



Chapter 1 ~ The Blue Valise

Go to the airport at 1000 hours, the communiqué instructed. There will be a blue valise with a red strap. Your name will appear on the attached claim ticket. Combination is 668437. Collect it without delay and make your exit. Best of luck.

Petal stands at the baggage claim, nerves afrazzle. She shifts her weight from foot to foot as the chute spits out luggage. The slam of each suitcase onto the carousel makes her shudder. She straightens her spine and imagines a bubble of protection, maintaining a picture of poise in her long black dress and wide-brimmed straw hat, but her insides roil, and she feels a chill although it is warm and humid. Her perfect oval face, large different-colored eyes, and luminescent pale skin stand out in the crowd like a hothouse bloom among a jumble of petunias.

Why does she get herself into these predicaments? *No! It's good.* She wants to do this. Adventure scares her to her core, but she's always pushing into unknown territory. To find courage is to be intimate with fear.

"There it is!" she exclaims, breath catching. She reaches across a pushy, pencil-thin man on her right, smiles into his glare. Then the boxy woman to his right nudges him aside, retrieves the blue bag, and presents it to Petal.

"Thank you so much. This is all a bit overwhelming," Petal confides as she sets the lopsided valise down, balances

it between her legs, and extends her hand to the thoughtful stranger, who gives it a pat, then turns away in search of her own luggage.

Her gut churning with curiosity and apprehension, Petal and the blue valise exit the airport. Petal spots a small patch of green and lowers herself onto the warm ground among the dandelions and crab grass. She pats the suitcase. She studies its combination lock. Then she rootles around in her purse for an orange notebook with a black elastic band.

Six, six, eight, four, three, seven. With great care she spins each dial until they line up. A thrill needles her nerves.

For six years, she has awaited this assignment as a card-carrying member of JARUM. The Jungle Animal Rescue Underground Movement is an international organization dedicated to saving abused and threatened wild animals from around the world. On August second, her sobriety birthday—she calls it her spiritual birthday—she officially signed up, asking to be put on a list of foster mothers.

I will take any animal of any size and disposition and love it back to health. That is what she wrote on the bottom of the official form in the *Comment* section. Two people had vouched for her—a requirement. She had also enclosed a generous donation, although that wasn't a requirement. After that, she waited with as much grace as she could, given the urgency of her hopes. The longer she waited, the more dreams of soul salvation embroidered themselves around this event.

"Here goes." She lifts the lid and throws it wide, banging her thumb.

On the left side of the valise is a neat stack of expertly ironed stiff-collared shirts. On the other side, tangled shreds of orange linen. Does she have the wrong case? On the inside of the lid, a fabric pocket presents a lump with squared edges. Petal reaches in and finds a slender, leather-bound book: . . . *Guide to Good Manners*. The volume is missing part of its front cover as though half the title has been bitten off. She slips the

book back into the pocket and notices a small ecru envelope tucked down the side. This she withdraws.

It reads: *Hi, my name is Po from the Okavango Delta in Botswana, Africa. I love water and mud. I'll eat anything but custard, and I miss my mother.*

Unblinking, Petal studies the shirts. Suddenly she detects a small movement—a stirring among the camouflage of collars and tangled strips of mangled fabric.

A tail appears—a short comma of a tail, twirling, then circling in a frenzy.

“Don’t be afraid, Po. My name is Petal. If it is agreeable to you, I will take you home with me to a beautiful green sanctuary. It’s not a jungle, it’s a farm, but it feels like an island unto itself. We will have grand adventures in the fragrant grasses, and you will sleep on silken pillows beside Lemon Face. I will love you for a lifetime and protect you from all harm. Please, don’t be afraid. Won’t you show yourself?”

The tail stops twirling. There is a rustle of fabric, the twitch of a starched collar. A broad nose appears between the folds of a polka-dot sleeve, followed by two blue eyes, a pair of cup-shaped ears, and a smile that could light the night.

“Ha!” Petal gasps. “Why, you’re a hippopotamus. A very small one.”

Petal picks up Po and clasps her to her bosom, then she extends her arms and they regard each other warily. Po wriggles in Petal’s hands, and Petal fears she has made a grave error, but then a mixture of curiosity and hope swirls between them, and the outside world fades away.

“Is there anything to eat?” Po speaks with lilting inflections.

Petal laughs and proceeds to shower Po with kisses.

“I think I am in hippo heaven,” Po giggles.

“Do you like tea, really strong?” Petal asks. “With a soupçon of milk? And pumpkin muffins thick with Brazil nuts and plump raisins? Oh, and Endangered Species brand chocolate—exceedingly dark!”

“I don’t really know, but I am eager to sample your wares.”

“You speak excellent English,” Petal says.

“I also speak fluent Zebra, four dialects of Hippo, and a smattering of French,” Po boasts. “I can teach you, if you like.”

“That would be lovely! But we have so much to do—we’d better get started.” Petal pauses. “By the way, are you always this small? Very convenient for travel, I would guess. I’ve heard of pygmy hippopotamuses but never of Po-sized ones.”

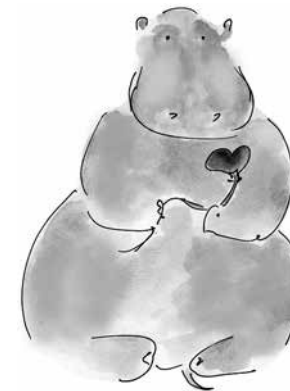
“I’ll resume my fully upholstered status when we get . . .” Her eyes glaze wistfully. “Wherever.”

“What is it, Po?”

“Nothing. Well, it is something, but I can’t talk about it right now. Is there any water?”

Petal offers Po a drink from the canister in her purse.

“Thanks.” Po glugs it down. “But I meant big water, like a river?”



“Ah, yes. There is lots of water, not a river, but a warm swimming pool and a cool pond full of lotus flowers, mud, and friendly fish, and an ocean nearby. Now let’s go home and put the kettle on.”

Petal tucks Po into her right jacket pocket, picks up the suitcase, and heads for the car. She has written down the letter and number of the aisle. (She hates getting lost.) “H-17,” she says, referring to a scrap of paper in her breast pocket. “How auspicious, the *H*, don’t you think?”

But Po doesn’t reply. She is wondering what a kettle is and how Petal will look when she puts it on, and what about this Lemon Face?