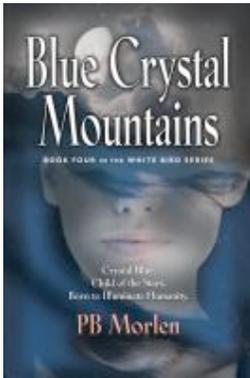


Blue Crystal Mountains

BOOK FOUR IN THE WHITE BIRD SERIES

Crystal Blue.
Child of the Stars.
Born to Illuminate Humanity.

PB Morlen



*In PB Morlen's fourth novel, **Blue Crystal Mountains**, the tale of Crystal Blue continues. In a remote area of the Tibetan Himalayas-so high up Heaven and Earth embrace-is the mysterious and holiest mountain in the world, the diamond-shaped snow mountain Kailas. To repair the harm she's done, Crystal must make a sacred pilgrimage around the mountain that can erase the sins of a lifetime. She is seeking forgiveness from Tara-a mysterious and green-eyed goddess.*

Blue Crystal Mountains

Book Four in the White Bird Series

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~

Crystal stroked the fragrant petals, gently running her finger over the tops of the long tubular shoots sprouting from the base of the flower's pin cushion center. She realized the fragrance she'd first smelled did not come from the candles. Rather it came from the flower. She closed her eyes, breathing in the flower's lovely fragrance as she continued stroking the petals.

"Say the mantra, Crystal, and don't stop. Think of the compassionate Buddha deep within you: the superlative enlightened being that knows the truth. The truth is already in you, Crystal Blue. You are the sister warrior, an enlightened star master walking among many who are ignorant to their own true natures. Life begins to unfold its mystery as soon as compassion is created in the heart, as soon as one's deepest feeling is wakened for all that is living, with regard for everyone's needs."

"Om mani padme hum," chanted Crystal, opening her eyes to stare into the yellow center of the lotus. "Om mani padme hum."

"See the beautiful pure flame of compassion in the flower," whispered Tara.

"Om mani padme hum. Om mani padme hum."

Crystal breathed deeply, feeling bathed in the flame's pure, radiant light. She felt like weeping when an overwhelming surge of love swept through her, squeezing her heart in its heated embrace. And then in a burst of light, Crystal disappeared, replaced by a single flame of unearthly light.

~

BLUE CRYSTAL MOUNTAINS

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First Edition

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pbmorlen@gmail.com**

****~****

This book is dedicated to my mother and all the mothers around the world—the divine masters of compassion.

Other books by PB Morlen

The White Bird Series:

Illuminating Crystal – Book One

Crystal Blue Sky – Book Two

Little Blue Star – Book Three

BLUE CRYSTAL MOUNTAINS

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PB MORLEN

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Characters in the White Bird Series

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BOOK ONE: ILLUMINATING CRYSTAL

Crystal's Family

Claire Blue: *Crystal's sister, Witness Sister.*

Madelynn Blue: *Claire and Crystal's grandmother*

Piers Blue: *Claire and Crystal's grandfather*

Elijah Lange: *Crystal and Claire's father; David's twin brother.*

Elizabeth Lange: *Crystal and Claire's mother.*

David Lange: *Crystal and Claire's uncle.*

James Lange: *David and Elijah's father.*

Josephine Lange: *David and Elijah's mother; twin sister of Madelynn Blue.*

Cosmo Attis: *Crystal and Claire's great uncle; owner of the Blue Crystal bookstore.*

Gina Attis: *Cosmo's daughter-in-law, ex-wife of Greg.*

Daniel Attis: *Gina and Greg's son and Cosmo's grandson.*

Greg Attis: *Cosmo's son and Daniel's father, ex-husband of Gina.*

Constantine Attis: *Cosmo's brother; Claire and Crystal's grandfather; Elizabeth's father.*

Catherine Attis: *Constantine's wife and Elizabeth's mother.*

Doris Attis: *Cosmo's dearly departed wife.*

Significant Others

Adam Walker: *Crystal's love and twin soul; co-owner of the Blue Crystal bookstore.*

Amin Ferdosi: *Elijah Lange's housekeeper and friend; brother to Man-Wyndon.*

Man-Wyndon Ferdosi: *Amin's brother; (Guardian of Stone.)*

Dr. Deloria Merovingian: *Sorceress and mythical peri: fallen angel.*

Serena Blackfoot: *Adam's sister.*

Will Blackfoot: *Serena's husband.*

Grey Eyes: *Lakota Shaman.*

Guardians of the Stone ~ Crystal's Soldiers

Luis Sibrusky: *Romanian Soldier*

Kolie Kuptana: *Inuit Soldier*

Pepper Morningsky: *South African Soldier*

Levi Jaul: *Arabian Soldier*

Angel Cordoba: *Columbian Soldier*

Daisy Pere: *Native North American Soldier (Golden Eagle Guardian of Stone)*

Marty Pere: *Hawaiian Soldier (Mountain Lion Guardian of Stone)*

Sandra Liang: *Asian Soldier*

BOOK II: CRYSTAL BLUE SKY

Lakota Family

White Buffalo Calf Woman, (Ptesan-Wi): *Female Goddess*

Weasel Bear: *Crystal's Lakota ancestor*

Wind Walker: *Adam's Lakota ancestor*

Nita Sun Bear: *Lakota initiate.*

Warren Sun Bear: *Lakota Shaman and host; Nita's grandfather.*

Corbin Sun Bear: *Warren's son.*

Hawaiian Family

Pele: *Female Hawaiian Goddess*

Leonani (Leon) Pore: *Hawaiian initiate.*

Manoa (Mike) Pore: *Hawaiian Elder, host, and Leonani's father.*

Kalea Pore: *Mike's wife; Leonani's mother.*

Kahuna: *Hawaiian Priest and Shaman.*

BOOK III: LITTLE BLUE STAR

Hopi Family

Grandmother Spider: *Female Goddess*

Birdie: *Angwusnasomtaq; One of the seven indigenous grandmothers of the celestial council.*

White Feather: *Ancient Puebloan Elder.*

Lomasi: *Hopi Shaman and Elder.*

Jasmine Chosovi: *Hopi initiate.*

Violet: *Hopi Elder, host, and Jasmine's grandmother.*

Heather Chosovi: *Violet's daughter; Jasmine's mother.*

Chayton Chosovi: *Heather's son.*

Shikara: *Wisdom Dakini.*

Sinpo: *Wrathful, unenlightened Dakini.*

Borg: *Red-haired giant.*

BOOK IV: BLUE CRYSTAL MOUNTAINS

Tibetan Family

Tara: *Goddess of Tibet.*

Shilog: *Buddhist Monk*

Drolma: *Tibetan Nomad.*

Tinley: *Drolma's granddaughter.*

Tenzin: *Drolma's grandson.*

Peruvian Family

Lady Moon: *Goddess of the Moon*

Michael: *Earthkeeper and Shaman-priest. Andean Guide.*

Lupita: *Inca Elder in ancient Peru.*

Kata: *Crystal's Inca name in ancient Peru.*

Maita: *Kata's husband.*

Cusi: *Kata and Maita's daughter.*

Captain Ralun: *Captain of the Inca Guard.*

Elandra: *Shikara's mother; Light Being who dwells in Hidden Kingdom.*

Animals

Kel: *The White Bird.*

Wyndon: *Crystal's dog who shares energies with bear shaman, Adam and Man-Wyndon.*

Daniel: *Ferret that shares energy with man-Daniel.*

Grizzly Bear: *The Bear Shaman*

Mountain Lion: *Hawaiian Soldier (Marty)*

Golden Eagle: *American Indian Soldier (Daisy)*

Mushika: *Mouse.*

Vincent: *Claire's cat; white lion.*

Lady: *David's Golden Retriever.*

Jezebel: *Adam's Siamese cat.*

Santiago: *Heather's huge black lab.*

Juneau: *Heather's gentle, white-haired dog.*

Samantha: *Cosmo's yellow parakeet.*

BOOK ONE

TIBET

“LAND OF SNOWS”

TARA

(She Who Brings Forth Life)

The Buddhist saint Miao Shan was a Chinese princess who lived in about 700 B.C. It is widely believed that the feminine form of Tara was derived from her. During the twelfth century Buddhist monks settled on P'u-t'o Shan—the sacred island-mountain in the Chusan Archipelago off the coast of Chekiang where Miao Shan is said to have lived for nine years, healing and saving sailors from shipwreck—and devotion Tara spread throughout northern China. She is known as the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

The goddess is depicted in many forms with each one demonstrating a unique aspect of her compassion and mercy. She is frequently portrayed as a slender woman in flowing white robes who carries in her left hand a white lotus, symbol of purity representing the ideal of womanhood. She may be wearing ornaments revealing her stature as a bodhisattva, or she may be shown without them as a sign of her great humility.

A great white veil covers her entire form and she may be seated on a lotus. Items usually presented with Tara include a willow branch, with which she sprinkles the divine nectar of life, a precious vase symbolizing the nectar of compassion and wisdom, or a blanket representing her warmth and protection.

As a true Enlightened One, or Bodhisattva, she vowed to remain in the earthly realms and not enter the heavenly worlds until all other living things have completed their own enlightenment and thus become liberated from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.”¹

PART ONE

THE JEWEL IN THE LOTUS

*I dreamt I dwelt in marble halls
With vassals and serfs at my side,
And of all who assembled within those walls
That I was the hope and the pride.
I had riches all too great to count
And a high ancestral name.*

*But I also dreamt which pleased me most
That you loved me still the same,
That you loved me
You loved me still the same.*

*I dreamt that suitors sought my hand,
That knights upon bended knee
And with vows no maidens heard could withstand,
They pledged their faith to me.
And I dreamt that one of that noble host
Came forth my hand to claim.*

*But I also dreamt which charmed me most
That you loved me still the same
That you loved me
You loved me still the same.*

“Marble Halls,” by Enya

ONE

Beside a well, one does not thirst. Beside a sister, one does not despair.

Chinese Proverb

A smile played about the man's lips as he looked down upon the young, dark-haired child who gazed ahead, her eyes roaming over the huge expanse of blue water below them. She tipped back her head and lifted her finger to point and follow a lone white sea bird until it became a tiny dot in the sky, soon disappearing all together.

With a sigh, she dropped her arm, tucking her hand back into his and squeezing it for reassurance as she often did while they stood together on the cliff's edge overlooking the Atlantic Ocean.

"Grandfather," she whispered, absently tucking her hair behind her ear, "is this the end of the world?"

"What do you think, my mouse? Does it look like the end of the world?"

She thought for a moment, thinking the sight way too beautiful to be the end of anything and slowly shook her head. "I think that maybe it looks like heaven. Do you think mother and father are up there somewhere?"

He noticed a snarl beginning to form in her wildly, untamed dark locks and his heart did that thing it always did when they spent intimate moments together—racing a bit faster than usual, filling with a fierce protective love he never thought he could feel, not even for his beloved, red-headed wife who needed protection from nothing.

"I think," he sighed softly, squeezing her hand gently. "I think your mother and father are somewhere...somewhere safe."

"You don't know where they are, do you, grandfather?"

Never in all his sixty-odd years did he feel so inept. He shook his head, crouching down in front of her. He cherished their moments together, knowing he was the one she'd chosen to confide in.

"One day, my beautiful mouse, you will see your father and mother again. He gathered her into arms and stood, wondering when she'd gotten so big. "I think the angels heard me praying for a little girl of my very own and your mother and father answered my prayers, letting me keep you for just a little while."

"I'll always be your little girl, grandfather," Crystal whispered into his ear before laying her head on his shoulder. "I'll always take care of you." She stroked his cheek.

"Maybe mother and father took a trip to the stars," she declared after a moment, looking up into the sky. "They will be safe there, won't they?"

He set her down and kissed the top of her head and together they watched the sun slowly sink into the horizon. His heart filled with such sadness knowing they would be leaving the emerald island he'd come to love, especially here, where the land met the sea in the most beautiful, dramatic way. He'd never known such fierceness as when the western sea waves crashed against the Cliffs of Moher.

He looked down at the black and white Rat Terrier sitting at Crystal's feet. Champ was always at her side, he was her companion and they would be leaving him behind. There was nothing for it—he'd made the calls and the dog wouldn't survive the move. Not in his condition—bad heart. This, he knew, would break Crystal's tender young heart. The only consolation was the dog would live with their kindly neighbor, Mrs. O'Cullen. She loved Champ almost as much as Crystal did.

He turned away from the cliff's edge with a long, drawn out sigh. The light was beginning to fade and if they didn't return home before nightfall, his wife would have his head. She was becoming alarmed at how quickly his health was failing—and so was he.

When Crystal and her grandfather walked through the front door they met Claire who stood with hands on hips, toe tapping. "Crys, where is my new red shirt?"

"I dunno." Crystal shrugged her shoulders, immediately guilt-ridden having worn it yesterday, spilling mustard down the front then rolling it into a ball and shoving it beneath her bed.

Claire tapped her foot. "I know you wore it, Crys. Gran told me."

Crystal turned to find her grandmother standing in the kitchen doorway and threw her a fierce look that said 'Betrayer!'

Madelynn rolled her eyes, tossed up her hands and turned away. "Saints preserve us," she wailed, "I'll never be trusted again."

"It's under the bed," confessed Crystal. "I'm-I'm sorry, Lucy. I spilled mustard on it."

Claire blew out a deep sigh, heading toward their bedroom. She bent down and pulled out the soiled and now rumpled shirt, holding it up and looking it over with an appraising eye.

Crystal sat on the bed, swinging her legs, twirling her hair and chewing her lip nervously. Champ's head rested loyally on her lap.

Claire's eyes softened seeing her sister's distress. "It's not so bad, Crys. I think Gran can get the stain out. I just wish you wouldn't wear my clothes or that you'd at least ask me first."

"Now come on," she grabbed Crystal's hand, pulling her off the bed, "let's see what magic Gran can do."

Crystal breathed a sigh of relief as she followed Claire from the room, knowing she didn't deserve such a wonderful, forgiving sister. If Claire knew she'd accidentally dropped her brand new Brittney Spears CD in the bathtub, well, she didn't think she'd be as forgiving.

THE SWAYING STOPPED AND LIKE a baby rocking in her mother's arms in the quiet hours before the world awakens, the moment the motion stopped, she became disturbed—something felt different.

Crystal breathed in deeply—the flowery scent bringing up images of her grandmother's lush rose garden—and tried opening her eyes, but they were stuck shut. Panic quickly set in.

Terrified of the darkness, Crystal groped around, relieved when she felt his warm body and steady heartbeat. She finally opened her eyes and let go the breath she'd been holding with a loud 'whoosh.'

Wyndon whined and licked her face. He gave a little *woof* and began thumping his heavy tail.

Without her glasses her vision wasn't perfect, but it was obvious they weren't in the belly of the serpent anymore—the swaying had stopped and

the walls around her weren't blue. They were covered in blurred images that wavered about in the soft, flickering candlelight.

Crystal, rising up on her knees to get a better look at the images on the wall, gasped when she came face-to-face with a wide-eyed man whose head was wreathed in flames.

Slowly sinking back on her heels, she watched him stare back at her with his wide open eyes set under a pair of sharply arched eyebrows. His nostrils flared angrily above his three-pointed mustache and he held a sword in one raised hand and in the other a scepter of sorts. Two large white tusks sprouted from behind his large headdress, curving downward towards two other arms wrapped around his ample belly.

Crystal eyed the other figures on the wall, all painted in vibrant shades of reds, blues and soft yellows, lined and shaded with heavy black lines, some clearly defined, others fuzzy blobs.

