

*The*  
**GOLDEN KEY**  
*of*  
**GANGOTRI**

**ALSO BY EYAL DANON**

Before the Kids and Mortgage

The Principle of 18

*The*  
**GOLDEN KEY**  
*of*  
**GANGOTRI**

**EYAL N. DANON**



## **The Golden Key of Gangotri**

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Published by Blue Branch Press, Tenafly, NJ

ISBN 978-1-7362994-2-5 (paperback)

ISBN 978-1-7362994-3-2 (eBook)

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Publishing consultant: David Wogahn, [AuthorImprints.com](http://AuthorImprints.com)

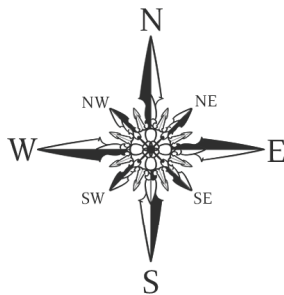
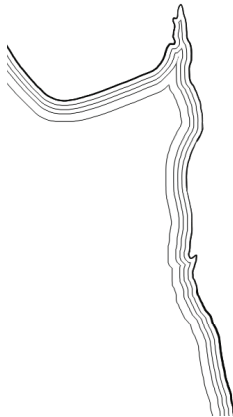
To my children,  
Maya, Jonathan and Daniel

“Our deepest fears are like dragons  
guarding our deepest treasure.”

