

MOWGLI'S MISSIONARY
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Chapter One

The Missionary Brothers of St. Aurelius lived on simple rations, but Brother Jude was issued an especially small portion of floor. It usually sufficed, since he had few belongings to place upon it anyway. His thin straw mattress melded with the pliant pine boards. His three-legged (once four-legged) stool, tin pitcher and wash bowl took little space. Even the chamber pot, and the flies riding the warm breeze through his window to its alluring stench, found a respectful distance to only mildly foul the summer air.

But pacing his little piece of floor posed a challenge for Brother Jude this particular night; there wasn't room to walk off the chill that seized him despite the heat. He typically savored these evenings, so different from his summers on the east coast of the United States. There the Atlantic Ocean drenched the night with its sweat, making sleep an uncomfortable chore. Here in Nagpur, tucked in the center of the wide peninsula of India, the summer heat was dry and Jude even found it pleasant.

But tonight he shivered, and there just wasn't room to walk it off. He had the run of the corridor if he wished; the rest of the convent had reported to the chapel to chant compline, lifting the world to God in exchange for "a restful night and a peaceful death." Yet he remained in his cell, circling its clattery floor like a caged tiger, in a restless vigil of his own.

The Aurelian Brothers had charge of the St. Thomas Orphanage and Day School, one of a number of such facilities for boys in the region, and Jude cared for them with creativity that usually rose to the occasion. Take Santosh, the serious one, whose elusive smile Jude could elicit by rolling up his eyeballs and beaming at him with veined white orbs. Aghosh talked too much; Jude kept him babbling through meals so his empty stomach might teach him to listen. Jaldhar the bed-wetter brought Jude out of his cell before dawn to change the linen before Brother Zachary could scold him. He once allowed Dhiren, the small one who was often bullied, to bloody his nose during a staged altercation to earn him the fear of his tormentors.

But tonight he paced for a child he knew only through stories that came from some Seonee villagers by way of the English at Kahnhiwara.

A boy no more than twelve years old lived as a beast in the jungle, orphaned by a tiger's ambush and reared by wolves. They were said to have named him Mowgli, "Little Frog," because his skin was smooth and hairless. He spent three months in a Seonee village, expelled by the jealous wolves to live with his own. They accused him of sorcery for his enchanted way with animals, and drove him back to the jungle with stones and curses.

Soon the jungle unleashed a fury upon the villagers: an army of elephants, wild pigs, wolves and other creatures descended upon them, destroying their huts and pillaging their fields. Some blamed the attack on angry jungle gods, but many wondered if the wolf-child conjured the

plague with powers of black magic. They thought him a wild beast and a demon, and they hated him.

His cell no longer containing his gait Jude burst into the deserted corridor. Lanterns on both walls sent conflicting shadows swirling like ghosts, his brown woolen habit flapping with each step. He passed the empty cells of the Brothers who soundly rejected his proposal, though it seemed so obvious to him. Shouldn't they try to find this boy, bring him to the orphanage, and teach him that he's a child not of wolves or hateful villagers but of a loving Heavenly Father? Surely such a mission, as both a corporal and spiritual work of mercy, should be a priority for their order.

But the Brothers offered a litany of objections that were frustratingly rational.

"We don't know anything about the jungle."

"He probably can't speak, how would we communicate with him?"

"How would we even find him?"

"He could be insane; we can't handle a child like that."

"He could be violent."

"His parents were attacked, we could be too."

"God wouldn't call us to a mission we're not equipped to do."

They all made perfect sense. But a human child lived as an animal in the jungle, and that made no sense to Brother Jude.

His head smacked the wall at the end of the corridor, and he stumbled to lean against a door. When it gave way he toppled onto the floor of Brother Zachary's cell, the Superior's grating old voice echoing in his memory:

"We have a jungle full of boys right here...h-e-r-e...h-e-e-e-r-e...."

Brother Jude picked himself up, lumbered to the bamboo chair by the door, and took a seat. It was a position he first assumed in an Aurelian Superior's quarters at the age of seven, when he was deposited at their orphanage in Baltimore's "Pigtown" neighborhood (named for the animals herded through the streets on their way to the slaughter houses). His father, who drove horse-drawn trolley cars for the city, was killed when one of the horses turned wild and attacked him in the municipal stable. His mother died seven years before, spending her last breath to give him his first. He was turned over to the Missionary Brothers of St. Aurelius.

