

Chapter 1

2010 – Phuket, Houston, boat to Koh Phangan

One of the great things about going on a silent retreat, Susanne thought, was the way it allowed you to observe everyone – brazenly and without embarrassment. Which is exactly what she spent all her time doing after realising on day one that meditation was not her thing. Sitting cross-legged on the floor wasn't a problem but the simple act of counting and breathing was just too much for her. She wasn't surprised, but Leonie had insisted that they emptied their minds completely before travelling to Koh Phangan for the Full Moon Party. At first, Susanne felt like bursting out laughing every time she caught Leonie's eye but she soon managed to control herself.

'Your thoughts are like clouds,' the Zen master explained. 'They are there but you don't have to do anything with them.' *No attachment*. During the retreat, however, Susanne found herself running after every carrot that was dangled before her. It was an exhausting, endless game. So much for an empty mind.

There were twelve women and three men in the group, all sitting on cushions in two semi-circles, one behind the other. Is this mainly a women's thing or is it just a coincidence? Susanne wondered. She suspected the others were all old hands at this and much better at surrendering themselves to the silence. She hadn't drawn three breaths before her mind began to wander and she became distracted by an itch on her bum. 'Why is my bum itchy?' she asked herself. 'It's never itchy when I'm sitting at home. I wonder if anyone else is feeling the same. Even enlightened souls must suffer from itchy bum sometimes. Or is this the whole idea? Jesus, how much longer do we have to sit here?'

She figured the three men in the group hadn't come here together. They weren't sitting next to each other and weren't communicating in a way that would suggest a deeper connection, like the one she had with Leonie. You can say a lot just by looking at someone, Susanne had discovered.

She had been stealing regular glances at the most handsome of the three men. Definitely Mediterranean; Italian, if she had to hazard a guess. He sometimes wore his long black curls, which just about reached his shoulders, in a ponytail, sometimes loose. Only Italians could pull off that look of studied nonchalance. At first sight it was like they had just thrown on any old thing that had been lying

around but upon closer inspection it was clear that nothing was left to chance. The faded T-shirt, the well-worn cap and the casual scarf were all part of a carefully cultivated image.

Italy was one of her parents' favourite holiday destinations and they had passed on their love of the place to her. As an only child, she always had the back seat to herself and she enjoyed being driven around the country. As she got older, Susanne discovered that she found Italian men more attractive than their Dutch counterparts and she also associated them with good weather, great food and a carefree life. It was true that Italian men could become very fired up about the tiniest of things but she liked a bit of spark. At least life was never dull that way.

Roman nose, black eyebrows, full lips almost hidden under a few weeks of beard and brown eyes, which were now closed. He was taller than most Italian men, slim and well-built. Her kind of guy. His right shoulder bore the bloodied look of a recently acquired tattoo. She couldn't make out what it was, something Chinese? He had a cloth wrapped around his waist and was sitting cross-legged and completely still. Did he not have an itch somewhere? Was he wearing anything under that cloth? Was it nice and airy or was it uncomfortable? Was Leonie having the same thoughts as well or was she sitting there counting like a good girl? Her Italian was already there when they had checked in and she wondered if he was leaving tomorrow, too.

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'Unbelievable!' said Johan, as he looked at his phone and shook his head in anger. The family was having breakfast together, which they always did on Sunday mornings when Johan wasn't away for the weekend. They all looked at him, surprised at this rare outburst of emotion. 'What does he think he's doing? The whole world is watching and there he is taking part in a regatta on the other side of the world only a few days after being grilled by Congress!'

'Who on earth are you taking about, dear?' asked Claire.

'That arrogant moron, Tony Hayward, the CEO of BP. Sitting there on his boat for all the world to see. Has he got no idea of the damage his company has caused?'

The effect it's had on the industry? He could at least pretend he's working day and night to tidy up their shit!