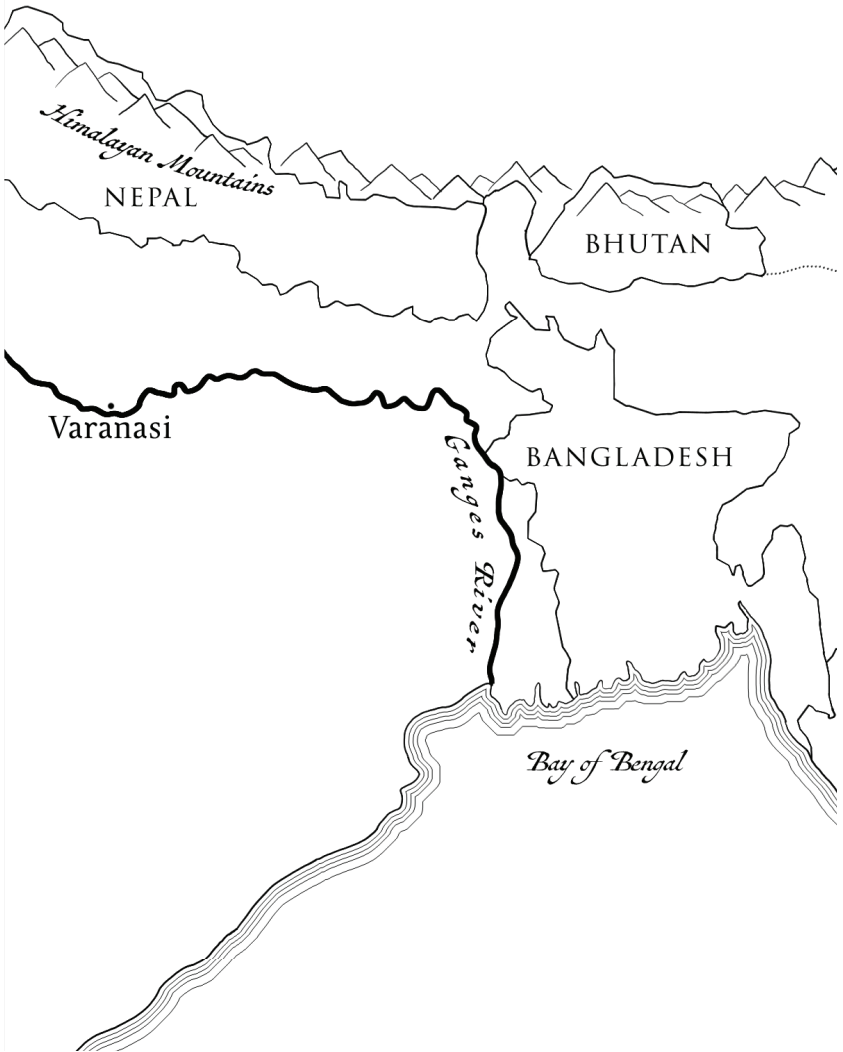
— Rainer Maria Rilke



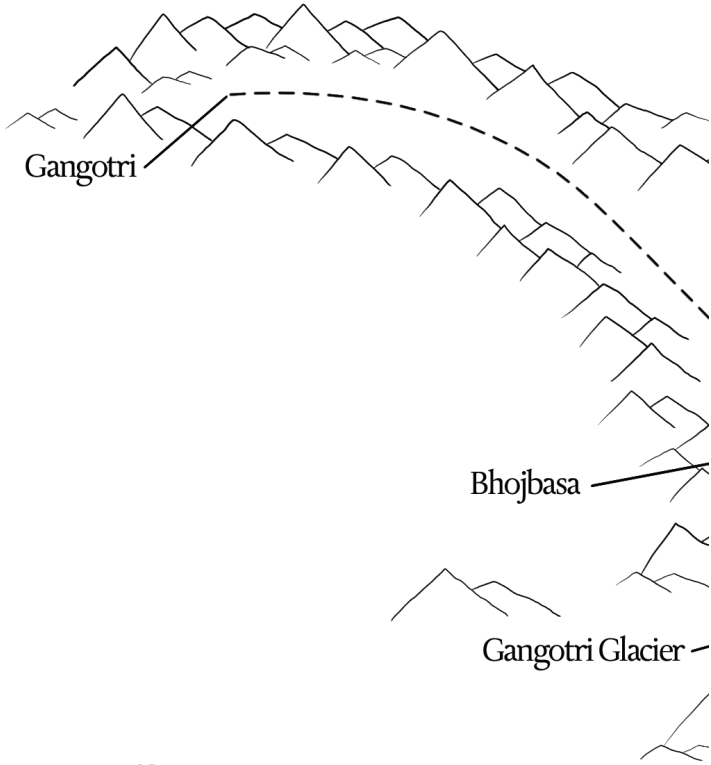
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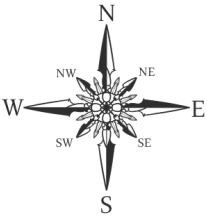