They were the only family he had, and he never gave them cause to oppose him. In his seventeen years in their fold, first as an orphan then a professed religious, he had never pursued anything out of their sense of the ordinary.

As his feet pumped the floor Jude closed his eyes and deepened his breathing. The Superior's room had an antiseptic smell so different from his own, and he absorbed as much of the sterile air as he could. As his lungs relaxed his legs followed suit, and his body embraced the calm. He was here, Brother Zachary would be returning soon, this might as well be the night.

But as the clip-clop of the Superior's footsteps began to echo in the corridor Jude's heart pounded again. Steadying himself against the returning chill he took another deep breath, another hard swallow, and offered a mumbled prayer.

As he crossed the threshold Brother Zachary's tired eyes fell upon Jude, and they closed with a groan. Knowing the protocol Jude rose to his feet, kissed the Superior's thin cool hand, and waited for him to speak. Brother Zachary collapsed into the chair Jude vacated and rubbed his eyes with dry, wrinkled fingers.

"How many times do we have to go through this?" sighed Brother Zachary in the Liverpudlian accent Jude found so quaint, often drawing him to the sound of his words rather than their content. "I'm not sending any Brothers to the jungle to search for a wild boy."

The well-rehearsed plea made its way from Jude's imagination to his tongue, like a cliff diver in the final anticipatory moment before taking the plunge. He squatted to meet Brother Zachary at his eye level, then knelt and reverently folded his hands.

"I'm not asking you to send anyone else," he said with a quiver.

He drew a breath deeper than necessary to utter the next few words, to give them extra lift as they flew toward their uncertain fate.

"I'm asking you to send me."

Brother Zachary's eyes rolled to their roofs, and then dropped with the rattle of his laughter.

"You? You don't know anything about the wild! How can you think that's even possible?"

Jude's eyes veered towards the floor.

"A little boy has survived there for years. Maybe I don't have to know much."

"He's survived perfectly well without you, and he's more of a menace than you can handle. The villagers say he's a sorcerer, that he controls animals and makes them violent. An entire village wouldn't fear and hate this boy if he wasn't dangerous."

“Hate does make people dangerous,” replied Jude softly, his eyebrows arching. “That’s why he needs love. Who needs it more than a child hated by an entire village?”

“And you have enough love to counter the rage of a village, to change this child from a beast to a boy, all by yourself?”

Jude continued to gaze at the floor, as Brother Zachary’s tone softened.

“Look, Brother Jude, you have a good heart, and I admire your concern for this boy, I really do. But you have to face reality. Even if I were to let you go, and you somehow managed to survive wandering among the cobras and the pythons, and the wild boar, and the wolves, and the elephants, and the crazed monkeys, and the jackals, and the tigers, and the bears, and the scavengers waiting for just one of them to catch you off guard...”

“If you were to let me go?” whispered Jude.

“...how are you going to teach a boy who’s lived his whole life as an animal, and probably thinks he’s an animal, when you’re just a novice teaching children who were raised as people?”

Jude’s head sank lower, and a grin creased the Superior’s face.

“This boy has no foundation to build anything. You don’t even know if he has language, on top of everything else. How do you expect to plant even the smallest seed in this hard patch of ground that’s never even been plowed?”

Jude’s chin rose, his eyes ventured towards Brother Zachary’s, and he spoke with a voice free of the trembling that hindered it until now.

“Mowgli is God’s child, so he’s able to know him.”

Brother Zachary’s mouth opened, but nothing emerged.

“And he has a right to know him. How can you be sure I’m not the one called to do the plowing?”

“How can you be sure that you are, with everything stacked up against you?”

Brother Jude shrugged, shook his head, and spoke with a voice not heard since his childhood.

“I just am.”

Brother Zachary drew his first notable breath of the evening, long and deep. Exhaling slowly he stood and sauntered toward the wall at the opposite end of the room where an image of Christ crucified monitored the conversation. After staring into the eyes of the corpus for several moments he turned and strolled toward his young ward.