"Where is everyone?" Crystal leaned back against Wyndon. "Where are Birdie and the others? And where are we?"

"Are you frightened?"

Crystal whipped her head around, blinking into a pair of emerald green eyes with long sweeping lashes as fine as phoenix quills set under slim brows of new moon shape.

Crystal admired the woman's upswept dark blue hair piled high on her head in a coiled-dragon bun with long tresses hanging down—her hair a stark contrast to her skin which was white as an autumn moon. A tiny nose, soft rosy cheeks and delicate chin gave her the appearance of a fine porcelain doll. Her neck, earlobes and wrists were adorned with precious ornaments.

When she smiled, lifting her red-painted lips slowly, Crystal realized she was staring and quickly dropped her gaze, discovering the woman sat on a large pillow shaped like a flower—layers of white petals sprouted from beneath the folds of her flowing red silk gown.

"I'm-I'm not frightened." Crystal slowly looked about the room, her eyes drifting back to the beautiful woman who looked like the Mona Lisa when she smiled. "Who are you?"

"I am Tara, but it matters not who I am, but who you are." The woman's clever green eyes dropped down to rest on Wyndon. "And, you're magnificent companion."

"I'm Crystal...Crystal Blue, and this is my dog, Wyndon."

Wyndon thumped his bushy tail.

"Do you know where Birdie is?" Crystal wanted to see a familiar face.

The woman tilted her head to the side. "Birdie?"

"Yes. I was with an old woman."

"I found no one else in my sacred cave other than you and your companion."

"Are we in Tibet?" Crystal peered up at the wide-eyed man wreathed in flames.

Tara nodded, narrowed her eyes and leaned forward. "Where did you come from?"

Where did she come from? Well now, thought Crystal. That was certainly a good question. "Um, well, I came from the desert, or rather I was in a place called Mesa Verde, but then I went into the ground and, well, um...." Crystal blew out a sigh. "Okay, I traveled here in the belly of a blue serpent."

"Then you are indeed the Warrior Sister. Thank you for coming."

Warrior sister? She'd never been called that before.

"You're welcome...I guess. But why are we here? Are we near the sacred mountain?"

The woman stared at her intently. "No. Not yet. The moon shows only half its face so the mountain can wait. There is another matter you must attend to first."

"Another matter? Like what?" Crystal drew the words out slowly.

"Your sister is in grave danger and you must help her."

Crystal stared at the woman like she had two heads. "Claire? Claire is in danger?"

Wyndon whined and licked her hand.

"Your sister has been seduced and brought to the Forbidden City by an ancient evil that was banned from there long ago. She carries the white feather he stole from you and it has entranced her."

Crystal shook her head, the blood pounding in her ears. She couldn't bear the thought of her sweet sister being mixed up in all of this. Claire was in Minnesota, safely ensconced in school, her head most likely buried in a book.

"No. You're mistaken," she whispered. "My sister is home where she belongs."

Tara smiled tenderly, seeing Crystal's distress. "I am sorry, but she is not."

"You say she carries a white feather?"

Tara nodded.

"That feather is special. It was a gift, one of seven feathers given to me by a magnificent white bird who helped me find my dog." Crystal gazed at Wyndon, stroking his head. "I was supposed to destroy it, but was tricked and burned a witch moth instead. That's when *he* stole it."

"Yes. The wicked one is using it to control your sister. He understands its power."

"But, why Claire? She plays no part in all this."

"He knows that your sister is the witness and is using her and the feather to gain entrance into a place he is neither wanted nor belongs."

"Claire is a witness? Witness to what?"

Tara eyed Crystal curiously. "Has no one told you the tale of the two sisters?"

Crystal shook her head.

"Then before we continue, I must tell you and then you will understand the importance of your sister. The story is this: Long ago when new worlds were being created, there were two sisters of royal birth, each known for their extraordinary gifts.

"The older sister was a great warrior whose skill in battle was unmatched. Her spirit was like the moon, dark and elusive, filled with powerful, mystical qualities, and her intuition, heat and passion in battle were legendary. When enraged, her anger was explosive and everywhere she went, a large snake with blue shiny scales would follow—a warrior in its own right.

"The younger was her opposite. Her spirit was like the sun, filled with powerful qualities of light. She was full of life with a strong clarity of mind, a warm open heart and possessed great wisdom. After heavenly battles were fought, many would seek her out to sit by her side—just being near her light would heal their bodies and their minds. And she was never seen without a glorious white bird at her side.

"The sisters were inseparable, spending hours in each other's company, desiring no other.

"One day the younger sister was called away and told by her father, the king that she must leave. A new planet was being birthed, a world

where the angels could pretend to be human, and the galactic council needed her help in overseeing its construction. To make it complete, they needed her warmth, wisdom and light.

“The news distressed her when she learned her sister would not be joining her, but she had to obey the king.

“She and the white bird left that day.

“The sister left behind went into deep despair, speaking to no one, taking her grief out on unsuspecting foes in battle, and more elusive than ever. She soon discovered why her sister had left and vowed to someday leave her kingdom to search for this new blue planet and the only being she ever loved.

“Finally the day came when she wasn’t needed in battle and she left, bringing the blue snake with her, spending untold years searching for her sister and the planet in the vast universe.

“When she came upon a blue star she was immediately drawn to it. Tired after eons of searching for her sister, she settled on the star, establishing a strong connection with the light beings upon it and became their leader, remaining there until the day she decided to once again begin searching for her sister. However, this time she didn’t travel alone, she brought with her twelve beings from the blue star, hoping their special gifts could help.

“And so, they set off, soon discovering a small cluster of stars and a council of six sisters. Without telling them why, the warrior sister asked them if they knew of this blue planet and they told her of a place that was newly born and how their sister, a warm compassionate creature with a sunny nature and open heart had traveled there to plant the seeds of compassion into the race of beings who were given the planet as a place to live. But she’d become trapped by an evil reptile who’d hoped to claim the planet as its own and who feared her light.

“The warrior sister, trying not to fly into a rage, calmly asked if this sister, like her, had traveled to them from the stars. When they nodded, she told them the truth of whom she was, asking them to help her find this planet, promising them anything if they did. They told her they could help upon one condition: if she could release her sister, she must return to them for it was necessary for their number to remain seven. Without hesitation she agreed and the sisters sent her off.

“Finding the blue planet was easy compared to finding her sister so she sent the twelve beings in different directions.

“She had just begun to despair of ever finding her sister when she saw a white misty bird hovering over a mountain that looked like a white pyramid. The white, shiny dome exuded a light brighter than anything she’d ever seen on the planet and so she knew she’d found her sister.

“Overjoyed at finding her sister, yet suspicious of the reptile that had trapped her, she told the blue serpent to stay behind, instructing it to find the other twelve and return to the blue star if anything happened to her.

“She fled to the mountain, encountering a large bronze serpent that reared up, attempting to strike her down but she fought bravely until the wicked one bested her, dragging her to its lair, entrapping her like it had her sister.

“When she found her sister sitting like a regal queen of light in a golden cage deep beneath the mountain her heart broke. Her sister had always been filled with joy, her smile lighting up the stars, her warm spirit boundless and free. Now she was a captive, sad and confused with no sign of recognition in her blue eyes when she saw her sister.

“The warrior sister knew her sister could not survive like this and called for the bronze serpent, making him a promise.

“‘If you release my sister,’ she said, ‘I will remain and share my warrior qualities with you and any that you choose. But if you do not, I will escape and use every means to destroy you.’”

“‘Very well,’ it hissed having witnessed her skills and realizing her request could make him stronger. ‘But once released, the light can never return. If it does I will destroy every creature upon this planet. And you must remain here forever, returning even after you die, using your skills to do whatever I wish.’”

“Satisfied that her sister would be safe, she agreed. The bronze serpent released the light, sending it into the heavens along with the white bird where the light sister remained. Once again, she became the seventh sister and vowed to return, knowing her sister had sacrificed everything for her.

“The blue planet, without the warmth and compassion of the light, suffered and moved into centuries of battles and death. The twelve beings from the blue star, along with the blue serpent, decided to stay and hid deep within the earth under great mountains, each caring for the planet in

their own way, attempting to maintain its energies until the light could return.

“Lifetime after lifetime kings and queens of great wealth sought out protection from the bronze serpent that used the warrior and her skills to betray and corrupt Mankind.

“But the warrior sister separated herself from him and began protecting those who loved the planet, sharing the sacred information she’d brought from the blue star, knowledge they’d once had but forgotten, showing them loyalty and compassion, becoming more legendary every time her spirit returned.

“All the while, the seventh sister watched, sending the white bird to the planet every thousand years to gather information, becoming witness to every life and event, recording with detail and great care everything that happened, witnessing the destruction of one age and the rebirth of another, placing the information into a blue stone. She even witnessed the contract made between her sister and the twelve caretakers of Earth, ensuring Mankind could regain their inheritance, their divine knowledge, if they did not destroy it by the year 2000.

“Not until the great event of 1987 occurred when 144,000 Lightworkers joined together in peace—raising the vibration of Earth and setting it on a new course—was there hope that the light could return.

“Because of this shift, the bronze serpent no longer had power over the earth and its people. For the first time since the planet was born, the sisters from the stars would spend their first lifetime together. One fulfilling the contract, unveiling the sacred information she’d once shared with those who loved the planet, and the other called on to witness the first days of the Fifth Age, bringing her light and the white bird with to herald the coming of a new world where compassion and love could once again prevail on earth.”

Crystal stroked Wyndon’s head, letting the story sink in. Even though the last few months were surreal and she’d done and seen things only the wildest imagination could dream up, the story of the sisters took the prize.

Crystal closed her eyes, seeing her sister’s sweet, beautiful face, missing her and loving her now more than ever. No one, other than her grandfather, had loved her more than Claire. Even in their youth when she’d tormented her, stolen her things, lied to her face, shut her out after their grandfather’s death, even growling when Claire had stopped her from

planting her fist in the moronic Luke Cob's nose. Her sister had stepped in, stopping her from doing stupid things time and again, but she'd never thanked her, only ignored her more. All because she'd been so jealous of Claire's goodness and she, rotten to the bone—or so she'd felt. Claire *was* like the sun, always bright and happy, she was her hero and she had to save her.

"I suppose this white bird is the same one who helped me find Wyndon, the same one who gave me the seven feathers?"

Tara nodded and anger nipped at Crystal. She clenched her fists, hating the serpent now more than ever. Her sister suffered because of something stupid she'd done, but mostly because of *him*. "He's using a feather to control my sister? How?"

"He's a geomancer and has put a spell upon the feather. Now you can understand why it's important to break the spell binding your sister to the wicked one. Her qualities are extremely powerful and he knows it."

"I know that Claire doesn't know the story, but does she know who she is?"

"No. Not as yet. But she will learn of it soon when the time is right."

"The blue serpent you spoke of, is she the one who brought me here?"

Tara nodded. "I see that she has marked you as the evil one has."

Crystal touched her neck. "He is nothing but a coward, a thief and a bully." She rose to her knees, the anger finally taking over. "He was warned not to interfere, but I guess he doesn't listen. If he dare hurts my sister, if he touches one hair on her beautiful head, I'll ring his..."

"Do you remember why you were traveling to the sacred mountain?" Tara interrupted Crystal's rant.

Crystal snapped her mouth shut. She looked down at her clenched fists, realizing she'd been twisting an invisible neck. "Yes, but..."

"Remember that forgiveness and tolerance of another's actions are keys that can unlock a shadowed heart."

"I can't allow him to hurt her..."

"Forgiveness and tolerance doesn't mean allowing," explained Tara. "But you must remain harmless, having compassion for life in every form, even for this evil, misguided one. It is the only way to help your sister and break the spell."

"How can I have compassion for him? He's using her for his own selfish, evil purpose! She's probably bloody terrified."

“Do not look upon your sister as one who is weak. Like you, she has a role to play and has yet to discover this. What you must do is remove the spell cast upon the feather. The only way to accomplish this is by showing the misguided creature compassion. Because compassion is your sister’s greatest asset, it can undo the spell.

“There is one more thing you should know. Something happened which made the white bird vulnerable and he used this opportunity to entrap her, just like he did your sister so long ago. She sits in the same cage your sister did and will remain there until the spell is removed from her feather. Only then can she fly free.”

Crystal’s shoulders sagged. “Bloody hell.” She stared at the woman, eyes now desperate. “How can I remove the spell then?”

Tara took Crystal’s hands. “You must start by having right intention in your thoughts. What you think matters for it often precedes what you do. When you have an evil thought or use violence, pain is surely to follow. You have already learned this when you struck out at the serpent, causing him harm. That is why you travel to the sacred mountain to seek forgiveness. Circling it once can atone for all the sins committed throughout one’s lifetime. Your violence watered the seed of betrayal planted deep within you; therefore, your actions betrayed others. You must water the seed of harmlessness for the sake of all others.”

Crystal raised her eyebrows. “How am I supposed to do that?”

“Deep within the consciousness of every living thing there are wholesome and unwholesome seeds. When you come into contact with any living thing, honor the wholesome seed within them by joining your palms and bowing, acknowledging the seed of Buddhahood in them.

“The Buddha taught us to perceive and cultivate for all beings the same love a mother would feel for her child. This love does not discriminate between benevolent people and malicious people. Buddhism is when you become awakened, discovering your oneness with every living thing. You are not separated, isolated, cut off from other beings. Their suffering is your suffering, their disillusionment is yours. In turn, seeing this, feeling this, you wish to alleviate it. You can’t do this by force or by magic, but rather by learning to distinguish one seed within you from the other and water only the seeds that are wholesome.”²

Tara opened her hand to reveal a large, pink flower with a yellow center and long green stem.

“In the Buddhist faith the lotus is the embodiment of perfection and faithfulness.” Tara brought the flower to her nose, breathing in the lotus’s sweet fragrance before taking Crystal’s hand and placing it into her open palm.

“The lotus flower is the perfection of the fourfold order of the natural world, symbolizing the union of the four elements: earth, water, air and fire. The roots are in the earth, it grows in and by means of water, its leaves are nourished by air, and it blooms through the power of the sun’s fire.

“A symbolic characteristic of the lotus is the plant’s stalk: it is easy to bend, but very hard to break because of its many fibers.

“This,” she lifted her green eyes, “can represent a close, unbreakable relationship between two lovers or the members within a family, like your sister.”

Crystal stared at the pink flower. It was one of the largest, most beautiful flowers she’d ever seen.

“I give this flower to you as a gift from one goddess to another,” said Tara. “Within its center is the jewel of compassion. When you and your sister make contact, rekindling your unbreakable bond, the flame from the flower will set fire to the feather, cleansing then releasing its impurities which will break the spell and cast the evil one from the Forbidden City. In turn your sister and the white bird will be free.”

Tara touched Crystal’s arm. “I fear, however, once this is done your sister will be vulnerable and most likely become quite ill. The spell he cast upon the feather is much like an opiate—many are quite addictive.”

What?!

“And, after you break this spell you must immediately leave and return to your mission.”

“But...how am I supposed to just leave her? She’s my sister! And now she’s addicted to *drugs?*” Crystal moaned and clenched her fists, knowing how it felt to be in the clutches of addiction. “She must be scared to death,” she whispered.

Tara flashed her Mona Lisa smile, her wise eyes searching Crystal’s. “You must not let her distress distract you. Deep within you there is the strength to put your hands deep into the earth and face the difficulties that lie ahead. Your sister has the same strength. Like you she has special qualities and will survive this.