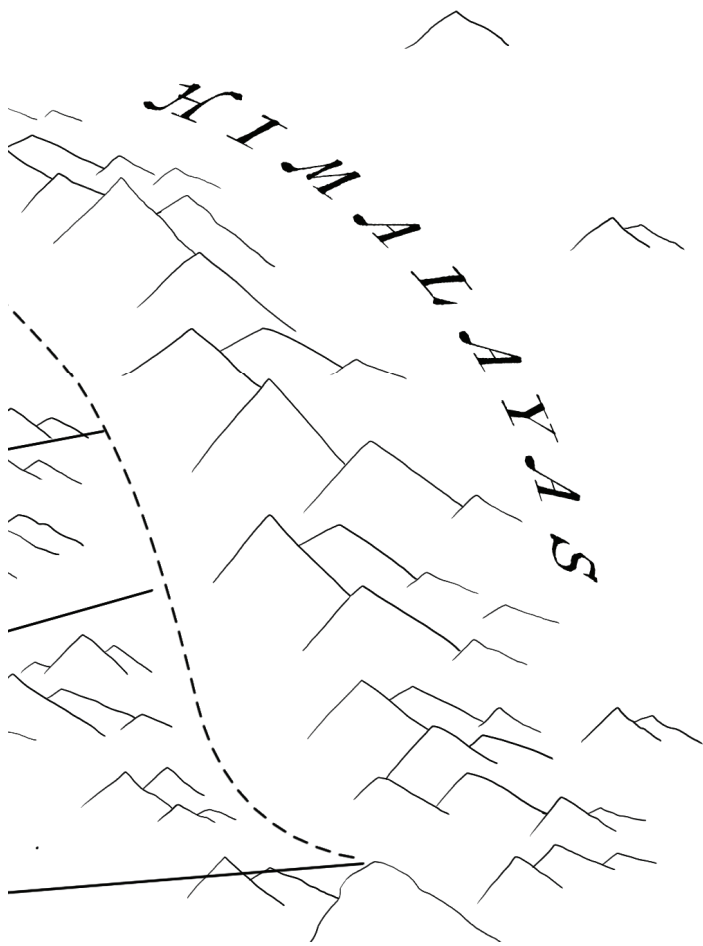
Gangotri

Bhojbasa

Gangotri Glacier

Tapovan





## CHAPTER 1

HARLEY FELT A TAP ON her shoulder and opened her eyes. The passenger sitting beside her had woken her up. The sun piercing through the bus window colored him gold. Raising his arm, he pointed at the surrounding view. "Rishikesh," he said and looked out the window. Harley stretched, and as she ran her fingers through her tangled hair, they grazed the painful bruise on her forehead. She bit her lip and looked around. On her left, green mountains sloped down gently toward the road. In the opposite direction she saw the Ganges River and a string of white-and-pink temples on the riverbank. The tips of other temples, hidden deep inside the green mountains, glowed in the distance. She recalled this was the very place where the Ganges completed its long journey from the Himalayas and began winding its way throughout India, and her heart swelled.

The pilgrims filed off the bus and headed straight to the river, speaking to each other in brisk sentences. Harley followed them. They passed through an area on the riverbank that was flat and full of small white rocks. Huge purple rhododendrons flowers surrounded them,

and the blue-green water flowed quickly down the wide river. When the pilgrims arrived at the edge of the water, they wasted no time before going in, fully clothed. Faces aglow, they rejoiced at having made it to the mouth of the Ganges.

Harley observed them for a few minutes, then took off her shoes and placed them near her backpack. She removed her wristwatch, shoving it deep inside her bag, and walked into the river, still wearing her clothes. The frozen water was rejuvenating. Dunking her whole head in, she felt all the aches from the night ride evaporate and her thoughts become clear and sharp. She carried a silent prayer of gratitude for having made it, for being alive and breathing and experiencing life with such clarity. She had no idea how the adventure she had gotten herself into might end, but was finally living the life she had always wanted to live, freely and bravely. She smiled, and the Indians nearby smiled back, happy to see this Western tourist connecting to the ancient ritual of bathing in the holy river.

After the refreshing dip, the pilgrims sat down and drank sweet hot chai. Harley held the steaming cup and felt a strange camaraderie with the group gathered on the banks of the sacred river. She began walking toward the main road. Rishikesh was bustling and noisy. Buses and trucks passed through with loud honks; peddlers hawked their wares with hoarse shouts; and rickshaw drivers artfully navigated the chaos. This was a far cry from the

quiet, peaceful town Harley had envisioned. A rickshaw driver pulled up and signaled her with his weathered hand. She gave him the name of the ashram and he nodded, then loaded her backpack at the rear of the rickshaw. Harley sat in the back and he sped off, honking a loud horn every chance he got.

Within ten minutes they arrived at their destination. Harley descended from the rickshaw near a magnificent metal bridge that crossed the river and walked closer so she could examine its beauty. She had long admired beautiful structures and had spent countless hours drawing bridges of every kind. *Once I cross this bridge*, she thought, *I can no longer go back*. Engrossed in the moment, she had failed to notice the fading noise of the rickshaw's engine. She turned her head and saw the rickshaw in the distance, disappearing around the bend. Harley began running toward the bend in the road. There she saw a bustling main street crammed with trucks and buses, all creating a commotion. The rickshaw driver and her backpack were nowhere to be seen. A peddler approached her proffering packs of chewing gum. With a wave of her hand, she sent him away and scoured the street for a police officer. Soon she gave up, overtaken by a sickening feeling. The driver had no intention of coming back. She had just lost all the possessions she had brought with her for the journey, and one possession that was more important than all the others combined.

Harley's father's letter was lost forever. It had never occurred to her to make a copy. She naively assumed that his letter was going to accompany her for the rest of her life. Her eyes welled up. Sitting by the side of the road, she covered her face with her hands. *This should not have happened to me*, she said to herself over and over again. *This should not have happened!* After some time had passed, she raised her head. A few small children were curiously staring at her but did not dare approach. She wished so badly for some miracle that would make the driver suddenly return but knew he would not.

