

# The Frangipani Year

Love and aid work in post-tsunami Aceh



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In memory of my mother, Barbara Maizland Hergesell

## Prologue

The moon hangs full as we sit on rattan chairs under the waxy leaves of the mango tree. I check my watch, aware that the Peter Pan concert will begin in the next hour. Listening to the lilting voices of James, Ben, Lucas, Ellie, Sheree, and Layla around me, I feel grateful that I finally have a circle of friends here in this remote place. We share a drink and toast our friendship. Once the glasses are emptied and the candles are blown out, we pile into two white UN Land Cruisers and drive over to the old stadium. It is a hulking grey cement building that has lain vacant for years. As we pull up, the first thing I notice is the circle of familiar blue tent camps surrounding the arena, a reminder of the tsunami refugees. I feel a pang of guilt—I am about to enjoy a rock concert, while there are others who still don't have a home.

"Are you sure this is safe?" Sheree asks.

"I certainly hope so," James says.

"Those cracks are a bit scary, aren't they?" adds Ellie. The stadium shows signs of the earthquake and its aftershocks. Some sections are badly damaged and unusable, while other parts bear deep cracks and scars.

The crowd is overwhelming; thousands of young fans are streaming into the building all around us. The feeling in the air is ecstatic as so much pent up energy is finally released. As we approach the entrance I also notice the telltale brown vans of the

sharia police, the Wilayatul Hisbah. "Uh-oh, the sharia police are here," I say to Layla under my breath.

"I guess there are no assigned seats," says Ben, looking at his ticket.

"No, it looks like we're going to be in the mosh pit with everyone else," James adds. As we enter through the main gate, two muscular young men in brown shirts stop us, holding out their arms to block our way. One of them shakes his round, shaved head slowly and says "Women-left, men-right."

"What's going on?" asks Layla, confused. Then it dawns on me that all the women are heading in one direction, while the men are walking to the other side of the stadium.

"It's segregated," says Ben. "See you, ladies! Be careful. We'll meet you at the cars afterwards." The gatekeepers are getting irritated, tapping us on the shoulders and gesturing aggressively for us to move on and let others through.

James leans over and whispers in my ear. "This is the weirdest date I've ever been on." I laugh.

On all sides I witness scenes of separation; husbands and wives and boyfriends and girlfriends hug and peck each other furtively on the cheeks as they part. I turn back, watching James go. He turns around one more time and slowly grins, meeting my eye. Then we lose each other in the crowd.



## CHAPTER ONE

### Washington, D.C.

*December 2004*

Sitting in the cozy den of my parents' house in Falls Church, Virginia, I watch the harrowing images on the screen. Waves of water toss lives away in the wreckage. I see a boat casually perched on top of a house as if no earthly laws or logic apply any longer. The world has been turned upside down. The hand holding the camera is shaking with the sudden realization of what is happening; this is followed by screams and running as the screen abruptly goes dark. Then we're back to the perfectly coiffed blonde news anchor, looking suitably anguished.

Curled under my favorite red velour blanket, I can't comprehend the images and the sounds. I can't feel the fear and the panic as a husband searches for his wife and daughter. Next to the hypnotizing crackle of the fireplace, the TV looks so small. It all seems so unreal here in the U.S., on the day after Christmas, on the other side of the globe. I want to watch something else: Christmas cartoons, silly movies? Something innocent, not this. How can this be happening in Indonesia, my adopted homeland, and the place where I grew up?

"I don't know about you, but I can't watch this anymore. Let's go out for a walk," my mom says with a forcefully cheerful voice, interrupting the CNN voice-over. I nod gratefully, leaping up.

"You go ahead," says my dad, stroking his beard. I know he is recalling all of his years in Indonesia working as a lawyer for a multi-national firm. He took us there when I was eleven years old, and it felt like the end of my childhood. It was difficult at



first; I felt the buildings crowding in on me, but after I made friends I grew to love the country over the next seven formative years. Life felt like a challenge and an adventure. We traveled around Southeast Asia and spent our first Christmas there in Bali, where I had my hair braided and spent all my time in the ocean. I climbed a volcano for a school trip when I was 13. I still have photos of us walking around the edge of a crater at sunrise wearing sweatshirts, colder than we had been in months because of the elevation.