“Consider the ravens,” he began. *“For they sow not, neither do they reap, neither have they storehouse nor barn, and God feedeth them. You have your own agenda for this boy, but God is already taking care of him in his own way, just as he cares for the animals he lives with.”*

“How much is he more valuable than they?” countered Jude with the same Scripture, following with: *“If a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them should go astray: doth he not leave the ninety-nine in the mountains, and go to seek that which is gone astray?”*

Brother Zachary didn't pause, pace, or even break his stare. He leaned toward Brother Jude, the tips of their noses repelling like magnetic poles, and spoke with rancid breath bent on killing everything in its path.

“You are forbidden to go. And this is the last I want to hear of it. You've got no business in the jungle, and without my permission, absolutely no right.”

Jude tried to swallow, but his parched throat rendered it a self-inflicted choke.

“Maybe someday a real missionary who knows what he's doing will find this boy and help him, but it won't be you. Your mission is here, with the children under our roof. If you disobey me you're through. These doors will never be open to you again, or the doors of any Aurelian house in the world, if you even survive the jungle and try to return. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, Brother Zachary,” replied Jude in a whisper.

The Superior straightened as much as his arthritic back would allow.

“Very well then, enough of this nonsense. Go get some sleep, Brother Jude. We've wasted enough of this night. You've got plenty of boys right here to look after in the morning.”

Brother Zachary waited for the obligatory sign of obedience. Jude rose, took the Superior's hand, and barely kissed it.

“Good night, Brother Zachary.”

Pulling back his hand like a frog's tongue that had its fly, the Superior turned and strode to his bed. Jude moved toward the door, one reflexive step following another, and wafted back into the dim and silent hallway.

A looming shadow magnified by the flickering light awaited him. Brother Nicholas, second-in-command at the St. Thomas Orphanage and Day School, greeted Brother Jude with an arm about his shoulders and a smile rather than a grin. They strolled down the corridor together.

“You were listening?” asked Jude.

“You weren't at compline, you weren't in your cell. I had a hunch this might be the night you got up the nerve to ask.”

Jude kept his eyes on his feet.

“It’s really for the best,” said Brother Nicholas. “Your love for this child is admirable, but also a bit irrational. You never would’ve survived a trip to the jungle, you know that. Brother Zachary has saved your life.”

“I suppose,” whispered Jude.

Brother Nicholas stopped and turned Jude to face him.

“Have confidence in the Lord with all thy heart, and lean not upon thy own prudence. In all thy ways think on him, and he will direct thy steps. Do you know what I’m saying to you, Brother Jude?”

He searched Brother Nicholas’s eyes.

“I think so.”

“All right, then. Keep the jungle boy in your prayers. That’s a powerful way to help him, don’t ever forget that.”

He gave Jude a brief embrace, which Jude returned lightly.

“Thank you, Brother,” he whispered.

Slipping from the hold Jude continued down the hallway alone, while a satisfied Brother Nicholas headed to his quarters.

Passing the door to his own cell Jude strode vacantly down the remaining swath of corridor, through the exit and into the moonlit courtyard. The vast night sky, the firm earth beneath, and the choir of tree frogs chanting all around were oblivious to any dilemma.

Have confidence in the Lord with all thy heart, and lean not upon thy own prudence. In all thy ways think on him, and he will direct thy steps.

He inhaled deeply of the warm air, but at first breath smelled something other than the night. The courtyard was laced with a slight haze of smoke, and the exquisite aroma of mild tobacco mixed with sweet molasses.

Beneath the stately columns of the banyan tree sat a brown skinned, thin haired little man in a ragged tunic. He inhaled deeply from a water pipe—known in these parts as a huqqa—smoke protruding from his leather lips and hairy nostrils. Occasionally fidgeting with a turban that was too small for his head, he smoked through a hoarse cough that tended to shift the hat along his scalp.

Jude smiled at the wizened little smokestack, and approached gently so as not to disturb his rhythmic combustion. He sat quietly beside him, stretching his legs while leaning back on his hands, and stared at the tiny glimpses of light the heavens ration to those in earth's darkness.

"Looks like you've fixed the leaks in the roof, Arun. Jaldhar's the only one waking up wet, and I don't think you can fix his leak."

Arun smiled, smoke slithering through the spaces in his teeth.

"That's your project. I've got lots more to fix in this old ruin."

Arun offered him the huqqa. Jude took the pipe and inhaled slowly.

