

Finding my way

By Ian Pugh



The Vanguard Series

Finding my way

A choose-your-own-path story



Preface

'Destiny is not a matter of chance; it is a matter of choice. It is not a thing to be waited for, it is a thing to be achieved.'

William Jennings Bryan

Life presents us with hundreds of choices every day. But some choices should never have to be made. Through this story, you will discover how poverty and the lack of opportunity can force individuals to make decisions that are difficult – even unimaginable – just to survive. Through this story, you will also experience the potentially devastating results that can follow. By sharing this book and discussing this subject, you can help others in your community learn about the dangers of unsafe migration and trafficking, and inspire them to take action and make a difference for others in our world.

In this story, you will be asked to take on the role of a female character who lives in East Asia. The challenges you face are a representation of the experiences that many other youth face in this region. By stepping into this character's life, you will see for yourself how even the small choices you make can affect the direction your life takes.

Be aware that some of the scenarios do not have happy endings and you may come out of the experience feeling somewhat frustrated. Make sure you take time to reflect on those feelings by reading through the debrief questions at the end of the story.

This book is based on true case stories. It is intended for youth aged 15 and older and may not be appropriate for young children.

The Vanguard series is designed to include the innovative resources and tools to combat trafficking and unsafe migration developed by the World Vision End Trafficking in Persons Programme (ETIP). This interactive book resource was designed within the Vanguard series to give youth the ability to apply the lessons they learned in the *Smart Navigator* and *Voice Up for Change* toolkits.

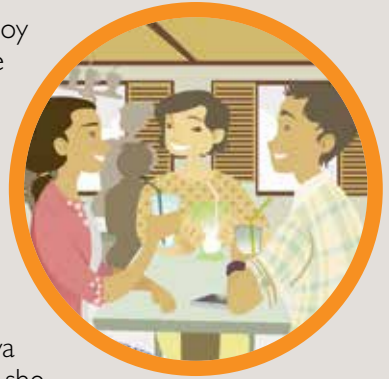
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A life-changing decision

You're sitting opposite the best-looking boy on the planet and, believe it or not, he actually seems interested in what you're saying.

You had arranged to meet your best friend, Soriya, for a milkshake and catch-up chat like you always do. Then, to your amazement, she arrives with this good-looking guy whom she casually introduces as 'my cousin Narin, from the big city'. Soriya has mentioned him before but only that she had this 16-year-old cousin who had gone across the border to get work. Sixteen – that's only a year older than you are, and yet, with his cool clothes, his fancy phone and his cute hairstyle, he could be from another world!



Now you're busy talking about your problems at home (only because Soriya asked) and you're convinced Narin is about to excuse himself and leave (or at least start texting his friends) but he's still listening.

'We always got money from the fish my dad caught and sold at the market,' you are explaining. 'But when my dad got sick he couldn't fix the nets any more and he was often too weak to go out fishing. My mom, my sister and I often tried to catch something, but the nets were getting so full of holes ... Eventually my dad borrowed some money to fix the nets, but he couldn't pay it back in time. The man he borrowed from (my little sister calls him "Mr. Snakey") is now charging so much interest that ... I don't know how we're ever going to pay it back. And my dad is just so angry all the time. I can't bear to be at home. I hate it when he shouts at my mom and us. As the eldest child I think I'm going to have to leave school and get a job.'



Soriya looks shocked, like she can't believe what she's hearing.

'You're not serious?' she gasps. 'You're doing so well in school! You can't just give up on all that!'

'Well, what am I supposed to do?' you shout. Your voice is cracking and you can feel the tears starting to well up. *You can't believe you're about to start crying in front of this guy!* You're also feeling bad for shouting at Soriya. You take her hand.

'Sorry my Sori,' you say, trying to force a smile.

But she is still shaking her head.

'I hope you're joking about going', she says, and yet she can see in your eyes that you're not joking at all.

Then Narin speaks for the first time since he sat down.

'If you do decide to cross the border, give me a call,' he says.

Soriya is suddenly eyeing her cousin. 'Hey, don't you start encouraging her!'

Narin smiles sheepishly. 'I'm just saying ... it's good to know someone when you arrive in the big city.'

You are just about to thank him when Soriya leaps to her feet. It's as if she wants to escape this whole conversation and pretend it never happened.

'Come on,' she says. 'Let's go and have some fun!'



You end up at a friend's house, dancing to some of your favourite songs and having a good laugh. At first you dance mainly with Soriya but then she manages to coax Narin onto the dance floor as well. You pretend not to notice that Narin is spending a lot of time watching you. It's the best evening you've had for as long as you can remember, and you don't want it to end, even though you know how angry your dad is going to be when you get home.

Between songs you take a rest and accept an offer of water from Narin.

'When are you going back?' you ask him.

'Tomorrow,' he replies, pulling an unhappy face. 'If you ever make it to the big city you should give me a shout. Here's my number.'

You take his number and put it in your phone. As much as you don't want to, you know you have to go home. You give Soriya a hug and tell her you'll see her the next day.

You then say 'Bye!' to Narin and you're feeling a bit awkward until he leans over and whispers, 'Hope to see you again.'



You run all the way home and open the front door as quietly as you can. You are relieved to see that your dad has fallen asleep in his chair. You creep past him, taking care not to kick over any of the empty beer bottles littered around his chair. For a moment you pause and take a look at your dad's face. There's no sign of the usual anger. This is how you remember him. If only he could always be like this.

That night you have a dream. You are on the dance floor with Soriya and Narin but, for some reason, Narin is keeping his back to you. You tap him on the shoulder and when he turns around you are shocked to see that it is actually Mr. Snakey, the loan shark. You stumble backwards, but Mr. Snakey follows you, and now he is shouting loudly, wanting to know where his money is!

When you wake up you realise it is your dad's angry voice that you are hearing. He has made it back to his bedroom and is now shouting at your mother about something. You pull the blanket over your head and block your ears.



The next day you're on your way to Soriya's house when a notice on the village noticeboard catches your eye.

LOOKING FOR A JOB?

There's a phone number for someone named 'Devi'. Is this some kind of sign? Is this the answer you've been looking for? School is starting the following week and you know you are going to have to decide what to do very soon. It's definitely going to be one of the biggest decisions of your life. You jot down the number and continue on your way.

When you get to Soriya's house you tell her about the notice you've seen and she is immediately suspicious.

'You have to be very careful who you deal with,' she warns. 'Or you'll get yourself into all sorts of trouble.'

Lying on her bed in her neat little bedroom, you can't help smiling at your friend. She has to be one of the most sensible, well-organised people you know – which is just as well because sometimes your own organisational skills could use a little help! She is now sitting with a pen and paper, jotting down all the things a person would have to consider if he or she were serious about getting work across the border.

'Obviously you'd need to organise a job before you go,' she says, writing down the word 'JOB' in large, bold letters. 'You'd do that through a recruitment centre. Then you'd need to get a passport, and a working visa; you would definitely have to save some money for food and accommodation and all that kind of thing...'

'There's so much to do!' you groan. You honestly haven't thought all this through yet. 'It sounds like it'll take ages to organise.'

'Of course it will!' Soriya says. 'What do you expect? Don't you realise what a big deal this is?'

You can't help feeling irritated by this. 'Uh, yes, Soriya – it is my life we're talking about here! I get it!'

'Sorry,' she replies. 'I just don't want you to go.'

You smile and squeeze her hand. 'How lucky am I to have a friend like you?'

'Luckier than you'll ever know!' she replies with a smile. Then she puts the pen and paper aside and says, 'Okay, enough about that. Time to tell me what's really on your mind – let's talk about Narin.'

You feel yourself blushing, and you cover up your face.

This makes Soriya squeal. 'I knew it! I could tell something was going on!'

You spend the next hour talking about Narin and finding out as much as possible about him. Soriya doesn't know him that well, but she thinks he has quite a good job in the big city.

'If you go there, will you look him up?' she asks, and then adds with a smile, 'And don't even try to say you won't!'

You laugh but now Soriya is looking serious again.

'Promise me one thing – don't you just go there because Narin is there.'

'That doesn't even come into it,' you say. 'I wouldn't even be thinking about this if things weren't so bad at home.'

'You realise you do have another option, don't you?'


'Really? Like what?'

'Like not going at all. Like staying here with me. I'll help you sort things out. We can earn some extra money together.'

This almost makes you cry. 'You know what? I don't deserve a friend like you.'

'You've got that right!' Soriya says with a laugh.



On your way home you receive a text message  from Narin.

Narin: Just checking you gave me your real number 😊

You reply: Who is this?

Then you quickly send another saying:
Only joking! 😊 Yes, it's me. Have you left yet?

Narin: Yes – on bus now.
Why did I have to meet you on my last night? 😞

You: Bet you say that to all the girls 😊😊😊!!!

Narin: Noooooooooooo!!

You: 😊

Narin: Hope to see you there one day

You: Thanks! Not sure what I'm going to do

Narin: Stay in touch OK?

You: 😊



A few hours later, you find yourself sitting in a small café opposite Devi, the man who had posted the notice on the noticeboard.

It had happened so quickly that you're still not entirely sure what you're doing there. You had decided to give him a call and he had come straight out with, 'So what are you doing now? Want to meet for a chat?'

At that moment you couldn't think of any reasons why not, so you agreed to meet, and now here you are.

It's easy to like Devi. He asks about your family and seems genuinely sorry to hear about the situation your dad is in. The very mention of the loan shark is enough to make him shake his head and mutter as though he knows exactly where this story is heading. You tell him you haven't decided what to do yet but that the pressure is growing at home. Sooner rather than later, money is going to have to come from somewhere.

'Most unfortunate,' is all Devi says at first. 'I certainly sympathise with your family. These sorts of things can happen to anyone. If there is any way that I can be of assistance ... perhaps helping you get a job across the border, or anything like that, then please just ask.'

'Thank you, I appreciate that,' you say, 'but I don't even have a passport yet, so I've still got a lot to organise.'

This makes Devi smile.

'I can help with that as well,' he says. 'We can sort out a passport in a couple of days. It's all possible. By this time next week you could be working in the city.'

You can't help but look surprised by this. 'Really?'

'Really,' he nods, flashing his big smile again. 'If you need things to move fast, give me a shout and I'll see what I can do.'



Walking away from the café, you're still feeling confused about everything but at least there is some comfort in the knowledge that work can be organised quickly if things get desperate.

You decide to go home via the market to see if your mother and sister are still there. Your mum had caught a few fish this morning and you know she was going to try and sell them at the market. When you get there she is just packing up her stall.

'Any luck?' you ask.

Your mum shrugs and does her best to smile. She looks tired. It's been a long day for her, especially as she has had to look after your little sister as well.

On the way home you tell her that you are seriously thinking about leaving school and getting a job. She stops and looks at you.

'And what sort of a job do you hope to get if you don't finish school?' she asks.

'I know, Mum, I know,' you reply. This is a conversation you've had before. You feel like shouting: '*Well, something has to be done! We can't go on like this!*' But you can tell that this is not the right time, so instead, you turn to your sister.

'Hey Sita, race you to the river?'

As you take off after your sister, you glance back at your mum.

'See you at home!' you shout.

She waves and gives you a smile. It's so good to see that smile.





Approaching your house later, Sita is in the middle of a very complicated story involving a princess and a tiger (who is actually a scary ogre but has a good heart really) when you both hear something that stops you dead in your tracks. It's the sound of raised voices coming from inside the house. It's your parents arguing and it's sounding really bad.

You burst in through the front door and find your parents in the middle of a scuffle. You can tell immediately what is happening. Your father is trying to pry your mother's purse out of her hand. He's after the proceeds from the market, but your mother is determined not to let him have it.

'No!' she shouts. 'This is for food! And the debt! Not beer!'

But your father, who looks like he has already had a few beers, is not giving up.

'Give it!' he roars, his face now purple with rage.

You leap onto his back and try to pull him away. Thankfully, the illness has made him weak. He staggers around a bit under your weight and

then slumps down on the couch. He continues to shout and curse from the couch, but then the sight of Sita, standing by the door with tears streaming down her face, makes him stop abruptly. He puts a hand out to her and asks her to come to him. But she is frightened and runs to your mother instead. The expression on your father's face at that moment is one you'll never forget. He lowers his head and starts to sob. You sit down beside him and take his hand. In that instant, you know the time has come to do something.

It's only much later that you make a decision. You have gone over all the options again and again in your mind, and now, with your father asleep beside you and your mother and sister tucked up in bed, you finally decide what you're going to do.



**If you decide to ask
Devi for help the next
day, go to page 12.**

12



**If you decide to follow
Soriya's advice and
start to get organised,
go to page 25.**

25

A long way from home



The next morning you phone Devi.

'Things are getting worse at home,' you tell him. 'I think I'm going to have to do something.'

He says he understands and asks if you have thought about the type of work you would like to do across the border. You tell him you haven't really thought about it much but that you don't really have any skills because you're still at school.

'What about looking after small kids?' he asks. 'And cleaning a house, that sort of thing?'

You tell him that is something you can do; in fact you've been doing it your whole life – looking after your little sister and helping your mum with the housework.

'Excellent!' Devi says. 'Well, let me make a few phone calls and I'll get back to you as soon as I can.'

You thank him and are just about to hang up when you hear his voice again.

'Oh, one thing I do need to ask. Do you have any money at all? Perhaps something to cover the transport cost to the big city?'

You're embarrassed to tell him how much you have. It's a tiny amount which you've tucked away in case of emergencies, but you know it's not really going to cover much at all.

When Devi hears how much you have, he says, 'Alright, well, that's something, but remember there is a boat trip and a long bus ride involved. I think what we'll have to do is get your new employer to pay the transport cost and then you'll have to work off that amount.'

It sounds like the only way you're ever going to afford the trip to the city. You thank Devi again and hang up.

Now for the big challenge – how are you going to tell your mother and Soriya about the decision you've made?



You seriously consider not telling your mother at all. You think it might be a lot easier to just slip away and let her know when you're already there. But then you think about how truly devastating it would be for your whole family if you just disappeared. So you end up telling your mother and, as expected, she reacts really badly to the news. She tries her best to change your mind, insisting there must be another way.

'What other way, Mum?' you ask. 'Tell me and I won't go!'

'What about Auntie Bopha?' she offers. But even as she says it, you can see she doesn't believe this is the answer. No one has had the heart to tell good-hearted Bopha how large the family debt actually is. Unfortunately, her offers of help amount to no more than drops in the ocean.

Your mother continues to try to change your mind, even suggesting that your father may be able to go back to work soon.

'Really, Mum?' you say, shaking your head. 'He's getting worse, not better.'

It's hard watching what your mother is going through. She appears so helpless. She had always had such high hopes for you at school, and had even spoken about you going to university, although that was before things started to go bad.

'Look, Mum,' you say, trying to offer some comfort. 'I'll give it a try and if it doesn't work out, I'll come home and ... we can try something else.'