“Even though you walk this earth as a human, with attachments and loyalties to others, you will need to look beyond these earthly manifestations in order to help her. No matter how uncomfortable it may be, you don’t have the luxury to avoid unpleasant things. You’ve walked the earth many times before showing great compassion to many and you can do this once again.”

“Very well,” whispered Crystal. She threw her arm around her dog, appreciating his solid warmth.

“Now it is time to learn how to summon the Buddha within which will help summon the courage you will need. There is a Buddhist mantra saying, ‘*Om mani padme hum,*’ which means ‘*Hail, the jewel in the lotus.*’ This mantra signifies not only the jewel of cosmic divinity living within the lotus, but also the jewel of man’s divinity living within the lotus. In other words, the mantra is saying: ‘I am in You and You are in me.’ It is one way of expressing the principle of ‘As above, so below.’³

“This mantra is quite powerful because even though it is easy to say, the six vowels contain the essence of the entire teaching of the Buddha. Repeating it can invoke the powerful, protective, benevolent presence of Chenzerig, the compassionate Buddha deep within us.

“You can imagine this by replacing the thought of yourself as a human with the thought of yourself as a compassionate Buddha, slowly eliminating the fascination on your personal, human self, expanding your compassion toward yourself and others.”⁴

“Ommanipadmehum.” Crystal rushed through the mantra.

“Remain open and let the rain of the Dharma soak into you, watering the seeds of harmlessness, honoring the Buddha within.”

“Ommanipadmehum.” Again, Crystal stumbled over the words.

“Say it slowly. Ohm...Mah...Nee...Pahd...May...Hoong.”

Crystal repeated it slowly.

“Good.” Tara nodded her head. “Learn by saying slowly, then, begin drawing the syllables more quickly.”

Crystal whispered it over and over until she felt certain she’d remember it. Then she threw the beautiful woman a smile. “Now what?”

“You must disguise yourself.”

“Like...with a hat and sunglasses?”

“No. You will be going to the Forbidden City and must not be seen by anyone. The marks you wear around your arm and your neck and your easily identifiable hair must not be exposed.”

“I can wrap something around them. I’ve done that before,” offered Crystal, slowly realizing the woman meant something completely different when she shook her head again.

“No. You must disguise your true form. There are those residing in the city who would take great pleasure in finding you and using your powers for their own selfish purposes.”

Crystal gulped and shuddered.

Wyndon lifted his lip and snarled.

“Is there not someone who just offered to help you?” asked Tara.

Wyndon wagged his tail, got to his feet and barked loudly.

“What?” Crystal stared at him.

Wyndon stared into her eyes intently.

“What?” Crystal threw up her hands, careful not to throw the lotus flower across the room. She got to her knees and grabbed Wyndon’s big head. “Wyndon, I don’t know what you’re trying to tell me.”

A little gray mouse popped its head out from the rough around his neck.

“Crikey!” Crystal fell back on her rump.

Tara smiled and the little mouse leapt from Wyndon’s neck, landing in her outstretched hand.

“Hello, Mushika.” She nuzzled the little mouse’s body with her porcelain cheek. “It has been a long, long time.”

Crystal swept her eyes between the mouse and the woman. This was the same mouse that had spoken to her in the belly of the serpent. The same mouse she’d traveled with in the Underworld. It had a name?

“Mushika has many gifts,” offered Tara, slowly lifting her green eyes to Crystal. “She can remain hidden under the cover of darkness in the light of day and is quite attentive to detail.”

Crystal continued to shake her head slowly back and forth. But a mouse? Surely not.

Wyndon wagged his tail, looking quite pleased. He knew another adventure was close at hand.

“I’m supposed to be okay with turning into a mouse?” asked Crystal.

Tara laughed and to Crystal it sounded like a thousand tinkling bells.

“My dear, you won’t become the mouse. You are the jewel in the lotus, the sacred flame that can vanquish the spell.”

Crystal stared at the flower in her hand. “I’m...going to become a-a flower?”

“You will not *be* the flower, but rather your consciousness will be the flame within the flower.”

Crystal looked puzzled.

Tara folded her hands in her lap. “When you summon your divine compassion, which is the pure flame of the spirit, you will become one with the lotus. Remember, the flower is the embodiment of perfection and its roots are deep in the mud, yet it can lift itself up within the muddy waters, rising above the surface toward the light, representing a journey from darkness to the light of knowledge or wisdom, much like the individual consciousness does on its path toward enlightenment. We know this can work as the flame is pure and can vanquish the spell, but the manner in which it will occur is not yet foreseen.”

Tara held out her hand and the mouse jumped back onto Wyndon’s back. “I understand changing forms is not new to you,” she added.

Crystal shrugged her shoulders. “Animals, yes, but nothing that’s, well, not alive, not breathing.”

Tara lifted her new moon eyebrows in surprise. “The lotus flower is very much alive, very much breathing just as the ground beneath you and the walls and air around you are alive with energy.” She lifted her arms, pointing to the walls around them.

Tara leaned forward, staring into Crystal’s eyes, her green eyes glowing. “You’ve a lot to learn, young Crystal and no doubt you will gain new knowledge about our world and how it works very soon.”

Tara leaned back and smiled. “Mushika is extremely clever and will help you along the way. She knows the city streets and secret passageways; she will find your sister. Yet only you can vanquish the spell cast upon the feather.”

Tara reached behind her and brought forth a beautiful wool blanket woven in bold colors. She draped it across Wyndon’s back and drew together the straps sewn onto the blanket underneath his belly, buckling them.

She looked into Wyndon’s eyes. “Keep to the tunnels,” she instructed, adjusting the blanket and tightening the belt. “When you get to the red

temple, take the gold staircase up and find the market in the city. Then look for the booth with the red and yellow pinwheels. Mushika will know what to do.

“Now,” Tara looked at Crystal, “show me the flower.”

Crystal held out her hand.

“Look closely into its center.”

Crystal looked at the beautiful flower, admiring its abundance of pink petals and lovely yellow center which looked like a velvety soft pin cushion. She stroked the fragrant petals, gently running her finger over the tops of the long tubular shoots sprouting from the base of the yellow pin cushion. She realized the fragrance she’d first smelled did not come from the candles; rather it came from the flower. She closed her eyes, breathing in the flower’s lovely fragrance as she continued stroking the petals.

“Say the mantra, Crystal, and don’t stop. Think of the compassionate Buddha deep within you—the superlative enlightened being that knows the truth. The truth is already in you, Crystal Blue. You are the sister warrior, an enlightened star master walking among many who are ignorant to their own true natures. Life begins to unfold its mystery as soon as compassion is created in the heart, as soon as one’s deepest feeling is awakened for all that is living, with regard for everyone’s needs.”

“Om mani padme hum.” Crystal opened her eyes to stare into the yellow center of the lotus. “Om mani padme hum.”

“See the beautiful pure flame of compassion in the flower,” whispered Tara.

“Om mani padme hum. Om mani padme hum.”

Crystal breathed deeply, bathed in the flame’s pure, radiant light. She felt like weeping when an overwhelming surge of love swept through her, squeezing her heart in its heated embrace. And then in a burst of light, Crystal disappeared, replaced by a single flame of unearthly light.

Wyndon barked excitedly as the flame grew taller and taller. Suddenly, it soared into the air, diving back down and disappearing into the center of the flower now floating to the ground.

Tara scooped up the flower, tucking it away in a pocket on the blanket.

She smiled at the little mouse as it crawled into the pocket with the lotus. “Do not let the lotus be seen by anyone other than the sister,” she whispered, patting the pocket gently, her eyes shining like green stars.

“And remember, even though this flower is powerful, it is quite delicate. Do not under any circumstances let it out of your sight.”

Tara took Wyndon’s chin and drew his head around to look in his eyes. “Do not worry about your mistress, she is quite safe. But remember that you carry special cargo, my fine, brave warrior. Please see that my friend, Mushika also stays safe.”

Tara turned, pointing to a narrow doorway in the wall. “Through there is a tunnel that will take you to the city. It is quite a long way, but you should not be bothered as no one has used the tunnel in centuries. You will know you’ve reached the temple when you hear music. Do not stop any time before that.

“Now hurry,” she said, watching Wyndon’s large body disappear through the doorway, thinking him a most graceful creature. “I will be watching and waiting near the sacred mountain.” Then the beautiful and compassionate goddess transformed into a single flame that wavered and burned brightly before vanishing into thin air.

THE GIRL LYING ON THE HOSPITAL bed felt awful. She had a massive headache and was so exhausted that even breathing was difficult. Wicked chills racked her body and her left arm and hand throbbed painfully.

These discomforts were nothing, however, compared to the ache deep inside of her. The aching need would course through her body in intermittent waves. When this happened, she thought she might die if she didn’t get whatever it was she ached for—when these waves crashed over her, she wished she were dead.

Lying on the bed, gray-faced and moaning, the dispassionate girl with the long blonde hair and angry bruise over her right eye didn’t notice the doctor’s concerned look, nor did she pay attention to the three Tibetans huddled together in the corner of the room. She didn’t know where she was, barely knew *who* she was for that matter.

“You say you found her on the steps of the monastery?” The doctor lifted his eyes to the elderly couple.

The old man nodded. “Her arm, we think it is broken.”

“And she was showing signs of mountain illness, walking unsteady and speaking nonsense before she collapse,” added the old woman. “My nephew, he is strong, he carried her. We did not know what else to do.”

The young doctor continued eyeing the trio for a few moments before turning his gaze to his patient, eyeing the purple bump over her eye, presuming she'd broken her arm from a fall.

He drew up one eyelid, shining his pen-sized flashlight in her eye, looking for signs of a concussion. Seeing that her pupils responded relatively well, he moved the heavy blanket covering her aside and gently examined her injured arm, now resting in a makeshift sling. Two of her fingers were purple and swollen, most likely they too were broken.

Now, however, he needed to check for signs of mountain sickness. Every year at least one person died from complications due to the high plateau's thin, mountain air and 14,000 foot altitude. Travelers not taking the necessary precautions suffered greatly.

The doctor began evaluating her puffy, gray complexion and shallow breathing. Then he checked her uninjured arm for swelling, noticing a slight puffiness around her wrist.

Becoming alarmed, he quickly but gently propped her into a sitting position and placed his stethoscope just below her shoulder blades, listening and hoping not to hear the dreaded crackling sounds in her lungs, another sign of high altitude pulmonary edema.

"Can you breathe deeply for me?" he asked her softly in English.

She moaned, taking a deep breath, causing a raspy cough to escape from her dry lips along with a small bit of yellow sputum which dribbled down her chin.

The doctor scowled when he heard the watery crackle in her lungs.

"Damn," he whispered, laying the girl back, draping the stethoscope around his neck and wiping her chin.

Striding purposefully to the door, he waved over a young attendant. "Bring me 4 milligrams of Dexamethasone and 500 milligrams of paracetamol. "

He went back and elevated the head of the girl's bed so she was in a semi-reclining position and reached behind her, grabbing the nasal cannula from its wall connection and pulled the lightweight oxygen tubes over her head, inserting the prongs in her nostrils and hooking the tubes over her ears. He should have put this on her the moment she entered the clinic. She was in a severe state of hypoxic distress, he thought wiping away the yellow sputum around her lips.

"Does your head hurt?"

She groaned and mumbled something unintelligible.

"Can you drink some water for me?"

"Mmmm." She nodded weakly.

In a matter of moments, a young attendant scurried into the room. He handed the doctor a syringe which the doctor immediately inserted into the girl's uninjured arm. He knew the drug would alleviate the life-threatening effects of AMS, but wouldn't cure it.

"I'm going to put two small pills in your mouth and you need to drink them down with water," he instructed, lifting Claire's head gently, raising his eyebrows slightly as he placed the pills on her tongue, bringing the cup to her lips.

The girl drank gratefully and lay back with a sigh.

The elderly couple in the corner, having watched the doctor closely over the past few minutes, approached him. The old woman held out her hand. "Here is twenty yuan. We have a little to spare to help with her medical expenses," he said, throwing a worried glance toward the girl. "We have all been healthy and haven't used any yuan in our own medical account since we registered."

The doctor accepted the money gratefully. Funds in the village clinic were scarce.

Then the old man stepped forward, handing the doctor a small, folded piece of paper before they swiftly left the room.

The three Tibetans headed up a steep and narrow cobblestone street then turned into an even narrower lane where they were greeted by a young Chinese man and woman who obviously did not want to be seen as they stayed tucked into the shadows.

"Well?" asked the young man who wrung his wool cap in his hands, his forehead crinkled with worry. "Will she be all right?"

"The doctor look very concern, but he give her medicine and take our money," replied the old woman.

"Did you give him the note?"

The old man nodded.

The young woman pressed some coins into the old woman's hand. "You have honored your family and ours. Please, do not speak of this to anyone. Ever."

Then the two fled, disappearing around a corner, heading back to the Ganden monastery and fleeing up its steps where they were met by four others.

Inside the clinic, the doctor stared at the note, reading it once, then twice before slipping it into his breast pocket.

The girl on the bed groaned and he quickly went to her bedside. If what the note said were true, then she was special. Earlier, when he'd lifted her head, he'd felt a slight jolt of energy sizzle up his arm and he'd almost pulled his hand away.

He tenderly stroked her fevered forehead, avoiding the tender bruise, recalling with a quick intake of breath the innocence and pain he'd seen in her powdery-blue eyes. Never in his life had he seen such a color. Not even Tibet's cloudless azure-blue skies matched her clear gaze.

He lifted her uninjured arm and placed his thumb on the underside of her wrist, grateful when he felt her slow, steady pulse. He lay her arm down gently, noticing her closed fist and slowly pried her fingers open, discovering another injury: the girl's palm was red and angry with blisters.

She surprised him when she sat up, grabbing his coat's lapel and shaking uncontrollably. "Can you help me?" she whispered, her blue eyes desperate and pleading. "Can-can you help me?"

The surprised doctor watched his once-complacent patient begin writhing about on the bed, her desperate eyes flying about the room.

"Where is it!?" She cried out in pain when she moved her arm, and began wheezing and coughing.

He took her shoulders and gently guided her back down on the bed, replacing the oxygen tubes that had come loose when she'd sat up.

"Can you help me?" mumbled the girl, her head whipping back and forth on the pillow. "I need, I need, I need...." She sobbed.

"Shhh...," he soothed, tenderly stroking her cheek now damp with tears. His heart broke seeing her body tremble and the tears stream down her pale face, and hearing her pitiful pleas. No patient's suffering had ever touched him this way, and he'd dealt with plenty. She was acting as though she were an addict in need of a fix.

He rushed from the room to find a nurse who could help him with the girl's many injuries.

"Oh, Crystal," whispered Claire longingly, almost reverently as she remembered her sister's cries for help. "Please be safe."

And then, with a deep, drawn out sigh she drifted off to a place where the pain couldn't find her. As the heavy hand of sleep swept over her, she sailed in a wooden shoe on a river of crystal light into a sea of sparkling dew with Wynken, Blynken and Nod. For the first time in days her headache eased, and she felt at peace.

TWO

My teaching is like a finger pointing to the moon. Do not mistake the finger for the moon.

The Buddha.

March 2011

Gonggar International Airport, Tibet

Claire followed the band of passengers off the airbus, nervously gripping her permits in her hand, remembering Amin's warning that Tibet would be closed to foreign nationals.

She held her breath when passing through the airport's special security screen which actually took her temperature, and then, trying to stay calm, she handed the permits to the young man in uniform who looked them over briefly before lifting his eyes, letting them travel over her slowly before handing them back.

