

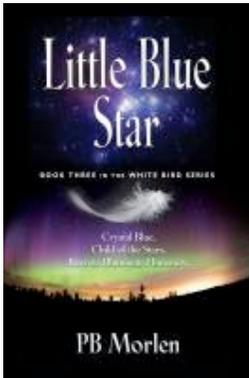
Little Blue Star

BOOK THREE IN THE WHITE BIRD SERIES



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

PB Morlen



Crystal Blue, the reluctant avatar in the White Bird series, sets off for the sacred Four Corners to meet with the Hopi. Still unconvinced of her shamanic powers, and without Wyndon, her protector who disappeared in Kauai, Crystal becomes vulnerable to dark energies following her. As a result, when she travels to a world mankind has left behind, the unthinkable happens. Only one can save her, but he, as she, has forgotten who he is.

Little Blue Star

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~

CRYSTAL LOOKED UP AND GASPED. The sky had turned a dark and angry shade of gray and the trees swayed wildly about in the wind. Then she watched the lone bird burst through the clouds, soaring straight at her like she were its prey. Unable to move or scream, she watched helplessly as the black bird rapidly approached.

The rest of the group also noticed a change in the weather, but unlike Crystal's angry sky, their sky displayed a beautiful spray of colors from the sun's ascent. Their eyes widened at the beautiful display and then the white eagle came—flying in from the east, circling high overhead—magnificent. The clearing around Violet's home amid the forest allowed the group a clear sight of the glorious bird flying through the heavens.

As the smoke from the fireplace spiraled up through the clearing and the swaying pines whispered their song, the eagle danced in the air giving the group great hope.

Crystal hadn't seen the white eagle, nor had she seen the colorful sky, she only saw the lone bird, watching wide-eyed as it got closer and closer until it was close enough for her to see its gleaming black eyes—and then she heard its message inside her head: *"Your canine companion walks near the blue caves where only the bravest of shaman dare tread. To find him, you must see as the flyer sees."* Suddenly the large black bird lunged, swiping Crystal's face with its sharp talons. *Bloody hell!* Crystal screamed, covering her face with her hands. The bloody bird had ripped out her eyes! She fell to her knees and then to her side, her hands covering the soft torn flesh.

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LITTLE BLUE STAR

Other Books by PB Morlen

The White Bird series:

Illuminating Crystal
Crystal Blue Sky

~

*This book is dedicated to my father, Paul.
His graceful dignity, insane intelligence, outrageous humor, and unfailing
honesty will be missed.
May you rest in peace, dear Papa.
I love you.*

~

LITTLE BLUE STAR

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Readers,

*Welcome Back! I hope that all of Crystal's followers, supporters and friends find themselves healthy, happy and living a life they can be proud of. It's been one year since the release of Crystal Blue Sky and now I'm proud to share with you Little Blue Star, Book III in the White Bird Series. Being that this is the third book in the series, I'd like to help all of you remember a bit of Crystal's struggles, joys, failures and successes so that you can pick up where you left off with relative ease. I, as a reader, sometimes find it frustrating if I have to always go back to a previous book to figure out what is happening in the current volume and as you've already figured out, there are many twists and turns throughout the story. So, I will do my best to bring you all up to speed. **(Also, please visit the back of the book where I've included a Cast of Characters.)***

In Book One, my story begins with eighteen-year-old Crystal Blue discovering an ancient manuscript in the basement of the Minneapolis-based bookstore The Blue Crystal owned by elderly Cosmo Attis and the broodingly handsome, half-blooded Lakota man, Adam Walker. Subsequently, because of this discovery Crystal learns she is the descendent of an ancient Star Warrior and was born for a specific purpose: to help illuminate humanity by visiting the indigenous tribes around the world so she can learn their sacred secrets which will ultimately help illuminate humanity. Due to the fact that the atomic structure of Crystal's eleventh layer of DNA (the Divine Feminine layer) was activated after she found the manuscript—subsequently stimulating her pineal gland—her human template changed. (Crystal at this time is introduced to an assortment of animals as well as a lovely blue-scaled dragon.) Now, Crystal, as many shamans, medicine men and women do, has the ability to walk between worlds and visit earth's many diverse and interdimensional worlds.

Nonetheless, even though our heroine was graced with this powerful ability, she has become vulnerable to certain dark energies because of a

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supernatural encounter with a large serpent who tries to squeeze the life out of her. As a result, she was given a strange serpentine tattoo around her neck, leaving her marked by the 'dark one' who now follows her, hoping to thwart her mission because if successful, this dark and somewhat evil presence will no longer have the power it now wields over Humankind.