My father first went to Indonesia as a young man in the 1960s; he has seen the whole country, except Aceh.

“Aceh’s a mystery, isn’t it?” he adds quietly. Remote Aceh in the far North was off limits because of the conflict. Plagued by battles between the government and the separatist movement, the region designated as a “special territory” was a no man’s land. Now it will open up, torn open, and the whole world will look in.

“I’m sure you’ll work in Aceh,” my father says mysteriously, stopping me in my tracks, as I wrap my Christmas present, a new powder blue scarf, around my neck. My mom is buttoning up her elegant black coat and shaking her head at him.

“I’m going for a walk now, Dad,” I say, avoiding his statement.

As we make our way along the wide suburban sidewalk, avoiding frozen puddles, my mother senses my feelings, as always.

“Your father wasn’t trying to upset you. We all know that you want to go and work in Indonesia. That’s why you’re studying Southeast Asian politics and economics, isn’t it? I know how much spending your teenage years there affected you,” she says gently.

“Yes,” I tell her, “I want to work in Jakarta. But Aceh, that’s a different story. It’s a disaster zone! What would I do there?” The truth is that I feel scared. Aceh is an unknown quantity and I feel too young and too inexperienced to make a difference there. What good could a ‘twenty-five year old’ possibly do?

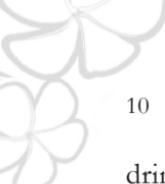
Yet my father’s words engraved themselves on my mind for months. As I completed my graduate program at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), and as I sat for my final exams, filling out blue books with careful handwriting, they etched themselves deeper and deeper.

*I’m sure you’ll work in Aceh.* I wondered if they were a prophecy, or if I would turn them into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Was this a defining moment, an opportunity to make a difference in the country I loved? Secretly I suspected that I was a coward, not brave enough to leave my comfortable bubble. In Washington I barely left a five-block radius of my Dupont Circle studio apartment.

From the beginning, we had been a close department. I saw Sofia, Vera, Chris and Rob almost daily. Observing Sofia deep in thought, twirling her long black hair, I remembered when I first met her, running down Massachusetts Avenue, both of us late to a brown-bag lunch on Thai political turmoil. We exchanged a smile as we settled into seats in the back. Her warm smile was genuine and I knew instantly we would be close friends.

One afternoon the five of us sat in Caribou Coffee on 17th Street, studying for our final exam in Southeast Asian Leadership. The Caribou, with its blonde wood paneling and brown leather sofas, resembled the inside of an idealized mountain lodge. I spent hours there, particularly at exam time. I thought back to the previous Christmas, when I had memorized their loop of Christmas songs while studying and



drinking endless hot chocolates. Now instead of snow I saw blinding sunshine and flowering trees through the windows, and my drink of choice had switched to iced coffee. I looked around at my friends, thinking that soon we would all be heading off in different directions.

Vera was deep in conversation with Chris about his plans to join the Foreign Service. “I’ll be starting language training this summer,” he said. “I’ve heard Arabic is tough, but Amman sounds interesting,” she said. Chris was quiet and incredibly smart—he’d gone to Harvard and then he’d built wells for the Peace Corps in Vietnam. I was also close to Vera, my Indonesian friend whose family hosted me when I interned in Jakarta over the summer between our two years of university. She was incredibly outgoing and it seemed that during those first days of orientation she was already surrounded by friends.

Rob was an ebullient Singaporean who was always full of witty comments. He was planning on going back to Singapore to work at Morgan Stanley after graduation.

“Where’s Sheree?” he asked. “She knows this stuff better than any of us.”

“At work, I think,” said Sofia, stroking her short black bob. Sheree was a beautiful, ambitious Indian girl who had also grown up in Singapore. She was working full-time at a small think-tank while attending graduate school.

What brought us all together? We shared an interest in Southeast Asia, but also a curiosity about the world, and a brand of idealism. Even the older students, in their thirties rather than early twenties, who had experienced more, still seemed enthusiastic and hopeful. Sure, some of them, like Chris, learned from the Peace Corps that development wasn’t for them, or others swore off working for the government, but they were still optimistic about making a difference in the world.