

# *One Step Ahead – A Novel of Enlightenment*

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## **Prologue**

### **- India**

The cool mud oozed through Michael's toes as he waded out of the sacred Ganges River toward the riverbank. He felt intensely alive as he emerged from the water, completely naked, his spirit saturated with peace, tranquility, and euphoria.

The crowds swirled around him, but Michael paid them no heed. His battered feet had finally formed a thick callus and he walked up the stony embankment without a care in the world. There was screaming and wailing but Michael had gotten used to the crowds. Intuition came slowly tapping at his revelry however. These were not the shouts of religious rapture. Something was wrong.

“Stampede!”

Michael focused his attention, scanning the crowds as he walked.

“Stampede!”

He heard it that time. Someone just yelled “stampede.” He looked around. There were literally thousands of people in every direction; a condition that he had adjusted to, but something was wrong and there it was again.

“Stampede!”

There was no stampede around him, at least that he could see, not here at the river. But this time he saw the speaker. A woman in a green silk sari was shrieking it at a man. She was covering her own ears, as if to protect herself from her own voice. Michael stopped to listen as his unease grew. He couldn't understand everything she said, but he heard the words "stampede" and "train station" again and again.

Suddenly he remembered that today was the tenth. Sebastian and Medi would be at that train station this morning. Then Michael was running -- running toward the tent that had been his home these past weeks. He pushed his way through the crowds. He heard the words again as he ran.

"Train station... stampede." He took the corner at a run and nearly overturned an entire table of jewelry for sale.

"Sorry...sorry..." he gasped as he ran past, the crowd parting before him as he turned another corner. He heard his bare feet slap the muddy path and felt his heartbeat in his ears. He had to get to that train station. Another turn and he arrived at the tent to see his new friend Vaishnav sitting by the smoldering campfire. Vaishnav scrambled to his feet at the sight of this panting, dripping, naked man.

"Where is everyone?" Michael asked.

Not sure what to say, Vaishnav merely pointed at Michael's bloody side.

"What's going on?" Michael asked, his voice rising.

"There was a stampede. Very bad. Many killed. Very bad."

"Where are Sebastian and Medi?"

"They went to the station this morning Mr. Michael."

"Where do you keep the vehicle?" asked Michael, throwing open the flap of the tent and walking in with Vaishnav chasing behind.

“Vehicle, sir?”

“Yes, yes – you have a car or a truck or something for this ashram? You all got here somehow” said Michael, now on his hands and knees, digging his entire arm under one of the floor rugs.

“We have a truck in the back, but...” started Vaishnav.

“Great, get the keys, we’re going to Allahabad” said Michael, pulling out a very large wad of red and purple money from under the carpet.

Vaishnav stared at the huge roll of rupees in Michael’s hand, then at his bloody side again.

“You’re bleeding, sir.”

Michael looked down at his rib cage, as if for the first time, and wiped away the blood with his free hand. Then he stuck his finger under the flap of skin, studying it for a moment. Now he remembered that one of the Naga Sadhus had lanced the side of his rib cage with one of those long pole tridents.

“I’ll be fine. I guess this will be evidence that I was here. Where are those keys?” asked Michael, now walking toward the tent’s exit.

“Mr. Michael!” called Vaishnav.

“Yes?”

“Um. You’re not wearing any clothing.”

Michael looked down at his nakedness, then ran his hand over his bald head. No hair either. He had forgotten about that. He stood there, contemplating for a moment.

“I’ll get you a robe. Please wait!” said Vaishnav.

Michael took the towel that he’d been given for bathing and dried himself, dabbing at the blood on his side.

“Here you go, sir. Please take this. It is mine. You can keep it” said Vaishnav handing Michael the orange robe of their order.

Michael pulled on the robe and cinched it around his waist, stuffing the wad of rupees into the single pocket.

“Thank you Vaishnav. Come on, we have to go” said Michael, walking out of tent.

“We?”

Vaishnav followed Michael around to the back of the large tent structure where a single Nissan pickup truck was parked next to the parade float it had pulled into the festival with all of the monks riding on top.

“Do you know how to drive?” Michael asked. .

“Not really. It is not my truck sir. I don’t have...”

“Ok, you’d better pay attention then, because you’re going to need to drive it back when we get to town. Keys?” said Michael, getting into the driver’s seat and holding out his hand.

Vaishnav handed Michael the keys through the open window.

