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## THE GURU AND GOLD SASH

As always, India and I were excited to set out on a new adventure together.

We made our way along the Venice Beach boardwalk early one morning in May 2011—past the maze of street performers, mystics, artists, funky shops, and bikinied girls on roller skates—until we reached our destination: a modern-looking duplex a block from the ocean.

It was our first day of a five-day “personal and professional growth” seminar called Executive Success Programs (ESP)—a course, I was told, intended for people looking to bolster their business acumen and develop their communication skills; entrepreneurs who wanted to be successful and make money, but in an ethical, humanitarian way.

“It’s *conscious* capitalism,” an acquaintance of mine, who’d been urging me to sign up for months, told me. “And it’s the best thing I have ever done. *Truly life changing.*”

A business seminar, life changing?

Hmm. I’d heard *that* line before.

At fifty, I was a veteran of the self-help, self-improvement, self-realization genre. In an effort to overcome a tenacious, life-threatening eating disorder that I’d struggled with from age sixteen up until my midthirties, I tried every kooky idea out there that promised to heal my body, enlighten my mind, and, hopefully, save my life.

In no particular order, I’d been rolfed, rebirthed, chelated, Deeksha-ed, magnetized, fêng shui-ed, baptized, ozoned, watsu-ed, and hypnotized. I’d meditated, chanted, 12-stepped, past-life-regressed, fasted, rehabbed, and sweated in lodges. I’d listened to Jungians, herbalists, angels, yogis, shamans, astrologers, Apache medicine men, Buddhist monks, Chopra, Robbins, Kabbalah, the maharishi who hung out with the Beatles, the constellations, and even my own dreams.

I drank a Peruvian tea that makes you hallucinate and vomit; I ran across hot coals and floated in sensory deprivation tanks; I flung myself off a sixty-foot telephone pole in the middle of a winter blizzard in Oklahoma.

I did everything I could to try freeing myself from the addictive clutches of a disorder that held me in its grip. Subsequently, self-help became a way of life. A badge of honor.

Did any of them help? Some did, some didn’t. It always seemed that the more they cost, the less effect they had.

What my experiences did do for me was make me skeptical about anyone or anything that promised to have The Answer and guaranteed to *truly change your life*. My life and I were just fine now, thank you very much. I’d recently entered a new decade and made peace with my past and with myself. I was done looking for that one magical, miraculous recipe that would make me perfect.

Life didn’t work that way, I’d learned. And human perfection was an oxymoron.

My sweet India, on the other hand, was a young woman on the threshold of seeking, trying, questioning, and experiencing everything life had to offer—as one should be at nineteen.

Back home after a year studying entertainment media at Bay State College in Boston, she was head over heels in love with her high school sweetheart, Hudson, and embarking on a new business

venture with a friend: a gluten-free baking company called Scrumptious Soul.

India was a born entrepreneur and foodie. As a little girl, she watched the Food Network as passionately as other kids watched cartoons. At six, she was whipping up those premixed, chemical-filled Easy-Bake Oven cakes (that Mom ate dutifully with a smile), and by seven, she'd graduated to artfully arranged vegetable and *burrata* platters (that Mom devoured!).

When we'd attended the ESP introductory meeting three months earlier, she'd been in the happy throes of creating her company and shooting a pilot for a potential TV series about their mobile bakery truck called *Food Angels*.

I was helping her launch this dream career of hers, so the opportunity to take a course that would hone India's business skills (and in a *humanitarian* way!) sounded like a good idea.

India and I sat in a rented conference room with a small group of other wannabe entrepreneurs, ready and eager to hear how to be successful businesswomen with heart.

Mark Vicente, a high-ranking member of ESP, began by explaining that the program was based on a revolutionary, patent-pending "technology" called Rational Inquiry, created by a scientist and philosopher named Keith Raniere.

"As we develop, we form beliefs about ourselves and the world, often innocently making associations that are inconsistent with reality," said Mark. "Our technology allows you to uncover, reexamine, and integrate these mistaken perceptions. We offer you the tools for removing errors of cognition and for creating consistency . . ."

Right around there, I started daydreaming—then perked up when I heard Mark say that this guy Keith had an IQ of 240, which apparently was in *Guinness World Records*. Really? Was that even possible? I'd never heard of anyone breaking the 200 barrier, not even Einstein. And this Raniere guy obviously wasn't a devotee of physicist-cosmologist Stephen Hawking, who said a few years earlier that "people who boast about their IQ are losers."