She hugs you. She doesn't want to accept it but she knows she has to.



The reaction from Soriya is even worse. You're out walking near her uncle's farm when you decide to tell her. You've been putting it off because you know how she's going to react. But now Devi has called to say that your passport is ready and that he is hoping to get you on a boat the very next day. You know this is the time to say something, but you don't know how to say it.

Eventually you just blurt it out. 'I've decided to go.'

Soriya stops and looks at you. It takes a few moments for her to realise what you're saying. She shakes her head and is about to reply, but then she turns and runs off down the path instead. You shout after her, but she keeps on running.

By the time you find her, she's inside her uncle's milking shed, sitting on a low stool, milking one of the cows. She doesn't want you to see, but she's wiping away tears as she pulls on the cow's teats.

Later, you walk home, arm in arm. Eventually it's Soriya who breaks the silence.

'So when you're a rich, trendy city girl, married to Narin...'

You burst out laughing and push her away playfully.

'...will you still remember me? Or will it be: "Excuse me, what was your name again? Oh yes, Soriya, that's right. Still milking those cows are you?"'

It breaks the ice and you continue to tease each other all the way home. But, underneath it all, you feel the horrible sadness. It's as if you both know that nothing will be the same again.



Saying goodbye to your family the next day is much harder than you ever thought it would be. You emerge from your room with your bags and find your mother fussing over an old mobile phone. She's borrowed it from Bopha so that, as she puts it: 'I can stay in touch with you every day,' but now she's worrying that she'll press the wrong buttons and forget to keep it charged. You tell her not to worry, that she'll soon get used to it. But she keeps on fussing and you realise she's just using the phone as a distraction. By focusing on something else, she doesn't have to think about you walking out the door.

Eventually, you hold her by the shoulders and say, 'Don't worry, Mum. It'll be okay.' You hug for a long time and when you let go, she quickly goes off, saying she must find the phone charger.

Your father is sitting outside, under a tree, working on his fishing nets. As you walk over, he glances up briefly and then goes back to his nets.

'I'm going now, Dad,' you say.

He nods and mumbles something, but keeps working.

As you walk away, he calls out your name. You stop and look back. You can see he is blinking back the tears but doesn't know what to say.

'Bye, Dad,' you say, and he nods his head.

Sita walks with you to the gate.

'Look after everyone, okay?' you tell her.

'I will,' she says. 'When are you coming back?'

'As soon as I've earned a bit of money I'll come back for a visit, okay?'

'Promise?'

'Promise.'

You give her a hug and a kiss by the gate.

When you glance back at the house you see your mother is watching from the front door. She gives you a final wave and then goes inside.



Soriya is waiting for you at the corner of the road.

'How was it?' she asks.

'Terrible,' you reply.

'We're not going to cry, okay?' she says. 'There's no reason because you'll be back home in a month. You'll have realised by then what a terrible idea this is!'

You smile through misty eyes. 'You're probably right,' you say.

You link arms and start off down the road towards the river.



Devi is waiting for you by the boat. He takes your bags and passes them to the boat skipper. There are five other passengers already sitting in the boat, surrounded by luggage.

'You'll be leaving as soon as it gets dark,' says Devi.

'Aren't you taking her to the city?' Soriya asks.

'No, no,' Devi replies with a smile. 'My colleague will be collecting her on the other side and taking her all the way.' Then he notices Soriya's concerned expression and adds, 'Don't worry, she'll be in good hands.'

'She better be,' says Soriya.

Now Devi hands you the passport he has organised for you. You try and take a closer look at it, but he is urging you to put it away somewhere safe so you tuck it quickly into your pocket.





Half an hour later, you are on the boat, motoring out into the darkness. It's difficult to look back because you are squashed between a man and another young girl. You crane your neck around and manage to catch a glimpse of Soriya, still waving from the shore. Behind her, you can just make out the figure of Devi disappearing into the gloom.

As you face the front, you are struck by a strange combination of thoughts and feelings: *I am now alone. This is it – the beginning of the new chapter. It's up to me now. I feel scared, but I'm also excited! I'm going to make this work – for me and my family. I have to!*



You are met on the other side by a young man who doesn't introduce himself. He leads you and two other girls from the boat to a small minivan and signals that you should all climb into the back. He then goes around and hops into the driver's seat.

As you set off, one of the other girls tries to ask him how long the journey will be. He doesn't seem to understand the question and he holds up a hand as if to discourage any further conversation.



The sun is just starting to rise as you enter the city. You have never seen this many cars before in your entire life. It's been a long, uncomfortable journey and you've hardly slept at all. You dream of stretching your legs and taking a shower. The man at the wheel is also looking tired and agitated. He curses the other drivers and hoots his horn at every opportunity.

Eventually, you pull up in front of a house. The front door is open and two young children wearing school uniforms are standing in the doorway. A serious-looking man in a suit shepherds them out onto the pavement and then stops when he sees the minivan. The driver is already running around to greet him. The two men shake hands and have a brief conversation before the driver opens up the van door and signals that you should all get out.

Meanwhile, the man in the suit calls inside and a woman (who you presume is his wife) appears in the doorway with a baby on her hip. She doesn't seem too pleased when he asks her to come outside.

What follows next is probably the most bizarre thing that's ever happened to you. The driver tells you and the other girls to line up on the pavement. Then the husband and wife come over and take a close look at each of you in turn. As they stare, they make comments to each other. They are like a couple in a shop, deciding what to buy for dinner. Eventually, the man stops in front of you and asks you something in his language which you don't understand. Then he starts to speak a few basic words in your own language. It's hard to follow exactly what he's trying to say, but you think he's asking your age and whether you've had experience with young children and housework. You tell him you have had experience and then you hold up your fingers to show your age. The man seems satisfied by this. He nods and then takes the driver to one side to discuss things further.

The wife is still not looking very happy. She says something to you which you don't understand. Then she gestures impatiently towards the minivan and you realise she is telling you to get your suitcase.

As you are unloading your suitcase, you see the husband handing money over to the driver. Only now does it dawn on you that you've just had a job interview and it seems like you got the job!

But it's all happening too fast and you've got a lot of questions you want to ask. *What is my salary? How much leave will I get? Where will I stay? Where exactly am I?* You indicate to the men that you would like to speak with them, but they are still busy with their discussion. And now the wife is gesturing to you from the front door, indicating that you should hurry up and come inside. You have no choice. You follow her into the house.

Inside, you try to speak to her, but she scowls and shakes her head impatiently, making it clear that she doesn't understand. Then she does something that seems fairly ordinary at the time, but will grow hugely in significance over the coming weeks and months.

She locks the front door and places the key in her pocket.



The days that follow are a blur of nappy changing, floor scrubbing, food preparation and endless laundry. It continues from early morning till late at night. You have given up trying to communicate with the wife because every time you say anything she just walks away, shaking her head. It's also difficult to speak to the husband when his wife is around because as soon as she sees you hovering nearby she starts to mutter and complain. It takes a few days, but you eventually manage to get the husband on his own and ask about your pay. The amount he first mentions for your monthly salary sounds reasonable but then he talks vaguely about some deductions for travels costs, accommodation and food. You can't imagine they will deduct much for accommodation and food, especially considering you are sleeping on a narrow, hard bed in a space beside the laundry and being fed leftovers from their meals.



By the time a few more weeks have passed you are starting to really worry about a number of things. The first issue is the amount of work you are being made to do, with almost no rest time at all. The wife is constantly lining up new tasks for you and always nagging you to get started on them. One evening, while the husband and wife are watching TV, you ask about having a day off. When the husband translates your request to the wife she launches into one of her high-pitched tirades and then turns up the TV. The husband says something about 'next week' before waving you away.

The next thing that is causing you a lot of concern is the fact that there is no way out of the house. The front and back doors are always locked and all of the windows have burglar bars on them. The only time you see the sky is when you are hanging up the washing in the small courtyard. As each day passes it feels more and more like a prison.

And then there is the problem with your phone. Your phone doesn't work in this country because you need to buy a local SIM card. It was the first thing you had planned to buy on arrival, but you literally haven't been allowed outside the house, never mind near a shop. You have tried asking the husband to buy you a card (and even offered the small amount of money you have), but he always forgets or has some other excuse.

You want to contact Soriya and your mum more than anything. You had promised to send Soriya a text message every single day, and there is so much you want to tell her! You keep remembering her words: 'Don't forget about me when you're in the big city.' You cannot even imagine what she must be thinking!

And your poor mum – you know she'll be keeping the phone close to her at all times, making sure it's charged. She's probably wondering if there's something wrong with the phone. You can imagine Sita coming home from school every day and asking your mum if she's heard from you yet.

You lie in bed at night, tears of frustration rolling down your cheeks. Is this your new life? Is this how things are always going to be? The only thing that makes you feel better is the thought of the money you'll be receiving soon. You picture your mum's face when she receives

it. Hopefully she'll take it straight to Mr. Snakey, explaining that these will now be regular monthly payments, so he doesn't have to visit the house anymore. Without those visits, your dad won't fly into his awful rages; he'll drink less; the house will become a much calmer place, a place filled with Sita's laughter again.

As you drift off to sleep, you can see your dad playing his guitar again, and Sita doing her crazy dance, the one that always used to make your dad laugh.



Finally, the day arrives when you've been working there for exactly a month. The husband leaves for work in the morning without mentioning your money, so you wait all day for him to come home. But that evening he still doesn't say anything. He probably needs reminding. When you serve the dinner you mention that a month has passed since you started work. At first he looks at you blankly, but then he mumbles something about Friday. You want to say more but the wife is glaring at you, and she now tells you to 'get out!' These are the first words you've started to understand in her language, along with 'hurry up' and 'serve the food'. Walking back to the kitchen, you take a few deep breaths and tell yourself that Friday is only a few days away.

When Friday arrives you mention 'pay' to the husband as he leaves for work. He snaps at you that he hasn't forgotten. When he gets home, you have to remind him again. Then you hear him having a heated discussion with his wife. A little later, he comes through to the kitchen, holding a scrap of paper with some figures scribbled on it. He points at the top figure and says, 'Your pay,' then underneath he points at other figures which he says are expenses for 'travel, accommodation, food.' At the bottom he has written another figure and circled it. You stare at the figure for a few moments and then it dawns on you that this is the amount you are going to receive. It's a tiny amount – not even enough to send home! You stare at the husband in disbelief as he places this amount on the kitchen table and turns to go.

'No, please,' you say, pulling on his sleeve to stop him from leaving. 'This is not enough... for all the work I've done! No, please, *please!*'



It's as if the wife has been expecting this reaction because she now comes flying into the kitchen. She taps the piece of paper vigorously and starts to sound off in her painfully shrill tones. You don't know what she's saying but now the husband starts to translate – 'bus very expensive', 'accommodation in city very, very expensive!' 'You eat our food! Very good food!'

It's impossible for you to get a word in while she continues to shout in your face. You can feel your anger building like steam in a pressure-cooker.

'No! It's too little!' you scream.

A sharp sting across your cheek makes you flinch and clutch your face. You've just been slapped, and the wife's hand is raised to strike again. This time the husband stops her and escorts her from the kitchen. She is still screeching at you as she leaves.

You sink down onto a chair, your cheek still burning, and stare at the paltry sum of money on the table.

A few moments later, the husband returns and starts to shout angrily at you for upsetting his wife. You can see his lips moving but you're not listening to the words.

You are now thinking that you have to get out of this house.



You've made the decision that you're going to escape from this place – the question now is *how* you are going to do it. It definitely won't be easy but there must be a way. You just have to make sure the husband and wife never suspect what you're planning.

As far as you can tell, you have two possible options. Both have their dangers and could easily go very wrong.

The first involves the wife's phone. Your phone is not working in this country, but the thought has crossed your mind that you could try to use her phone. She sometimes leaves it charging in the kitchen when she goes for a nap or is busy in another room. Perhaps this is how you can contact Soriya or your mother. At least then they would know you are safe. But what could they do to help? You wouldn't be able to tell them where exactly you are in the city. You've been checking all the addresses on the envelopes that arrive in the mail, but they are always in a different language, so you still don't know your exact location. But perhaps they'd be able to contact Devi and he would surely be able to help them find you?

The other possibility involves a very small window you've spotted up in the attic. Once when you were sent up there with some boxes, you noticed the tiny window. It would be a real squeeze getting through it, and you would then be on the roof, but it might be your only chance of getting out. Of course, even if you did manage to get out, you would then be stranded in the middle of a big city, a long, long way from home, with very little money. But at least if you had contact with other people you might find someone willing to help you.



The next day the husband tries to make you feel better by telling you there will be more money at the end of the next month. He also advises you not to walk around with an unhappy face as he says this will only make his wife more annoyed.

Then he does something which makes you freeze on the spot. *He suddenly gives you a hug!* You count the seconds until he lets you go. He is now smiling and he waits for you to nod in agreement. You force a smile but, inside, you are feeling physically ill. You know you have to make your move as soon as possible. Your only dilemma now is which option you should go for: the wife's phone or the upstairs window.



If you decide to try to use the wife's phone, go to page 33.

33



If you decide to try the window in the attic, go to page 40.

40

Milk, honey, money



You're walking to school with Soriya. You know you have to tell her about your decision, but you're not sure how to say it.

'Things are getting worse at home,' you say. 'Last night was really bad ... I'm going to have to do something.'

'Like what?' Soriya asks. She glances anxiously at you, like she's expecting what's coming next. You don't reply, but she can tell by the look on your face what you've decided. She walks on ahead in silence.

'It's not what I want to do!' you shout after her.

But Soriya keeps walking.

'What choice do I have?' you mutter to yourself.



Later, during break-time at school, you find Soriya sitting on a bench by herself, eating her lunch.

'Can I sit here?' you ask.

'You don't need my permission,' she replies.

You take a seat and, for a long time, you both eat in silence.

'You know something?' you say eventually. 'I'm going to need your help.'

Soriya looks at you incredulously and shakes her head. 'Are you serious? I don't want you to go, remember? Why on earth would I help you?'

'Because you're my best friend – and I'm yours. And you love me and I love you. And you want me to do this the right way, because if I do it the wrong way and something bad happens, then you're never going to forgive yourself – and neither am I.'

You're hoping this will get a smile out of her and eventually you do see that she is starting to soften.

'You have such a cheek, you know that?' she says.

'Hey, it's not like I'll be going forever,' you say. 'Just long enough to earn some money – then I'll be back before you know it.'

'You're never going to come back.'

'Of course I am!'

'So what do you need my help with anyway?'

'Uh... everything? I need to get a passport. I need to organise a job. I need to have some money for travel and accommodation and that sort of thing.'

Soriya looks at you and shakes her head. 'How are you ever going to manage without me?'

'I don't know. You want to come too?' you ask with a smile.

'No!'

'Just checking!' Now you get more serious. 'I think the first thing I'd better concentrate on is earning some money. I can't ask my mother for anything. Got any ideas?'