Olivier and Paul were all ears. It wasn't often they heard their father talking about his work, much less with such intensity. Lucas, on the other hand, was engrossed in attempting to slice open his croissant, a more important task at the age of seven than listening to his father talk about work. His brothers were eight and ten years older and they knew exactly what their dad was referring to. On 20 April, one of BP's oil rigs, Deepwater Horizon, had exploded in the Gulf of Mexico and then sunk a few days later. It was now June and they still hadn't been able to stop the oil from leaking. A few days ago, President Obama had used the occasion of his very first speech from the Oval Office to talk about the disaster. The children had watched it at school because it wasn't often that a president addressed the nation from his office. Olivier had found it difficult to listen to the heated discussion that followed afterwards in the classroom. At the International School in Houston, everyone knew his father was the director of Shell in the US and somehow or other he felt partly responsible. He understood why his father was so angry because the BP disaster had a direct impact on Shell and all the other oil companies. Olivier thought his classmates were being hypocritical. Had they forgotten how the oil they were now criticising powered the SUVs that dropped them off at school every day and fuelled the airplanes they boarded for their holiday breaks?

'Do you know this Hayward guy?' asked Olivier.

'Yeah. I've met him a few times. Nothing but a jumped-up engineer. A tech-head with a lack of empathy for others. Exactly the kind of CEO the public tends to hate. And now he's only confirmed their prejudices again. Look at him, two months on from the disaster, sitting there on his sailboat. Imagine, only a week after the explosion he complained to his team that he wanted his life back. The poor guy. As if he was the victim! How did he ever become CEO? He actually sold a third of his shares back in March. Good timing, seeing how they have since lost half their value. And that has only added fuel to the fire, of course.'

Johan knows he needs to be careful. He and Shell are not exactly saints, either. But he thinks BP have made a complete mess of things.

'What I mean to say, Olivier, is that when you are the head of a big company like that you have to take responsibility for what happens on your watch. I heard BP cancelled a test scheduled for 20 April, the day everything went haywire, that

would have shown whether the cement they used to seal the well would do the job or not. All for the sake of cutting back on costs. Most of the crew left that morning, leaving the rest to celebrate the fact that they hadn't had an accident on the rig in seven years. And what do you think happens? That same evening, eleven people are killed and seventeen are wounded in the explosion. The costs are now running into the billions. Hayward must share the responsibility for a culture that allows people to think they are doing the boss a favour by cutting back on safety. He is, at the very least, partly responsible for the damage caused, not only to the environment but also to the victims and BP itself. He'll be gone by Thanksgiving.'

In the meantime, Lucas' croissant had turned into a sticky lump of dough that resisted every effort to cut it in two. With the rest of the family busy digesting his outburst, Johan took the croissant from Lucas and set about saving the day. 'You use an ordinary knife to spread the jam but you need a sharp knife to slice it first. Look, this is how an expert does it.' Johan held the croissant theatrically out at arm's length and placed the blade of the knife against it with his right hand. But the combination of sticky dough, which was more resistant than he expected, his less than steady outstretched arms, his irritation regarding BP and the sharpness of the blade caused the knife to slice through the croissant too quickly and shoot into the palm of his hand. His cries of pain drowned out the howls of laughter from his family, who at first had found it all very funny. The knife, complete with sticky croissant, clattered onto the table. Johan grabbed his left hand with his right but the blood began oozing out through his fingers. Swearing loudly, he stood up, walked over to the sink and ran his hand under the tap. Blood and water flowed in equal measure and it was clear a simple plaster wouldn't suffice. 'Shit, I think I'm going to need stitches. I can't move my fingers. I must have cut a tendon. Jesus!' Claire, who by now had realised it was more than just a little cut but also not life-threatening, walked over to Johan, put her arm around his shoulders and looked at the blood pooling in the sink. 'C'mon. I'll take you to the hospital. No golf for us today.'