At present, the world is moving into the Fifth Age and humanity and earth will have their challenges. Therefore, every time Crystal travels to another place, she's to discover the sacred secrets of being a divine human from each tribe's ancient Elders—which is, after all, humanity's birthright—and the secrets will be shared with humanity via the cosmic lattice.

So, we learn that Crystal is an Avatar of sorts—a rather reluctant one I might add—and a messenger, a divine being able to walk between worlds to spread her light. This once unhappy teenager is reluctant because she has finally found a bit of happiness working in Cosmo's bookstore and considers herself unworthy for this auspicious task due to certain unsavory situations from her past. And, she'd rather stay with her older sister, Claire, who she's just been reacquainted with, and of course her new love, Adam Walker.

But after meeting David Lange—a physics professor and self-proclaimed decoder of ancient script who suffers from a severe case of amnesia—saves her from a botched kidnapping—which unfortunately leaves Adam seriously injured—and Crystal discovers she has no choice: she must travel the world within a twelve month timeframe in order to set humanity and earth on a course for peace...and, she must leave those she loves behind.

A group of wily septuagenarians—led by her grandmother Madelynn Blue—ultimately give Crystal courage for her mission. After Crystal was covered in darkness in David's living room due to a mysterious attack, each member of this special group, all graced with supernatural powers, blessed her with their gifts and as a result, Crystal becomes stronger.

Then, Crystal receives another tattoo: now the bronze serpent around her neck is coupled with a blue serpent. This fey mark will balance the other and as a result, Crystal is not as vulnerable to the dark one's allure.

Unfortunately, as a result of this recent assault upon Crystal, her memory of the previous two days has been erased. All that aside, what ultimately gives her the strength to accept her newfound mission is the gigantic black dog named Wyndon who she meets the morning she and David are to leave for Pine Ridge, South Dakota. The moment she lays her eyes upon Wyndon, she feels an immediate connection.

The story continues in Book II, Crystal Blue Sky, where Crystal, David and Wyndon set off to meet with the Oglala Lakota Sioux, leaving Cosmo, Claire, Madelynn and Adam behind. Fortunately, Cosmo decides to ask Crystal's sister, Claire, to help him in the bookstore and they, like Crystal and Cosmo, begin a special relationship.

After meeting a Lakota Elder named Warren Sun Bear and his son, Corbin, our avatar Crystal travels to another time and place, experiencing the horrifying massacre of hundreds of Lakota men, women and children in the tragedy at Wounded Knee, but is saved from being shot by a huge grizzly bear who gives her a large shield. Later, Crystal meets the Native American Goddess, White Buffalo Calf Woman, fondly known as the Wacan Woman, Ptesan-Wi: the Star Person who gave the Sioux their spiritual history, health practices and ceremonies. Then, Crystal, along with the Lakota Elders, enters the ini ti (Sweat Lodge) to soothe her spirit, strengthen her ghost, and cleanse her spirit.

During this ceremony, Crystal meets the grizzly bear again when she travels to another world, walking as a young Lakota Sioux girl named Weasel Bear. This girl has an uncanny ability to communicate with animals and one night sets off to warn the mountain lion living on Grandfather Mountain that its life may be in danger because of foreigners now looking for gold. Here she meets Wind Walker, a young warrior living in the time before Custer who, surprisingly, looks like Adam. Very soon Crystal and the bear save Wind Walker's life and afterwards we learn that the mountain lion—whom she also saves, ultimately giving her a profound message—has a fey connection with her grandmother, Madelynn and the group of septuagenarians we have come to learn are Crystal's soldiers.

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Soon, Crystal learns their next destination is Hawaii and she, David and Wyndon are accompanied by Nita, a young Lakota girl who is Crystal's first initiate; the protector of the sacred pipe given to Crystal by Warren Sun Bear.

Upon their arrival to the Hawaiian island paradise, Kauai, the tired travelers meet their host, a big, hearty native named Manoa Pore—affectionately known as Mike—his wife, Kalea, and teenage son, Leon, who, we learn at the end of the book will become Crystal's second initiate. Crystal revels in the lush tropical environment but soon, during a trek along the magnificent Cliffside Kalalau Trail along the Na Pali coast, Crystal leaves David, Wyndon and the others behind, suddenly finding herself in another world, standing at a cliff's edge as Pele, the Hawaiian Fire-Goddess who works to protect the Order of Kane who have long been hunted by the tyrannical leader Pa'ao and his soldiers. Now in extreme danger after being shot with an arrow by one of Pa'ao's soldiers, Crystal remembers the message given to her by the mountain lion, and as a result, turns into the magnificent cat, terrifying the soldiers who flee down the mountainside. Consequently, Crystal saves the clan of the Order of Kane, and their leader, an ancient priest named Kahuna shares with her sacred knowledge: The seven principles of Huna.