"The Brothers are all in bed, what keeps you up?" asked Arun, scratching his sparse layer of beard with yellow fingernails.

"The boy," replied Jude, before taking a longer draw. "Only now it's over."

The Brothers thought Arun a strange choice for Jude's closest confidant. Raised to be a mahout, an elephant handler, Arun was taught as a boy to train the gentle pachyderms to perform in Hindu temple rituals by poking them into obedience with a sharp ankus. The practice repulsed him, as soon did all religion, which he likewise considered nothing more than a conditioned response to pain.

But Jude found him refreshingly candid, and openly shared with the handyman intimacies he could not with the Brothers.

He recounted the entire conversation, including Brother Zachary's warning of banishment if he were to disobey.

"You're assuming you would've failed," suggested Arun, "and would've needed a place to return?"

"No... well, maybe," said Jude through a cough. "But even if I succeeded, where would I have brought Mowgli once I found him and led him to the Lord?"

The question drew a chuckle from Arun.

"This Lord of yours must have a small operation if the Aurelian Brothers are the extent of it."

"Well of course they're not," replied Jude with a blush. "But... but they're all I have, they're all I've ever had. I wouldn't know where to go if they closed their doors to me."

"So are you relieved it's over?"

Jude took another slow draw from the huqqa.

“I don’t know, maybe. At least I don’t have to fret about it anymore. But I can’t stop thinking about him, Arun. I can’t stop wondering what might’ve been.”

Arun took back the huqqa. He drew deeply and held the smoke for a moment before letting it spill out in slivers.

“Why is this boy so important to you? I understand your sympathy for him, anyone would feel that. But why do you so badly want to find him, to be the one to rescue him?”

The chill returned, and Jude rose to resume his pacing. Tears began to moisten the red rims of his eyes. He paused a few feet from his inquisitive friend and stared into the night sky.

“That wretched St. Francis,” muttered Jude with a tremble. “My father and his wretched St. Francis.”

Arun’s eyebrows raised, adding even more wrinkles to his forehead, and he put aside the huqqa.

“He talked to birds and fish, you know,” said Jude, the mist in his eyes failing to rinse the sarcasm from his voice. “He had all kinds of animal friends, even a wild wolf he stopped from terrorizing a village—by talking to it, for God’s sake. Can you believe that?”

He turned to Arun, who shrugged.

“My father wanted to be just like him. Everything in Papa’s world revolved around the animals he loved. That’s all he had after Mama died.”

Arun nodded, and picked up the huqqa to take another draw.

“‘Animals were the first to see baby Jesus,’ he told me, ‘so at midnight on Christmas Eve God allows them to speak.’ I asked him to bring me to the stable to hear his horses talk, but he’d say I was too young. ‘Someday, son, you’ll hear the animals speak and praise their creator.’ I even prayed grace for his horses when I helped feed them, thinking they were no different from me. I was a regular little St. Francis myself.”

He took a few more steps, raised his eyes once more to the sky, and closed them tightly.

“And then one of his beloved horses...one of those vulgar, filthy animals...”

Tears began to fall, as a brief sob interrupted his speech.

“The Aurelians set me straight. It took a while to put those childish stories behind me, but I learned. Animals aren’t anything special, they’re the stupidest creatures. Selfish, stupid, violent creatures.”

“That’s what they taught you when you were a boy?”

“They taught me that only man is made in God’s image, only man has the breath of God inside him. Jesus Christ, not some dirty animal, is how a man comes to know God and to know himself.”

He pointed past the silent buildings of Nagpur in the direction where the jungle lay somewhere in the distance.

“But out there is a boy, a *human* boy, who thinks he’s one of them. He’s a child of God, a temple of the Holy Spirit, but he thinks he’s a beast. How can I let that be? How can anyone let that be?”

Arun spewed another mouthful of smoke and rose to face Brother Jude.

“Is there any other reason you want to look for this boy?”

Jude’s eyes seared Arun’s.

“What other reason could there be?”

Arun drew a breath, then held it. He now felt the need to pace, and moved haltingly toward the iron gate that separated the St. Thomas property from the rest of the world. His limp, the indelible mark of an accident years before, propelled him slowly. He paused to stare through the bars.

“I agree that the jungle is no place for a boy. It wasn’t for me...”