'No,' replies Soriya. 'If I did I'd already be rich. Then I would have paid off your family's debt and you wouldn't have to go anywhere.'

You grab hold of your friend's hand. 'Did anyone ever tell you that you are seriously awesome?'

'Of course – I hear it all the time! But don't think flattery is going to work here!'

You're happy to see that she is smiling again.



A few days later, you're waiting at the corner for Soriya when you see her coming down the road. She looks excited, like she has something to tell you.

'What's going on?' you ask.

'Sorry, don't know what you mean,' she replies, trying to play it cool.

'Come on!' you say. 'I can see something's going on.'

'Well, I may have some news,' she taunts.

'Tell me!' you shout.

Only when she's sitting comfortably on the wall beside you, does she start to tell her story.

'So... I'm at my uncle's place this morning, helping milk the cows like always – and I just happen to mention that we are trying to think of ways to make some money. Well, I can see straight away that this gets the attention of both my uncle and aunt. Next thing, they sit me down and tell me they've had an idea which they've been meaning to talk to me about. Apparently, for a while now, they have been producing more milk every day than they can sell. So...'

Soriya pauses for effect.

You can't stand the suspense! 'So? ... Soriya! What?'

She smiles smugly and continues.

'So... they are thinking about opening a milk bar café in the village market, selling milkshakes, ice cream, that sort of thing. My aunt will be working there for half the day, but she also needs to help out on the farm, so they would need someone to run the place in the afternoons and evenings.'

Your eyes are wide with delight. You can't believe what you are hearing.

Soriya is grinning. 'I said I could probably think of a couple of people who might be able to help!'



Exactly six weeks later, the doors to the Milk & Honey Bar are opened to the public. To be honest, it is more like a market stall than an actual shop, but Soriya's Uncle Samrin has invested in a milkshake maker as well as a fridge-freezer to store the milk and ice cream. He has also made a deal with his friend, old Vithu, the beekeeper, who makes the tastiest honey in the region. Not surprisingly, the honey-flavoured ice creams and milkshakes are the most popular items on the menu, and jars of Vithu's honey are also available for sale.

You help Soriya and her Auntie Chea paint the Milk & Honey Bar sign, which Uncle Samrin then hangs proudly over the serving counter. You and Soriya then stick up posters around the village announcing 'The Grand Opening Night – all milkshakes and ice creams half price!' This is Uncle Samrin's idea because he wants everyone to experience just how delicious the products are.

And it seems to work. On 'Grand Opening Night' it feels like the whole village has turned up to sample our creamy treats. You work behind the counter alongside Uncle Samrin, Auntie Chea and Soriya, which is more than a little chaotic but a good way to learn the ropes. You feel like you've been thrown in at the deep end and it's a case of 'sink or swim'.

Three hours later, the Milk & Honey Bar has completely sold out of everything. Uncle Samrin and Auntie Chea seem very pleased with how it has gone – but, as they remind you, the proof of real success will



be if the customers come back when the prices are normal, and then continue to come back after that.



The first few weeks are a bit slow. It's as if the village is still trying to get used to the idea. At one point, you can tell that Uncle Samrin is starting to have his doubts about the project. But, very gradually, sales do begin to pick up, especially with the arrival of the warm, summer weather.

You and Soriya share the afternoon and evening shifts. This works well because it gives you both time for your other commitments. Soriya has youth group meetings twice a week and you often have to help out at home, like looking after Sita when your mother is out fishing.

Some days your mother and Sita are at the market, selling fish, not far from the Milk & Honey Bar. On those days Sita often spends more time at your stall than at your mothers. You'd like to think this is all

about sisterly love, but the fact that she always appears soon after you've served a milkshake has raised your suspicions. Within seconds of handing a milkshake to a customer, you generally sense a small presence by your side. You look down to discover Sita staring up at you, bright-eyed and innocent.

'Can I help you?' you ask.

She just smiles, and then you wait for the inevitable glance towards the milkshake maker. It hasn't taken her long to discover that there is usually a bit of milkshake left over that won't fit in the glass.

Soon she is off again, now sporting a vanilla and honey moustache.

You don't mind the job at all. The best thing about it is that you get to meet new people. Uncle Samrin has placed a few stools beside the counter and you often get chatting to the customers as they sit and enjoy their milkshakes and ice creams.

The amount of money you are earning is by no means amazing, and it's not because Uncle Samrin is being unfair. You can tell that the stall is not making a huge amount of profit but at least you are earning something and are able to put a bit away at the end of every week.



Unfortunately, life at home is not going so well. Your dad's condition has continued to deteriorate. Even the short walk to the vegetable patch and back has become a struggle and often brings on one of his terrible coughing fits. Despite his worsening condition, he still insists that he could do a better job catching fish than your mother is doing. He rants and raves about this on a daily basis, but in reality, he does not even have the strength to cast a net out, never mind pull it back in.

The one thing that hasn't slowed down is the amount of beer he is drinking. It seems like the sicker he gets, the more he wants to drink. Fortunately, he usually falls asleep in front of the TV after a few beers, which is why your mother now lets him have a few every night. It is not something the family can afford, but it is better for everyone (and the mood in the house) if he's asleep. It doesn't always work, and sometimes he'll start to argue and threaten your mother. Anything

can set him off, so everyone tries to be careful what they say and do around him when he's in one of those moods.

However, nothing will prepare you for the blow-up that erupts on the night that Mr. Snakey comes to visit.

During the previous month the fishing had been particularly bad, and this of course had affected the amount your mother was able to pay towards the debt. When she had visited Mr. Snakey he had told her the amount she was offering to pay was unacceptable. But there was nothing she could do except promise to try to pay more the following month.

When you hear the rap on the door that night you fear the worst. Your mother opens the door to find Mr. Snakey standing there. From his expression you can tell that he clearly means business. He announces to your mother that he has no choice but to take something of value from the house.

Your father, who has already had his quota of beers that night, is snoozing in front of the TV. But the sound of Mr. Snakey's raised voice jerks him out of his sleep, and he is soon peering around, trying to work out what is going on.

This is exactly what your mother had wanted to avoid. She tries her best to keep Mr. Snakey by the front door but he comes blustering in, looking around for something valuable to take.

As the fog inside your father's beer-soaked brain begins to lift, he is greeted by the sight of the man he despises most in the world, unplugging his TV and preparing to carry it away. At that moment, it's as if every last piece of your father's pent up anger and frustration is about to explode through his eyeballs. He launches himself at the debt collector and the two men go sprawling across the room, smashing and crashing into furniture. It turns into an ugly brawl with both men cursing and raging and lashing out at each other.

At that moment you know you have to do something. You rush into your room, grab something from a drawer and rush out again. When you get back to the living room, Mr. Snakey is on top of your father, and about to pummel him with the leg of a broken chair.

'Wait!' you scream. 'Take this!'

The seething debt collector looks up and sees that you are thrusting money towards him. He begrudgingly gets off your father and staggers over to where you are standing. He takes the money and looks at it. It's everything you've saved since you started working at the Milk & Honey Bar.

'I'll need more than this next month!' he growls as he leaves.



After that night, you have to reconsider everything. Your family desperately needs money and they need it fast. Perhaps the best thing to do would be to phone Devi? He said he could have a job for you within a week.

Or do you keep on going at the Milk & Honey Bar and try to do everything properly, like organising a passport and making sure you have a decent job to go to?

The only thing certain in your head at this point is that you've got a massively important decision to make and you have to make it right now.



**If you decide to phone
Devi, go to page 12.**

12



**If you decide to
continue with
your current plan,
go to page 55.**

55

The call

You think you stand the best chance of making a call on the wife's phone when she is taking a nap. It's not something that happens all the time, but occasionally she'll leave her phone charging in the kitchen when she lies down for half an hour. When this happens, she'll usually leave the baby with you and then close her bedroom door so as to keep out any baby noises.



You have decided, when the time comes, the best person to try and contact will be Soriya. You are worried that if you phone your mother she will either press the wrong button and cut you off or get so worked up that she won't listen to what you're saying. You know that Soriya will act on any information you give her, as well as pass on any messages to your family. Before your departure, Soriya (being the person she is), had altered her number on your phone to include all the codes necessary to dial from another country. So you have the exact number you need on your phone. You start to carry your phone around so that you can access her number as soon as you need it.



While you wait for the right moment to come along, the situation in the house continues to deteriorate. You are doing your best not to antagonise the wife in any way. This means trying not to look unhappy while you are doing your work and always following her instructions immediately.

But there is now another situation developing which is making you feel extremely uncomfortable. Since the time the husband first gave you a hug, he has been doing his best to get close to you whenever the circumstances allow it. You start to dread the weekends when the

wife often goes out visiting her friends. Usually she leaves the children behind so you try to keep them around you as much as possible. But this doesn't always work. On one occasion, he calls you away from the children and asks you to come into his office. You tell him that you can't leave the children, but he says it will just take a moment. As soon as you enter the office, he closes the door. Then he tries to hug you again. You resist and turn away, but he keeps holding you.

'Please,' you say, shaking your head.

'One kiss,' he says. 'Then you can go.'

He tries to kiss your cheek but again you turn away.

'Hey,' he says with a friendly smile. 'Me and you be friends – why not? You need friend in house. Wife not your friend. I make sure everything okay. We be friends, okay?'

You don't answer.

'Better this way – you see!' he says. Then he smiles again and lets you go. You hurry out of there and return to the safety of the children.

After this unsettling episode, you are more determined than ever to get out of there as soon as possible, and you know that making contact with the outside world will be a good start.



Finally, it happens.

One afternoon, the wife hands you the baby and tells you she's going to take a nap. You glance over towards the counter and see that she has left her phone charging. Your heart skips a beat. This is the moment you've been waiting for.

The wife goes down the passage and into her bedroom. You wait for the bedroom door to close and then you wait a bit longer to make sure she has settled. You have placed the baby in her pushchair and are

now rocking her to sleep. After a few minutes, there is no noise from the bedroom and the baby has fallen asleep.

You have Soriya's number ready. You go over to the wife's phone. Your hands are shaking as you pick it up. You take a deep breath and punch in Soriya's number. Your heart has never pounded this hard before.

You close your eyes and listen carefully. There are some strange crackling noises on the other end... and then... nothing. The call hasn't gone through. You are just about to dial again when the baby suddenly wakes up and starts to cry. You know the mother will get up if you don't stop the crying. You pick the baby up and rock her gently in your arms. Only when you're sure she's asleep, do you dial again.

This time, you hear it starting to ring on the other side.

Moments later, Soriya's voice comes on the line. 'Hello.'

'Soriya,' you say in a whisper.

She can't hear you. 'Hello!' she says again.

'Sori, it's me!' you reply in a louder whisper.

Now she hears you. There's a loud squeal on the other end.

'Sori, listen to me,' you say.

But she's not listening; she's peppering you with questions, 'Where are you? Why haven't you contacted us? Do you know how worried we've been? Your mother is beside herself!'

You want to shout at her. You want to tell her to shut up and listen! But you can't – you have to wait for her to stop talking!

Then you freeze. You've heard a noise in the bedroom. The wife is up and moving around. Now the bedroom door opens and you hear her coming out into the hall.



On the phone, Soriya is calling your name, but you can't reply. The wife is now coming down the hallway. You hang up and quickly place the phone back where it was.

Seconds later, the wife enters the kitchen. She is looking suspicious, like she may have heard something. You make out like you are talking to the baby as you rock her in your arms, but you have to turn away because you can feel a tear running down your cheek.

After surveying the scene for a few moments, the wife decides that all is in order and turns to go.

Then her phone starts to ring.

Your heart sinks. You know who is calling.

When the wife goes to answer it, she sees the international number and immediately looks at you. For a moment, she hesitates, like she's not sure whether to answer it or not.

You pray she doesn't.

After a few more rings, she presses the answer button but doesn't say anything.

Even from where you are standing, you can hear Soriya's excited voice on the other end, shouting your name, shouting 'Hello!' The wife listens without taking her eyes off you. Then she hangs up and turns the phone off.

You know what's coming next. You don't look at her but you can feel her eyes burning right through you. She takes the baby and places it in the pushchair. Then she pulls you around to face her, and nods knowingly at the sight of your tear-streaked cheeks.

Now the angry slaps rain down on you.



Later, when the husband arrives home, you hear the wife launching into one of her high-pitched tirades about the whole incident.

It's not long before he comes into the kitchen and snaps at you to get into his office.

As you enter, he slams the door behind you, and then starts to shout in a voice loud enough for the whole house to hear. The strange thing is, he doesn't appear to be angry, and, at one point, he even gives you a wink. Then he does something even more surprising. He raises his hand, and you think he's going to slap you, but instead, he hits the back of his hand, hard, and now you realise that the loud smacking sound is for the benefit of the wife outside. He does this a few times and then makes you hold your face as if you've been slapped.

Before leaving, he smiles and gives you another wink. Your secret pact has been sealed.

'And don't ever do that again!' he shouts gruffly. Then he flings the door open and storms out.

The wife is watching as you scuttle through to the kitchen, still clutching your face.



From that day on, a number of things change in the house. The wife's phone is never left out of her sight. And she seems pleased to tell you that she has changed her phone number.

The incident has also made the husband and wife realise that you might be seriously considering an escape, and this has made them more cautious about everything. To your dismay, this leads to them boarding up the small window in the attic. When you hear the hammering upstairs you feel like your last possible escape route has just been nailed shut.

Now your only hope rests with the outside world and the knowledge that at least Soriya and your family know you're still alive. And they must have realised from the call that you are in trouble. Surely, they will now force Devi to help track you down. Or perhaps they'll contact the police who will then threaten Devi with prison if he doesn't tell them everything.

But what if Devi genuinely doesn't know where you are? What if he lost track of you from the moment he put you on the boat?

No, you cannot allow yourself to think like that. You have to stay positive. There must be a trail they can follow! They won't give up on you!



But, as the weeks turn into months, it becomes more and more difficult to keep your hopes alive. The thoughts creep in: *Have they exhausted all their options? Have they given up on me? Is it possible that I have really slipped through the cracks and disappeared without a trace?*

If that is true, which you still can't believe, then you have to consider the possibility that *this* is now your new life. And, if that is the case, then you have some more serious choices to make. For instance, do you tell

the wife what the husband is up to? What would happen if you did? Would they still keep you working there? Yes, probably, because they wouldn't want you going to the police. But would the wife believe you? Or would she decide that you must have encouraged him in some way? Then you will have both of them against you. Whatever happens, you know the husband will put his family first. And you fear what lies beneath his smiles and promises.

So do you remain quiet, play along, keep him happy? Do you accept his secret gifts of chocolate and other small tokens? Do you pretend you like him? But, the more you play along, the more he expects and demands, and the greater the danger of being caught. If the wife ever discovered what was happening ... well, you don't even want to imagine what she would do.