After Crystal's return to the present, a tragic event occurs and David's life hangs in the balance. Crystal, along with Vincent—Claire's cat that has the supernatural ability to turn into a large white lion—and Wyndon, travels to David's past trying to save him. Here she encounters David's twin brother, Elijah, his mother, Josephine, and his father, James. Then, during this encounter, something strange happens to Wyndon and he changes into a horrifying red-eyed beast ready to tear out her throat! Crystal awakens the next morning, remembering nothing of this event, but knows something is amiss when she cannot find Wyndon. With a heavy heart she must leave her dog behind when they leave the beautiful island paradise. And David, upon awakening, realizes that because of his amnesia he's believed himself to be David, but now recalls that he is really Elijah:

Crystal and Claire's father who disappeared seventeen years ago. (Their mother, Elizabeth, also disappeared at this time.)

As Crystal is traveling with David and Wyndon, Adam lays in a secret room below the Blue Crystal bookstore. Because of his injuries he lies in a state of unconsciousness, but that doesn't mean he's inactive. He is on a vision quest walking with his ancestors and must not be awakened. However, he does awaken briefly, joining Claire and Cosmo on a mystical excursion within a blue tunnel to retrieve the manuscript which has mysteriously disappeared from David's room. While on this adventure, Adam loses his special necklace, jeopardizing his life and his fey connection to Crystal and Wyndon. Now lying unconscious once again, he is tended by Gina, Cosmo's daughter-in-law whom we met in Book I as the leader of the small group that kidnapped Crystal. Also tending to Adam is his most avid protectors: his sister, Serena and her husband, Will.

We've also met Gina's son Daniel, Cosmo's grandson who unfortunately has been turned into a ferret by none other than Deloria, the foul-tempered sorceress introduced in Book I now held captive in David's home and guarded by Amin, David's trusted housekeeper who we have learned is connected to the group of septuagenarians now residing in David's lakeside home.

As you know, I cannot share with you everything in this short synopsis, but I hope I've been able to acquaint you with some particularly important characters and events. As the author, it is my duty to suggest that for those of you who haven't read Books I and II that you do so before reading Book III. But if you do not, I hope you can begin building a fond relationship with the characters you will be introduced to in this volume. There are many more twists and turns with familiar characters switching places, appearing as another, not who they really are. You might have to do a bit of detective work, figuring this aspect of the story out, but I know you can do it—after all, you are all extremely clever.

And so it is with the greatest appreciation that I say thank you to those reading this. I passionately believe we are now entering a time never seen before in the history of humanity where compassion, not greed or violence,

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will become the standard of our leaders. Because I feel so strongly about this, I want to share with you the secrets of the divine human: the compassionate feminine. The indigenous of our world know and understand these practices and it is our duty as humans to discover them so we might walk into the next age with relative grace and ease, protecting Earth's natural resources, respecting and honoring Earth's animals, and nurturing our children—our future leaders.

I would also like to add that even though my characters use prayers, stories, myths and prophecies from the indigenous, my story does not in any way attempt to reflect their true beliefs. The sequences of events happening in this book are fiction, garnered from their stories.

As I stated in my previous letter in Book II, I invite you now to find your safe space, tuck up your feet and enter into Crystal's world where dreams are real, shape-shifting is not unusual, and mystery is most common.

Crystal and the others are excited to see you again! They have missed you.

*Namaste,
PB Morlen*

Visit my website: www.pbmorlen.com or send me an e-mail: pbmorlen@gmail.com. I would love to hear from all of you!

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BOOK ONE

THE SACRED FOUR CORNERS

*We have been telling the people that this is the eleventh hour
Now you must go back and tell the people that THIS is the hour
And there are things to be considered.*

Where are you living?

What are you doing?

What are your relationships?

Where is your water?

Know your garden

Create your community and be good to each other.

And do not look outside yourself for the leader.

This could be a good time.

There is now a river flowing very fast.

It is so great and swift that there are those that will be afraid.

They will try to hold on to the shore.

They will feel they are being torn apart and will suffer greatly.

Know the river has its destination.

The elders say we must let go of the shore,

Push off into the middle of the river,

Keep our eyes open, and our heads above the water.

See who is in there with you and celebrate.

At this time in history, we are to take nothing personally.

Least of all ourselves!

For the moment that we do, our spiritual growth and journey comes to a halt.

The time of the lone wolf is over.

Gather yourselves!