The incident quickly became a running gag in the family and the famous line 'Look, this is how an expert does it' was soon being used by one and all to comment on everything from a stupid mistake to an inspired manoeuvre. Never again would a croissant be sliced in the Dijkhuizen household without someone quoting that line

again. Johan also retained a physical reminder of his theatrical clumsiness because, as suspected, he had cut through a tendon and his middle finger had lost much of its movement. He was still able to play the piano but it was a good thing he didn't have to depend on it for his livelihood. The same applied to his golf game.

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I don't believe it ... there he is!

Leaving the retreat had all been done in silence, too, as everyone had checked out at different times. Leonie and Susanne soon found themselves standing outside. While they were hugging and getting used to the sound of their own voices again, Susanne was suddenly stung by a painful realisation. She had not been able to make any contact with her handsome Italian, which was what he had most certainly become in her head in the meantime. She had sat on her cushion trying to think of a good opening line and how he might react. Or maybe she should hand him a note. But now she found herself outside with nothing to show for it all apart from the looks they had exchanged. *So frustrating.* But also a bit of a relief because she had spared herself the possibility of an embarrassing conversation.

But there he was, leaning over the railing on the boat. Hair tied back, flip-flops, faded green Bermuda shorts and a pink sports shirt covered in logos. Pink? Giro d'Italia? That was surprising because she hadn't considered him to be the cycling type. It was a bit of a bummer, actually.

Non ci credo ... la bionda!

Pino was disappointed the day before when the bubbly blonde appeared to have vanished into thin air. He had enjoyed watching her struggle with the meditation, despite the fact that she had distracted him from his own efforts. He usually found it annoying when someone disturbed his moments of contemplation. But this time it was different. In fact, it actually helped him. More, in any case, than endlessly going over the events of the past year and trying to figure out where everything had gone wrong.

Maybe it was naïve of him, but he didn't want to be constantly on his guard and looking over his shoulder all the time. He also didn't want to believe that people were intrinsically bad. There was enough cynicism and scepticism in the world already. It was almost as if being cynical was a precondition for people who wanted to make the world a better place. At the same time, he understood the frustration and resentment felt by many. They would never be able to achieve their goals, at least not in a single lifetime. But Pino didn't want to become bitter. He wanted to fight for a better world while still enjoying everything life had to offer. No easy task.

He had to take a break and these few weeks in Thailand were exactly what he needed. The combination of silence and partying should signal a fresh start. But the five days at the retreat had been more strenuous than expected and it would probably have been better if he had done things the other way around: first Koh Phangan and then meditation. In the end, *la bionda* had helped him get through it, without her even knowing. Thinking about her had been so much more enjoyable than thinking about Alessandro.

He still didn't understand how he could have been so mistaken. Alessandro had appeared to be the winning lottery ticket, literally. Finally they would have the means to make people in Italy and beyond more aware of the damage they were doing to the environment and to show them how things could be done better. But from the very beginning there had been small things that irritated him, mostly concerning Alessandro's failure to keep his promises, but Pino had always been able to rationalise everything. Nobody is perfect and if Alessandro was able to help them move forward, they would just have to accept his imperfections. Giulia, however, had seen right through him. In the end it turned out he had been lying to them all the time and instead of bringing in the promised funds he had used their scarce resources for his own objectives. To make matters worse, he had done irreparable damage to their carefully built network. But instead of listening to Giulia and to his own gut feeling, which had been sending him increasingly urgent signals, Pino had begun to argue more frequently with her. That was what he regretted the most.

Pino wasn't too bothered about having to start all over again and that the whole affair would only confirm many people's perception of them as nothing but a bunch of misguided idealists. Setbacks were all part of the game. But the fact that

he had treated Giulia so badly, especially when she had been right about Alessandro all along, weighed heavily upon him. And allowing himself to be led up the garden path so easily by the prospect of more money made it even more painful. Giulia's I-told-you-so speech continued to ring in his ears and it cut him to the bone. It was not so much the opportunity they had squandered as the fact that they no longer respected each other's opinion that left such a bitter aftertaste. How were they supposed to save the world if they couldn't even manage their own affairs? They had learned an expensive and painful lesson and Pino had promised himself never to allow himself to be blinded like that again.