And so, in the dead of night, when the whole house sleeps, you wait for the sounds – the soft pad of footsteps, the creak of a floorboard, the whisper of your name.

And this is the time when you let yourself fly – out of this house and all the way back to your village. And there you find Sita, doing the dance that makes your father laugh; and Soriya (now the school head girl) organising everyone's lives whether they like it or not; and your mother, sitting on the riverbank, pulling in her nets, squinting at the passing boats for any sign of you.

 **THE END** 

The hard road



The next time you are sent up to the attic you take a closer look at the small window. There are two things that worry you about it. Firstly, it is positioned quite high up in the pitch of the roof, which is going to make it hard to reach. You are definitely going to have to climb on top of something to get up there. Fortunately, there are plenty of boxes around so you should hopefully be able to pile a couple of those on top of each other.

Your second concern is that the window looks like it hasn't been opened for a very long time, so you hope it's not jammed shut. You're only going to know this by getting up there and trying it, but that can't happen now or the wife will start wondering what you're up to.

You decide the best time to attempt your escape will be late at night when everyone is asleep. Luckily, the ladder up to the attic is situated not too far from your bed, so as long as you are extra careful, the couple shouldn't hear your movements from their bedroom.

The one thing that's becoming crystal clear is that you are going to have to make your move sooner rather than later, and the main reason for this is the husband. He is now trying to catch you alone whenever he can, like coming up behind you and hugging you when you're working in the laundry. You feel helpless in these situations because you're worried that if you protest, the wife will hear you. And you know that if she ever finds out what's going on, you'll be the one who gets the blame.

You decide to attempt your escape on Saturday night. That's usually the night when the husband and wife enjoy a few beers and a bottle of wine together, so you're hoping this will put them into a really deep sleep.



By the time Saturday arrives you are a bundle of nerves. You know how easily it could all go wrong. You've decided to take just one small rucksack with a few essentials such as your passport (the one you received from Devi) and the small amount of money which you've managed to tuck away. You know you're going to need this cash when you get out, although you're still not exactly sure of your plan on the outside. You've decided to focus on getting out of the house first; then you can think about how to get out of the city and back to your village.

That evening, you are pleased to see the husband is drinking a beer and preparing to open a bottle of wine for his wife. You are cooking food on the stove when he comes into the kitchen looking for a corkscrew. He keeps brushing past you as he goes back and forth. You can see he's enjoying himself and trying to get a reaction out of you, but you are determined not to show anything.

Inside, all you are thinking is: *this is the last time you're ever going to touch me, you pathetic human being!*



It's past midnight when the husband and wife finally go to bed. By then, you've been waiting on your bed for over an hour, and this has done nothing for your nerves. A couple of times you've almost decided to call the whole thing off, but, deep down, you know this is something you have to try.

You wait a bit longer, just to make extra sure that everyone is asleep. Then you sit up and pull the rucksack out from under your bed.





As you climb, each creak of the wooden ladder seems to echo through the stillness of the house. You keep imagining the husband or wife suddenly appearing out of the darkness and grabbing at your ankles.

Finally, you reach the opening and pull yourself up into the darkness of the attic. The only source of light is coming from the star-lit sky which you can see through the little window.

To reach the window, you know you have to shift some boxes. But they are heavy and every time you move one you're convinced the noise must be waking up the whole house. Once the first box is in place, you peer down through the opening to check for any movement. It all remains quiet and still.

Standing on the first box, you are able to just touch the window, but it's still too high for you to pull yourself up. You need another box. You feel around in the darkness and eventually find a smaller box that you are able to lift. You heave it up on top of the other one.

Now when you climb up, you're pleased to discover that you can easily reach the window handle. As expected, it's very stiff and you have to pull on it really hard before it starts to budge. Then suddenly it releases and you feel the cool air rushing in.

The window is so small that you have to remove your rucksack before attempting to squeeze through it. You place the rucksack on the roof outside and then pull yourself up. You manage to get halfway but then you have to kick your legs a bit to get yourself all the way up. As you kick, your foot knocks the small box and you feel it starting to teeter. You try to stop it, but it's too late. It crashes down onto the attic floor.

You squirm out onto the roof. You can't believe this has happened! Now you can hear the house starting to come to life beneath you.

You grab your rucksack and slide on your backside down the slanted tin roof. As you reach the guttering along the edge you hear a shout behind you. You glance back and see the husband's head sticking out through the window. Thankfully, he can't fit through the space. He shouts again and then quickly ducks back inside.

You peer off the edge of the roof. It looks like an alleyway below but it's so dark that you can barely see what's down there. You decide you have no choice but to jump. You take a deep breath and launch yourself.

You land with a clatter amidst trash cans and rubbish. You try and get to your feet but a shooting pain in your hip makes you wince and sink back down again. You've landed awkwardly on something and your hip is now starting to throb. You lie there for a few moments, willing the pain away, trying to massage some life back into your leg. As you do this, you're becoming aware of a terrible stench from something nearby, and now you realise you're lying beside a large pile of rotting vegetable scraps.

You know you have to get moving and you're just about to get to your feet again when you notice a dark figure coming down the alleyway. Although you can only see his silhouette, you're certain it's the husband. Thankfully he doesn't have a torch, but he is moving slowly and methodically, peering into the shadows, listening out for any telltale sounds.

You lie back down again, frantically trying to decide what to do. The alleyway is dark and you are lying in shadow, but you know you have to do a better job of concealing yourself. You look at the pile of foul-smelling scraps and decide you have no choice. You wriggle into the pile and begin to scrape the putrid vegetables all over your body and face.

Then you lie dead still and pray that you won't be seen.

You can hear the crunch of the husband's footsteps approaching slowly, but there's also another noise, much closer, a kind of scratching sound. You don't want to look, but out of the corner of your eye you can see some movement. There's a dark shape, edging closer. Now it comes into focus – a large rat. You bite your lip to stop yourself from screaming.

The husband passes by where you are lying and keeps moving. You dare not move until you are sure he has gone. Meanwhile, the rat is sniffing around, getting closer and closer. You find half a rotten potato which you toss in the rat's direction. It scurries off.

You sit up slowly and check out the alleyway. There's no sign of the husband. Getting to your feet is a struggle; your hip feels severely bruised.

You walk tentatively to the end of the alley and peer out onto the street. The coast appears to be clear. Sticking to the shadows, you limp off into the night.



As the sun rises, the streets get busier. You have no idea where you are or where you are going. Most people look like they are on their way to work, and you notice how everyone gives you a wide berth when they see you coming. You look down at your filthy, vegetable-stained clothes and realise how terrible you must look (and smell!). You even have potato peelings in your hair which you do your best to comb out with your fingers.



Now you come across a group of people waiting at a bus stop. You join the back of the queue and try to ignore the strange looks you're receiving.

When the bus pulls in, you do your best to communicate to the driver that you want a bus out of the city. He asks you some questions which you don't understand, and you can tell he's on the verge of throwing you off the bus. Then you show him your money and his attitude seems to soften. He takes a note out of your hand and gives you some change.

As you walk down the aisle of the bus you get the feeling that no one wants you sitting beside them.



After driving all over the city, you are eventually dropped at what appears to be the main bus terminal.

Inside, you can see on a large electronic board that there are buses that go to the border of your country. You go to one of the ticket counters and ask how much a ticket is. At first you don't understand what the man behind the counter is saying; then he writes the figure on a scrap of paper. You are shocked! It's a lot more money than you have.

You don't know what to do. You go to a toilet and try to tidy yourself up a bit. Then you take a seat on a bench and count your money again. You are hungry but you don't want to spend any money. Eventually you buy some rice because it's the cheapest thing you can find.

You hang around the bus terminal all morning, watching the buses come and go. At one point you're surprised to hear some people speaking your language. You watch them for a while and consider going over to talk to them, but you can't think what you'd say, so instead you just keep watching them.

A little later, you notice these people from your country are starting to move towards one of the buses. You follow them and see by the name on the front of the bus that it is travelling to the border of your country.

You so badly want to climb on this bus with them, but there is a man checking everyone's tickets at the door.

Your frustration grows as more and more people climb aboard, and eventually you decide you have to do something. You pluck up all your courage and approach one of the families who are preparing to board. At first, you try to explain what has happened to you, but you can tell immediately that they are not interested, and this just makes them push towards the bus with more urgency. So you ask them if they would consider lending you some money, saying you promise to pay it all back as soon as you are back in your country. But again they are not interested. The children stare at you as their parents herd them onto the bus.

You try again with another couple but the response is the same.

Now the bus is almost full and you are running out of people to approach. You see a man hurrying towards the bus. This could be your last chance.

You run beside him and plead for help. But he doesn't even look at you. He's only interested in getting to the bus.

'Please!' you cry, and, without thinking, you grab his sleeve.

The man reacts angrily to this, shaking your hand off and shouting loudly. You immediately back off but the commotion has got the attention of two policemen who are patrolling nearby.

You try to walk away, but before you know it, the policemen are beside you and one of them has you by the arm. They start asking questions, and the only word you understand is 'passport'. You dig around in your rucksack, find your passport and hand it over to them. Then you watch as they take a close look at it, including holding it up to the light. Something about it is not making them happy.

You ask them what the problem is, and one of the policemen just points at the passport and shakes his head. When he sees your confusion he surprises you with a word in your own language.

'Fake!' he says.

You stare at him, dumbfounded. You try to speak but you can't. You start to protest. You tell him, 'It's impossible! There's got to be a mistake! Please listen to me!'

But the policeman is not listening. He's already talking to someone on his radio.



The next day you find yourself standing in front of a judge. He is asking you questions which are being translated by a lady sitting at a table. The first thing the judge asks is how you entered the country. You tell him about the boat and add that you thought it was legal because you had a passport. The judge then asks where you got your passport from. When you answer: 'Devi'. There are a few chuckles around the courtroom.



After a few more questions the judge informs you that you have been found guilty of entering the country illegally with a fake passport. You are told that you can pay a fine, but the amount is way more than you can afford. When the judge hears this, he says something else; then he hammers his gavel and stands.

You haven't understood, and you look to the translator for help.

'Two months,' she says.

You still don't understand.

'Two months in jail,' she says.



You are placed in a jail cell with 20 other women. It is cramped and uncomfortable, and there is only one toilet in the corner which is in full view of everyone. You are only allowed out of the cell for one hour a day and that is for 'exercise' in a small, concrete yard. For the rest of the time you must just sit in this hotbox, listening to women talk in a language you don't understand.

The days are stifling hot but at night the temperature drops and all you have for warmth is a rough blanket that stinks of sweat and makes you itch.

You quickly learn which of the women are friendly and which you should stay well away from. Some of them have been in there for years. Some seem to have lost their minds. Perhaps this is the only way they've managed to survive in there. You wonder if you will go mad as well.

The food is so disgusting that you can't eat it. For the first few days you eat nothing and you can feel your body getting weaker. Even the hour-long walk in the yard becomes a huge effort. One of the kinder women in the cell has noticed your condition, and she encourages you to try to eat something. You retch when you first try the watery gruel (you're not even sure what it is) – but, as the days pass, you manage to keep it down.

One day blurs into the next. You spend your time thinking of home, wondering what Soriya is up to. You would give anything to speak to your mother. It all feels a world away, and you start to doubt if you'll ever see them again.

You have been in there a month when you start to get sick. It must be a flu bug of some kind. You are feverish and completely sapped of energy. For days you are unable to even get to your feet. You lie shivering in your blanket, drifting in and out of sleep. Sometimes you can't distinguish between your nightmares and life in the cell. You start to think a lot about dying. You are convinced your short life is going to end in this place.

You owe your life to the kind woman in the cell who keeps you eating and drinking, even when you can barely keep anything down. As the days go by, you begin to feel the strength returning to your body.

One day, a woman appears at the cell door and asks for you by name. You follow her to a small interview room and are pleasantly surprised when she starts to speak your language. She tells you she is from your country's embassy and that they have been looking for you since your family reported you missing to the authorities. She then asks a lot of questions about your situation. Once she has jotted down all your answers she packs up her briefcase and prepares to leave.

'Can you help me get home?' you ask.

'We're going to do our best,' she assures you.

Back in your cell you can only imagine the worry your family must be going through. You pray you'll be reunited with them soon.

A week later, you are sitting in the cell when someone nudges you. You look up and see the lady from the embassy standing by the cell door again. For a few tense moments you fear the news is bad, but then she smiles.

'Let's get your things,' she says. 'You're going home.'

As you leave the cell you look back at the kind woman who has helped you so much. You mouth the words 'thank you', and even though you don't speak the same language, you are sure she understands. She nods at you and smiles.



You are driven to the border in a police bus, along with a number of other women.

At the border you are all made to wait in a small, airless room while your papers are processed by the immigration officials. Then, one by one, you are called by name and permitted to cross the border.

On the other side you are told you will have to make your own way home. Thankfully, your village is not too far from the border, but all the same, the bus fare empties your purse completely.

As you trundle along in the bus, you reflect on the sad truth of your situation. You've been away for nearly four months and have less money now than before you left.



You have not had the opportunity to phone anyone, so there is no one to meet you at the village bus stop.

Walking to your house, you hope and pray that you don't meet anyone you know. The last thing you feel like doing now is answering a whole lot of questions.

You arrive at your house and pause for a moment by the gate. It looks quiet and deserted. You realise Sita is probably at school, but you were half-expecting to find your father sitting outside with his fishing nets.

Then, just as you are about to start down the path, the front door opens and your mother comes out carrying a basket of washing. She sees you and stops.

'Hello,' she calls. 'Can I help you?'

You blink back the tears. She hasn't recognised you.

'Mum,' you say in a brittle voice. 'It's me.'

She looks again. Then she bursts into tears and drops the basket. You run to her and you hold each other for a long time, the tears streaming down your faces.

'I thought I had lost you,' she says.

Inside the house, she caresses your face and hair.

'What has happened?' she asks.



It's only when you look in the mirror that you fully grasp what she's getting at. You haven't seen yourself in a mirror for months, and now you can hardly recognise the person staring back at you. You have lost so much weight. Your face is pale and gaunt, and your hair, once so beautiful, now hangs dead and limp.

'Where's Dad?' you ask.

Your mother looks down and you can tell the news is bad.

'He's gone,' she says. 'He died last month.'

'How?' you ask.

'He went out in a boat with his nets – trying to fish, we think. They found the boat floating. There was no sign of him or the nets.'

When Sita comes home, she can't hide her shock.

'I know,' you say. 'You don't have to say anything.'

She runs into your arms and the tears well up again.

Later, your mother comes into the room where you are lying with Sita. She is holding her phone.

'I'm going to phone Soriya,' she says.

'No, please don't,' you reply. 'Not now, Mum. I just want to sleep.'

The truth is that you cannot bear the thought of Soriya seeing you like this.