Banish the word struggle from your attitude and your vocabulary.

All that we do now must be done in a sacred manner and in celebration.

We are the ones we've been waiting for.

Message from the Hopi Elders, Oraibi, Arizona

PART ONE

A DARK MESSENGER

*Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore—
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of someone gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door—
"Tis some visitor," I muttered, "tapping at my chamber door—
Only this and nothing more."*

*Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing,
Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before; But the
silence was unbroken, and the stillness gave no token, And the only word
there spoken was the whispered word, "Lenore?"
This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the word, "Lenore!"
Merely this and nothing more.*

*Then this ebony bird beguiling my sad fancy into smiling, By the grave and
stern decorum of the countenance it wore, "Though thy crest be shorn and
shaven, thou," I said, "art sure no craven, Ghastly grim and ancient Raven
wandering from the Nightly shore— Tell me what thy lordly name is on
the Night's Plutonian shore!" Quoth the Raven "Nevermore."*

*And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon's that is dreaming,
And the lamplight o'er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;
And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor
Shall be lifted-nevermore!*

Excerpts from "The Raven," by Edgar Allen Poe

ONE

Wisdom comes only when you stop looking for it and start living the life the Creator intended for you.

Hopi Proverb

*Clearwater, Florida
December 30, 1993*

The attractive woman with the cap of short, black hair and nervous demeanor peered into the rearview mirror, licking her lips tentatively, darting her brown eyes away from the rearview furtively, looking about as she waited in the black coupe. She gripped the steering wheel tightly and glanced at her watch: 4:30 a.m.; he'd been gone for nearly ten minutes.

"Jesus Christ!" She yelped when the car's backdoor was flung open and the man hopped in. "Did anyone see you?"

He pulled his hat off, wincing in pain when he moved his broken collar bone. "I don't think so, but we must leave, now."

She glanced at him in the mirror, noticing his tight lips and gray complexion, wondering if he was still in pain.

"Leave?" she asked. "Leave and go where?"

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He thrust up his chin, wincing again, angry that every movement caused him pain.

"Go back the same way we came."

With one more glance in the mirror, the woman pulled away from the curb, cautiously turned the car and headed out of the neighborhood, soon pulling out onto the busy road heading north.

He looked out the window saying nothing for a moment or two.

"It's gone," he whispered.

"What?!" She threw a surprised look over her shoulder.

"Be careful!" He cried when the car swerved.

She whipped it back into its lane right before the oncoming car passed them, horn blaring loudly.

"What do you mean, it's gone," she asked, now a bit more composed even though her hands shook.

"I mean, it's not where he put it. I searched, but it's gone. Someone must have taken it," he added quietly.

Once again the woman looked at him in the rear view mirror, her brown eyes now moist with tears.

"You said it would be there; you promised."

The man blew out a sigh. "I know I did."

"Should we go back?" She slowed the car down, preparing to turn around.

"No!" he shouted, adding in a softer voice: "Keep driving. If someone knew about the stone, most likely they know about us. We can't go back now."

"But...what about my daughters?" she cried. "You promised me we would find them. You said —"

"I'll think of something, Elizabeth," he interjected, his heart breaking when her shoulders shuddered as she gulped back her tears. Hopefully, she'd keep the car on the road.

Then he glared out the window, angry that he'd been double crossed twice in one day. Now he had more than the girls to look for: He needed to find the stone and the man who'd betrayed them.

He thought of the eerily empty house he'd just searched. It was strange how everyone had disappeared. He thought they would be there, waiting for him with the stone. But they were gone without a trace.

He looked at the woman gripping the steering wheel. She sniffed and glanced at the mirror, wiping her nose angrily before throwing him a look of hate.

This wasn't his fault. But now she blamed him and he'd have to let her do that. She needed to blame someone. Unfortunately, he knew she'd hate him even more because in less than an hour he'd sedate her before putting her on a plane to send her where she'd be safe. He had things to take care of and needed to do this alone.

"Turn right at the next light," he told her quietly. "I'm taking you to someone who will help us find the girls," he lied, hating himself when he saw the look of relief in her large brown eyes, knowing he was about to betray the woman he would die for.

~

January 31, 2011

Somewhere over the North Pacific

THE MAN EVERYONE THOUGHT WAS David Lange—including himself less than twenty-four hours ago—looked over at Crystal who was reading a novel, head bowed, murmuring—the tiny green gem on her nose and the turquoise beads threaded through her dreadlocks sparkled softly in the glow of the overhead light. His heart gave a quick tug when he thought of their conversation a few hours back. He'd tried consoling her about Wyndon, secretly hoping she didn't know how worried he was. Not that he worried so much about the dog, he worried about her: Wyndon was one of her protectors, and now, mysteriously, he was gone.