Harley peered up at the bridge. She had to continue her journey but lacked the strength to move. A small monkey was curiously looking at her, hanging on a tree branch. When she saw the monkey, she instinctively touched the pouch that her mother had given her back in New York. Taking a deep breath, she turned toward the flowing river. After a while she felt her body begin to calm. The current crashed against the smooth white rocks and her thoughts wandered to a time a few months back, to that fateful morning at faraway Columbia University in New York. She was a student at the college, where, during a morning class about sacred landmarks in India, a single word was destined to change her fate forever.



At the word *Gangotri*, Harley sat up straight. Something had awakened within her, urging her to focus on what was being said. She surveyed her classmates. No one reacted as she had. She tried to conceal her sudden excitement and looked out the large old windows at the pouring rain. A refreshing breeze gusted through the window screens as Dr. Mark Shelby, a world-renowned professor of Eastern cultures, described pilgrimage sites located in a remote and wild part of the Indian Himalayas. He was a tall dark-haired man in his early fifties with an athletic build. He moved nimbly across the large classroom and paused his lecture to pick up a piece of paper from the floor. He turned the paper over and when he saw that it was filled with scribbles and doodles, he crumpled it into a ball and threw it with a long circular motion toward a green bin in the corner. The ball hit the rim and went in. Behind Harley, someone clapped. Professor Shelby smiled, pleased by the applause.

Animatedly, he continued describing how the mighty Ganges, considered to be the world's holiest river, begins in an ice cave at the summit of an isolated glacier on the Tibetan border. From there it flows through the Indian subcontinent until it merges with the Bay of Bengal. Indians believed the sky and earth met precisely at that special place and the devout embarked on their pilgrimage in the freezing cold, lacking appropriate gear. There is a special power to that place, the professor emphasized, and pilgrims believe that arriving at the true source of

the holy Ganges River opens the door to understanding ourselves and the world around us.

Someone from the back row called out, "Professor Shelby, did you visit there during one of your adventures?" It was common knowledge that Professor Shelby spent his annual vacation on long adventurous trips across Southeast Asia. A gloomy expression passed over the professor's face before he replied, "There, I have not yet gone."

The question interrupted the flow of Professor Shelby's speech. Staring at an indistinct spot on the wall, he gathered his thoughts and continued his lecture. With his professorial power of observation, he noticed that he had Harley's undivided attention and turned to her enthusiastically. In the student before him he saw a lean girl with an upturned nose, freckles, and piercing green eyes that were concentrating on him. She did not smile. Professor Shelby was now talking about the ancient temple in Gangotri. Harley knew she had heard of that place before, and that it held great significance. Something about that name took her back . . . but to what?

For some reason she could no longer focus. Her father's image appeared in her mind, with his big smile, his arm around an Indian friend, and great snowy mountains in the background. It was the same picture she kept by her bed, the one she spoke to every night before she fell asleep. She thought of the short prayer she used to say before going to bed and began to absentmindedly doodle



on the piece of paper in front of her. To her surprise, her hand was sketching the mysterious ice cave, surrounded by towering mountains whose peaks brushed the clouds. The cave looked like a dark hole in the middle of the glacier and Harley felt as though she had already been there, that she knew the place. Deep in thought, she added more details to complete the image. Upon hearing her name, she almost jumped out of her chair.

“I hope my class wasn’t *that* boring, Ms. Green.”

Professor Shelby was standing directly in front of her, staring at her drawing with great interest. The students began leaving the classroom, chattering lively. Harley blushed, folded the paper in half, shoved it in her bag, and turned to the professor.

“I am sorry. For some reason, my mind wandered.”

“Sometimes it happens to me during my own lectures,” he said, smiling in return.

Harley headed for the door. She had a feeling that Professor Shelby wanted to converse about her drawing, but she was too disoriented to speak coherently. She said goodbye and began walking home.



Harley lived with her mother, Sarah, in an apartment building within walking distance to the university and Central Park. As she walked, she tried remembering where in the world she could have heard about Gangotri,

that meeting point of the sky and the earth. Her mind remained blank, but her body felt cold, as if pressed up against a wall of ice. Suddenly Harley lost her balance and fell backward. Without noticing, she had bumped into a sidewalk fruit cart. The neat rows of apples rolled onto the pavement.