As Claire headed toward customs, she swore there was something akin to fear in his eyes as they'd met hers, but set the thought aside as she cleared customs and immigration.

With a deep, drawn out sigh, hitching her heavy bag up on her shoulder, she headed down Gonggar's wide, window-lined terminal, feeling somewhat alone in the maze of tourists as she searched for grandfather. If she didn't see him shortly her trip would be over as the

Chinese government would most likely send her back home. She knew she wasn't supposed to travel alone in Lhasa. It simply wasn't allowed.

Moments later, eyes down, she let out a little 'yelp' and whirled around, fully expecting to see a Chinese official ready to drag her back to the plane. Instead, she found a young man holding a sign with **Attis**, printed in bold letters.

"Miss Claire?" His smile was wide and ready.

Claire nodded.

"I am Sum Lum." He bowed quickly and took her luggage. "Welcome to the roof of the world."

"But," her eyes swept the crowds, "I'm supposed to wait for my grandfather."

Sum Lum smiled. "Your grandfather has asked me to help. He does not have the proper authority to be a guide and you cannot travel without one. I will take you to your hotel and show you the city and your grandfather will see you tomorrow."

Claire chewed her lip nervously. Then she hitched her bag up and peeked inside. Satisfied the large white feather was still there she decided to let Sum Lum take her to the city. She followed the young man with a type of blind faith to the baggage claim area—she was simply exhausted from the long flight and didn't want to wait around any longer,

After hefting her large bag off the carousel, Sum Lum led her outside to a shiny black Land Cruiser waiting at the curb.

Claire sighed gratefully as she sank into the large car's back seat letting Sum Lum handle her luggage. She flipped him a tired smile when he sank into the seat beside her and sensing her fatigue, he asked no questions as the large car made its forty-minute trip to Tibet's capital city, Lhasa, the political and religious heart of the Tibetan world.

Immediately after exiting the airport, western Tibet's breathtaking landscape unfurled before them and Claire's jaw quickly dropped at the spectacular views. White billowy clouds sailing high in the wide-open sky threw pools of dancing violet shadows over hills of rolling, golden carpets that bowed at the feet of soaring snow-capped jagged peaks. Bands of turquoise-blue lakes glimmered along the shores of the golden hills, and wide open ranges sliced by ribbons of winding blue tributaries swept out before them.

More than once the car passed beneath long strings of fluttering flags in bold colors spider webbed high above the road attached to cliffs on either side—she even saw a painting of a giant blue man on the side a cliff. The blue man was surrounded by ribbons of white scarves fluttering from the walls.

Not long after passing by the blue man, the once forbidden city of Lhasa—a city steeped in mysticism situated in a valley surrounded entirely by mountains—came into view. Once in the city, Claire marveled at an impressive fortress-like castle covering the top and sides of a small mountain in the center of the city. Because the palace walls sloped inward, following the lines of the mountain, and the doorways and window frames sloped inward from their base, it appeared as though the 12-story complex of grew out of the hill.

As they drew closer, Claire could see bright colored awnings fluttering above the palace doors and windows, lending the massive complex a bit of cheer.

Sum Lum informed Claire the white and red palaces perched high above the city was the majestic Potala Palace, once serving as the impressive seat of the Tibetan government and home to the Dalai Lamas since the 17th century. But now, since China's occupation in the late 1950s, the palace was a rather sad museum, devoid of any inhabitants but still housing thousands of Tibetan treasures.

Claire pressed her face to the window, excitement sizzling through her when she learned which palace this was. She would be visiting it soon, her grandfather had promised.

Sum Lum pointed to the large square fronting the palace which had been spruced up with a huge ornamental garden, long strings of red lanterns and prayer flags.

“During the days of Losar, the Tibetan New Year” said Sum Lum, “the Tibetan people come out on the streets and chant, pass fire torches, dance and sing, and make offerings at home altars, shrines and monasteries. The square will soon be filled with actors and dancers celebrating, with great fervor, age old ceremonies commemorating the struggle between good and evil. It is essentially a time for general merriment for Losar is celebrated by all and the largest Tibetan festival of the year.”

As they made their way through Lhasa's elaborately decorated streets and squares filled with both traffic and brightly dressed Tibetans on foot—

looking slightly out of place amid the congested streets—Claire began grasping the extent of the Chinese control and influence over the Tibetan people.

Already, they'd passed five Chinese soldiers marching down the street on patrol, two in front, two in back, and one in the middle with a shotgun. On almost every street corner was a glass box with four Chinese soldiers inside, each facing out a different direction, and red Chinese flags were hung everywhere, more indications of China's tight-fisted control over Tibet and how they wanted everyone to know it.

Claire turned to watch the long car drive away and then she followed Sum Lum into the Kyichu hotel. After a friendly greeting by an English-speaking staff, and now, slightly out of breath and even more exhausted than when she'd stepped off the plane, Claire plodded tiredly behind her young guide as they made their way to her room.

"Would you like a tour of the Barkhor, the spiritual heart of our city?" asked Sum Lum as he hefted her bag onto one of the twin beds.

"I don't think so." Claire shook her head and turned from the window she'd gazed out of, dropping into a chair. "I'm so tired."

"It is the altitude. You are not acclimated yet," explained Sum Lum with a sympathetic smile.

"You can show me around tomorrow morning," Claire covered a yawn, "after we see grandfather of course."

Sum Lum dropped his gaze and began backing out of the room. "Of course.

Oh, and do not take a shower until late tomorrow or the next day."

Don't take a shower? Claire's head snapped up, her eyes wide with surprise.

"Why can't I take a shower?" she blurted out before he closed the door.

"To avoid the flu," he answered simply. "You do not want to become ill."

"Humph," Claire snorted. She needed to remove the grime from traveling. Not taking a shower was out of the question. She'd make it a quick shower and since she'd never been sick a day in her life, she was sure a little shower couldn't hurt. But first, she needed to lie down.

Feeling lightheaded and now a bit queasy, Claire lay back on the bed and closed her eyes. She burped and giggled, feeling a bit like she had after her first glass of champagne.

Five minutes later, her eyes flipped open when she realized she hadn't checked on Daniel since before she'd gotten off the plane.

She sat up quickly and put her hand to her head when a bout of dizziness nearly slammed her back down. Now, moving slowly, she opened her suitcase and unzipped a side pocket, pulled out a small stuffed animal that looked a lot like a ferret—a lot like Daniel and held the little animal in her hand.

She grabbed her bag and pulled out the huge, white feather, putting it to her ear and closing her eyes, listening for a moment. Then, she touched the feather to the animal's head before waving it back-and-forth, whispering, "A little time, a little trouble, release the boy from the magic bubble. Fur and whiskers should be his form, not the human which was his norm. Counting one, now two, three and four, return this creature to what he was before."

The little animal quickly morphed into a very-much alive ferret who peered around uncertainly before jumping from Claire's hand onto the bed and then to the floor, darting underneath the bed.

Claire blinked and shook her head as if she'd been in a dream, staring at her empty, outstretched palm a moment before carefully putting the white feather back into her bag.

She knelt down and peered beneath the bed. "It's all right, Daniel," whispered Claire. "We're in Tibet now, in the Old Town of Lhasa, soon to meet Grandfather. You probably don't remember anything. Grandfather said it would be best that way."

The ferret pushed itself further back into the corner beneath the bed, sneezing softly when some dust got into his nose.

"Suit yourself," said Claire, getting to her feet, heading to the bathroom. She needed a hot shower . . . now.

She hadn't meant to stay under so long, but the hot water had felt wonderful. Now, feeling a little guilty and wondering if her decision would bode ill, she wrapped herself and her hair in two rather meager towels.

Claire looked around and, with an irritated snort, suddenly realized she'd been in such a hurry to get her shower, she'd forgotten her robe.

Shivering, wishing she hadn't been so hasty she threw open the door, letting the chill of the other room in. On tip toe she sped to her luggage, flinging garments out of the bag as she looked for her robe.

“Good grief,” she muttered after a moment, toe tapping, hand on hip, irritated. Where was her bathrobe?

She grabbed some clothes and ran back into the steamy bathroom, slamming the door behind her. Teeth chattering slightly, she quickly dressed, and was once again warm.

She flung the door open and stepped into the room, stopping quickly when she saw Daniel sitting next to her fluffy pink bathrobe now draped across the end of the bed, her suspicious gaze traveling between Daniel and her robe.

Strange, she thought, rushing across the room and grabbing her robe, rubbing the soft fleecy fabric against her cheek. Suddenly she gasped and her legs gave. She grabbed the bed post, her eyes desperate. Where was she? How did she get here? She didn’t know this room, had no idea how she’d gotten here.

Feeling lost and confused, terrified and alone, Claire dropped down on the bed, searching the room for something familiar. And then a vague, unsettled feeling overcame her like someone had dropped a veil of forgetfulness over her head, swallowing her in darkness, locking the memories up inside her that wanted to escape.

Suddenly every fiber of her being was in agony. She thought she’d die if she didn’t get a dose of whatever it was hiding in her purse.

With sporadic, jerky movements she grabbed her bag, groping around inside, sighing with pleasure like an addict finding its fix when her fingers clamped around the feather’s smooth shaft.

She drew the feather out and soon her body went limp. When she flipped her eyes open they were black and blank as stones.

The ferret stared, twitching its whiskers nervously.

A few minutes later—her eyes once again blue—Claire shook her head, flung her bag over her shoulder and stuffed the feather back inside. “You stay here.” Claire stroked the ferret’s head. “I’ll find something for us to eat and will be back soon.”

Claire made her way down to the lobby having all but forgotten the moments of terror she’d just experienced.

Once seated, she smiled pleasantly at the young waiter who was handing her a menu. She glanced it over, grateful for the English translations and ordered a cup of ‘butter tea,’ some flatbread and a bowl of noodles.

The noodles, she decided when she'd finished, were delicious, but the tea was not. It was like drinking the butter topping from movie theatre popcorn. She'd definitely not be ordering that again.

Even though it was just past 8:00 in the evening, jet lag and the affects from the high altitude quickly took their toll and she barely had the strength to return to her room. She gave Daniel some of the bread she'd saved for him, and fell face down on the bed. She stayed like that until she awakened with a start, her heart racing, her breathing shallow and labored. She groped for her water bottle, gulping some down. God she was thirsty. Claire crawled beneath the blankets, falling asleep only after her heart stopped racing.

The morning sun was streaming in through the gaps at the edge of the window shades and someone was knocking on the door.

Claire sat up. "Who is it?" she mumbled sleepily.

"It is me, Sum Lum."

Claire put a shaky hand to her head. "What time is it?"

"It is ten o'clock."

Ten o'clock! She'd never slept this late in her life!

She threw on her robe and opened the door.

Sum Lum smiled widely, peering into the room. "It is a beautiful day, Miss Claire. Did you sleep well?" His jaw dropped when he spied Daniel sitting on the bed.

Claire turned around, wondering if maybe she shouldn't have kept him hidden.

"What is that?" Sum Lum pointed at Daniel, eyes wide.

"That" — Claire leaned sideways, blocking his view of Daniel — "is none of your business."

The young man peered over Claire's shoulder, but she stepped back and began closing the door. "Please wait for me downstairs. I won't be but a minute."

Claire closed the door before Sum Lum could get another word out.

She turned around, peering at Daniel shrewdly. "What am I going to do with you?" she murmured, striding toward him and scooping him up, putting him onto her shoulder.

Daniel's whiskers tickled her cheek and Claire laughed, stroking his soft head. "I'll just have to keep you hidden is what I'll do with you." She laughed again when he chattered in her ear.

After changing her clothes and zipping Daniel into her fleece jacket with instructions to 'stay there,' she met Sum Lum near the front desk. Insisting he join her for breakfast, she dined on sweet tea and a tasty Tibetan flatbread called *balep korkun*, soon determining the tea would be her new drink of choice in Tibet.

As they headed outside, Claire slipped a bit of bread into her coat and tried not to burst out laughing when Daniel's sharp little nails tickled her when he began nibbling the bread.

Claire looked up and down the street, expecting to see her grandfather any moment. "Where is my grandfather?"

Sum Lum cleared his throat before looking away. "I am honored to be your guide." He bowed, but did not answer her question.

Claire narrowed her eyes and clenched her fists. "Where is my grandfather?" she asked again, her voice louder.

Sum Lum's eyes darted toward a Chinese official on patrol across the street watching them intently.

"Two days ago I received a message with instructions to be your guide," said Sum Lum, hoping his client would not draw the attention of the Chinese police. "I do not know where your grandfather is. I was told to pick you up, bring you to the hotel, and show you the Barkhor and the Jokhang Temple."

Claire felt a moment of panic. Her grandfather had promised to meet her and now, standing on the streets of Lhasa with a stranger, surrounded by officials who might throw her out of their country any moment, she began trembling with fear.

She reached into her bag and began stroking the feather, and soon, the feather's magic took effect, reassuring her again that everything would be all right. Claire quickly dismissed the feeling of panic with the assurance that her grandfather would meet up with her later in the day and smiled brightly at Sum Lum, informing him that she was ready to go.

Sum Lum raised his eyebrows, astonished yet relieved at her quick transformation. One moment she'd been trembling in fear, the next moment, calm and confident.

He shook his head, his dark eyes traveling up and down the street as if he looked for someone.

Then they set off down the street and he began regaling her with tales of the ancient city.

"MY HEAD IS KILLING ME." Gina popped another white pill into her mouth, grateful their guide had given them the medicine called Diamox. Supposedly it helped alleviate symptoms of altitude sickness.

"Why must we stay hidden in this wretched hotel room?" She tossed a piece of gum into her mouth and began chewing it violently, wishing for a cigarette, and missing the soothing smell of sage from Gray Eye's pipe.

Cosmo turned from the window. "Give me one of those, would you?" He didn't want the affects of the high altitude keeping him from doing what he needed to do.

Gina handed him the bottle.

"Well?" Gina snapped her gum, extremely impatient as she watched him struggle with the cap. A bit of her surly disposition was beginning to return—she hadn't had a good night's sleep in over three days. She actually missed her bed in the cloistered little room under the ground.

Cosmo dropped into a chair. "You know why we're here, Gina. We can't scare him off—we need to find him before he finds us. We have to be careful."

She rolled her eyes and snapped her gum loudly, knowing he was probably right. And when she got her hands on his neck she'd have to wring it. Fool of a man.

"Why don't we just disguise ourselves?" she offered after a moment, getting to her feet and striding to the window, brushing the drape aside. She watched a group of tourists in the street below snapping pictures of three red-robed monks and a lone woman herding her goat down the busy street with a long stick. She narrowed her eyes, taking offense at the audacity of some people.

She turned from the window. "All we need to do is put on hats and strap cameras around our necks. We'll fit right in. Nasty brutes," she mumbled, stomping back to her chair and dropping down. "Why don't they mind their own business?"

Cosmo smiled. Even though a little of his daughter-in-law's churlish ways was rearing its head, he knew her ire came from a place of compassion. He too had been appalled at the lack of respect some of the tourists had shown the native Tibetans quietly going about their business. But they needed to stay put until their guide returned.

Yang Yan, the young Chinese student from Ya'an, a city in the western part of the Sichuan province of China, with a ready smile and short cap of

unruly black hair, who'd met them in Kathmandu's airport, warned them to stay indoors until she returned. She'd taken their passports and permits, saying she needed to fix them so they could all travel about the country freely.