“Get in,” barked Michael slapping the seat next to him.

The moment Vaishnav climbed into the cab, Michael put the car into gear and it started to roll.

“You might want to close that door and buckle up” said Michael.

He drove the truck through the crowded streets of the Kumbh Mela, honking the horn as they made their way toward the entrance for the festival. There was a long line of cars separated by barricades, both waiting to leave the festival and waiting to come in. The traffic jam stretched as far as the eye could see. Michael steered the

truck around the car in front of him and knocked over the barricade that kept traffic to one lane, driving over it, and headed out over the patchy grass.

“Sir, I don’t think this is such a good idea” said Vaishnav.

“It will be fine. Now, I’m not kidding about that seatbelt” said Michael as he stepped on the gas.

The truck picked up speed and the stationary cars blurred by. There was now a large plume of dust billowing out behind the truck as it violently bounced Michael and Vaishnav around the cab like rag dolls. Vaishnav tried furiously to buckle his seatbelt, but every time he got close, the truck lurched again. Michael looked at him and smiled for the first time.

“I told you to buckle up” he yelled over the roar of the truck.

They were now going as fast as one could travel off road while still holding on to the wheel. Michael weaved back and forth around trees and the occasional cow.

Vaishnav had been covering his face ever since he finally managed to click his seatbelt buckle.

After another few miles, they could see the flashing emergency lights in the distance. He drove toward the lights but was greeted with a police barricade where officers were waving at cars to turn around. Michael glanced at his image in the rearview mirror and didn’t recognize the tan, bearded man with the shaved head looking back. The excitement of the wild ride had distracted him from his purpose. He needed to get to that station. His friends were there. He heard it in his head again “many killed – very bad.” This was the biggest day of the festival and the train station would be the major portal for hundreds of thousands of people coming and going. Millions.

“I guess this is where we say good bye for now, my friend” said Michael, putting the truck into park and leaping out.

Vaishnav reluctantly slid over to the driver's side and Michael handed him a stack of rupees from the wad in his pocket.

"For gas," he said. "Sorry for the trouble."

Before Vaishnav could respond, Michael was running toward the flashing lights and the crowds around the Allahabad train station. The police were positioned everywhere but none of them seemed to be doing anything, so Michael easily ran right past them and into the station.

Reaching the terminal, he was overwhelmed with the total chaos. Women wailing, men shouting, and children crying. It was a catastrophe. There were wounded people everywhere. Some cared for by medical workers and others carried away on stretchers. Michel pushed his way forward through the crowds. Finally, he got to a taped off section with a police officer standing at the threshold, holding a clipboard in hand.

"Excuse me. Can you please tell me what has happened? My friends were here" he asked.

"There was a stampede. Too many people. Too many. The train pulled in" the man motioned at the entrance on the other end of the platform, "and they pushed. They just pushed and pushed. Very bad. Lots killed, many hurt."

"How many? Killed?" he word stuck in Michael's throat.

"Thirty or forty"

Michael looked and saw the rows of bodies.

## Chapter 1

### – London

A woman's voice was speaking loudly into his ear and something sharp was poking into his belly.

“Wake-up sir. You must put your seat up, the plane is landing at Gatwick this very minute.”

In his dream, Michael imagined that his wife was telling him to do something – something that he couldn't quite understand. He was going to stand up to her this time, but when he turned to face her he found himself nose to nose with a frowning British Airways flight attendant who was struggling to straighten his seatback for him. She had one hand on his armrest button and the other was wrenching the seat forward. Still not entirely sure what was happening, Michael jerked up in his seat and bumped heads with her. She stood up with a start, cupping her eye with one hand. There was a red blush on her forehead, soon to be a bruise. Her British Airways hat slumped forward into her face in a cocked position making her look disheveled and unkempt.

She stood up straight, gathering herself and shook her finger at him.

“If you won't cooperate, sir, I'll have to report you to the captain.”

Then she spun on her heel and walked rapidly toward the forward section of the airplane. Michael began to feel that the plane was descending and looked around to find several people glaring at him in disapproval.

England. Right. He was flying to England..

The stout woman across the aisle continued to stare at him until he met her gaze. She looked away mumbling to no one in particular.

“Drugs,” she whispered “It must be drugs.”