Much later, you wake suddenly and feel someone sitting on the bed. Your first thought is that it's the husband.

'No!' you gasp, 'Get away!'

Then you see that it's Soriya. You feel humiliated, and you hate the way she's staring at you. You turn away.

'Please, leave me alone!' you cry.

Soriya starts to say something but you cut her off. 'Please!' you say forcefully.

'Okay,' she replies. She sounds shocked and sad. You hear her leaving the room.

You bury your face in your pillow and cry. This is never how you imagined your homecoming.

Then you hear a noise by the door. You glance up and see that it's Soriya. She's standing there with her no-nonsense expression, shaking her head.

'No,' she says. 'I'm sorry. I'm not going to go. I've been waiting for you for four months. I thought you were dead.'

She comes over and sits in a chair.

'You don't have to talk to me. You don't even have to look at me. But you know what? I'm staying. I don't care if you don't talk to me for three months. I don't care if you never tell me about anything that's happened. I don't care! But I'm staying, because that's what best friends do.'

With your face still buried in your pillow, you extend a hand out towards her and she takes it.



The meeting room is filling up. You are standing at the back and your nerves are going crazy. In the six months since your return you haven't seen this many people in total, never mind all together in the same room! You can't believe you've let Soriya talk you into this.

Now, when everyone is seated, Soriya steps up to the microphone at the front.

'About a year ago, my best friend in the world did something to try to help her family. They were going through some pretty tough times, and she decided she had to help, whatever it took. She was so brave. Things didn't work out as she expected, and she ended up going on a journey that no one should ever have to experience. Now, my beautiful friend over there has agreed (with a little bit of persuasion from me!) to do something which I think requires just as much bravery. She is going to tell us about her experience. And she is doing this in the hope that it may prevent someone else from suffering like she has. Please give my friend the warmest welcome ever!'

Everyone jumps to their feet and applauds. You take a deep breath and walk to the front.

 **THE END** 

First steps



‘A penny for your thoughts?’

Soriya’s voice jolts you out of your daydream. She’s come in through the back of the Milk & Honey Bar without you noticing and found you staring into nowhere.

You go back to wiping down the counter. It’s the end of your shift and Soriya is here to take over.

‘You okay?’ she asks.

‘No, not really,’ you reply. ‘I had the worst evening ever last night.’

You tell her all about the awful encounter between your dad and Mr. Snakey and how you ended up giving away all the money you had saved.

‘I seriously don’t know what to do,’ you say. ‘I was so close to phoning Devi this morning.’

‘Hey,’ says Soriya. ‘You’re earning the money to help them aren’t you?’

‘I know but ... I need to earn a lot more. Don’t get me wrong, I love working here, but ...’

Soriya nods like she knows what you’re going to say. ‘I know, we’re not exactly going to be millionaires soon, are we?’

You both have a giggle at this but then you look at your friend more seriously.

'I *have* to do something. I have no choice.'

You can see Soriya is thinking about this as she puts on her apron. Eventually, she faces you.

'Okay, then,' she says. 'You say you have to do something. So have you got any kind of plan?'

'Of course,' you reply. 'My plan is to earn some money so that I can get a passport and go and find a job. But I just gave away all my money!'

'All right,' Soriya nods. 'Well, you'll earn that back again. In the meantime, maybe you need to be making some enquiries and finding out exactly what you need to do. At least then you'll know how much money you need, and all that kind of stuff.'

As usual, Soriya is sounding very sensible, but you have no clue where to start.

'Okay,' you say. 'Got any ideas?'

Soriya smiles. 'I may have. Who do you think you're talking to here?'

You can't help smiling at her. How lucky you are to have a friend like this.

'Maybe the first thing you could do is look on the Internet and see what jobs are out there. You could come to the youth club on Saturday if you want. There's a computer there we can use.'

You know it might be difficult to leave the house on Saturday, but you tell her you'll do your best to be there.

Before you leave, you give her a big hug.

'Just do me one favour,' she says. 'Don't phone Devi, okay?'

'Okay,' you reply.



When you wake up on Saturday morning your mother has already gone out fishing and your father is still sleeping off the beers from the night before. You text Soriya and organise to meet her at the youth club.

You feel a bit shy going into the youth club building. You've only been there a couple of times before, and you hardly know anyone. Soriya, on the other hand, is one of the youth leaders, so she knows just about everyone.

You spot Soriya straight away. She's sitting with another girl who you've never seen before.

You go over to them and Soriya introduces you.

'This is Chanlina,' she says. 'We've been having an interesting chat. I think you two need to talk.'

'Okay,' you say tentatively. You wonder what Soriya has been saying to this girl whom you don't know.

'Hi, pleased to meet you,' Chanlina says. She seems very friendly and relaxed. She's probably about a year older than the two of you. 'I believe you're thinking about migrating for work?'

You nod. 'It's looking like I might have to.'

'I know a bit about it because my sister had a pretty bad experience over there. She didn't know what she was doing. So I've learnt a few things about what *not* to do! You've definitely got to get organised.'

'That's what I've been telling her!' says Soriya.

'Hey,' you say, getting on the defensive. 'I am trying to get organised and do things the safe way!'

'That's great,' says Chanlina. 'Even the fact that you know there are dangers to watch out for is a good start. But maybe there's some other stuff that you haven't thought about yet?'

'Like what?' asks Soriya. 'Can you tell us?'



'Well, firstly, it's better if you don't go alone. Can you travel with someone else? Or do you know someone else there? Maybe someone who could meet you when you arrive?'

'Narin?' Soriya says with a smile.

You shoot Soriya a disapproving look. You really hope she's not going to go on about Narin.

'There is a boy,' Soriya explains to Chanlina.

'Soriya!' you squeal. This is so embarrassing!

Chanlina smiles. 'Is he a trustworthy guy?' she asks.

'We're not sure about that yet!' says Soriya with a laugh.

You can only shake your head at your friend.

'Okay, well, it would be good to have his phone number,' Chanlina continues. 'Just in case anything does go wrong. My sister just went by herself. She didn't know anyone. So when things went wrong she had no one to reach out to.'

'What went wrong?' you ask.

'Well, the biggest mistake she made was to believe everything the company told her about the job. She didn't check out the company or anything. If you see a job offer you should check out the company on the Internet. Then you can also give their address and phone numbers to your friends and family. My sister just started working without any kind of contract or work visa, so when the job turned out to be nothing like they said it was, she couldn't do anything about it. The work conditions were terrible and the pay was less than they said – but she had no contract. And then they wouldn't let her leave because they said they had paid the broker a lot of money. So she ended up working there for two years. It was really bad.'

'Oh my goodness,' you say. You are starting to realise how easily things can go wrong. 'What kind of work was she doing?'

'It was something in a factory, and she was working with machinery. So with the really long hours, it got dangerous because the workers were so tired. Apparently there were a lot of accidents happening. That's why you've got to get a signed contract beforehand.'

'That's such great advice,' says Soriya.

'Yes, thanks so much,' you add.

'No problem,' says Chanlina. 'By the way, I've heard there are actually agencies that help with migration. They can help you with all the paperwork, work visa, finding a job, negotiating a contract and everything. It's also a good idea to organise your accommodation before you go. And obviously you've got to have enough money for this *and* your travel costs, including your return ticket home. Having some spare money is really important.'

'That's the part we're working on now,' you say. 'We just need to find a way to make a whole lot more people come to our stall every day. Then we'll be fine!'

After Chanlina has left, you and Soriya start to look on the Internet to see what jobs are out there. There are quite a few jobs advertised on a recruitment agency site. You take Chanlina's advice and notice that some of the companies who are recruiting have websites and others don't appear at all. Already you can see how much sense it makes to do some research on a company before committing to anything. You are determined not to fall into the same trap as Chanlina's sister.

As Soriya navigates expertly from site to site you jot down the names of the companies that look promising. Even though you're not ready to travel yet, it feels good to have at least started your preparations. You are reminded of the famous quote from Lao Tzu, which you now quote to Soriya.

'A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.'

'Yes,' says Soriya, adopting her grumpiest expression, 'a single step away from me!'

You are just about to respond when you suddenly hear someone shouting your name. You swing around and see Sita standing by the door. It's obvious from her expression that something is very wrong.

'Come quick!' she shouts. 'It's Dad – at the river!'



The three of you rush down to the river. On the way, Sita gives a garbled account of how your dad has taken a fishing boat out onto the river and run into trouble.

When you reach the river you find your mother waiting anxiously on the shore.

'Where is he?' you ask, still breathless from the run.



'Out there!' your mother replies, pointing to a couple of boats in the distance. 'I can't believe he's done this. He rowed a boat out there in his condition and then threw in his nets. But he couldn't pull them back in. Thank God some other fishermen saw what was happening and went to help.'

As the boats get closer, you see that a boat with a motor is towing another behind it. The sight of your father slumped, exhausted and forlorn, in the second boat is enough to break your heart.

Once the boats have moored you go down to the water's edge to help your dad out of the boat.

'You okay, Dad?' you ask.

'I may as well be dead,' he mutters.



During the months that follow you focus on only two things: making money and getting yourself organised to migrate.

The first big goal you are able to tick off the list is getting a passport. It takes some organising and you have quite a long wait, but it all feels worth it when you have the passport in your hand. You feel more grown-up, more independent, a little closer to where you have to be.

You are now a regular visitor at the youth club. You've spent a lot of time on the computer looking for jobs on a recruitment centre website and have come across a few possibilities. The one you decide to pursue is a job in a factory. It doesn't look that exciting, but there are no real qualifications required, so you decide to fill out the application form. It's not long before the recruitment centre replies saying the job is available but that you'll first need to get a work permit and work visa. They supply an official job offer letter from the company which you are able to use to get a work permit.

The other thing you've started doing is an online course to learn the language which you know you're going to need in the big city. It's slow going and you're not confident speaking the language yet (Soriya has a good laugh every time she hears you practicing), but after a few months you are quite surprised by how much your vocabulary has grown.

You have also started to communicate quite a lot with Narin. He seems genuinely pleased that you are still thinking about coming and has even offered to meet you when you arrive.


The money is the one thing that is holding everything up. You have had to give more of your earnings to Mr. Snakey, as well as pay for your passport, so the saving is happening at a frustratingly slow pace. It's tempting to just leave with the little you have (especially with Narin urging you to 'just come now'), but deep down you know that you shouldn't be going anywhere until you have at least enough for your first month's accommodation, your return fare and a bit extra for any unforeseen expenses.



It takes almost eight months before you reach your target amount. This is the amount you've decided you will need for all your initial expenses including a bit extra. The fact that you've managed to reach your target has a lot to do with the kindness of Soriya's Uncle Samrin. Out of the blue, Uncle Samrin has given you a bonus for all the hard work you've been doing at the Milk & Honey Bar. It's a bittersweet moment when he hands the money over because hitting your target means you'll be leaving soon.

You know you're going to have to break this news to Uncle Samrin and Auntie Chea soon. To make it even worse they have invited you (and Soriya) to their house for dinner that night. You decide this is when you'll have to tell them.



Later that day you receive a text  from Narin.

A screenshot of a text conversation between Narin and You. The messages are displayed in a light blue rounded rectangle. Narin's messages are in orange speech bubbles, and Your replies are in white speech bubbles.

Narin: Are you ever coming?!!

You reply: Maybe sooner than you think!

Narin: Heard that before!

You: Seriously – I think I've saved enough

Narin: Cooooool !!! So when are you coming???

You: Will let you know very soon I promise! 😊



That night you go to dinner at Uncle Samrin and Auntie Chea's house. You are dreading telling them about your decision. They have been so good to you, and you really have enjoyed working at the Milk & Honey Bar.

Before dinner you all sit in the living room where Auntie Chea has served tea. You notice Soriya is sitting with a rather smug smile, as if she knows something that you don't. You're not sure what it's all about but you've got a horrible feeling that your decision is going to spoil her mood. As much as you don't want to put a damper on the evening you decide you owe it to them to be upfront and honest.

But, just as you are about to open your mouth to speak, Soriya looks at her uncle and aunt and says, 'okay, shall I tell her?'

Uncle Samrin and Auntie Chea nod, and now you notice that they are also looking excited about something. You decide to let Soriya go first.

'Okay, here goes,' says Soriya. She really is bubbling over with excitement. 'What you don't know is that I've been having a lot of discussions lately with my uncle and aunt about the future of the Milk & Honey Bar, and ... well, we think we have some pretty exciting news to tell you. Do you remember us saying that what we really need is a way to get a lot more people into the Milk & Honey Bar? Well, we've had an idea which we think can achieve that. It's called the Milk & Honey Internet Café! It's exactly what this village needs. My uncle and aunt have agreed to help us with the start-up money to secure the premises and buy the computer equipment. And ... I want *you* to be my business partner. There's only one stipulation. We both have to finish school first so this will only be happening in a year's time.'

You stare at the three faces, all looking at you with expectant smiles. You are in total shock. You have no idea what to say.

'So?' asks Soriya. 'What do you think? I feel so positive this can work. We could make some decent money, and you wouldn't have to go anywhere to find a job.'

You nod and swallow and nod a bit more, until you eventually manage to get some words out.

'I think the idea is great,' you say. 'It's just that ... well, as you know, I've been making these other plans and ...'

You immediately see signs of disappointment appearing on the faces of Soriya's uncle and aunt.

'I just need to think about it. Can I let you know in the next day or two?'

Everyone agrees that this sounds fair.



If you decide to continue with your plan to find a job in the big city, go to page 66.



If you decide to stay and go into business with Soriya, go to page 86.



The big city



It's the hardest decision you've ever had to make. How many people have the opportunity to start up a business with their best friend, especially when that friend is someone like Soriya? She is one of the most hard-working, dependable people you know, and her love of computers and technology makes her the perfect person to run the Internet side of the business. That would leave you to take care of the Milk & Honey Bar side of things, which you are confident you could handle. In fact you know in your heart that the two of you would make a formidable team.

But to wait for another year, until you've finished school...? Yes, ideally you would like to complete your schooling, but the growing pressures at home are making you reconsider your priorities. You need to make some decent money, and you need to make it soon.

And then there is the excitement of seeing Narin again, which, if you're completely honest, is also influencing your decision.

When you tell Soriya that you've decided to go, she is clearly disappointed, although she says she was kind of expecting it. She tells you that she's never going to give up on her dream of opening a business with you, and she makes you promise that in a year's time, if things have not gone well in the city, you'll still consider joining her as a partner. You promise her you will.



It now only remains for you to contact the recruitment centre in the big city and tell them you are interested in one of the jobs they are advertising. Chanlina had mentioned going through an agency, but you feel like you are managing to organise everything yourself. When you contact the recruitment centre, they tell you the job is still available and that you should report to the company as soon as possible. The job is in a factory, which doesn't sound that exciting, but the pay seems reasonable and the company also offers accommodation for their employees.

You can't believe it. After all the planning and preparation, you are finally ready to go.