Resting his head back in the chair and closing his eyes—listening to Gina destroy her gum with every loud *snap*—he took a deep breath and began wondering how David and the three delightful teenagers traveling with him were doing. He squirmed a bit, feeling guilty about what he'd done, but he'd done what he had to do. The impetus for his actions, however, overshadowed this guilt—he needed to find his son. Find out why he was in Lhasa with his crazy brother.

Cosmo jumped to his feet when someone knocked on the door.

Yang, smiling brightly, stepped into the room offering the set of documents to Cosmo. "We can now go into the city," she declared, her bright eyes darting between them. "Did you take your medicine?"

Cosmo and Gina nodded, both dragging on their coats as they followed the young woman out the door.

"Good. Now let me show you a city filled with religious treasures like the world has never seen. We will start with the Jokhang Temple. It is said a Tibetan king began building the temple...."

SHHH...CRYSTAL HEARD THE MOUSE whisper as they made their way down the ancient city's side street. Crystal realized the mouse was talking to Wyndon who'd just growled, long and low. Her newfound existence was incredible and quite often she had to remind herself that she had a job to do. She was easily distracted by her heightened sense of awareness, but she wasn't worried, she knew they were safe.

Existing in a state of pure consciousness was a mystical experience at best, and for most of the trip, she'd been completely unaware of her surroundings.

At first, she was both conscious and asleep as all sense of substance had left when she'd turned into the flame, leaving her physical body, needs and drives behind.

There was no weight to her, no feel of flesh and all that was left was a keen sense of wakefulness and deep quiet. She became one with an unlimited, expansive universe lying outside the mortal existence of flesh

and bone, passing a gateway to a new and free existence of limitless space and time. And she had no awareness to measure the passage of time.

It began with a voice and soon, the world returned, surrounding then reconstituting itself around her one layer at a time. Over and over, the word 'goddess' washed over her.

Having no sense of what a word was, let alone how to respond, she'd left it alone, floating in the vast expanse of awareness like a feather on a soft breeze, being pulled here, then there. But the voice had acted like an anchor, gentle yet firm, and before long the first layer of awareness surrounded her and she paid attention to the voice.

After awhile, piece by piece, she was put back together, except of course without her body and slowly, a vague sense of her self returned, along with things making up her everyday life: her relationships, engagements, and finally she became aware of who she was and what she was about. If not for Mushika's gentle persistence and guidance, she'd have floated into oblivion; happy, never knowing she was missing a life she'd left behind.

Now, she was actually quite comfortable in her newfound state of being. And not only was she comfortable, she was incredibly pumped. Being pure consciousness was an amazing thing. Her senses were multiplied tenfold. She discovered even colors made sound.

"Goddess," hissed Mushika, "you must pay attention! Goddess!"

Crystal found herself staring into the eyes of an angry gray mouse.

"You must not go off like that," admonished the mouse. "I can tell your thoughts are miles away. We don't have time to put you back together again. You must stay with me, with us if we are to find the feather."

"Sorry"—her mind spoke to Mushika. "I'm still getting used to this 'having-no-body' business."

"Humph," snorted Mushika. "I think we've found something."

Sensing they were in a crowd, Crystal felt rather than heard the voices around them. Because the flower was safely tucked into the pocket of the blanket, she had to make a conscious choice to bring her awareness out of the safety of the darkness and soon she floated above the crowd, eyeing the activity from above, making sure to keep a sharp eye on Wyndon who strolled casually through the crowds below. Mushika had encouraged her to feel as though she were a balloon, safely tethered to the lotus flower so that she wouldn't lose them and go floating off again. She needed to be

their eyes and ears and not get distracted by the hive of activity around them.

“What am I looking for?” she asked.

“We were to find a stand filled with red and yellow pinwheels. To my knowledge, these are toys and here is a toy stand. Am I right?”

Crystal looked over the stands below, bringing her awareness down so that she was in line with the stand, and then, she brought her awareness in. The stand was packed full of all sorts of things, from candy to books, jewelry and beautiful white satin scarves, and lots of toys, but no pinwheels.

“There are many things, but no pinwheels.”

“Very well,” sighed Mushika. “We’ll keep looking.”

Wyndon kept up his steady pace, weaving between the stands and people as if he’d been doing it all his life, his brown eyes casually studying the crowds around them. His relaxed gait and manner was such that they attracted no unwanted attention, not even by children who watched with wide eyes as the huge black dog lumbered past.

“Stop!” Crystal spied something spinning that was red and yellow. “Those are pinwheels, right?”

Mushika jumped off Wyndon’s back and scampered to the leg of the table in the stand.

Crystal, determined to remain focused, sensed the pinwheels dancing in the breeze. Round and round they went. It was all she could do to stay focused.

Om mani padme hum, she whispered, having learned that saying the mantra kept her attention focused. *Om mani padme hum*.

Moments later, Mushika returned, climbing up Wyndon’s leg and nestling back into the thick fur. “Something has happened, but many eyes and ears are around. We have to return when it is dark,” she instructed. “For now, we will find a place for Wyndon to lie down. He is very tired.”

Of course he was tired, thought Crystal. He’d carried them over miles and miles of ground before they’d gotten to the city. She wished she could throw her arms around him, but he wasn’t aware of her. Mushika had to do all the communicating. She’d tried talking to him, but never got a response. She missed her dog, but it didn’t bother her much. Emotions left her alone. She was content being a part of the trio, glad to see that Wyndon was safe.

They came upon a quiet lane where a small boy, a goat, and a Buddhist nun were out for a leisurely stroll and Mushika instructed Wyndon to lay down beneath a wooden table tucked up between a stone building and a pile of straw.

Wyndon settled down and fell fast asleep.

“Come back into the pocket, goddess. I will tell you when it is time.”

Crystal floated down, settling into the comfort of the pocket and felt herself begin drifting off. *Om mani padme hum*. She breathed in deeply, taking in the exotic fragrance of the lotus she’d come to love. Then she felt her awareness go deep within the center of the lotus where it would remain until Mushika awakened her.

*Tribhuvan International Airport
Kathmandu, Nepal*

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN WE’RE not allowed to board!? We have visas and I’ve purchased tickets.” Elijah shook his ticket-filled fist at the female customs agent.

“That is impossible, sir,” replied the agent calmly. “No foreign tourists are issued permits to enter Tibet at this time of year. Your travel agent must have misguided or misinformed you.”

His head throbbed from fatigue and his pale, semi-sickly complexion—due to almost 48 hours without sleep and now this—made the long scar on the side of his face pop out angrily.

He thrust the now-crumpled ticket at the composed young woman who eyed his long scar with a hint of wariness. “This ticket clearly shows our destination,” seethed Elijah through tightly-clenched teeth.

She took it, lifted an elegant eyebrow and smoothed it out before looking it over.

“I am sorry, sir.” She handed the piece of paper back to Elijah. “I have my orders. No foreign travelers without special visas from China’s government are allowed to enter Tibet.”

“But I *have* special permits!” bellowed Elijah.

“You do not have the required TTB permit,” she explained calmly, glancing casually toward a senior agent.

An older gentleman, somewhat used to tirades from misinformed, weary tourists, stepped in, dismissing the young agent with a quick nod of his head. He took Elijah's arm, leading him away from the long line of tourists waiting to pass through customs and board the airplane bound for Lhasa.

"May I help you, sir?" he asked.

Elijah handed the elderly gentleman his ticket and visa, praying the man would see its authenticity.

After glancing them over both briefly, the agent lifted pseudo-sympathetic eyes to Elijah. "I understand your displeasure, sir," he purred in a voice trained to handle nervous travelers, "but it is above my pay grade to allow you entrance into a country closed to foreign travelers without Tibet's Travel Bureau permit. Might you like to tour our beautiful city instead? We have wonderful hotels, temples, and ancient..."

Elijah stared at the man, speechless and dumbfounded, quickly becoming angry. He narrowed his eyes as his lips tightened into a thin white line.

But before he could bare his teeth, which was his intention, and before his scar turned an even angrier shade of purple, Nita stepped in, placing her hand on his arm, reminding him gently that there were other travelers watching and maybe he could use a hot cup of tea.

"There must be other ways to enter Tibet," whispered Nita as she led him away. "We shouldn't draw too much attention. Jasmine and I will find something for us to eat and drink. Then we can make alternate plans."

Elijah threaded his way through the crowded airport, heading over to a long row of chairs, sagging down into an empty one. He closed his eyes and dragged his hand through his thick hair. God, he hated traveling. The noise in the airport sounded like the chronic chaos of a kid's soccer match. And it was hot, uncomfortably hot.

He watched Leon make his way over to a travel desk, striking up a conversation with a young man who, after a moment, handed Leon some brochures with a dull nod of his head.

It wasn't long before he and Leon were poring over brochures and a map, trying to decide the best way to pass into Tibet and how they were going to get past the Chinese checkpoints at the border crossing without Tibet's special permit.

Amin should have known! he fumed. He'd trusted him to get his permits in order.

He thought of Cosmo. The old man and Gina had caught an earlier flight hours ago. Obviously they hadn't experienced any trouble as they never returned. They were probably in Lhasa by now. How did *they* get into the country? And what the hell were they supposed to do now? It was going to take a goddamn miracle.

Elijah took the sandwich and cup of tea Nita offered him and as he ate he considered where Crystal might be. During the long flight he'd pored over the manuscript, searching for more information. The family she was to meet resided near a town by a lake where a certain queen was bathed by the gods. As yet, he hadn't figured out who or where that was.

"Halloo."

Elijah looked up and blinked. Standing directly before him, like he'd appeared out of nowhere, was an old man with a long, thin gray beard and happy black eyes that gleamed from beneath his well-worn, wide brimmed hat.

"You need someone to help you gain entrance to sacred country?" The old man's English was stilted yet clear.

Elijah's mouth dropped open and he quickly stood, snapping it shut. "Yes, yes, we are. Do you know of someone?"

The old man smiled, displaying a set of teeth, some of which were missing. "Me." He made a quick bow. "I am Tak and I will help. Follow me."

The old man turned around and began striding away.

"But, we need permits," sputtered Elijah, grabbing his bags, gesturing for the others to follow the old man who threaded through the thick, chaotic crowds with ease.

Elijah's long legs quickly caught up with Tak. "We need permits," he repeated.

The old man stopped and peered up at Elijah, his hat slipping back, revealing a crown of gray hair. "I say I can help you gain entrance into the old country. I do not say how. Please, follow me."

Once again the old man headed toward the airport's exit.

Elijah lifted his eyebrows and scratched his head. Well, why the hell not? he concluded, hefting his heavy bags and falling in line behind

Jasmine who passed by wearing a cheerful grin. Stranger things had happened lately. Might as well see where this takes them.

Stepping outside everyone was astonished when a blast of the valley's sub-tropical, afternoon air greeted them, and soon they were pulling off their coats.

Tak opened the back end of a red, dust-covered 1990s era Toyota Land Cruiser looking like it had been over and through many a river and mountain pass.

"Leave it to me," Tak assured them as they threw their luggage into the back. "I will see that you reach the sacred lake where Queen Maya was bathed by the gods before she bore her son, Buddha."

Elijah almost dropped his bag. "You know why we're here, where we're going?" he asked with surprise.

Tak grinned and nodded.

"How?"

"My wife tell me." Tak took Elijah's bag and placed it on the front seat. Then he slid in behind the steering wheel, throwing Elijah another wide smile as he pulled his door closed.

Elijah stood with hands on hips until Tak rolled his window down.

"How did she know?"

"The Arya-Tara tell her," stated Tak matter-of-factly.

"Who is Arya-Tara?" Elijah narrowed his eyes suspiciously at the old man, thrusting his head in through the open window.

"Please, get in the car."

Elijah glanced back at the serene faces of the three teenagers in his charge. They were jammed together in the back seat, eyes lit with excitement like they were going to the movies.

Elijah pulled his head out of the car, threw up his hands and stomped around the front of the vehicle, sliding in beside Tak.

Tak ground the gears, and soon, they were heading away from the airport. It wasn't long before Elijah realized Tak wasn't going to share any more information about the mysterious Arya-Tara as he was busy winding the Land Cruiser through Kathmandu's busy city streets and market squares, passing rickshaws, large tourist buses, and taxis.

"Where are we going?" asked Elijah, eyes wide as they drove past a large monument of the Buddha.

"To my family who will help us," answered Tak.

Soon the car left the city and began speeding past wide-open terraced rice fields and sweeping green foothills of the rugged yet pristine snow-clad mountains surrounding the lush, tropical valley.

Two hours later, they reached the edge of the valley and began making their way into an old village nestled into a wooded hillside. The village, it appeared as the car rolled over cobbled streets, was untouched by tourism. Traditional Newari homes ornamented with elaborate bricks and colorful tiles lined the cobbled streets that were now a hive of activity. Children were playing everywhere, tethered sheep and a few loose goats foraged for food, dogs roamed freely, even some ducks and ducklings waddled around.

They passed small groups of men and women chatting, and a group of beautiful girls carrying large, polished brass urns. The girls smiled brightly as they made their way to the red wood temple they'd passed on their way into town where they would make their offering for the day.

Tak ground the gears, pulling the car to a stop in front of a tidy home painted in bright colors. He pulled off his hat, turning to stare at his passengers intently. "This is my home. I must go find someone. I come back in one or two hour."

"What are we supposed to do?" Elijah was still tired and irritable. "Are we supposed to just wait for you? I don't even know who you are."

Jasmine leaned forward, putting her hand on his shoulder. "We trust him, Elijah, and so should you."

Elijah turned to stare at the three youths and all three smiled back, nodding their heads in unison.

"Fine," he said turning back around. "Just tell me how you know where we are going."

"Did you question your other hosts?" Tak peered at Elijah shrewdly. "Did you ask so many questions of the son of the bear?"

"Who?"

"He means Corbin, Elijah," offered Nita.

Elijah looked at her with an odd expression, remembering meeting Corbin at the gas station in Pine Ridge and how Crystal had looked so frail sitting on the bench next to him, her large brown eyes swimming in her pale face, her smile weak. He missed his daughter now more than ever.

He eyed Tak carefully. "This is different. You found me, I didn't find you."

“How do you know you didn’t find me?”

Elijah shook his head. “What do you mean?”

“We found Tak in the airport, Elijah,” whispered Jasmine. “I asked my stick and it pointed to him quite quickly. He was waiting for us.”

“What do you mean?” Elijah sounded like a broken record.

“Auntie Lomasi told me the stick will never lead us astray if we use it for a higher purpose. We needed help.”

“You have helpers all through Asia,” added Tak, bowing his head quickly. “I am honored that I can help. Now, let us go in and I will introduce you to my family.”

Tak smiled widely as he opened the front door of his home. They were greeted by an old woman and two younger ones who bowed deeply as the group of travelers entered the brightly painted, traditional Newari home, endorsed with colorful prayer flags and dried corn husks hanging from the ceiling.

Tak’s granddaughter, Srijana led them into the tiny kitchen with a ceremonious air and motioned for them to sit at a table already laden with bowls heaped with delicious-smelling rice teamed with a pickle and a fresh vegetable that looked like a miniature cob of corn.

“Please,” said Tak, “eat and rest. I return soon.”

Grateful for the food, Elijah and the three teenagers settled around the table, each smiling appreciatively when first tasting the traditional meal.

An hour later, Tak returned accompanied by two men. He introduced the younger of the two as Gourishankar.

“Call me Woody,” the hearty man smiled.

Tak then introduced the older man named Shilog. He was small, nimble, and bright with a head of white hair and lively, intelligent eyes.