He sighed, turned to face Jude, and slowly limped toward him.

“...and it can’t be for anyone else.”

He continued his approach as Jude watched with wide eyes.

“It’s a dangerous place, but I survived, even with this useless leg.”

Arun placed his hands on Jude’s shoulders, and looked into the considerable depth of his wet eyes.

“If you really need to do this, I’ll go with you.”

Sweat formed on Jude’s forehead, like a monsoon striking without warning. The butterflies in his stomach morphed into bats, churning a wave of nausea that crashed up to his throat. His voice digressed to a child-like pitch.

“They won’t let you back, either,” he managed to squeak.

“I’ve been homeless before,” said Arun with a shrug. “I can help you navigate that too.”

Jude looked into Arun's cracked, hardened face and the soft, gentle eyes embedded there, and his glands stopped their sweaty flow. He turned to the dark and silent windows of the convent, curtains swaying with the breath of sleep, and his stomach calmed. He stared at the heavens, so far away yet so near, and he breathed calmly.

He looked to the extinguished horizon, where the jungle lay hidden somewhere beneath its fold, and once again began to shiver. The unfettered gate that now commanded his attention offered only one promise: plenty of room to walk it off.

Chapter Two

A full moon hovered over the jungle, illuminating only a colorless outline of the vibrant world that lay beneath. Mowgli reclined on a rock on the bank of the Waingunga River, the life source for both flesh eating and plant eating animals. He gazed at the night sky, starlight produced generations before only now reaching his eyes, and lifted a hand to trace its patterns. Though a breeze rustled his long hair and pushed the tall trees engulfing him these small, delicate objects held aloft by nothing remained unmoved and brilliant.

His eyes wandered to the tree tops, where flying fox sailed from one branch to another in search of juicy berries. He followed the thirsty tree shrews as they swirled down the trunks, for the soft evening hours brought many to the river to drink. There they met a variety of creatures: anteaters aiming their long snouts and tongues at the earth, blunt-headed capybaras chewing tree bark, peacocks vainly spreading their tails though the darkness hid their colors, and leopards prowling freely without causing alarm—even the porcupines' quills remained flaccid.

Often prey would scout for predators before daring to approach the waters, risking death for a few swallows of life. But tonight Mowgli reclined on a rock, and at least in this bend of the Waingunga all could drink and bathe in security and peace in the calming presence of the man cub.

We are of one blood, you and I was the Master Word of the jungle; it put all creatures within earshot at peace. It was the Master Word that turned Mowgli from a potential meal for Chil the Kite to a friend of the scavenger bird when he was captured by the Banderlog, the lawless monkeys. It was the Master Word that put Mowgli at peace with the poisonous cobras when he was cast into their pit at the Cold Lairs. And it was the Master Word the man cub proclaimed this night of the full moon to put all creatures at ease when the dewanee—the madness—might otherwise overtake them.

He gazed at Bagheera the black panther as he stretched and sharpened his claws on the bark of a dhak tree. The moonlight reflected off the cat's shiny black coat, light and darkness blending fluidly.

He turned to the nearby brush where his four Wolf Brothers wrestled on the hard earth. Raksha, their mother who adopted Mowgli as a toddler, earned her name ("The Demon") through the same skill in the fight her litter inherited. Tonight the tussle was for pleasure, for sport, and for building a bond which might someday save them from death.

In the moon shade of the mowha tree sat Baloo the brown bear, eating the waxy blossoms and thinking of many things. Baloo taught wolf cubs the Law of the Jungle, and Mowgli was an apt though not always patient pupil. He learned well the moral code that was so civil and wise: one that forbade killing for choice rather than need, forbade all killing in times of draught, and had many other features Mowgli wished man could learn.

A splash in the shallows turned his attention there. Hathi the elephant and his three sons offered their trunks for anyone wanting a moonlit shower. While Baloo taught Mowgli the law

Hathi gave him insight to understand. His stories and wisdom helped shape the boy into the much-loved and respected leader of the jungle he had become.

Piercing the calm was Kaa the rock python, who slithered toward his friends' encampment with an uncharacteristic sense of urgency. A creature who ate only once a month and spent much of the interval lounging, to motor his thirty-foot body at such speed caused alarm. Mowgli leapt from the rock and ran to his friend, cradling the python's diamond-shaped head in his lap while the others circled around.