Once you have your bus ticket in hand, you send a text  to Narin.



The very next day you are on a bus, crossing the border, heading for the big city and feeling like a thousand butterflies are fluttering around in your stomach!

No one can blame you for feeling nervous. This really is the start of a whole new chapter in your life – a new country, a new city, a new job. And then, of course, there's the thought of seeing Narin again after so long. It's been almost a year since you last saw each other. In that time you've exchanged a lot of text messages, but that's not the same as seeing each other again in person. What if he doesn't like you? What if you don't like him? There are so many things that may not work out. You try to prepare yourself for everything, good or bad.

Now, as the bus pulls into the city terminal, you search for his face in the crowd. You can't see him but there are a lot of people waiting.

You climb off the bus and go around to the side where the driver is unloading the bags. As you collect your bags, you're half expecting Narin to come up behind you and surprise you. But he doesn't. You keep looking but you still can't see him.

Now most of the people have wandered off, and you are feeling like a spare part, standing there, looking lost. Has Narin changed his mind? Your initial excitement is quickly turning to disappointment, and you are starting to feel very alone.

You go to a small kiosk and buy a local SIM card. Outside the kiosk, you are fumbling around, trying to fit the card into your phone, when you feel a tap on the shoulder.

'Hey!' says a voice behind you.

You jump and almost drop the phone. When you turn you see Narin standing there with a big grin on his face. You are so relieved that you almost burst into tears – but you are determined not to let him see this.

'Sorry, I'm late,' he says. 'I couldn't find a parking spot.'

'That's cool,' you reply, as if you weren't worried at all.



There's a brief awkward moment when you both consider a hug – but no one wants to make the first move so nothing happens.

Thankfully, Narin moves things along by picking up your bags. 'Ready to go?'

Out in the car park, Narin leads you to a rather old, rusty car that's definitely seen better days. He smiles when he sees your reaction.

'Hey, it's a car!' he laughs.

It takes a bit of tugging to get the passenger door open, but you eventually manage to open it and climb in. Narin puts your bags in the back and then hops into the driver's seat.

'So, where are we off to?' he asks.

You show him the address of the place you'll be staying which was sent to you by the recruitment centre. This is the accommodation which the company organises for its employees. You have been told to sleep there tonight and then report to the factory in the morning.



Driving through the city with Narin at the wheel is not a relaxing experience. The traffic is diabolical, the car is making some very strange noises, and you get the impression that Narin has not done much driving in the city. He is so preoccupied with where he's going that you're not really able to have much of a conversation at all. In fact, you spend most of your time holding on tight and pointing out vehicles and pedestrians to him which you're worried he hasn't seen.

By the time you reach your destination you are feeling quite exhausted.



The accommodation is very basic. You have your own tiny room, which is actually more like a cubicle than a room. And there seem to be hundreds of these cubicles, which means a lot of other girls and women around and a lot of noise. It's not quite what you had in mind, but you decide it will do for starters, until you can find something better.

With it being your first night in the city, Narin has offered to show you around a bit. You almost decline the offer because you are so tired from the journey, but you can see how enthusiastic he is to show you the sights, and he promises you a relaxing evening, so eventually you agree.

You are so glad you did. It turns out to be a wonderful evening. He takes you for a walk beside a river with stunning views of the city. It's the first time you've really been able to talk and you feel yourself starting to relax in his company. You end up in a food market, bustling with people, surrounded by sizzling barbeques and mouth-watering aromas. Narin recommends you try some food you've never heard of, and it's delicious. You end up sitting on a bench for ages – eating, chatting, listening to the buskers and watching all the people go by. It's

a world away from your village life, and you're feeling so excited and grateful to have Narin there beside you. Without him, you realise this could be a very different experience.

At the end of the evening Narin drops you back at your accommodation. Standing outside the building, you thank him for a wonderful time.

'I'd like to see you again soon,' he says, taking your hand. 'How about tomorrow night?'

Suddenly, you're feeling very self-conscious and unsure what to do. You'd also like to see him again soon, but you're starting a new job the next day and you know that has to be a priority.

'Text me,' you say. 'Maybe we can do something on the weekend?'

He nods and squeezes your hand, but you sense he's a little disappointed.

You say good night and disappear into the building.

Inside, you close your eyes and shake your head. *You've had such an awesome time. You hope you haven't messed things up!*



The next day you report to the factory. It's your understanding that you'll be having an interview before you are officially offered the job, but there are actually a lot of girls waiting there and you don't see any interviews taking place. The only questions you are asked is your name and age; then you're told to wait in a room with all the other girls.

Eventually, a rather stern-looking supervisor enters and asks everyone to pay attention. He is not speaking your language but you are surprised how much you understand.

You are told that you'll be starting work in the factory immediately and that you'll be partnered with workers who have experience so they can show you what to do. He then mentions the amount you'll be earning, which is less than the amount advertised. When someone

raises this point, he snaps at them, saying that everyone has a probation period to start with and only once they've proved themselves capable will their salaries be reviewed. The hours you are required to work are also longer than you were led to believe by the recruitment centre.

As the supervisor now prepares to leave, you realise there has been no mention of a contract. Chanlina's words are ringing loudly in your ears: *you must insist on a contract!* You put up your hand and ask the supervisor whether you'll be given a contract to sign. His abrupt reply is that the company doesn't use contracts. And with that, he leaves the room.

You are still busy trying to process this latest bit of information when you are all shepherded from the room and taken into the factory. The factory floor is huge and incredibly noisy. It is lined with rows of giant machines, each manned by a worker or two. You are issued with a coat (but no gloves or safety goggles, which surprises you) and then escorted to one of the machines where the woman operating the machine has been instructed to show you the ropes.

You can hardly hear the woman above the noise of the machines, so all you can do is watch her and copy what she does.

This machine is making the plastic inners of construction site helmets. Every ten seconds or so one of these plastic inners pops out of the machine. It has a small defect on it which you have to trim off with a scalpel. Once you've done this, you lay it on a pile and wait for the next one to pop out. The plastic is hot, which makes you wish you had gloves, but no one in the factory seems to be wearing them.

You do this work continuously for the next six hours until a siren sounds to indicate the start of lunch break.

During lunch you find yourself in the large factory cafeteria, seated next to someone from your country. She doesn't appear at all interested in communicating with you, but you try to get some information out of her. You discover that she's been working there for six months and is still on the initial 'probation period wage' which the supervisor referred to. You do a quick mental calculation and work out how much will be left once you have deducted the cost of your accommodation, food

and other necessities. It's not that much. Of course, it's more than you were earning at the Milk & Honey Bar, but the thought of this tedious, mind-numbing work stretching out for months, even years, ahead is something you are battling to get your head around.



The day never seems to end. You've worked almost a twelve-hour day when you are finally told you can clock out. Wearily, you return to your cubicle. You wash in the communal bathroom, cook in the communal kitchen and then sit on your bed, surrounded by the din of radios, TVs and voices.

You send Narin a text saying you've just finished your first day and you're not at all sure about the job. You explain about the lower wages, the long hours and the fact that you don't have a contract, and you ask him what he thinks you should do.

You don't get a reply. Perhaps he has gone to bed? You hope he is not upset about how the previous evening ended.



The next day in the factory is exactly the same as the day before except you are now working on the machine by yourself. You've also been told you can't sit down, so by the end of the day your feet are aching. Every now and again the foreman comes by and starts shouting at you about something. You think he's saying something about keeping your piles neater although they look perfectly neat to you.

At lunch time you send Narin another text and tell him you are seriously considering looking for another job. But still you don't get a response. Perhaps he's at work and has left his phone at home? You can feel the worry starting to creep in. You would love to talk to him now.

Halfway through the afternoon the factory foreman starts shouting at you again for no apparent reason. You can see he is one of those people who feels he must throw his weight around, perhaps to justify his job. You watch as he moves from one machine worker to the next,



shouting and threatening. You make a decision there and then that you are going to try to find another job.

At the end of the day you tell the supervisor that you are leaving. He doesn't seem to care. He says there are plenty of others waiting for your job. When you go to collect your wages you are told they have been deducted for your accommodation, and that you have to move out of your room immediately. You leave the factory with nothing, but you still feel a sense of liberation as you walk out those doors.



You collect your bags from the noisy cluster of cubicles. It's a relief to be out of there as well. Now you have to find somewhere else to stay. Eventually, you find a hotel. It's a bit expensive but it will do for a night or two.

Sitting in your hotel room that night, you try to phone Narin. It just rings and rings. You send a text telling him what you've done and asking him to please contact you. You end the message by saying, 'I hope I've done nothing to offend you. Please call.'

You also send a text to Soriya, who says she supports your decision 100% and that 'you deserve better.'

But there is still no reply from Narin. You drift off to sleep with your phone lying beside you.



The next day you take a long bus ride to the recruitment centre (the same one that had organised the factory job for you) to see if they can help you find another job.

After a bit of a wait you find yourself sitting opposite a busy-looking woman named Kamala. You explain to her about the problems with the last job, specifically that the wages were not what were advertised, as well as their refusal to sign a contract. You also mention that you were having to work twelve-hour shifts and hadn't been supplied with gloves or safety goggles.

Kamala listens to everything you have to say and makes a few notes. Once you have finished, she lays her pen down and sits back in her chair.

'All right,' she says. 'Let me explain a couple of things to you. The first thing you need to know is that changing jobs once you are here in the country is not that simple. Your work permit was issued based on that job offer. So you can't simply walk into another job.'

This is terrible news. You feel your heart sink. You hadn't even thought about your work permit situation. Suddenly you are faced with the awful prospect of having to return to the job at the factory. You feel like you're about to burst into tears.

Kamala can see how upset you are. She looks down at her notes and then starts to search for something on her computer. Eventually she seems to find what she's looking for.

'All right, here it is,' she says, reading the information on the screen. 'This might be the answer.'

You have no idea what she's talking about, but you sense there might be another option.

'One of the reasons migrant workers are allowed to change jobs is if their employers have breached the labour laws. Twelve-hour shifts and no safety equipment – that's definitely a breach. But before you get too excited, I need to warn you that there is a whole process to go through, including a lot of paperwork and a fee. You sure this is the route you want to take?'

At that moment you are more than happy to pursue any route that doesn't involve a return to the factory.

'Yes, please,' you nod.

'Of course, even when this process is completed, we'll still have to find you another job, which may take some time.'

'I understand,' you say. 'Thank you for your help.'

It is a lengthy process. For several days you are busy filling out forms, standing in queues, paying fees and filling out more forms. Kamala is a great help. She scans and copies documents for you and tells you where to go. She also spends a lot of time looking for other jobs, but by the end of the second day, she still hasn't found anything suitable. This is a worry because you cannot complete the application until you have another job offer.

On the third day you return to the recruitment centre and find Kamala sitting opposite another woman. She beckons you over and asks you to take a seat.

Kamala introduces the other woman as Prisana and explains that she is one of her top clients. Prisana works for one of the biggest restaurants

in the city, and they are often on the lookout for new staff. It appears they have been speaking about you, and Prisana would like to ask you a few questions.

Prisana starts to fire questions at you in English. Thankfully you did quite well in English at school, so you understand most of what she is saying. You also reply in English, telling her that you do have experience in catering and that you ran your own food outlet back home. At the end of the short interview, Prisana takes your phone number and says she'll speak to her boss.

Once Prisana has gone, Kamala explains that jobs at this restaurant are highly sought after. It is one of the most popular restaurants in the city, so the money, especially with tips, can be very good. But she also warns that you are required to work very hard and the hours can often be long. Of course, getting a job there would also enable you to complete your work permit application.

You have a good feeling about this job and you thank Kamala for thinking of you. Now all you need is for Prisana to call.



Prisana doesn't call but a man by the name of Aran does. He asks you to come to the restaurant that night for a try-out. He says you should wear a black skirt, a white blouse and comfortable shoes, and that you should not be late. You try to thank him but he has already hung up.

Yes! You know you have to make this opportunity count.

Now all you need is a black skirt, a white blouse and comfortable shoes!



That night you report to the restaurant dressed in your newly acquired clothes. The restaurant is called The Blue Elephant, and you are going to learn very quickly that it is one of the biggest and busiest restaurants in the city. The reason for this is great food and great service, and that all boils down to an excellent calibre of staff.

Aran, who phoned you, turns out to be the manager. He has a quiet yet firm manner about him. He doesn't shout or get angry, but when he issues instructions, everyone listens and jumps to it immediately. He works harder than anyone, leading from the front and you get the feeling the staff would follow him anywhere.

When you arrive, he is already busy with his preparations for the evening ahead and has very little time for you. He looks you up and down briefly and then goes back to what he's doing while asking you questions.

'Are you scared of hard work?'

'No, Sir.'

'Don't call me "Sir", call me "Aran." Are you a team player?'

'Yes, Sir... I mean... yes, Aran.'

'Can you do what you're told, fast and efficiently?'

'Yes, Aran.'

'Well, we'll find that out tonight, won't we?'

Then he summons another waitress over.

'You'll work with Nin tonight. She is one of my best. You'll do everything she says. Understand?'

You nod.

'Any questions?'

You shake your head.

'Good. Get to work.'

As you go off with Nin to start work you realise you don't even know what this job pays.

It's one of the most frenetic, adrenaline-filled nights of your life. From early evening until well after midnight you run between the kitchen serving area and the restaurant, taking orders, delivering meals, clearing plates. Anything that Nin says to do, you do immediately. You make a few mistakes which Nin corrects you on immediately. You can also feel Aran watching you. He seems to hover over everything, pointing things out to the staff, checking on customers, keeping the whole place moving like a giant well-oiled machine.

By the end of the evening you are so exhausted you can hardly move. Only now do you realise how much your feet are aching. The night has flown by in a flash and a blur and you've loved it. You are given your wages, including a cut of all the tips that are pooled and then split amongst all the staff. It is a very decent amount of money for seven hours work.

Before you leave you hear Aran asking Nin about your performance. She gives a nod and Aran seems satisfied. He turns to you.

'Can you work tomorrow?'

'Yes, Sir!'

'Aran!'

'Yes, Aran!'

You leave with Nin and several other waitresses. Nin asks you where you are staying and you tell her the name of the hotel, adding that you don't plan on staying there long as you can't really afford it. This starts a lively discussion between the other waitresses about another staff member who might be looking for a flat-mate. Nin says she'll let you know tomorrow.

Before you say good night you thank her for all the help she has given you that evening.

'That's okay,' she replies. 'Just don't let me down.'

'I won't,' you say, and you mean it.



Your second night at The Blue Elephant is even busier than the first. It is now the weekend and the place is hopping. There are more staff on duty and you are told the speed of service has to be even faster than the previous night.

Halfway through the evening, you are on your way back to the kitchen when you feel your phone vibrating in your apron pocket. You take a quick look at the screen. It's Narin. You hesitate for a moment and then answer: 'Hi. I can't talk now.'