They soon discovered Woody—a man fond of Pixar movies, Red Bull and Winston cigarettes—was a bricklayer whose job had recently taken him to a hidden kingdom near the Nepal/Tibet border.

“Do you ride horse?” asked Tak once they were all seated around the kitchen table.

Elijah raised his eyebrows and the three teenagers nodded enthusiastically.

Tak stared at Elijah, waiting for his answer. “Once, maybe twice,” offered Elijah slowly. “Why?”

“Did you stay on horse?” asked Tak, his happy eyes twinkling.

Nita giggled.

Elijah nodded, rolling his eyes. "Yes, I stay on horse."

"Good." Tak nodded and explained what they were going to do next. Tomorrow morning, Woody and Shilog would take them north to Pokhara, a city fringing the base of the Annapurna mountain range spanning the Nepal/Tibet border. Here they would catch a flight to Jomsam and trek for half-a-day to the village of Kagbeni, a town with the only entrance to the hidden Kingdom of Lo in Upper Mustang. Tak pronounced it: *Moos-tahng*. "You will overnight to rest and acclimate to the higher altitudes," he said, "while Woody attains the special permits needed to enter the tiny kingdom offered to a privileged few each year."

Woody flashed everyone a smile, whispering through the blue haze from his cigarette, "I have seriously good connections." His bright eyes flashed.

"From there," continued Tak, "you will proceed on foot or with the aid of stout, Tibetan ponies that will carry your gear, and sometimes you, through the valleys many canyons and arid, desert-like mountain passes, finally crossing the border into Tibet via an old, presently unused salt caravan route only a handful of people still know exist."

"It will be very strenuous trek," explained Woody, lighting another cigarette.

"The area is a small bit north of main Himalayan range and part of highlands of Tibet—very high altitude," added Shilog.

The men went on to explain that it being March, and trekking at high altitudes, temperatures would barely reach forty degrees during the day, lower of course at night and even though the valley lay in the rain shadow of the Annapurna mountain range, and thus quite arid, they might encounter snow.

The trip would take a week or more depending on the weather or any number of other reasons that might stall them, and before they were done, they'd need to traverse one of the world's deepest river gorges via a suspended bridge. But, Woody promised, his dark eyes shining knowingly, the trip through the sacred valley would be one they would never, never forget.

Elijah listened carefully, sweeping his eyes between the men as they delivered their plans. Trekking on foot or on horseback across the Himalayas and a suspended bridge? This he did not expect. Having

dragged his hand through his hair a half-dozen times, Elijah looking like Albert Einstein's twin, let the information sink in.

"There's no other way? No other road into Tibet? We're kind of in a hurry."

The men shook their heads. "Heavily guarded," offered Shilog.

"Police and guns at all checkpoints," added Tak. "No one wants to deal with Chinese official." He swerved his dark eyes to Shilog. "Shilog knows the valley well and will get you across the border safely. Many in Tibet, China and Nepal, who follow Dharma, know story of Star Goddess. They will do what is necessary to get you where you need to go."

Elijah presumed the Star Goddess was none other than his daughter. So now it was definitely time to learn who this other goddess was. He put his elbows on the table, leaning forward. "Who is Arya-Tara?"

Tak's wife, who had yet to speak, stepped to the table, joining her palms together and bowing before them. She began speaking in her native tongue and Tak took the liberty to translate.

"White Tara is ageless goddess who embodies perfect wisdom. She sacrifice herself lifetime after lifetime, give up final bliss of nirvana, ultimate goal of Buddhist endeavor, and taking Bodhisattva vow to serve beings of earth until all are free. Her compassion for others is true, come from a sacred chamber deep within heart." Nanu smiled, her heavily hooded, shining black eyes crinkling at the corners.

She put her hand on her heart. "It was here that I connect with the goddess. Deep within chamber of my heart she told me you coming."

Elijah looked at Leon, Jasmine and Nita. "It'll be cold, and hard, and long, and...."

Leon put his hand on his arm. "It's the only way." He swung his eyes between his two new friends. "We were raised on the land and we know how to live on her without special treatment, Elijah. We'll be okay."

Elijah blew out a long sigh. "Okay then." He slapped his hands down on the table. "But I'll probably need another pair of shoes. If I have to get on the back of a horse, these"—he looked down at his brown loafers—"will just not do."

Srijana stepped to the table, filling everyone's cup from a pot of freshly brewed sweet tea. Then, they all put their heads together and continued making plans.

THREE

It is better to live for one day as a tiger than to live for a thousand years as a sheep.

Tibetan Proverb

Claire and Sum Lum headed into Lhasa's religious center, Claire staying close to Sum Lum as a long line of green-clad Chinese soldiers, walking two abreast and carrying rifles, passed by. Sum Lum kept his eyes averted and stopped talking until the soldiers passed.

Soon they were in the heart of the old Tibetan quarter near the Jokhang Temple, a magnificent whirlwind of brightly-dressed prostrating pilgrims, chanting toddlers, old nomads tottering on canes, monks in gold and maroon robes, and Chinese tourists in iconic T-shirts, many carrying Prada bags, walking in single-file.

Sum Lum wound his way through the crowds and Claire followed with wide, wondrous eyes. Rickshaws, taxis and small busses carried the tourists through the crowded streets, some hanging out the windows taking pictures with long-necked cameras, others with noses pressed to the glass. Claire stopped to watch a lumbering yak stroll down the street led by a small boy—they were causing quite a traffic jam.

After climbing a short flight of wide stone steps they were in Barkhor's public open air square. The square, brightly decorated with strings of colorful prayer flags, red lanterns and a huge bed of red and yellow silk

flowers in the middle of the square, was teeming with Tibetans and Chinese tourists. Flanking the square was the Jokhang Temple, a large, four-storied white and red timbered temple with a top made of gilded bronze tiles. A sprawling complex constructed in various architectural styles.

Claire swept her eyes to the top of one of two thirty-foot poles in the square wrapped in hundreds of colorful flags and immediately began smelling sweetly scented smoke. She gazed around to find the smoke billowing out the mouths of four large, pot-bellied stone structures placed at each corner of the square. Sum Lum called them *sangkangs*, incense burners, explaining that they were placed at the four cardinal corners. "The incense burns constantly," he said, "to please the gods protecting the Jokhang. The flags that you see wrapped around the poles are peace flags."

Sum Lum's dark eyes casually flicked toward a lone Chinese official, one of many standing guard in the square. "The square has been the focus of numerous demonstrations," he explained. "Now they are forever standing guard and I fear some drastic changes are soon to come to this ancient city."

He smiled sadly and turned to face the temple, his face brightening as he gazed at the structure. "This temple is considered to be the most sacred and important temple in all of Tibet. It consists of three floors and an open roof all filled with chapels and chambers. A Tibetan king named Songtsen Gampo, the first ruler of a unified Tibet, built the temple in the year 647 B.C. initially as a place to house the three sacred Buddhas that were brought to him. One by his first wife, Princess Bhrikuti, the sister of the Nepalese King Narendradeva, and two Buddhas by his second wife, Princess Wencheng, daughter of the Chinese Emperor. These two foreign wives are credited with bringing Buddhism into this land and this temple became an inseparable part of Tibetan history and culture. The city of *Ra-Sa* grew around the temple and over time, became known as Lhasa, a holy land.

"The sacred temple was sacked several times during Mongol incursions"—Sum Lum swung his eyes to a passing official—"but its worst treatment has been at the hands of the Chinese since their occupation of Tibet in 1959. Today, the temple is open to pilgrims and tourists but carefully controlled by the Chinese government. Only one hundred monks can occupy the temple at any time and, as you can see, the area is

monitored by hundreds of police. Therefore," once again he swung his eyes toward an official, "it is not safe for monks to speak to foreign visitors.

"However, once built the temple became a pilgrimage destination for Tibetan pilgrims and soon a path appeared around the temple making the beginnings of Barkhor Street, the circular street which surrounds the temple. Hundreds of pilgrims each day, from dawn to dusk, circumambulate the temple as part of a pilgrimage to the site. In Tibetan, this circuitous route is known as the *kora*."

Sum Lum pointed out the pilgrims gathered in the plaza on a large porch in front of the temple. At first glance, Claire thought the women she saw, who wore their long hair in colorful braids, were falling down, one after the other, but moving closer to get a better look, she quickly realized she was wrong.

The area in front of the temple was filled with men and women of all ages, all chanting, some standing up, slapping their hands—covered in pads—together high over their head with a sharp note of praise, while others dropped down on onto mats, sliding their padded hands out in front of them as they prostrated themselves on the ground only to stand up again, quickly bringing folded hands to their chest, then to their foreheads and up to shout. Each pilgrim repeated these movements over and over. The porch in front of the plaza looked like a sea of bobbing bodies.

"These," declared Sum Lum with a proud lift of his chin, "are the Buddhist pilgrims performing their daily devotions to express their spirituality and devotion.

"For both monks and lay Tibetans, Buddhism is an integral part of their daily lives and many take arduous journeys in pilgrimage to holy sites such as this temple. Tibet has suffered extreme political turmoil and upheaval over the past 50 years, yet Buddhism permeates every part of a Tibetan's life. Due to the strength of the Tibetans' faith in Buddha and the Dalai Lama, their devotion and belief have remained extraordinarily strong."

As Claire and Sum Lum began walking along Barkhor's streets, Claire took notice of two Buddhists on their pilgrimage around the temple, looking like two inch worms as they slowly made their way along, stopping and dropping to their padded knees, sliding their padded hands out before them, prostrating, standing up, slapping their hands together over their head before taking two steps forward, progressing body-length by body-length down the street.

She looked up and down the street and began watching two old Tibetan women, each holding and spinning a long, wooden spindle with a beautiful golden cylinder attached to the top; a small chain attached to the cylinder spun around as it twirled—both were chanting.

Claire noticed more and more of these hand-held wheels, some with text written on them and some with detailed etchings. Sum Lum explained that the spinning wheels were called ‘Tibetan hand prayer wheels’ and were carried by many Tibetan Buddhists. “Turning the wheel in a clockwise direction while praying,” clarified Sum Lum, “helps release the pilgrim’s prayers for happiness, long life and good health, the relief of suffering for all beings, and the return of his Holiness the Dalai Lama.”

They reached the area on the north side of the Barkhor Sum Lum called the Tromsikhang, a large, free-wheeling outdoor market with narrow, shiny stoned streets and store fronts with colorful awnings and street vendors lining both sides. On the corners were dozens upon dozens of vibrant floating stands.

Sum Lum pointed out exotic articles such as yak butter lamps, long-sleeved ‘*chubas*’, the Tibetan people’s traditional clothes, prayer wheels, turquoise, silver and coral jewelries and Tibetan carpets.

They passed long tables laden with colorful, intricately carved handheld butter sculptures, bushels of barley seedlings dyed in bright colors, rolls and stacks of silk cloths for decorating homes, and tables full of *kasai*—the popular fried cereal eaten during the festival. The New Years decorations, Sum Lum explained, were offerings and tributes Tibetans used during the festival for altars in their homes and bringing blessings into their lives and the lives of their family and friends.

Walking more than two hours, now hungry as well as tired, and feeling quite lightheaded, Claire slowly made her way to an empty bench and plopped down with a grunt.

Sum Lum, knowing his charge was not yet acclimated to the high altitude, hurried off to get them both something to eat and drink, intent on returning quickly. Earlier, he’d noticed two Chinese soldiers eyeing them with too much interest. Claire’s blonde hair and fair skin stood out like a white pebble in a sea of black ones. He should be wearing a hat.

Claire focused on catching her breath and Daniel poked his head out of her jacket and looked around. “It’s quite an exotic place,” whispered Claire, stroking his soft head, watching an old man with a weathered, wizened

face progress down the street at a snail's pace; body-length by body-length, up and then down, another inch worm on the sacred path. The man was in no hurry and appeared quite content in his devotion.

Claire was struck with envy. How would it be? Your only purpose in life was to pray for, what did Sum Lum say? Happiness, long life and good health? It sunk in then how sacred the walking paths were, and how special this place was. Such devotion she'd never before witnessed. She was humbled, witnessing the ancient Buddhist ritual.

When Claire gasped and quickly stood up, Daniel almost fell out of her jacket, but his sharp claws hung on tightly. She stared with wide eyes. There. Across the street near a stand filled with toys was a man who looked just like Cosmo.

On shaky legs she took one step forward then stopped, seeing the Chinese soldier with a large rifle turn her way. She'd stood up so fast her head spun and the ground seemed to tilt and she knew she wasn't supposed to be alone so she slowly sat back down, her frantic eyes searching the crowd. Had she imagined it? Had she seen her old friend?

As she scanned the colorful crowds and busy booths, her vision blurred and her head began to throb. And suddenly her tongue felt swollen and dry, like a huge ball of cotton was lodged inside her mouth. Blinking furiously, trying to see past the black spots beginning to form in front of her eyes, she began to sway.

Before Claire hit the ground, Sum Lum swooped in and caught her, throwing the soldier striding their way his wide, ready smile.

Claire put her hand to her head and the soldier stopped his approach, watching Sum Lum give Claire a drink. Then he turned away.

Claire drank greedily and the cotton ball disappeared, but her headache remained. "I saw someone that I knew," she croaked, pointing a shaky finger at the crowds. "Over there. Cosmo."

Daniel poked his head out of her coat and leapt to the ground, dashing away toward where she pointed, quickly disappearing into the crowds gathered around the colorful toy stand.

"No!" cried Claire, jerking to her feet. "Daniel!"

Sum Lum watched with wide eyes but kept a firm hold of Claire's arm.

Claire's bottom lip trembled as she stared at the spot where Daniel had disappeared. It had happened so fast she hadn't had been able to stop him.

Lifting angry eyes to Sum Lum she yanked her arm from his tight grip and sank back onto the bench. She was tired, more tired than she'd ever been in her entire life. Her head was pounding and her heart was sick. There was no possible way Daniel would come back. He'd be stepped on, or someone would steal him, or worse...she shivered, thinking of her grandfather.

"Come," said Sum Lum gently. "We should get you back to the hotel."

Claire shook her head. "No. He's so small, he'll never find me. I won't leave until he returns."

Sum Lum reached into his deep pocket, pulling out a handful of white paper with something wrapped up inside.

"Here then," he said, unwrapping and handing Claire something long, black and leathery, "eat this."

She took it with two fingers, sniffed it disdainfully and gulped. "What is it?"

"Yak jerky," he replied with a wide smile. "You will like it. Now," he declared, getting to his feet, "stay right here. I will return shortly."

Even though her stomach was a bit queasy, her head ached and she worried about Daniel, Claire knew she needed to eat something and the jerky did smell quite good. She began nibbling the jerky as she watched Sum Lum approach two women working in a stand filled with colorful trinkets.

After a few moments of chewing, Claire determined Sum Lum was right: even though the jerky was rather chewy, its flavor was soft and delicate, quite satisfying really.

She was licking her fingers when Sum Lum sat down.

"I put the word out about your pet, Miss Claire, and..."

"He is not my pet," she declared with a shake of her head. "He is, well..." she stammered, pursing her lips and furrowing her brow, "a friend."

"Okay," said Sum Lum slowly. "I put the word out about your friend, and if he is found, he will be returned to you."

"I'm still not leaving," announced Claire firmly, taking up her search again, her eyes traveling through the crowds.

Sighing deeply, Sum Lum pulled out his yak jerky and set out to eat his own lunch, his dark eyes keeping watch over the crowd around them.

An hour later, still waiting and watching for Daniel to return, Claire realized she must have imagined seeing Cosmo, there was absolutely no way he would be in Tibet and with a heavy heart, followed Sum Lum back to the hotel.

