be joyful. It’s not every day that you get to save a life!”

IT TOOK ALL MY NERVE to get in my car on Monday morning and head into the office. I had three weeks of vacation coming, and I would have to take them as soon as possible. But if the journey took longer than that, I could be in real trouble. All I could ask for was unpaid time off, and if the answer was no, I guess I was out of a job.

But honestly, I said to myself, as I hauled my reluctant carcass out of the car and forced myself through the front doors of the office, what did one foolish choice matter? After all, in the past, I had always made what I thought were great decisions at the time. And where had that got me? My job had become a constant source of stress and frustration. My wonderful wife was leaving me. Whatever savings I had built up through all my hard work were going to be decimated by divorce. And even the joy I felt with Adam was being eaten away by the guilt I had, seeing him only on the weekends—and being such a lousy dad even then. Could one crazy move like this trip really cause me any more pain than all my sensible decisions had brought me?

I spent an hour swiveling in my desk chair, wallowing in disappointment and pessimism. By the time I walked into my boss's office, I had accepted my whole predicament with fatalistic resignation. I had, in fact, almost forgotten how difficult this discussion was going to be.

I was quickly reminded, however, once the first few sentences had left my mouth.

I had settled into one of the strategically low office chairs that faced David's mammoth desk. He had hardly looked up from his computer as I walked in. But as I explained that I needed to take my vacation, and perhaps even more time to deal with a family emergency overseas, he raised his head. His expression

could only be described as “stunned.” As I launched into an explanation about my accumulated vacation days, he held up his hand.

“Let me get this straight,” David said. “You want twenty-one days off in a row, without notice?”

I couldn’t help myself. “Well, technically, Saturday and Sunday are called ‘the weekend,’ so no, not twenty-one straight days.”

“Jonathan, you know damn well that no one is allowed to take more than two weeks’ vacation in a row,” he shot back.

The conversation only got worse when I said that I didn’t know exactly when I would return.

“Of all the people in this organization,” David said, “you’re the last person I would have thought would pull a stunt like this.”

“I know,” I said. He was right.

“You know, Jonathan, you’re considered a rising star around here. And before today, if you asked me to name one person who was going to come out of this sale or merger or whatever it is looking like the golden boy, I would have said it was you. But you take off like this, at this time. . .”

He turned to look at the window. He was twirling a pen between his fingers, a frown stiffening his face.

I didn’t need to hear this.

“Look,” I said. “I talked to Nawang over the weekend. She has agreed to manage my projects during my absence. She knows what she’s doing. And she can always try me on my phone in an emergency. So—can I take my vacation, or do I have to resign?”

“Take the vacation,” David said tersely. “But I’ll tell you one thing. If we can do without you for a month, we can probably do without you forever.”

I got up from the chair and headed for the door. Before I crossed the threshold, I stopped and turned.

“David, would you have said the same thing if I’d made this request because something was going on with my wife or son?”

David continued to stare out the window. His expression was unreadable.

The walk back to my office was a long one. It was chilling to think that David might not care about helping me if my child was ill or in need. But why did I expect anything different? This place did things to people. I had seen that with Juan.

Juan. There wasn’t a day I didn’t think about my old boss, my old friend. As the months passed, I had found it increasingly difficult not to be distracted by his absence. I often found myself waking up in the night, unable to fall back to sleep, going over and over events in my mind, reliving my part in the whole disaster. But no matter how often I replayed it, I couldn’t put it behind me. Getting away from it all was probably the best thing I could do.

THE NEXT FEW DAYS were a maelstrom. I scrambled to resolve things at work. I let loose a tsunami of messages and phone calls. I blew around town, doing banking, picking up dry cleaning, attempting drive-by visits with my son. Even packing was chaotic—how did I know what to take if I didn’t even know all the places I would be heading to?

And then I was sitting on the red-eye flight. To Turkey. On my way to meet a friend of Julian’s. My phone was turned off; there was no paperwork in my overhead luggage. I had many quiet hours by myself with nothing I had to do, nothing I *could*

do. I was hoping to rest, but my mind was still racing. I took out a piece of paper from my jacket pocket. Julian had sent me a brief note with the airline tickets.

“Thank you,” it said, “for taking time away from your family and your work to take this voyage. I know you had a dozen reasons not to go, but one of the best gifts we can give ourselves is to get rid of our excuses. Rudyard Kipling once wrote, ‘We have forty million reasons for failure, but not a single excuse.’ And the dangerous thing about excuses is that if we recite them enough times, we actually come to believe they are true. This task I’ve asked you to do involves a lot of travel, but I hope that you can focus on the opportunities it provides rather than the inconveniences it may pose. Life itself is a journey after all, and what matters most is not what you are getting, but who you are becoming.”

Julian had also sent a small leather pouch on a long cord. I was supposed to wear it around my neck and put the talismans in it as I collected them. For now, it was in my jacket pocket. I fingered the soft leather absentmindedly.

Everyone around me on the plane was falling asleep. There was a gentle hum of the engines; the subtle rattle of the drinks cart disappearing to the back. I closed my eyes. I thought about Annisha and Adam. Somehow I knew, being so far away, I would miss them all the more. Then I thought about the other people missing from my life. My dad’s absence was a dull ache that was lodged in my chest. But it was pain with a certain gentleness, accompanied as it was by so many happy memories. Then there was Juan. Julian’s words came back to me. “It’s not every day you get to save a life.”

Wasn’t that the truth?