'Where are you?'

'Where am I? Where are you?'

'I'm really sorry. I can explain. Just tell me how to find you.'

Now, as you look up, you see Nin glaring at you. She shakes her head and indicates that you should terminate the call immediately.

'I've got to go,' you say. 'The Blue Elephant.'

Nin hands you a tray of meals. 'If Aran had seen that, you'd be gone. Understand?'

'Yes, sorry,' you say before disappearing back into the restaurant.



By the time you get out that night it's after 2:00 a.m. You leave with Nin and a few of the other girls, and the first person you see waiting outside is Narin. When the other girls realise he's waiting for you, there are a few laughs and comments.

At that moment, you're not sure you feel like talking to him.

'Where have you been?' you ask. The irritation in your voice is plain to hear: 'I've been phoning you. Texting!'



'I know, look, I'm sorry, I can explain.'

You keep walking, and he can see how upset you are. Eventually he moves around in front of you so that you have to stop. 'Please!' he says. 'Just hear me out.'

You stop and wait for the explanation.

'Okay, first thing,' he says. 'You know that car I picked you up in. That's not my car.'

'Well, that's a relief,' you say.

He smiles at this but it fades quickly when he sees you're not smiling.

'I borrowed it from a friend. I don't know, maybe I thought it would impress you or something. But anyway ... that night I left my phone in

the car and my friend, the owner, had to travel out of town on a job so I only got the phone back today.'

You stare at him. 'Are you expecting me to believe this?' you ask.

'It's the truth! I promise! And I couldn't phone you because I only had your number on my phone. So I went to that room where you were staying and you had gone. Then I went to the factory, and they said you had left. I couldn't do anything else until I got my phone back.'

'You came looking for me?' you ask.

'Yes!' he nods. 'I came looking for you!'

'That's good to hear,' you say, and for the first time that evening you give him a smile.

'And now you're working at The Blue Elephant?'

'I am.'

'That's pretty cool!'

'That is pretty cool,' you agree.

You stare at each other for a while and then he takes your hand. 'So... you going to let me take you out again sometime?'

'Maybe,' you say with a smile. 'Not sure when I'm going to get a night off.'

'I'll wait until you do,' he says. 'We might have to take a bus. That okay?'

You smile and nod. 'I'm used to buses.'



It's six months later and you're on the phone to your mother.

'Did you receive the money?'

'We did. Thank you. It's making a big difference. It really is.'

'That's good. I'll try to send more next month. How's Dad?'

'Better now that we're not getting any visits from ... what's your name for him?'

'Mr. Snakey,' you say with a laugh.

'Yes, no more visits from Mr. Snakey, thank goodness!'

'We'll come and visit you before the end of the year, Mum.'

'Did you say "we"?''

'Yes!' you laugh. 'I said "we"':

'Getting serious, is it?'

'I don't know, Mum. We'll see ... Okay, I've got to go to work. Give my love to Sita and Dad, okay? Love you, Mum. Bye.'



You have been working in the city for over a year when you receive an envelope in the mail. The beautifully crafted card inside brings a smile to your face.



And then scribbled on the back in Soriya's writing it says: The position of Partner is still vacant! Ha, ha! Please apply in person!! 😊



'Which way?' says Narin, peering out through the windscreen. The village still hasn't got many streetlights, so all the roads look the same at night.

'There! Down that one!' you say, pointing down a road. You can't believe how late you are!

Narin hits the brakes, reverses and pulls into the road.

'There!' you shout. 'Park anywhere along here.'

Up ahead you see the glowing neon sign: THE MILK & HONEY INTERNET CAFÉ. Narin parks and you both jump out.

There are so many people at the venue that they are overflowing out onto the street. You pick your way politely through the crowd until you manage to get in through the door. You're just in time to see the mayor cutting a ribbon and declaring the business open. Everyone applauds and cheers. Beside the mayor you now see Soriya, beaming with pride. When she sees you, she squeals and comes rushing over.

'I thought you weren't going to make it!' she says, giving you a big squeeze.

'I'm sorry,' you say. 'We got held up at the border. Congratulations! It looks amazing!'

'Thanks, it's been a lot of work. You missed my speech. I thanked you.'

'For what?'

'For being there with me right from the beginning. Those days in the market, remember?'

'Earning all that money!' you say, laughing.

'And look where you are now,' she says. 'Assistant Manager? I'm so proud of you.'

'It wouldn't have happened if it wasn't for you.'

'Oh, rubbish!'

'I'm serious! Without you I could so easily have made some really bad choices.'

'Well, it looks like you made a pretty good choice right there,' Soriya says. She's referring to Narin, who is talking to someone nearby. 'And you made that one all by yourself. How's it going?'

'Can't complain,' you smile. 'What about you?'

'So far so good,' Soriya replies.

She's referring to a good-looking young man who is standing nearby. Someone has just put on the music, and the party is coming to life all around you.

'Hey, what do you say we dance?' Soriya asks.

You look over at Narin. 'I'll do my best. He's not always that...'

'No!' shouts Soriya above the music. 'I said how about we dance!'

You smile and take her hand and head towards the dance floor. It feels like yesterday.

 **THE END** 

Standing up for the fight



Early the next morning you run down to Uncle Samrin and Auntie Chea's farm. You know that Soriya will be there helping with the milking, and you want to catch them while they are all together:

You find them in the barn. They've just completed the milking and are now sitting around on stools, enjoying a cup of tea. Old Vithu, the beekeeper, is also there. It looks like he has just delivered several large jars of honey.

'I've made a decision,' you announce. 'I'm going to stay!'

Soriya leaps up and gives you a hug.

'You are not going to regret this,' she says. 'We are going to make this business fly!'

You can also see how pleased Uncle Samrin and Auntie Chea are with your decision. Old Vithu, meanwhile, is asking Uncle Samrin what's going on. Uncle Samrin has to explain to him in a loud voice so that he can hear:

You sit down with the others and gratefully accept a cup of tea from Auntie Chea.

'Now I just have to figure out how I can survive for another year at school!'

'Finishing school is very important,' says Auntie Chea. 'Education gives you choices later.'

'You're right, Auntie,' you say, nodding in agreement. 'My only worry is for my family. Trying to pay off this debt. Anyway, I'm sure we'll work something out.'

Once again Old Vithu asks Uncle Samrin to explain what is being said.



Your last year of school commences and, as expected, the challenges begin to mount. You know you're going to have to work hard at school this year; but it's often difficult to concentrate on work with everything that's going on at home.

You are still doing your daily shift at the Milk & Honey Bar, and Soriya has even given you some extra hours to try to improve your earnings. The business really is just ticking over, and you are giving all the money you earn to your mother to help pay off the loan. But even with the money you give her, the monthly repayments are not enough to satisfy Mr. Snakey. On one occasion he suggests to your mother that she should consider selling the house. The mere thought of this drives your mother into a deep depression. Of course, the subject is never mentioned when your father is around. You hate to think how he might react, especially as the house has been in his family for many generations.

On most nights you try to get home as late as possible to ensure your father has already fallen asleep. You find it almost impossible to do any school work when he is still awake. Quite often, when Soriya is working the late shift at the market, you end up doing your homework at the back of the Milk & Honey stall. Even the distractions of the market are preferable to the disruption caused by your father's ranting and raving.

And then, when you least expect it, everything changes.



On a winter's day, halfway through the school year, you and Soriya are standing outside your class when one of your classmates, Kiri, saunters up for a chat.

'I didn't know your dad had gone back to fishing,' he says to you.

At first, you don't get what he's saying.

'My dad?'

Kiri sees your confusion.

'I saw him earlier at the river, preparing to take a boat out.'

'My dad? At the river?' Alarm bells are starting to go off in your head.

Kiri nods. 'I noticed because he had loaded a few rocks into his boat which I thought was unusual.'

'Rocks?'

The alarm bells are suddenly screaming. You drop your bag and run.

When you reach the river there is no sign of your father by the boats. Out on the river you can see a few boats but it's difficult to see who is in them. You rush up to one of the other fishermen.

'Please I need help! My father is somewhere out there. He's in danger. I think he's on one of those boats!'

The fisherman can see how frantic you are, and he agrees to take you out. Soriya has now arrived, and you both clamber into his boat. The fisherman pushes off from the bank, leaps in and fires up the engine.

You roar out across the river, the engine at full throttle.

As you get near the first boat, the fisherman on board looks up from his nets. It's not your dad. You sweep on past. There's another boat further ahead which the driver now heads towards.

The closer you get to this second boat the more desperate you become. You can't see anyone on board. Perhaps they are lying down? You crane your neck and shade your eyes from the glare off the water.

As you pull up beside the boat, you burst into tears. All your worst fears are confirmed. The boat is empty. Even the nets have gone.



'Yes, it's true my father was ill. But that is not the main reason he took his own life. The main reason is that his heart was broken because he was unable to look after his family. He could see what his family was going through, but he felt helpless to do anything about it. I imagine, for a husband or a father, there can be no worse feeling.'

You look up from the paper you are reading aloud. The hall is full to capacity. The whole village must be here. There are even people standing at the back. In the front row your mother is dabbing tears away while comforting Sita. Beside them sit Uncle Samrin, Auntie Chea and Soriya. You can even see Old Vithu there, sitting near the back.

'We are not sure what the future holds for us,' you continue. 'But there is one thing I am sure of: the death of my father will not be in vain. I'm determined that something positive will come from this tragedy. I don't know what that is yet, but perhaps there will be a way to prevent other people having to go through what we are going through. That is our hope. Thank you all for coming. Dad would have appreciated it.'

Outside the hall, many people come up to you and offer their sympathies. One of them is a lady by the name of Akara who you know vaguely from around the village. She holds your hand and speaks to you in a soft voice.

'Thank you,' she says. 'Your words meant a lot to my family. Our circumstances are similar and we also pray that something can be done.'

You want to ask her more but there are other people waiting in line to greet you and you can see she is not comfortable talking in public. She squeezes your hand again and leaves.

Another person that approaches you is Old Vithu. He holds both your hands in his tough old wrinkled hands and mumbles his condolences. You can tell he has something he wants to say, but for some reason,

he's hesitating. Eventually, he just fixes his kind eyes on you and says, 'Come and see me.'

You nod and tell him you will.



You go to Vithu's place the next day. As usual he is tending to his beehives. He always appears to be at home with the bees.

'You want to meet my bees?' he asks.

'Okay,' you say, a little tentatively. This is not quite what you were expecting.

'Don't worry. I have a suit for you,' he adds, flashing a toothless grin.

A short time later you are all suited up and walking amongst the swarming hives. Vithu shows you how to remove the wax combs from the hives and scrape off the honey. You can see how much he loves the bees, and you listen as he explains in detail which are the workers and which are the drones, and how they all work together for the good of the hive.

'People think they are so important,' he says. 'But man wouldn't be able to survive without these little creatures. Nothing grows without pollination from bees.'

Once the honey is collected, Vithu takes you into his 'honey house' where he completes the extraction process. By the end of the afternoon, there are ten large jars of honey ready for the market.

'This is for your family,' he says. 'If you come every Wednesday, we can do the same.'

'Oh Vithu,' you say. 'I can't take this!'

But Vithu insists, saying, 'Don't worry. You'll be working for it. These bones are getting old. I need some help around here.'

You thank him and tell him you'll see him next week.



Then, just as you are leaving, he calls to you and says, 'Don't forget what the bees taught you today. Strength in numbers. Work together.'

It's only when you are halfway home that you catch onto what Vithu may have been trying to tell you. Perhaps what he's saying is that if you want to challenge Mr. Snakey and try to make a difference, you are going to need help. You need to join forces with people in the same boat. Strength in numbers. You immediately think of Akara, the lady who approached you after your father's memorial service.



In a village where most people know each other, it doesn't take you long to find out where Akara lives.

You knock on her door and wait. No one comes to the door for a while but then, just as you're about to leave, a young girl opens up and

peeks out. She's maybe a year younger than Sita and your first thought is, *I wonder why she's not at school?*

The girl pushes the door open and beckons you in. You tentatively enter the house.

'Hello?' you call.

At the sound of your voice several other children appear. Again you wonder why they're not at school, and now you notice the poor condition their clothes are in – most are old and worn out and a couple of sizes too small. As you look around the house you see there is almost no furniture and no modern comforts at all.

Suddenly Akara appears from one of the rooms, holding a basin and a sponge. She looks surprised to see you standing there.

'I'm sorry,' you say. 'I shouldn't have come in.'

You start to retreat down the hall but she stops you.

'No, wait,' she says. 'Please, just give me a minute.'

She goes back into the room and then calls you in.

Inside the room, you find her tending to a very old, frail-looking woman, lying in a bed.

'My mother,' she explains.

You greet the old lady but it's not clear whether she knows you're even there. You look around and see that, apart from the bed, the room is almost entirely empty.



Later, you take a walk with Akara. She tells you the only way she can have a conversation is to get out of the house. You ask about her family and it's not long before she starts to tell you her story.

It's a story with many similarities to your own. Like your father, Akara's husband had fallen on hard times financially. He was a farmer who had borrowed money to buy seed and fertiliser. When his crop failed due to excessive rain and flooding, he had no choice but to borrow more. After another bad season he found himself in a hole that he couldn't dig himself out of. You're not surprised to hear that the person who had lent him the money was Mr. Snakey.

With five children to support, as well as Akara's aging mother, the pressure on the husband became extreme. He ended up migrating to try to find a job, and landed up working on fishing boats. Initially they received a few small amounts of money from him, but then these stopped coming, and for over a year they heard nothing. Then came the devastating news that he had died, apparently from an illness, although this was never verified by any doctor.

Akara buried her husband and was now at the mercy of Mr. Snakey. She could no longer afford to send her children to school, and she had handed over almost all her possessions to him as part of her debt repayments.

'Some days I think I can't go on,' she says, wiping away a tear. 'Then I look at the faces of my children...'

You take her hand and tell her how much respect you have for her. You know how incredibly difficult your family's situation is, so you can only imagine what it's like with five children and an elderly mother.

'What about if we go and see him?' you suggest.

'Who? The loan shark?' asks Akara.

You nod. 'We could try to reason with him.'

Akara doesn't look at all sure. 'He's a very difficult man to talk to. I've tried.'

'I know... but if we went together? Isn't it worth a try?'

You can tell that Akara hates the idea, but she doesn't have a lot of other options.



The next day, the two of you nervously approach the office of Mr. Snakey. His real name is Mr. Houy, and the name HOUY LOANS & FINANCIAL SERVICES is emblazoned across his front window.

You go into the scruffy reception area and ask the bored-looking receptionist if you can see Mr. Houy. She barely acknowledges you as she nods towards his door.

As you enter his office Mr. Houy looks up suspiciously from his desk. He seems surprised to see the two of you together.

'Yes?' he asks. 'What can I do for you?'

Akara glances at you. It seems you have been elected spokesperson.