“Hopefully your pet, I mean your friend, will be returned,” said Sum Lum when they reached Claire’s hotel. “You must rest now and make sure to drink plenty of liquids.” He shoved a large water bottle into her bag. “This will help you acclimate to the high altitude. I will be along later to check on you.”

“My...grandfather coming...show me palace.” Claire put her hand to her head—she could hardly speak. Had she been drugged? She felt terrible.

“Get some rest.” Sum Lum bowed and turned away.

After struggling with the key, barely having the strength to hold it, Claire finally pushed her way into her room falling face first onto the bed.

She didn’t know she’d fallen asleep, but she jerked awake, head hammering, heart racing, breathing labored, and nauseas. Visibly shaking, she sat up and immediately felt dizzy so she lay back down, but her head began throbbing again so she sat up and slowly reached for the water bottle in her bag, drinking deeply.

Oh god! Claire put her hands over her mouth and lurched to the bathroom, knelt down in front of the toilet and threw up the little bit of food she’d eaten. Now whimpering, thinking she might die, wishing she would, she managed to drag herself out of the bathroom, crawling on hands and knees to her bed.

Shivering and cold, she found her bathrobe and wrapped it around her, rubbing the soft fabric against her face for comfort and curled into a ball on the floor. She didn’t have the strength to get up into the bed.

From a deep sleep she heard the deep voice whisper in her ear. “Where is the boy?”

Her eyelids fluttered. *Boy? What boy?*

Claire blinked her eyes open and saw a strange man with an eye patch sitting in a chair across the room. She put her hand to her head when she sat up.

“Where is the boy?” repeated the man.

Claire looked around the room, not recognizing anything. Why was she on the floor? She needed some water. Her head hurt.

“Where is the boy!” shouted the man as he got to his feet.

Claire cringed, staring up at the stranger in fright.

He loomed over her, his one gold eye gleaming.

She cowered at his feet, thinking he looked like a deranged pirate.

"I-I don't know," she whimpered.

He crouched down. "He came over on the plane with you," he sneered. "Where did he go?"

Claire stared at him blankly.

He rolled his eye in disgust and got to his feet.

"You brought something else with you. Where...is...that?" he demanded with a loud hiss.

A hollow desperation surged through her, clinging to her like thirsty vampires, making her nerves zing, and Claire knew that there was something in her purse that would make everything okay.

She struggled to her knees and crawled on all fours to her purse, thrusting her hand inside.

"Ah." Her sigh was audible as she rubbed her thumb along the feather's smooth shaft. She began to feel better, like someone had filled her with sweet honey. The sucking vampires with the sharp little teeth were going away.

Claire lifted her eyes, suddenly recognizing her grandfather, feeling small tendrils of fear creep up her spine when she saw his odd, golden eye peering down at her.

"Well?" he asked, tapping his foot impatiently. "Where is he?"

"He-he ran away in the market," she whispered, licking her dry lips. She was still quite thirsty.

The man offered Claire his hand and lifted her to her feet.

"We must find him so we can go to the palace," declared her grandfather, striding toward the door.

Claire struggled with her jacket. "Yes, grandfather," she whispered, her fingers fumbling with the zipper. Excitement began sizzling up her spine—she was finally going to meet her mother in the tunnels beneath the palace.

The two left the hotel as darkness fell over the city, heading toward the Barkhor. They remained in the shadows, the white feather in Claire's hand glowing in the dark.

WYNDON LIFTED HIS HEAD WHEN Mushika returned. He licked his lips, suddenly ravenous and quickly devoured the yak meat Mushika had scavenged from the garbage.

"I took it upon myself to go back to the stand," explained Mushika when Wyndon began licking his paws.

He stopped mid-lick and lifted his head. "You went without me?"

"I thought it would attract less attention that way. You are very big. From the woman who owns the stand with the pinwheels, I learned a great deal. She has been communicating with one who has been helping the sister who carries the feather. He tells her that she keeps speaking of the palace on the red hill. That is where we should go."

Wyndon got to his feet and the little mouse scurried up his leg, settling into the fur around his neck. "Do you know where this palace is?"

"Of course I do. I have been there often. And I believe I know where they will go once they are there for there is only one way down to the tunnels. They will go to the temple on the east side of the palace to gain entrance. The goddess's sister is completely under the feather's control and I've been told if we don't arrive soon to vanquish the spell, she will be in grave danger for she has taken ill."

Wyndon set off at a trot, then picked up his pace and started to run.

"Turn here and stick to the shadows," instructed Mushika as Wyndon flew down the lane. "When you see the illuminated palace let me know. I know a secret way. I will awaken the goddess now."

"Not yet," grumbled Wyndon, running faster.

"But she will want...."

"I said not *yet!*"

AT FIRST, THE THIN ICE gently lapped against the shore. Then, moments later the ice began to churn and slam against the pebbly shore as the icy surface of the huge lake began to heave and buckle, soon breaking apart.

Then, up from the depths of the dark lake and out from the shards sprang a huge, black and white whale, its glorious hide gleaming in the moonlight as it leapt into the air before crashing back down upon chunks of ice, the plume of water in its wake creating a large fissure in the ice that sped toward the shore.

Two figures attached to the whale held on tightly as it sped through the now-open water toward the shore and before it made land, the

magnificent whale changed, its figure becoming much smaller. Moments later, three women dragged themselves from the icy water, sputtering and coughing as they crawled up the beach.

"We were supposed to go there directly," said Kolie, now huddled beneath a blanket. "Now I don't know what we'll do."

Sandra squeezed her friend's shoulder as a thread of excitement began sizzling through her—they walked in her homeland. She recognized the sacred mountain in whose shadow they sat.

"Can you change back again?"

"I don't think so."

"Bah," spat Deloria. "What are you afraid of?"

Kolie's dark eyes flashed. "Fear is not what's holding me back, Deloria. I just need some more time."

Deloria gazed at the mountain. Even though the early morning hour promised them the cover of darkness, the snow-clad peak would soon catch the first rays of the morning sun and they'd be out of time, discovered by those traveling past the lake in pilgrimage to the mountain or around the lake itself. Unfortunately, the shore they sat upon wasn't far from this well-traveled route, and if Kolie didn't come up with a solution fast, they might as well grab a walking stick and join them.

"I've got it!" Sandra jumped to her feet. "It's so simple," she said, her knowing eyes resting on Deloria. "Is there any rope in your bag?"

Deloria nodded slowly.

"Good. Kolie, could you bind her hands?"

Deloria narrowed her eyes as Kolie dug in the bag, pulling out a long, thin rope. "Why must you distrust me so?" she asked, feigning disappointment, hiding her fury and frustration.

"We need your magic," explained Sandra. "Invoke the spell which will alter the timeline and put us back under the water."

Deloria stared at her, pursing her lips stubbornly.

Sandra crouched down. "Do it or else Kel will perish and you will certainly be cast into hell rather than the salvation you so desperately seek."

Deloria growled and began mumbling, her incantation causing the stars to begin traveling backwards and the waves to grow larger.

Sandra grabbed Kolie's belt and one of Deloria's bound hands. "Now you know when to conserve your breath and we can find Kel," she shouted as they flew into the air. "Swim down, not up!"

Kolie's body quickly changed back into the Orca whale once they hit the water and she gave her tail a mighty thrust, sending them spiraling down into the bowels of the round lake situated high on the Tibetan plateau.

Moments later, seeing blue light spill from the mouth of a cave on the lake's floor, Kolie sped inside and soon all three were crawling out of the underground lake onto a white sandy shore.

Deloria struggled to her knees, her eyes widening: All around them the iridescent walls of the cathedral-like cave glowed and pulsated like the Aurora Borealis, casting shards of blue crystal fire around the cavernous room and high ceiling, then out over the subterranean lake's floor. She swept her eyes up and around the room, her heart dropping when she saw a huge door with strange markings, realizing where they were. This she did not expect.

Deloria turned and held out her hands. "I can't do what we came here to do if my hands are bound."

Sandra got to her feet, standing inches away from Deloria as she searched her eyes. "If you betray us, your life will be for naught," she hissed.

Deloria remained expressionless. "I cannot help Kel if my hands are bound."

"First, show me where Kel is."

Deloria flicked her eyes toward an iridescent wall a dozen yards away. "There," she gestured with her chin, "behind the wall of blue ice."

"What is your plan?" Sandra asked Deloria. "How are you going to do this without Claire and Daniel? Madelynn said we were to find them first."

Deloria shrugged. "If you have an idea of where they might be...."

Sandra narrowed her eyes.

"Then we'll have to free her without them. Now unbind my hands."

Sandra, still not trusting the old sorceress, ignored her and knelt down next to Kolie who had rolled onto her side, exhausted from transforming twice in such a short time.

"How are you?"

Kolie smiled thinly. "I'm all right."

"She's up to something." Sandra threw a suspicious glance Deloria's way. "But I must untie her hands. She's the only one who can free Kel."

"Untie them then." Kolie struggled to her knees. "My energy is returning and I'll be on my feet soon."

Sandra slowly approached Deloria and with regret, removed the ropes.

Deloria rubbed her sore wrists and stared at the blue wall of ice she knew separated them from the ancient treasure who had once shown her compassion. If it hadn't been for *him*, she'd have already returned home instead of being held captive in this miserable realm. Unfortunately, her dark eyes flicked around the cave, she'd have to be very careful once Kel was released if she were to go through with her plans. It would be a miracle if the giants she suspected were nearby had forgiven her.

Deloria walked to the wall and raised her arms high over her head.

Sandra and Kolie, both standing and now holding hands, watched the wall of ice turn into a wavering blue veil and then the white bird appeared, known to some as 'The Treasure of the World,' head tucked into her wing, fast asleep on her perch in a giant golden cage.

HIGH IN THE POTALA PALACE Claire's legs finally gave out and she slumped to the ground, gasping for breath as she peered up the flight of stairs, certain she was dying as it was nearly impossible to breathe.

Her grandfather stared down at her with a disapproving eye, taking care to stay out of the lights shining up from below that illuminated the palace walls around them. "We are almost there," he hissed. "Do not forget to use the feather for strength."

Claire breathed deeply and with shaking fingers twirled the feather in her hand. The feather did make her feel better, still zapped her with the magic elixir and she felt warm and fuzzy, but as far as giving her more energy, it simply did not work.

"I-I'm sorry, Grandfather," she moaned.

He narrowed his eye and pursed his lips. "If you hadn't lost the boy the feather would work as it should!"

Claire cringed. "I'm *sorry*."

"Well then," he snarled, "I guess you will never see your mother!"

Claire's blue eyes widened in terror. She struggled to her knees, chin to her chest, too tired to hold up her head. "No," she whimpered, "no."

"Then stand up!" he hissed through clenched teeth.

Claire dragged one foot up, then the other and tried standing, but fell to the ground. "I can't," she whispered.

Anger and frustration had the man raising his hand high in the air, intent to strike the pitiful creature groveling at his feet, but just as he bent down to deliver the blow, a small creature ran out from the shadows, scrambling onto Claire's back, staring up at him with dark, angry eyes, challenging him to strike.

Constantine dropped his arm and quickly stepped back, his golden eye shining with triumph. "There you are," he smiled wickedly. "I knew you would come to her defense."

He peered down the darkened stairway. "I thought I heard someone following us."

He eyed Daniel and sneered. "If you leave again, I will kill her."

"Daniel?" whispered Claire, feeling his whiskers tickle her cheek. "Where did you go?"

Daniel crawled into her zippered-jacket and nestled in deep.

Constantine grinned, knowing the pair would help him gain access into the most sacred place in the universe, a place he'd been banned from over half-a-century before—a place he'd been trying to get back to ever since. Using them together was a stroke of pure genius.

Claire slowly got to her feet and straightened herself up, taking great gulps of air. Now she felt strong and quite capable and began walking up the remaining thirty steps that lead to another heavy gate which mysteriously swung open, leading to the great plaza where the ancient Tibetan Buddhists once held great ceremonies and danced.

THE TALL MAN WHO MOMENTS AGO had been leaning against the large Buddhist stupa in front of the Potala Palace began running after Wyndon when he saw the big black dog trot across the street. "Come on," he hissed over his shoulder, "we can't lose him!"

The man following him sped up. "Where's the girl?" he shouted.

The taller man grabbed him by the coat, pulling him into the shadow of the massive stone wall when Wyndon skittered to a halt and turned around, his big head whipping back and forth as if he searched for something.

"I don't know where the girl is," he hissed. "But quit hollering and keep your eyes open."

The two men stayed hidden until Wyndon turned around and fled down the sidewalk spanning the massive stone wall surrounding the palace.

"He's going in the east entrance," shouted the taller man, seeing Wyndon disappear around a corner. "Come on! He's a fast son-of-a-bitch."

He sped up, his long legs pumping. He hoped the man behind him could keep up. At the corner he slowed down, peering around the wall, intent on not being seen by the dog he'd been told was very, very clever and very mean. The man behind him caught up, breathing heavily.

Confident he would stay hidden in the shadow of the high wall, he crept toward the east gate and quickly picked up his pace, the dog was nowhere in sight. He'd visited the palace twice, checking stairways and passages near every entrance for the fastest way to the hall and then for a good hiding place. If the dog and the girl were headed there, he'd find them first.

When he reached the spot in a dark corner of the stairway leading to the plaza, he knelt down, pulling the large canvas bag off his back and yanking it open.

"Put these on," he hissed, tossing a pair of heavy leather gloves to the other man and putting on a pair himself. "Keep your eyes open for the girl and stay out of sight."

He reached back in the bag and pulled out three metal tubes. He slipped off the band binding them together and connected them end-to-end. Then he pulled a thick leather loop from the bag and attached it to one end of the pole. Standing up, he handed the pole to the other man.

"He's gonna come this way and when he does, ya gotta grab him and ya gotta be careful." He leaned against the wall and peered around the corner as he pulled a huge syringe from his coat pocket. "The dog's big and mean as they come."

Greg Attis gripped the pole angrily, his eyes shooting daggers at the man who now held the syringe like a weapon. When this was done, he'd deal with him.

Wyndon crept through the shadows up the stairway. "The temple is on the other side of the hall which should be around the corner up ahead," hissed Mushika.

Wyndon stopped and pricked his ears, sensing something. "I sense a dark presence," he growled.

"Of course you do," said Mushika. "The evil one is here and you feel his dark energy. I do too. We should wake the goddess up now."

"No," said Wyndon, beginning to take the stairs slowly, keeping his eyes and ears alert.

"That is not what she would want," replied Mushika. "I will awaken her now."

They turned the corner and suddenly a thick leather loop shot out of the dark, looping over Wyndon's head. He lunged away, but the black pole held the loop tightly in place. Wyndon scrambled desperately, trying to free himself from the tight collar, but the more he pulled the tighter it became.

"Hold him!" The tall man lifted his arm.

Wyndon thrashed, his sides heaving in fear, his lips drawn back from his snapping teeth.

"Run!" his mind screamed to Mushika.

But Mushika clung on tightly even though Wyndon's body heaved and thrashed. She would never leave him or the goddess.

An arm came down out of the darkness, and the needle sunk into Wyndon's shoulder. With one yelp he slumped down and lay still.

Mushika, now hidden on the underside of Wyndon, crept slowly and quietly over his dark fur. She found the blanket and wiggled her way into the pocket, hearing the men whispering as they dragged Wyndon into the shadows.

"Goddess," whispered Mushika. "You must wake up now. Goddess!"