“Look what you have done!” a vendor fumed.

“Oh, no, I am sorry,” Harley apologized. She bent down and began helping the vendor collect the apples.

Sensing her confusion, the vendor said in a softer tone, “It’s alright, no big deal.”

She gave him an absentminded smile and offered to buy the apple in her hand. He took it from her, rubbed it on his sleeve, and handed it back. “This one’s on me. Just watch where you’re going next time.”

The apartment was quiet and empty. In the living room, Harley pushed the curtain aside, letting sunlight filter in. At this time of day, her mom was working at her private clinic. Remembering this helped Harley relax for a bit; she wanted to be alone and get to the bottom of the uncanny feeling evoked by that strange name. She turned on the air conditioner, poured herself a bowl of cereal, and sat in front of the picture window overlooking the Hudson River. A few minutes later she got up to wash the dishes. The sensation of the running water helped steady her breath.

She changed into sportswear, grabbed her bike helmet, and went downstairs. Soon she was pedaling toward

Central Park. It was empty at this time of day and she started her usual route around the large lake in the middle of the park. A nice breeze cooled her face. As she rode, she went over what had happened to her that morning. She had a feeling that things were about to change, that her life would no longer be the same, and this left her with mixed emotions. She was excited by the promise change brings, but at the same time she feared the unknown.

Harley opened the bottle of water she had strapped to her bike and drank her fill. When she looked up, she noticed a squirrel on a low branch frozen in place. It then turned its head toward a taller branch close to where it was standing. The squirrel didn't move at all but looked like it was measuring the distance between the branches. Harley continued her route, wondering if the squirrel was ever going to leap.

The flat trail turned into a moderate climb and she switched into a lower gear. On her right she saw a steep slope leading to a clearing in the woods, outside of the marked trail. On previous rides Harley had always passed it by. But this day was different. She felt she was on the cusp of a significant change and spurred herself on to live more daringly, and not become addicted to a false sense of security.

Ever since she was a child, she believed most people chose the safe path in life. She saw herself as an adventurer, taking constant risks to discover new lands. She usually researched the terrain before confronting danger,

but this time she simply swerved her bike downward. The wind whistled in her ears as she gripped the handlebars and swerved from side to side, struggling to keep control. She was almost at the end of the slope when her front wheel struck something, spun around, and tilted upward. The handlebars jammed into her ribs and the bike flew from her hands, sending her spiraling into the hard ground. There was no one around. Harley rose slowly, her ribs pierced with pain. She limped toward the bike, picked it up, and headed back for the trail. It was an hour before she made it home.

Back in the apartment, she washed and bandaged her cuts. She took deep, measured breaths to calm down, and soon knew where to look to find the answer to the question that was nagging her. She went into her bedroom and opened the bottom desk drawer. In it was a dreadful mess of notes, erasers, pens, hard candy, hair clips and keys, but she quickly found what she was looking for. Harley pulled out a thin plastic bag with a yellowing envelope inside. The faint postage stamp indicated the letter had been sent from Rishikesh, India. Her pulse quickened as she opened the envelope and removed a piece of paper that was beginning to disintegrate at the margins. Her eyes landed on the top left line, and she smiled. It read "Gangotri, 18 October."

Although she had asked her mother endless questions about what had happened to her father, Sarah was never eager to discuss the matter. As a child Harley would

spend hours poring over maps of the Himalayas, tracing with her fingers the paths that, she imagined, led to the spot from which her father had never returned. A strange excitement grabbed hold of her. Clutching the letter, she began reading it.

*Harley, my dear daughter!*

*You have no idea how much I miss you. I think of you when I see all this beauty around me, great snowy mountains with peaks brushing the clouds. At this moment I am looking at the Ganges River flowing over immense white boulders inside a steep canyon. I am among a group of pilgrims that arrived from across India to this sacred place. I have dreamt about this journey for a long time, and here I am now, fulfilling my dream. The feeling is simply wonderful.*

*I am including in this letter a gift for you—a small golden key. I spent several hours yesterday with an old man as he sat and made jewelry. He made the key from a small piece of gold he melted on the spot. He has been around pilgrimage sites for many years. You would be surprised to hear, but he asked many questions about you, what kind of child you are. He insisted on engraving your name in Sanskrit on the back of the small key. I did not believe he could do it, but as you can see, I too am learning something new every day. Whenever you may need to make an*