'Thank you for seeing us, Mr. Houy,' you say. 'We wondered if we could have a word with you.'

'I'm listening,' he says impatiently. He hasn't even offered you a seat.

You take a deep breath. You're still not sure what exactly you're going to say.

'Mr. Houy ... it's about our loans. As you know both our families have lost the men of the house, the breadwinners...'

Mr. Houy seems to know where this conversation is going and he is already shaking his head.

'The truth is,' you continue, 'we have no way of paying back our loans. No matter how hard we try. And this debt is destroying our families. Would you not consider changing the terms of the loans because our circumstances have changed? Is there any way we could perhaps pay less?'

Mr. Houy laughs when he hears this last bit.

'Pay less?' he says. He's speaking softly but you get the impression there is a volcano inside him, waiting to erupt. 'Are you being serious? Let me explain something to you. This is my business. This is how I survive. Do you think it's easy? Especially with families like yours that don't pay me on time. You talk about *your* family – what about *my* family? How do I put food on my family's table?'

'Please, Mr. Houy,' you continue. 'We are not saying we won't pay, we are just asking ...'

But, before you can finish, he suddenly stands up. And now the volcano erupts.

'Out!' he shouts. 'Get out of my office!'

He shepherds you out through the reception area and onto the street.

'Next time I see you I want to see your money! Do you understand?'

He glares at you both for a moment and then goes back inside.

Akara looks shocked, like she has just been physically assaulted.

You are also in a daze. *What just happened?* You walk around, trying to decide what to do next. You have no idea. All you are feeling is anger and disappointment.

Then you think about your family. This is for them. Are you going to just walk away? Now when you turn to Akara, she can see the look of steely determination in your eyes.

'No,' you say. 'This is not how it's going to end. We're not giving up on this, okay?'



Later that day, you phone Soriya. She sounds just as upset as you are when she hears what happened.

'He can't treat people like that,' she says. 'Who does he think he is?'

You talk more about what you should do next and agree to meet later at the youth club.

'I'll get some other friends to come along as well,' says Soriya.



Along with Soriya, there are five other friends at the youth club that night and everyone is keen to help in any way they can. The question: what is the best way to tackle this problem? There's a lot of discussion about various options, but it's not until one of the other girls, Kanya, says something that you suddenly have an idea.

Soriya had just been talking about how much damage these loans are doing to families and Kanya responds by saying, 'I'm sure most people would agree with that.'

'That's it!' you say. 'Most people *would* agree. So why don't we go and ask a lot of people? Why don't we start a petition?'

'A petition?' says Soriya. 'You mean when people sign to say they support something?'

'Yes, exactly!' you nod. You are starting to get excited about this idea.

'But what would the petition say?' Soriya asks.

'Well, we'd have to explain what our families have been through and then say something like: "If you disagree with these types of lending practices, please sign here."''

Soriya is still looking a bit doubtful. 'But who would we hand this petition over to?' she asks.

'I don't know,' you reply. 'How about the mayor?'

One of the guys in the group is also not looking too convinced about this plan. 'But do you really think a loan shark is going to pay any attention to a petition?' he asks.

'Maybe, maybe not,' you reply. Now you're starting to have doubts about the idea. But isn't it worth a try? Unless anyone has a better idea?'

It's the best idea anyone can come up with so the group decides to give it a try. After all, what have you got to lose? With a bit more discussion, a plan is drawn up and everyone is given their instructions. Your job is to write a brief summary about what is happening to your families with an appeal to please sign if you think it's unfair. This is then printed on sheets of paper and distributed to all the volunteers.



For the whole of the next week everyone in the group uses any free time they have to go out with the petition. Each person has been designated a different area in the district, and the plan is to go house-to-house, shop-to-shop and even approach people in the street.

For you personally the challenge to try and gather as many signatures as possible becomes a kind of quest. Every time you knock on a door or stop someone on the street you launch into an impassioned plea for understanding. Thankfully, most people listen to what you have to say and then sign. Perhaps this is because they can see how much the issue means to you.

But others are just not interested. They shake their heads and walk away or say 'No thanks' and quickly close the door. You are tempted to shout out: 'Please, just listen!' But instead you make every effort to just swallow your frustration and smile.

'Thank you!' you say in the brightest voice you can muster, and then you move on.

It's hard work. In fact, it's one of the hardest things you've ever had to do, and at times you find yourself wondering if it's actually going to be worth all the effort. Then you think of all the other volunteers in the

group who are giving up their free time to help you and Akara. You push on to the next person and launch into your story once again.



Towards the end of the week you find yourself outside the offices of the local newspaper. You decide you may as well try inside for some signatures.

Inside, there are several people sitting at computers, all looking very busy. You shuffle around for a bit, hoping someone might notice you. Eventually a young reporter glances up briefly and asks if she can help. You tell her you have a petition and that you're trying to gather as many signatures as possible.

'What's it about?' she asks, still tapping away on her keyboard.

You start to tell your story but you're not even sure if she's listening because all her attention remains focused on her computer screen. It's only when you mention the death of your father that she hesitates for a moment and looks at you. You then tell her about Akara and her situation and you can tell that she's gradually becoming more and more interested.

It's not long before she has her notepad open and is firing questions at you. She asks a whole series of questions like who the loan was from and what your father's occupation was, and she scribbles all the answers down in her pad.

Then she asks you to please tell her when you plan on handing the petition over to the mayor. She says she would like to be there and that she might even be able to take a photograph for the paper. This is wonderful news! You tell her you'll definitely let her know.

As if that's not enough, she then convinces everyone in the office to sign the petition. You are so pleased you walked into that office!



At the end of the week the whole group gathers again at the youth club to see how the petition is going. You are feeling quite happy with the amount of signatures you've managed to gather, but you have no idea how everyone else has done.

As you enter the club the first thing you notice is that everyone is sitting around looking really glum.

'Was it not a good response?' you ask Soriya.

She shakes her head and your heart sinks.

'How many signatures did we get?'

Soriya looks at the forms she has sitting in front of her.

'Only three,' she says.

'Three!'

You can't believe it! You've managed to get over fifty signatures on your own and they've only managed to get three!

Then you notice Soriya and the others are trying to suppress smiles.

'What?' you ask. 'What's going on?'

Suddenly everyone bursts into laughter.

'Not three!' Soriya shouts. 'Three hundred!'

You cup a hand to your mouth. 'Are you serious? That is amazing! And I got over fifty.'

'That's more than three hundred and fifty signatures!' squeals Soriya. 'Not bad for a week's work!'

'Not bad at all,' you say. 'Thank you so much, everyone! The honey milkshakes are definitely my treat tonight!'



A week later you have all gathered at the mayor's office to hand over the petition. The reporter is there as promised, and she has her camera to snap the moment.

The mayor emerges from his office and you and Akara hand the petition to him. You tell the mayor that you are hoping this petition will help draw attention to the unfair loans which are crippling many families. You also suggest that one day it may even lead to a change in the law.

The mayor poses for the photograph, then thanks everyone and goes back inside.

You are all left standing around. Soriya gives you a hug and says: 'Well done!' but you get a sense that everyone is thinking, 'Well, what happens now?'

Then the reporter comes over and you notice that she is smiling.

'I think I have some good news for you girls,' she says.

The group gathers around, eager to hear what she has to say.

'As you probably know,' the reporter says, 'I'm interested in writing a story about your petition and the effect some of these loans are having on families. Well, I wanted to get Mr. Houy's side of the story so I went to see him.'

'Oh, my goodness,' you say. 'So I guess he knows about the petition now?'

The reporter nods. 'Yes, he does. And when he heard I was writing this story, he became, shall we say, a lot more sympathetic to the plight of your families.'

This comes as a real surprise to you. 'In what way?' you ask.

'Well, after giving the matter some serious consideration, he said he would be willing to renegotiate the terms of your loans.'

You can't believe what you are hearing! 'Are you being serious?' you ask.

'Oh yes,' the reporter continues, as she opens her notepad. 'I even have it here in writing. It looks like your debt is going to be significantly reduced.'

You hug Akara. You hug Soriya. You even hug the journalist!

Soon everyone is celebrating, jumping up and down, whooping and yelling.

For just a second you stand back and view the scene. How did this happen? How did you get to this point?

Then you are reminded of Old Vithu's words, 'Strength in numbers.'

'Thanks, Vithu,' you say quietly to yourself.



What you could never have known at the moment is that, just two months later, Vithu would influence your life in an even more significant way.

It's Soriya who delivers the sad news to you that Vithu has passed away in his sleep. As sad as this news is, it is not unexpected. No one knew exactly how old Vithu was, but the general consensus was that he was at least ninety, and perhaps even a bit older than that. You had also noticed lately how much he was slowing down. On your days at the bee farm you had found yourself doing more and more of the work while Vithu had taken to just sitting in the shade, watching you, and talking about his bees.

So the news of Vithu's passing is no great surprise. However, the real shock comes when Soriya tells you what he had written in his will.

'You're not going to believe this,' she says. 'He's left his bee farm, with all the equipment and hives and everything, to your family!'

This is something you had never imagined would happen and yet, now, when you think about it, a lot of things start to make sense. You now

realise he was teaching you everything so that you could take this over as a family business.

It's your mother that becomes the real beekeeper of the family. Although she has some initial concerns about getting stung, she soon grows to really enjoy the work.

You spend long pleasant days working with her, teaching her everything that Vithu had taught you.

'I'll take beekeeping over fishing any day,' she tells you.

The honey also provides more money for the family than the fishing ever did. This income, along with the reduced debt repayments to Mr. Snakey, eases a lot of your family's financial stress.



One evening, just a few weeks before the end of your school year, Soriya invites you to a talk at the youth club.

'I thought you might find this interesting,' she says as you enter the club.

It turns out the talk is being given by Chanlina's sister. She's the girl who had such a disastrous experience after migrating to find work. It's a harrowing story. She ended up working in a factory for two years. The conditions were truly awful and the money pathetic, and yet she was unable to leave. She basically became a slave to her employees and her health deteriorated so much that she was lucky she didn't die.

On the way home, you and Soriya stop at a café for a soft drink.

'I bet you're glad you never went,' says Soriya, as you sip your drinks.

'Well, at least I would have got a bit more organised than she did,' you reply. 'And that would be thanks to you and Chanlina!'

You think about all the misfortunes that Chanlina's poor sister had to suffer at the hands of her unscrupulous bosses.

'I just find it so disappointing that there are these people out there who don't care at all about people's welfare – as long as they are making more money. That's what it boils down to, doesn't it? Money to them is more important than the people they employ – the lives they destroy!'

Soriya glances at you and smiles.

'What?' you ask.

'I haven't seen you this fired up since you took on Mr. Snakey!'

'Well there you go – another perfect example – destroying people's lives just to make more money!'

As Soriya sips on her drink, you can tell she is thinking seriously about something. Eventually she seems to come to some sort of realisation.

'You know what?' she says. 'This is what you're passionate about. This kind of thing – fighting against injustice. I can see it in your eyes. This is what fires you up.'

You think about it for a bit and nod. 'I suppose I am. So?'

'Well, maybe that's the sort of thing you should think about doing in your life?'

'What are you talking about?' you reply. 'We are going to make the Milk & Honey Internet Café the most happening place in the whole district!'

Soriya smiles at your enthusiasm.

'Look,' she says. 'Making the Internet café a success is my passion. I cannot wait to get started. But all I'm saying is that, at the end of the day, we have to follow our hearts. We have to do the stuff we're passionate about – because then we'll put everything into it. We'll do it well.'

'Don't you want me as your partner?' you ask.

You are putting on your saddest puppy dog face which makes Soriya laugh.

'Of course I do! If that's what you really, really, really want to do. I'm just saying I'm not going to stand in your way if your passion takes you off in another direction, that's all.'

'You're firing me, aren't you?' you say with a smile. 'You've found another partner! I bet they can't make a Milk & Honey Shake like mine!'

Soriya laughs and shakes her head.

'You are a clown, you know that?'

You laugh as well, but deep inside, you feel like something important has just happened.



A year later a lot has changed, and you are sitting in the Milk & Honey Internet Café staring at possibly the most perfect Milk & Honey Shake ever made.

'Who made this?' you say to Soriya.

'Taste it first,' she smiles. 'Then I will reveal the creator!'

You take a sip. It tastes even better than it looks.

'This is amazing! Okay, I admit it – it's better than mine! Now I have to meet the person who made it.'

Soriya leans through the hatch into the kitchen and shouts, 'Hey, someone wants to meet you.'

Moments later, Narin emerges from the kitchen.

Your eyes go wide. You feel the blood rushing to your face. You are speechless.

'How are you?' he asks, sitting down opposite you.

'Um... ' You nod and glare at Soriya, who is clearly enjoying your surprise. 'I'm doing okay, thanks. How about you?'

Narin nods. 'Yeah, pretty good, thanks. So you never made it to the big city but I hear you're now at university?'

'I am,' you reply, still shell-shocked.

'And how's that going? I believe you are studying so that you can right the injustices of the world?'

'I wouldn't go that far. But I am really enjoying it, thanks.'

'How long are you back for?'

'Just a couple of weeks. It's our vacation. I must say I was not expecting to see you here.'

'This is home now,' Narin smiles. 'Think you'll ever come back? I'm sure we can find some injustices for you to put right.'

'Maybe,' you reply with a smile. 'We'll see.'

'Hey,' says Soriya. 'Do you know what this has just reminded me of? When was it – two years ago? I remember the three of us sitting around enjoying a milkshake. And now we've all taken our different paths, made all these choices – and yet, here we are again, sitting around. It's like nothing's changed.'

'Hmm,' you smile and look around the café. 'If you ask me, things have definitely changed! For one, look at this amazing place you've created. And then there's me, of all people, at university, if you can believe that? And what about City Boy over here, returning to his roots?'

'Okay,' Soriya nods. 'I guess there have been one or two changes.'

You pick up the milkshake and raise it up in a toast to your friends.

'Here's to making good choices and good friends, and, most importantly, to making really good milkshakes!'

 **THE END** 





Debrief and reflection questions

After you have read through this book and discovered the various story outcomes, these reflection questions might help you to process the story and what it may mean for your life. You can answer these in a group setting or individually, but either way, we challenge you to think about what you have learned through this experience.

Reflection questions:

1. What outcomes did your choices result in?
2. What were some of the frustrations you had as you went through this story?
3. Did you experience unexpected turns in the story? What were they?
4. Describe how it felt to come across situations that were unfair.
5. If you made decisions as a group, how did those conversations go? How did you decide which choice to make if there was a difference of opinion?
6. What are some of the things you've learned through this experience?
7. If you could have changed anything, what outcome would you have liked to see?
8. Do you regret any of the choices you made for the main character? Try reading an alternative story option!
9. What are some actions you think you could take in your own life to ensure that you don't get yourself into bad situations similar to those in the story?

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