Drugs? He had taken that pill. Never a good air traveler, Michael had taken a tiny tablet that he'd found in his wife Krista's collection of medicines. Pill bottles for her various maladies had grown to consume an entire shelf of the small linen closet in the bathroom that they shared. This one had been moved from its original bottle to one that had simply been labeled “sleep.” When it didn't work right away, as the plane headed out across the Atlantic from Detroit, Michael had ordered himself a scotch. This all came back to him as he removed the small green bottle from underneath his left leg.

The plane touched the runway with a rumbling thump and some of the passengers started to applaud. Michael looked to his right to see the same woman sneering at him as she clapped her hands in his direction.

“We have landed at Gatwick International Airport,” a voice from the speaker over his head announced.

Definitely London, he thought – the fog was clearing. The recollection of the trip came back to him slowly.

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His ultimate destination was India and this flight was only the first leg of his journey. First fly to London, then the Chunnel train to Paris, then fly to New Delhi. Not exactly the most direct route, but this had been Sebastian's idea.

Sebastian was Michael's best friend. That is if you can call someone a best friend if you see him only see once a year and usually with little warning or communication between visits.



Michael and Sebastian had met on youth mission trip to the Colorado Rockies nearly thirty years earlier when they were both fifteen. Michael had seen a flyer on the church bulletin board advertising a ski trip for the church youth group. In a rare moment of independence, he had gathered up his life savings and told his parents that he wanted to go. The group had actually been a multi-church, interdenominational group that would be taking a chartered bus from where he lived in Detroit all the way to Denver, a straight shot across the country.

“Running off to join the circus or something?” his father had teased. “What’s this all about?”

“It’s just a church group Dad. It’s affiliated with that Church of Nazareth near my school. It’s a ski trip.”

“The bible thumpers, huh? What’s skiing got to do with it?”

Michael’s parents attended a Methodist church occasionally when Michael and his brothers were little but were what people liked to call “Christmas and Easter” parishioners. Michael was surprised at how easily they had allowed him to take this trip at such a young age and with so little information.

After sitting by himself on the bus for nearly 18 hours, Michael started to second guess his decision to strike out in the world of travel. It was at this very moment of indecision that a boy of about fifteen had dropped into his life.

Michael had been looking out the window, watching the pastures roll by when, without warning, a shaggy haired Sebastian had swung into the seat next to him. He swung so hard in fact that he smashed Michael’s nose against the window. When Michael had turned to face his aggressor, he was met by a smiling boy wearing wrinkled preppy clothing, wild long hair and a mischievous smile. He held his hand out in greeting.

“These leaders haven’t got a clue. Lots of room for trouble this week.” He held out his hand a little further. “Sebastian Becker.”

“Michael Thomas.”

“Have you brought along any contraband?” asked Sebastian.

“Contra what?”

“Booze. Weed. Smokes. Explosives. You know – the sort of stuff these weenies,” he gestured toward the leaders in the front of the bus, “don’t want you to have.”

“Well, no but...”

“Shoot. Well, neither have I, but don’t worry – we’ll figure it out.”

They became fast friends and this trip had led to a rarely interrupted string of annual adventures around the country and one notable streak across the continent of Europe. Sebastian would show up in Michael’s life, each year. His parents were Christian missionaries and would move every year as if on some schedule. Merely by chance, they had moved to Michigan to stay for the two years of Sebastian’s junior and senior years of high school. Most of Dr. Becker’s assignments had not been as mundane as Detroit, Michigan. Shortly after high school graduation, the Beckers had moved to Hong Kong, and hadn’t stayed in a single country for this long since then.

Sebastian had attended a string of American prep schools along the way and eventually attended college in Oxford, England. This hadn’t stopped him from showing up somehow, remarkably, on Michael’s doorstep every year with some idea of an adventure. These adventures would range from canoeing the length of the Au Sable River, to driving the entire coast of the Eastern coast of the United States. One year, the two had hiked for ten days through the mountains

of New Mexico with only backpacks and a generous supply of Ramen Noodles. The trips had continued over the years and eventually became a point of contention between Michael and his wife Krista.

While reasonably attractive and always physically fit, Michael's appearance with Sebastian always caused people to do a double-take. Sebastian, with his rugged features and dirty blond hair tucked behind his ears looked like the cool kid that was forced to hang out with his cousin for the weekend. Sebastian's clothes were from the same era as Michael's, but he had a way of looking like he belonged in some catalogue from Maine rather than a teen dressed for church. Now, as they were both approaching 45, Sebastian simply looked like the adult section of the Maine catalogue.

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