*important decision, touch the key, and think about what it is your heart desires.*

*That is all for now, my beloved daughter. Tomorrow I embark on my adventure in the mountains, so the next letter will arrive after my return.*

*I love you more than anything in the world!*

*Dad*

When she finished the letter, she grew pensive. She thought about the years that had gone by so quickly. When her father disappeared, she was twelve years old. Eight years had already passed from the time he mysteriously vanished in Indian Himalayas. Time slipped by like a crafty thief that never gets caught. She fingered the golden key pendant around her neck, flipped it over, and marveled at the craftsmanship of the old artist who had managed to engrave her name on such a tiny delicate object. She thought of the sentence her father used to say to her, "Do not fear the fear," and a distant memory resurfaced.



When Harley was ten years old, one beautiful winter day her father had come to her school to pull her out of class. He did not tell her what they were about to do, but by then she was already familiar with his adventurous spirit. Once out of the city, they drove for an hour

along the Hudson River. He brought her to a long snowy slope, took a red sled out of the car, and together they began climbing up the mountain. Not a soul was in sight; a yellow sun peered through a blue cloudless sky and the tree branches were covered in thick snow. They left visible tracks in the snow—the giant footprints from her father’s large boots next to her own small ones. She marveled at being able to leave such clear tracks in the snow even though she was so little and thought how great it would be if her father’s tracks and hers could remain embedded there forever. As far as she was concerned, she would continue walking behind her father until the end of time.

When they arrived at the summit, they looked down. The snowy slope was adorned with bumps and pits. That warm sense of security suddenly evaporated, and a chill traveled down her spine. Her father smiled at her and sat her at the front of the sled, placing himself behind her. Before she could think, they were flying at an incredible speed down the snowy slope. She felt safe with her father at her back, but she still tried to slow the sled with her feet. The wind whistled in their ears, the sled raced forward, and her bursting laughter was equal parts pleasure and horror.

When they went up the mountain again, panting heavily from treading in the heavy snow, her father said to her, “You know, this would be a whole lot more fun if you tucked your feet inside the sled as we go down.”

“But Dad, that would be way too fast.”

“That’s exactly the point,” her father said, and his familiar laughter echoed. She glanced at him, shrugged her shoulders, and said, “I don’t want to do that.”

Sitting on the sled, he invited her to sit near him. He collected fresh snow in the palm of his big hand and let the flakes leisurely fall onto the white bed that surrounded them. Then he looked at Harley and said,

“You can learn to live with your fear and let it make you stronger.”

“But how?” she asked.

He smiled at her as his foot nudged the red sled forward. She held her breath and he pushed again, harder than before. She screamed, and he screamed with her, and down they sped, their feet inside the sled, her father holding her, the wind in their eyes and nature all around them. And she knew, with that mysterious sense children have, that this was a moment she would never forget. After several more rounds down the slope, her father took her to a nearby restaurant on the side of the road. Harley asked for hot cocoa with whipped cream and her father raised two fingers to the waitress. Like daughter, like father.

“Don’t you want to order something else? Something for grown-ups?” Harley asked in a tone that was almost concerned.

Her father threw his head back and laughed heartily. Then he grew serious, held her small face in both hands, and said, “Sweetheart, remember when you got on the sled and saw the long, scary way down?”



Harley nodded, wide-eyed.

“And how did you feel?”

She hesitated. “Happy—no, scared—no, happy and scared at the same time, I think.”

Harley’s father smiled and nodded.

“You know,” he said, “there’s an old Native American saying: ‘Leap into the abyss and the net will appear.’”

Harley pouted her lips as she drank the hot cocoa. “But what if I leap and discover there is no net down there?”

“That’s also a possibility,” her father admitted.

“That doesn’t sound like such a good deal to me; leaping into a scary abyss only to crash at the bottom with no safety net.”

He looked at her, his eyes shining mischievously. He leaned forward from his chair and said, “We have to jump into the abyss because the key to your freedom is at the bottom.”