"What's wrong, Kaa?"

"I bring dreadful news" panted Kaa, taking a moment to compose himself. "In the western glades sleep two man hunters, the most terrible I've ever seen."

"Man hunters? Buldeo?" asked Mowgli, surprised the old man may be making another attempt on his life. Buldeo was the jealous hunter who incited the villagers against him. He accused him of sorcery after Mowgli enlisted the aid of wolves to kill Shere Kahn with a buffalo stampede, entitling the boy to the tiger's bounty that Buldeo wanted and for which Mowgli had no use.

"Far worse than Buldeo, I fear," hissed Kaa. "One wears a death pendant about his neck."

"A death pendant?" asked Mowgli. "I've never heard of such a thing. What does it look like?"

"It's hideous. It bears the image of a murdered man, lying with his arms spread apart, nails driven through his hands and feet."

"How brazen," muttered Bagheera, "to announce their mission to kill with such a dreadful pendant. These must be the most evil of men."

"You said there were two," said Mowgli.

"Yes, but only one wears the pendant."

"To kill a man in such a way would call for more than two," pondered Bagheera. "At least two or three would be needed to pin him down while another strikes the nails. What an unsportsmanlike manner of hunt."

"Do they have any weapons?" asked Mowgli.

"Each has a knife in a sheath about his neck, like the one you brought back from the village."

"No muskets?"

“No, nothing else, save a string of beads carried by the one who wears the death pendant. It too has the image of a murdered man dangling from the end.”

“For strangling, perhaps?” offered Bagheera.

“Or whipping, as the beads would leave painful welts,” suggested Kaa.

“But still,” said Mowgli, “two men, no muskets, only knives that would make them no match for the fury of the jungle if we were to unleash it upon them.”

“Unless they’re scouts for the Man Pack,” said Bagheera, “to lead the villagers back for revenge.”

“But that’s the puzzling piece,” hissed Kaa. “The one who wears the death pendant is not of the village. He’s white skinned; only his companion is brown like you, Little Brother.”

The only white skinned men known to Mowgli were a tribe called the English, to whom the villagers fled for refuge at Kahnhiwara. But Mowgli heard only good things of the English, how they were temperate and fair-handed, tolerating none of the vigilante tactics employed by Buldeo and the villagers whose fears were so easily flamed.

“Kill!” proclaimed a cry from above. Chil the Kite, silhouetted across the full moon, circled gradually downward until he was close enough to stop eavesdropping and properly join the conversation.

“You erred in chasing Buldeo rather than killing him,” scorned Chil. “Man kills and will return to kill, ever since he learned from the First of the Tigers.”

“You speak with your stomach instead of your head,” said Mowgli, reproving the scavenger who fed on dead creatures. “You know what the Law of the Jungle says about killing man, and why.”

The Law of the Jungle forbade killing man except when teaching one’s young to kill, and then only outside one’s own hunting grounds. It brought the Man Pack into the jungle seeking revenge.

“Every law has exceptions,” purred Bagheera, “and this could be such a case. The type of murder called for by the death pendant requires many executioners. To protect our Little Brother we may have to fight these men to the death.”

Mowgli’s stomach turned. He was no stranger to a fight, and he knew how it felt to kill. He executed Shere Kahn, and anticipated a deadly battle with Shere Chor, his reclusive brother who was rumored to seek revenge.

But he had smelled human blood, and it sickened him.

Messua, the kind woman from the village who took him into her home, had been cut by the thongs that bound her when Buldeo's mob tried to kill her for harboring the boy. Mowgli vowed he would never smell that scent again.

"Sit beside me Little Brother," said Baloo. His eyes had been momentarily closed for thought rather than sleep. The wise bear who taught Mowgli the Law of the Jungle with patience yet firmness beckoned for the man cub to recline against his side.

"Man errs in judging his brothers before the facts are known," began the sage, putting a paw around the boy's shoulders. "You would be foolish to land in the same trap."

"I know I shouldn't doubt you, Baloo," said Mowgli, still bearing bruises from when the bear taught him not to doubt. "But how can I know the facts?"

"If everyone cooperates we can learn together."

And as the full moon yielded its soft beam to the approaching daylight Baloo laid out a plan to confront the white man with the death pendant and his companion, and to learn the nature of their mission.