"Mushika, what is wrong?" Crystal sensed the mouse's fear.

"Wyndon has been captured," whispered Mushika. "He can no longer carry us."

If Crystal hadn't been pure consciousness, she would have been frightened for her dog, but she remained calm.

"We must hurry. Your sister's life is in danger."

"Let me check on Wyndon first."

"Be careful," hissed Mushika. "I will pull the flower from the pocket and take you there myself."

Crystal lifted her essence out of the pocket and floated upwards, making sure the cord of light followed. It was then she saw the two men. One was crouched down tying Wyndon's feet together and the other stood

watch. She looked at her dog lying lifeless in the shadows and knew he wasn't dead: his aura was still pulsating around him, but it was very weak.

"I don't see the girl anywhere," said the man standing watch. "She must have gone on ahead."

Crystal lowered her spirit, coming closer to him, now curious. The man looked exactly like David, except heavier and without a scar. But there was something wrong—she felt no connection with this man, nor could she see his aura. It was as if he was an empty shadow. She began to lower her spirit into the flower, feeling a threat.

"Take that blanket off him and toss it over the side, but check the pockets first," said the man who looked like David. "And hurry. We gotta go back down and find the girl or there'll be hell to pay."

"Goddess, get back to the flower!" cried Mushika. "Goddess!"

Greg Attis unlatched the belt around the blanket but before Crystal could get inside the pocket he thrust his hand inside.

"Holy shit!" he shouted, dropping the blanket. "Something bit me!"

"Shhh!" hissed the other man, striding forward and grabbing the blanket. "Are you trying to wake the dead?"

He carried it to the stairway's wide stone balustrade and looked over the side before tossing it over.

As the colorful blanket sailed through the air and began billowing toward the ground, the cord of light tethering Crystal's spirit to the flower severed and her spirit floated free, whirling into space.

Moments before, when the tall man had picked up the blanket and leaned against the railing, Mushika had scrambled out of the pocket, hurtling down to a window's ledge ten feet below as the blanket, along with the flower, sailed down past her.

"Goddess!" cried Mushika, watching the blanket and the flower disappear into the darkness. "Oh no!"

COSMO AND GINA, BOTH TRYING to garner enough energy to continue climbing, stared at each other with fatigue and frustration.

"I've smoked too many damn cigarettes." Gina placed her hand over her heart. "I don't think I'll be able to climb back down. They'll have to carry me in a stretcher."

"But...Greg...might be...up...there," Cosmo managed to choke out. "We have to help him. I'm just...too...old."

Gina sighed loudly before getting to her feet. "Okay, I'll go, but I'm sure they're long gone by now."

Cosmo pulled off his glasses, wiping his tired eyes with a trembling hand. "He must have his reasons."

"Are you going to be all right?" Gina stared down at Cosmo fondly. He looked so pathetic slumped on the steps, glasses dangling in his hand. "Are you warm enough?" She pulled off her large fur hat, slipping it onto his head.

He smiled feebly and pushed it up as it had slipped down over his eyes. Then he motioned with his hand for her to go. "Find him, Gina. He has a lot of explaining to do. I know he's up there somewhere."

Gina's smile was grim. "If I'm not back in half-an-hour, Cosmo, go back to the hotel. Find Yang. Tell her we're sorry for ditching her. Beg her to help us, but don't worry about me. I'm just angry enough to do a bit of damage to them both."

She lumbered up the stairs slowly, muttering, "I'll bring him back all right—back in a body bag if I have to. I can't imagine why he would be here with that horrible, horrible man...."

"Be careful," whispered Cosmo, watching until first she, and then her shadow disappeared around the bend in the staircase.

Cosmo lay back and put his hand on his chest, willing his racing heart to slow down, fearing if it didn't he'd be found dead the next morning by some poor Tibetan, or worse, by the first wave of tourists.

As he caught his breath, he smiled, remembering the look of surprise on Gina's face when they'd found Daniel in the crowded market. Poor Yang had watched with horror, thinking the little ferret a large rat, and tried yanking him away after he'd leapt onto Gina. But Gina had shouted, 'no!' and a Chinese official had begun making his way over so they'd dashed into the crowds, hiding in the thick throng of shoppers, soon losing Yang and the official.

After finding a quiet spot and learning how to ask Daniel the right kind of questions, they'd ended up near Claire's hotel. Thinking they'd found Greg, he'd been astonished when Claire, not Greg, had followed his brother out of the hotel. When he saw Claire's pale face, he'd wanted to rush to her side, gather her into his arms and get her away from his crazy brother who now wore an eye patch, of all things. Yet when he'd taken a step forward, Daniel had sunk his nails into his shoulder in warning and

he'd stayed hidden. Now they were all gone and he sat here like a feeble old fool.

"Blast it all to hell," he hissed loudly, wishing for a younger, stronger body. He jumped, peering into the darkness when he heard his name. "Who's there?"

Yang stepped from the shadows and quickly made her way up the steps. "Here you are." She smiled, her dark eyes sparkling.

"Humph," grunted Cosmo, surprised at seeing the young girl, hoping she wasn't going to cause trouble.

Yang put her hand on his arm. "I am your friend, Mister Cosmo. I will help in every way I am able."

Cosmo stared at her with distrustful eyes.

"I know you are looking for your brother. Mister Amin asked me to help because my family is greatly in his debt. I would dishonor them if I betrayed you or mislead you. Do not be alarmed," she looked over her shoulder, "but someone else is here to help."

Yang swept her eyes to the shadows where young man stepped out, joining his palms and bowing down low.

Cosmo eyed him suspiciously.

"This is my brother, Sum Lum Gephel," said Yang. "He has been showing Miss Claire around the city and fears she might be unwell. He went back to the hotel to check on her, but she had left. He is the reason I knew where to find you."

Sum Lum crouched down. "Your brother has a tight control on Miss Claire and if she's not careful, I fear mountain sickness will put her life in danger if she does not get help. Last time I saw her, she was showing signs."

"Mister Amin told us that we must help in any way we can," said Yang. "We did not travel all the way here to deceive you, Cosmo Attis. I know this city as well as my own. And I know this palace."

Cosmo blew out a sigh. "Could you help me up the stairs then?"

Yang smiled, jumping to her feet and thrusting out her hand. "It would be my greatest honor."

Both Yang and Sum Lum helped Cosmo climb the stairs, at times almost carrying him. When they reached the top, the sight greeting him took his breath away. He stumbled to the stone balustrade, ogling the beauty of the nighttime city spread out dozens of stories below.

“Before any skyscrapers were built, the Potala Palace was considered the highest building in the world,” declared Yang, allowing Cosmo a moment to catch his breath. “It is the grandest of all sights, is it not?”

Yang turned, pointing toward a pagoda-style building with a golden roof. “This is the Dalai Lama’s temple. It was built on east side of the palace so he would be the very first person to see the morning sun.”

Cosmo gasped when Gina walked out of the temple, closely followed by a maroon and gold-robed monk who joined his palms and bowed deeply.

Gina raised her eyebrows when she saw Yang and Sum Lum flanking Cosmo.

“It’s okay, Gina,” explained Cosmo, still trying to catch his breath. “They’re here to help.”

Gina inclined her head toward Yang and Sum Lum, grateful they helped Cosmo up the stairs. She’d barely made it herself. “It appears Claire and Constantine went this way,” she said, sweeping her arm towards the temple.

Yang approached the monk, joining her palms and bowing. She and the monk shared a few words in Tibetan before she turned to Cosmo.

“The monk tells me a young woman and an older man passed this way a short time ago. He says the young woman has brought a great darkness to the city and fears this darkness will awaken the sleeping dragon.”

“Is that bad?” asked Cosmo, quickly realizing it was probably a very stupid question. He’d never heard of a dragon being happy when awakened.

Yang nodded. “Very bad for Tibet and the palace. If this dragon awakens, the earth will shake and all of Tibet’s ancient secrets will spill out.”

“I’m going after them, Cosmo,” declared Gina. “You don’t have to, you can wait here.”

Cosmo shook his head. “I haven’t come this far to turn around now.”

Gina smiled softly, straightening the fur hat resting on his head. “You slow me up, old man, and I’ll have to leave you behind.”

His heart warmed seeing the concern and love shining from her eyes. It hadn’t taken long, but now she was as dear to him as Crystal and Claire had ever been.

Gina led him through the temple's doors, pointing to a tall, narrow gap between the bookcase and the wall. "They went through there."

Cosmo blew out a heavy sigh. If not for the fact that Claire and his grandson, maybe even his son, Greg, might be waiting for him on the other side of the wall, nothing on god's green earth could have dragged him toward a sleeping dragon.

They passed through the wall into a small dark room with rough wooden floors, soon discovering a square hole carved into the floor with the poles of a wooden ladder sticking out.

Cosmo's shoulders sagged and he turned to the monk standing in the doorway. "They went down there?" he asked.

The monk nodded, stepping forward and handing them two flashlights. Then he turned and left.

"I will go first," offered Yang.

Gina put her hand on Yang's shoulder, leaning in. "The old man trusts you," she whispered into her ear, "but as yet I don't. There are only a handful of people on this earth that I love and if any one of them gets hurt, I'll consider it your fault."

Yang bowed deeply. "I am honored to help," she said, stepping toward the ladder.

"I'll be right behind you," declared Sum Lum, stepping behind Cosmo who followed Gina and Yang.

And down the wooden ladder they went, down, down, down within the dark, narrow shaft deep into the belly of the mountain.

KEL LIFTED HER HEAD FROM beneath her wing and stared at the old sorceress standing before her. Deloria stared back, thinking the white bird looked very sad. It bothered her to see this treasure behind bars.

"I have come to set you free." Deloria took one step toward the curtain separating her from the bird.

The white bird ruffled her feathers. "*That will be impossible.*"

"You are wrong, oh magnificent Kel," declared Deloria, raising her arms. "I will use the organic powers you gave me long ago to break his spell." She threw out her hands releasing her magic, fully expecting to see both the curtain and the cage disappear, but nothing happened. Deloria looked dumbfounded and tried again.

The bird shook her head. *"The serpent who cast me here controls one of my feathers. He has taken the witness to the temple in the palace atop the red hill. If his plans succeed, the dragon beneath will awaken and every ancient secret in the king's tower will be destroyed. That is why he is in the Forbidden City, using the witness and one of my sacred feathers to gain entrance into Shambhala."*

"No!" shouted Kolie. "That cannot happen. We have all worked so hard to keep him out!"

"It is the only way he can take back his power. Our fate is now tied with the fate of the witness. Not until the spell cast upon the feather is removed can magic dispel these bars. Until then, I am bound to this cage. You would have known this if not so intent on what he promised you." Kel eyed Deloria intently.

Deloria dropped her head.

"Who is this witness you speak of?" asked Sandra, stepping forward.

Kel stared at each woman intently. *"Are you unaware that The Blue One's sister's importance on Earth is just as important as hers?"*

"Claire?" asked Kolie.

Kel nodded slowly.

"She plays a part in all of this?"

Kel nodded once again. *"She is the witness. The Blue One is the warrior. They are the most important sisters in all of history."*

Sandra and Kolie—immediately understand the meaning of Kel's words—stared at Deloria angrily. This was why Madelynn wanted them to find Claire first.

"Is my grandson still alive?" Deloria dropped her arms, knowing Daniel was with Claire.

Kel nodded. *"He is using them both, knowing their coupled powers are strong. I fear, however, that The Blue One was in the ancient city on her way to save her sister and break the spell cast upon the feather, but something has happened and now she is in danger."*

"Crystal is in Lhasa too?" Sandra threw Deloria another angry glance.

"Do not be angry with Deloria," said the bird softly. *"I fear he has manipulated her once again. Did he not promise to take you to the manuscript once I was released?"* she asked.

Deloria set her lips in a hard line, refusing to look at the white bird, feeling like a fool.

Kolie and Sandra, fearing for Crystal, the one they'd sworn to protect, dropped to their knees, staring up at Kel. "What can we do?" asked Kolie.

“Her spirit has become the flame within the sacred lotus flower, the flame that can vanquish the feather, releasing me and her sister from the dark one’s control. But she became unleashed from the flower and her spirit floats freely along tendrils of energy, drawn away from the realms of earth by the magnetic pull of a familiar place. She will need a guide to lead her back home.”

Kel’s eyes settled on Sandra who quickly got to her feet. *“You are familiar with Mushika?”* she asked.

Sandra nodded quickly.

“Mushika travels with the Blue One, requested by the bodhisattva Tara to give her aid.”

Sandra bowed her head hearing the revered goddess’s name. Then her clever eyes looked up. *“This is my ancestor’s country. I will find her and offer my gifts.”*

“No.” Kolie quickly got to her feet. *“That is not how it works, Sandra. You have not been summoned.”*

“That’s not important right now.” Sandra took Kolie’s hand. *“I can guide her back. My special gifts might prove very useful. I’ll be careful.”*

“If you are not summoned by her and you interfere,” said Kolie slowly, looking deep into Sandra’s eyes, *“you will never be released from your oath.”*

“I know. But she needs me now whether she knows it or not. Besides, I’m not bonded to someone like the rest of you are.”

“But, Sandra,” implored Kolie, *“she might need you in another world and your choice to leave now might threaten her life later.”*

“If I do not help her now there won’t be a later.”

“You might end up like Daisy, or worse,” whispered Kolie fiercely. *“Are you going to do that willingly?”*

“I trust you to look after me.”

Sandra quickly turned to Deloria. *“I know you care for your grandson, Deloria. I can see it in your eyes. If you change me and send me out to look for Crystal, I will have the energy to help Crystal, Claire and Daniel. You owe us this much for if we’d traveled to the city first, we might have found them all in time.”*

Deloria thought of her grandson, the only one she’d ever really loved. *“He promised he wouldn’t hurt him,”* she hissed, remembering his words.

“You know better than that,” said Sandra. *“How many times will you let him use you for his own gain?”*

"I fear you must hurry," said Kel. *"I can sense that the witness is becoming very, very weak."*

"Very well then." Deloria gathered her magic. "I will send you out in your hybrid's form, but that's all I can do without using black magic. The rest will be up to you."

Sandra nodded and smiled at Kolie. "Don't worry about me, dear friend. We never know when or how we'll be called."

Kolie smiled sadly, fearing she'd never see her small, clever friend again. She took Sandra's hands in hers. "Do everything you can so Crystal will summon your help before you claim her spirit. It is the only way your spirit can return." Then she gave Sandra a fierce hug and turned away.

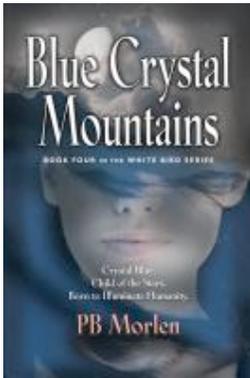
Sandra grabbed her arm and leaned in. "If we are successful and Kel is freed, Deloria will no longer be inclined to stay. Keep a close eye on her."

Kolie nodded.

With one last hug, Sandra turned to face Deloria and dropped to her knees. She closed her eyes, gathering together her gifts, focused and intent with the detail of Crystal's spirit, knowing she could be anywhere, but sensing where she'd gone. It would take steady determination, but this is what she was good at.

Deloria raised her arms, covering Sandra in a green light. And just as she did, the thick wall of blue ice returned, and once again Kel was gone, hidden behind the ice.

Kolie sunk down into the sand next to Sandra. She touched her friend's arm and it was like touching stone. Now all she could do was wait. She closed her eyes, wishing her beloved Luis was at her side.



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