This promise was quickly forgotten, however, when *la bionda's* look of surprise at seeing him again was quickly followed by a seductive smile. The twinkle in her blue eyes, her full lips – Pino was speechless for a moment. She looked even more attractive now. Freshly showered, her blonde locks falling to her shoulders and a short white top that accentuated her small breasts. The piercing in her bellybutton, the firm butt in her frayed denim shorts and the lean legs – they didn't make women like this in Italy, and certainly not in Sicily.

So what was he waiting for? It was now or never.

'Hi, I'm Pino and, as you can hear, I also have a voice. And I'm curious to hear yours, too.'

They were standing at the railing, the wind playing with their hair. Susanne started laughing. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Leonie turn around to look. She was just as surprised to see the man Susanne had spent the whole night talking about standing there before her.

'Hi, I'm Susanne.'

'I don't want this to sound tacky, but I have the feeling I already know pretty well you and I'd like to find out if all my ideas and fantasies about you are true.'

Susanne was pleasantly surprised. Did he belong to that very select group of Italians who could speak good English?

'Fantasies? I thought the whole idea had been to think of nothing. To empty your mind and just count your breaths?'

'Ha-ha. Yeah, I suppose so, but I couldn't help myself.'

'Really? I thought you were tougher than that. You seemed so experienced.'

'Appearances can be deceiving. You never really know what's going on inside another person's head. And if you can't even control what goes on in your own mind, there's not much chance of you being able to read someone else's, is there? What else went through your mind?'

'I was just thinking, you don't strike me as the cycling type.'

'Cycling? Why?'

'Well, an Italian wearing *la maglia rosa*. Has to be a cyclist.'

'Ha-ha! Yeah, I'm Italian. Well spotted. And you're right, I'm not the cycling type. This is the jersey of The Eagles in Palermo, my favourite football team. They always play in pink and black. I was born in Palermo and have been a *tifoso* all my life. So I'm more the footballing type, like plenty of Italians. So where are you from? Norway? Some other part of Scandinavia?'

'So blonde means Scandinavian? There's plenty of blondes where I come from, too, you know. I'm from the Netherlands. From Haarlem to be exact. Near Amsterdam, which is where I live these days.'

'You're Dutch! Of course! I should have known, but don't ask me why. So, what did you make of the retreat?'

'It was my friend's idea. That's her over there,' Susanne said, pointing at Leonie. 'I actually quite enjoyed not being allowed to talk, but I can't say the same for the sitting around and counting. What I need right now is a party!'

Present Day

That was easier than expected, thank God. Jesus, they had all been very tense. But he was so drunk Pino could have done it on his own. He let them take him like a defenceless little lamb and his friends hadn't seen a thing. They probably thought he had gone to take a leak.

On the monitors, Pino could see that Nemo – the codename they had given him – was just waking up and looking around in surprise. Suddenly it dawned on Pino: *alea iacta est*. There was no going back now. A shiver ran down his spine. He thought of Susanne and Pipi and Luna. What would they think of him? Would they see him as a hero, a coward, an ideological nutcase? Pino knew that their game plan could all go very wrong but he had fought that battle with himself already. And now, seeing Nemo on the screen, he knew there was no more room for doubt. He was the leader and he must not show any weakness. Everyone was in agreement that although the means were extreme, so was the goal. At some point you needed people who were crazy enough to break the status quo. Rational behaviour rarely ever led to progress. Pino hoped that Susanne would be able to forgive him someday or, better still, be proud of him. Over the past year he had often wanted to reveal his plans to her, but each time he had realised that his reasons for doing so were selfish. He didn't want to burden her with the dilemma of choosing between him and the future of the world. This sacrifice was his alone to make and he sincerely hoped that everything would turn out for the best in the end.