Mark continued to boast:

"He's been recognized as one of the world's top three problem solvers. He has an estimated problem-solving capability of one in four hundred twenty-five million with respect to the general population."

Whatever that meant. If he was the third best problem solver in the world, I wanted to know who the first and second were! Still, number three was pretty impressive. Mark Vicente was known and respected in the entertainment industry, so I assumed he wasn't making up this shit. He'd cowritten, directed, and produced the 2004 indie hit *What the Bleep Do We Know!?*—a spiritual, existential documentary about quantum physics and how consciousness shapes the material world.

After Mark's pitch, a handful of current ESP devotees got up in front of the room and proselytized about how much better their lives were because of the program. A pretty brunette, who I would later find out was Sarah Edmondson, an accomplished Canadian actress in her late thirties, stood up to give a charismatic close, avowing that "ESP is the key to success and happiness." With Mark, Sarah was the co-owner of the Vancouver ESP center, and she was hosting this introductory course with him.

Again I heard the term *life changing*. It was about more than just business, they stressed; it was about learning tools that would improve all of mankind.

What tools, you ask? So did a bunch of us in the room, including me, who couldn't make heads or tails of what they were saying. Mark was expounding some kind of lofty, noble ideology, but it wasn't clear how they or we were supposed to achieve it.

Apparently, we'd have to wait a little while longer to find out. None of those details could be divulged in the slightest until *after* we made an initial down payment on the very special, time-limited \$2,400-per-person discount rate that would end imminently.

It was all very top, top secret because their material was "proprietary," Mark said with a reverential tone, and people were always trying to steal it and copy it.

“You do *not* want to miss this *deal of a lifetime*,” one of the coaches urged us.

*Oh, pleaseeeeee*, I thought, trying not to let any of them see me roll my eyes.

I turned to India, assuming she would have seen through the snake oil tactics as well.

“This is for me,” she said resolutely. “I want to do this, Mom. And I want you to do it with me.”

Later, I would wonder desperately what attracted her so powerfully. I think it was their talk about creating more joy in the world and improving mankind. Ever since she was born, India was good and kind to her core and drawn to help others. She was the family mediator who rushed to diffuse anger and find common ground when a squabble was brewing among siblings and parents. With her light touch and disarming sense of humor, there was an artistry to her diplomacy.

She couldn’t stand violence or to see anyone get hurt, and acted as warrior and protector for those who were. In those instances, her touch could be bolder. When she was nine and at summer camp with her younger stepbrother, Cappy, she saw him being picked on and pushed around by a group of bigger, older bullies. She marched straight up to the bullies, unafraid, and demanded, “Leave my brother alone!” The boys scampered away.

Around that same time, she also showed a wisdom and empathy beyond her years. I took her with me to Italy when I was shooting *The Omega Code* in 1999, and, as usual, little India had an impact on everyone she met, in the most beautiful way.

We were filming in the Castello Orsini-Odescalchi, a fifteenth-century castle just north of Rome (Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes would marry there a few years later in what would become Scientology’s most extravagant and highly publicized wedding of all time), and the director invited India to be an extra in one of my scenes. They made a big to-do: the costume person took her out to get a new dress, and they did her hair and makeup in the trailer, sitting right next to me. She loved it!

India always had a luminous, ethereal quality about her, but as soon as they put her under the lights, she looked . . . magical.

“Remember, angel face, don’t look into the camera,” I reminded her in a whisper before the director called “Action!”

She looked at me like I’d just said the most asinine thing in the world to her.

“I *know* that, Mom!”

As the camera rolled, I watched her out of the corner of my eye; she knew exactly where to go and what to do. I was so proud! She was a natural. Later, as Linda the makeup artist powdered her nose in between takes, India looked at her seriously.

“Linda, even though you’re smiling,” she said, “and I heard you tell someone with my rabbit ears that you’re happy, you don’t have to lie about your feelings. Kids always know the truth.”

Linda looked at her, stunned. She had indeed been going through a difficult time all week but was trying not to show it.

“But it’s okay,” India continued. “Don’t worry. You may not be happy now, but you will be—soon.”

Linda nearly fell over backward. Everyone was amazed at how precocious and compassionate India was.

So back to the ESP introductory meeting: I imagine their promise of creating a better, more ethical workplace and happier world appealed to India. Whatever it was, I put aside my skepticism, took out my credit card, and checked and signed some paperwork they’d handed me without much scrutiny.

What appealed to *me* was spending time and sharing a new experience with my daughter—that, I was always interested in.