Harley furrowed her brow toward the bridge of her small, upturned nose and asked, “Which key? What does it open?”

“This key, if you can find it, will bring you the biggest gift life can provide—freedom from all of your fears. It will also show you how to be happy, regardless of what other people think of you.”

“I don’t know, leaping into the unknown sounds too dangerous.”

“It is not an actual abyss,” he smiled again and tousled his daughter’s hair. “And it gets easier with each leap. In time you will understand what I am talking about.”



Harley looked at her father’s handwriting and tears began to fill her eyes. She missed his embrace and his sense of humor, his rare ability to downplay every crisis and render it insignificant. After her father disappeared, she found no one else she could talk to about anything beyond the everyday existence everyone around her was so busy with. But she never ceased to feel there was something beyond this ordinary life, something marvelous revealed only to those who knew where to look. She enrolled as an architecture major at Columbia University, and for her minor she chose East Asian studies. That’s how she ended up in Professor Shelby’s class on holy pilgrimage sites in India. But to her disappointment, all the books and classes she took only deepened her confusion and flooded her mind with a torrent of conflicting ideas and words. She knew she had to search for this secret knowledge out in the world, but until now she had no clear idea where to start. Taking stock of the things those around her held dear, she was astounded that people could waste their lives chasing after comfort, security, and superficial pleasures without attempting to understand life’s true meaning.

Her mother dedicated all her time to her but was unable to answer Harley's complex questions. Harley understood long ago that her mother was a practical woman who had raised her with a mixture of deep love and an expectation of excellence, a mother who pushed her forward whenever Harley needed encouragement or a receptive ear. Even though Sarah worked as a psychologist with a demanding schedule, she knew how to juggle her work and caring for her only child. It was only recently that Harley noticed her mother had stopped buying new clothes and going out in the evenings. Sarah's life revolved around her daughter and her work. She did not try to meet new men and rarely participated in social gatherings.

Harley returned to thinking about her father's mysterious disappearance in the Himalayas and about the magical place described by Professor Shelby, the location from which her father sent his final letter. She felt a strange pull to that enigmatic place—Gangotri. For the first time she could understand what had compelled her father to go there. Professor Shelby's description left no room for doubt. The fact that Gangotri drew believers who, for hundreds of years, had been arriving by every means from across India to bathe at the source of the world's holiest river, was proof positive that this place left its mark on every visitor. She thought of her father, and how she could better understand what had happened to him. Her mother still refused to discuss it. She dismissed Harley's questions by repeating, "He disappeared in the

Himalayas; there is nothing more to say." Now, although she could not explain it, Harley sensed that her father's disappearance had to do with Gangotri. Her heart told her so.

She approached the bookcase and pulled out an old photo album containing photographs of her father and mother during their trip to India, while they were in college. Seeing the two of them, both with long hair, wearing flowing white shirts and striped red-and-blue bell-bottom pants, still made her laugh. In the photos they looked happy and young against the backdrop of bustling cities and green mountains.

Harley sat on the armchair and adjusted her position to relieve some of the pain in her ribs. She was exhausted, both inside and out. From where she sat, a picture of a massive wave at the heart of the ocean peered back at her from the opposite wall. It was by a Japanese artist whose name Harley could never remember. The wave appeared to be in the middle of nowhere, just a perfect force of nature at the heart of a vast ocean, where no observer could ever witness it. It seemed to Harley that this picture had been with her for her entire life. Whenever she looked at it, she envisioned herself surfing that giant wave until she safely reached the shore. Harley opened her eyes wider; she stared at the image until a sweet fatigue spread through her limbs.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

EYAL DANON IS THE AUTHOR behind *The Golden Key of Gangotri*. His other books include *Before the Kids and Mortgage*, a humorous travel memoir on backpacking around the world for one year, and *The Principle of 18*, an innovative self-help system for getting the most out of every stage of your life by fulfilling the promise of five distinct life chapters.

Eyal is a Columbia University-trained life coach, and the founder of Ignite Advisory Group, a global leader in creating expert communities. He lives in New Jersey with his family, trying to embrace the four seasons of the Northeast after growing up surfing the Mediterranean Sea. He enjoys reading anything by J.R.R. Tolkien, hiking, table tennis, and Japanese whiskey.

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