Chil the Kite was charged with tracking the men's progress by day and Mang the Bat by night, alerting everyone to their whereabouts. A good location was crucial; they were not to confront them until Baloo determined the time and place were right. The creatures in company with Mowgli agreed to steer clear of the men and even protect them, so they might receive the fair trial Baloo had devised.

Once word spread the animals who opposed Mowgli vowed to leave the men alone as well, in the hope they really meant to harm him. If not, they would have two more to hunt as prey. For the Law of the Jungle, like any other law, has many who follow but too many who don't.

With a plan carefully crafted and implemented both the obedient and the lawless opened wide the jungle's welcome, and eagerly awaited the encounter of the man cub with the mysterious intruders.

Chapter Three

The creatures of this jungle lived with varying degrees of fear of each other, but dread of two common enemies bound them as powerfully as the Master Word: man and his fire. The summer months brought plenty of each to the easternmost edge, and the animals avoided this macabre sector of their world.

Wild sugarcane grew in the east, and the Man Pack performed a frightening ritual at harvest time. They set entire fields on fire, flames ravaging once tranquil groves. Men then foraged the smoldering remains with large blades, slashing the charred stalks and stuffing them into bags while leaving behind the ashen debris. For days the jungle was plagued with the dark and dirty sky only man concocts with his fire and his war.

The animals didn't know this eased the men's labor: it burned away leaves that would otherwise be removed manually, killed damaging parasites, and provided ash to fertilize the fields for future growth. All they knew was their eyes stung and their throats choked from the acrid vapor if they drew too close.

But what is frightening to an animal can be fascinating to a little boy. Five-year old Sabu was mesmerized by the sugarcane fires. From his perch on a tree limb outside the burning zone he gazed with pounding heart at its power. It grew so quickly from a few kindled leaves to a blaze that engulfed the entire field, releasing its gases in an even more spectacular manner than he. (The excitement of the show often caused him to pass his own with a shudder of laughter.)

For days afterward Sabu and his parents swung machetes in the summer heat, harvesting the cane so its sweet delicacies could be enjoyed by people who considered their family to be, at best, one step above animal feces.

Abhay and Sahiba Sumer and their son were Dalits—"untouchables"—the shunned refuse on the floor of India's caste system. As field laborers they obtained one of the least objectionable occupations available to them; burying corpses or hauling away excrement from ground latrines were more common tasks for their lot. Chopping sugar cane day in and day out was monotonous, but better than many lines of work.

But it could not erase the indignity of being an "untouchable," which Abhay knew all too well: being spat upon for letting his shadow fall on a superior, or beaten for walking through the neighborhood of a higher caste. It was the only life he had known, it was all he would ever know, and it was all his son would know as well. All because of the sins of a past life for which there was no redemption, only the curse of repeating this misery life after life after life.

But Sabu found wonder in the work. Swinging a machete made him feel big and powerful, inciting fantasies of swashbuckling adventures he had never heard about but intuited as somewhere in the human experience. Even the ash, the remains of the cremated fields, fascinated the boy as he gathered handfuls and let it sift through his bony fingers to the scorched earth that hungered for anything dropped its way.

But his favorite part was the climb to the tree tops to watch the fire spread.

As a new field was torched Abhay climbed a tree to join his son. Sabu wrapped his arms around his father, gave him a squeeze, and looked with vibrant eyes into Abhay's more pensive orbs.

"Isn't it beautiful, Babu?" said Sabu with a smile. "How does the fire get so big and strong so quickly?"

"I don't know, son," said Abhay. "I wonder the same thing about you."

Sabu smiled again and gave his father another well-muscled hug.

"It is beautiful, son, but there's something so much more beautiful I want you to see."

He carefully turned around, draped his legs across the other side of the limb, and placed his son on his lap.

"Look over there," said Abhay, "way off in the distance. Do you see what's out there?"

"Yes," said Sabu, squinting, "the western part of the jungle. It's very pretty."

"It's beautiful. Take a good look at it, Sabu, see how different it is from what's behind you. Nothing burns over there, nothing gets cut down. It's always alive, clean, and colorful."

"It looks wonderful," whispered the boy, gazing at the far away world. "Can we go there sometime?"

"I want to so much," answered Abhay softly. Then after a pause he gently took his son's chin in his hand and turned the boy's eyes toward his. "I want us to live there."

Sabu took another wide-eyed look at the distant western jungle.

"Live over there?"

"Yes, leave all this behind and start a new life."

The boy turned around and looked at the fire.

"But if nothing burns there, Babu, what would we do? There'd be no work for us."

"That's exactly why I want to go. There'd be plenty for us to do, but we would decide. There wouldn't be anyone to give us orders, to yell at us or beat us. We could do whatever we want, live the way we want, gather food just for ourselves, not work in these dirty fields for others who hate us."

Sabu turned his glance from the burning cane field back to his father.

“Does Maa know about this?”

Abhay sighed.

“Yes son, she does.”

“Does she want to go too?”

The question led Abhay deep into his memory, where he became momentarily lost.

“It’s too dangerous, Abhay,” said Sahiba the first time he raised the idea. “We don’t know anything about that part of the jungle. We could die there.”

“And this is living? Breathing smoke, swallowing ash, swinging a machete when your arms are so tired you can’t even feel them? Being cursed, spit on, considered worthless, like some god defecated and left you on the ground?”

She reached to touch him gently on a forearm which for the moment had stopped swinging.

“*You* are my life,” she said softly, “you and Sabu. And I wouldn’t have either of you if we weren’t Dalits.”

Tenderness managed to quell his rage, aroused by this young girl whose quiet and gentle companionship had been planned for him at a young age.

Even among untouchables marriages were arranged. Abhay’s family spotted Sahiba when they were toddlers, for it was clear even then she was as industrious as she was beautiful. She showed the marks of becoming a productive wife whose hard work would contribute to a family’s livelihood, for everyone in a Dalit family must work.

Sabu had Sahiba’s best qualities: gentleness, seriousness of purpose, quiet but not timid, along with Abhay’s determination filtered through Sahiba’s moderation. They were his treasures, and they deserved so much more than their lowly status could offer.

“I know you don’t understand, Sahiba, but you have to trust me. At least within this family I’m still a man, and I have to do what’s best for us.”

She laid her head silently upon his chest and listened as his heart beat with his words.

“We’ll just sneak away, nobody’s going to care. We’re expendable, there are plenty more to take our place.”

“I don’t know,” said Sahiba. “At least here we have the company of others. We have friends. Who will be in the jungle? Only animals.”

“I’d rather live as a man among animals than as an animal among men. And Sabu deserves better than this too.”

Sahiba held him close.

“Yes, he does,” she whispered.

Abhay gently turned her face towards his with his calloused hands.

“Do you trust me?” he asked.

“I trust you, I don’t trust the jungle.”

He kissed her gently, and held her again to his chest.

“I trust the jungle more than I trust men. Things will be better there. They can only be better.”

The memory of the embrace led Abhay back to the present, and to his son who embraced him now.

“It’s not a matter of whether Maa wants to go. We have to.”

He held his son as they looked once again to the western jungle while the cane fields burned behind them, their vibrant crackle gradually diminishing to a deadly groan.

As evening concluded their final day as untouchables Abhay sat his family down away from the other laborers.

“We’ll no longer have to work in the hot, dry dust, we’ll have colors and shade and plenty to eat, clean air to breathe, and nobody can tell us what to do.”

“Will I get to play with the animals?” asked Sabu.

“Of course,” replied Abhay.

Sabu jumped and danced in a circle.

“Yay! I’ll get to play!”

“We’ll have to be careful,” said Sahiba to Sabu while looking at Abhay. “Not all animals are friendly or can be played with.”

“That’s okay,” said Sabu, “the ones we make friends with will protect us from the bad ones. Oh Bapu, Maa, I’ll get to play! I’ll get to play!”

They watched as their son danced in front of them, laughing and calling the few animal sounds he knew. Sahiba bit her lip.

“I still don’t know if it’s the right thing to do,” she whispered.

“It’s right,” Abhay whispered back. “Just look how even the thought of playing instead of working has made him so happy. You’ll see.”

He took her into his arms and held her close.

“We’ll leave tonight. The moon is full, it will guide our steps. Things will be so much better tomorrow. You’ll see.”

And as they waited for the moon to reach its apex they held each other close and watched Sabu dance.