He looked back to the two young people behind him, their dark heads bent together in secret communication, and he smiled to

himself: Nita and Leon were obviously bonding well over their similar fates and striking up a wonderful friendship.

He settled back into his seat. It was late, and the plane was dark and quiet. He closed his eyes, his mind wandering—once again—to the dream he had the night before, or rather to his memory of the young family he'd forgotten he had. He wasn't who he'd thought he was for the last seventeen years and he had no idea why he'd believed himself to be his brother. Hopefully, he thought as his breathing and eyelids became heavy, he'd remember more.

Crystal shuddered, drawing herself back to the present, blinking and refocusing on the words of her book. After a few moments, she realized it was useless, she'd have to read something else—Alice Hoffman's novel about the two sisters was too reminiscent of her own life, dredging up old, buried memories that had left wounds in her young heart—the wounds had healed but the memories remained.

Every now and again, she'd return to that awful day, wondering if in her anger she'd magically caused Rachele's illness—the girl sitting two rows ahead of her in sixth grade math class. The moment she'd been wishing her ill, staring at her back, hating her for causing most everyone in school to avoid her, Rachele had jumped out of her seat, slapping at her head, shouting that something had bitten her. Rumors had quickly spread that the popular girl had been bitten by a recluse spider.

Two weeks later Rachele had returned, trying to make Crystal's life even more miserable than she already had, claiming she'd put a curse on her. Luckily, this accusation had made the girl look quite ridiculous and she'd soon stopped, but not after instigating more trouble, and she continued suffering at the hands of the moronic school bully, Luke Cobb.

Crystal closed the book, sighed deeply, rolled her neck and glanced over at Elijah—the man she knew as David—who slept with

his head rested against the plane's drawn window shade. She smiled softly, grateful he hadn't pulled out the manuscript or his notes. This trip over the Pacific was much different than their first trip over as he'd been very attentive to her, finally listening to her accounts of her journeys and lending an empathetic ear when she'd once again expressed her concern over Wyndon's disappearance. She was especially grateful for this: it helped, sharing her fears, doubts and worries.

But her dreams were becoming unpleasant, so she'd decided to read instead of sleep. She reached down, grabbed her bag, stuffed *Practical Magic* back in, and pulled out Lord Byron—her book from Adam—now becoming dog-eared from use. She flipped it open and found her spot; she was reading *Don Juan*, Byron's classic about the infamous young lover.

An hour later Crystal, lost in her book, jumped in her seat when Elijah cried out, lurching forward and whipping his head around, eyes wild with fear.

She grabbed his hand. "It's okay, David. You had a bad dream." She watched him drag an unsteady hand through his hair before turning away, gripping the armrests so tightly his knuckles turned white. She turned away, giving him a moment, hoping he wouldn't return to his hermit-like ways. She needed him, needed his company, his friendship.

Bugger.

She missed her dog.

Elijah dragged his hand through his hair, leaned back and closed his eyes as a wave of grief punched him in the gut: He remembered it now, remembered all of it and it was a damn shame. His chest heaved and he tried not to cry out for his parents who'd died in the car crash.

He breathed deeply, gripping the armrests so hard that his knuckles turned white.

Guilt and remorse coursed through his veins as he realized he'd been nothing more than an embittered fool who hadn't known how lucky he'd been. He looked out the airplane window, tears streaming down his face. He'd lost his children, his parents, and his wife—his beautiful, loving, good-natured wife who'd put up with him even though he'd resented his brother and abused the bottle. With a hitch in his throat, he thought of the last time he saw her, lying limp and pale next to his twin brother in the back seat of the limousine that had been flying down the Florida freeway at break-neck speed.

He closed his eyes, reliving the last moments he'd spent as Elijah Lange, not David. He dragged an unsteady hand over his face—now he knew why he thought himself to be his brother, where the confusion had come from, but he intended on keeping it a secret. No one need know, after all, his brother had claimed that someone had tried to kill him and his family. It had been *his* house that had been destroyed, *his* family that had been threatened. Quietly, he grieved for the years he'd missed, but he had to accept the fact that he'd had no choice.

And then, with a lighter heart he thought of his beautiful daughter, Claire, now all grown up. As a four-year-old, she'd been such a happy and bossy little thing, and extremely precocious. He shook his head, baffled at how he'd not known her to be his own flesh and blood when she'd sat in his classroom. No wonder she'd been his favorite student that year.

He turned his head and stared at Crystal's profile, his breath catching in his throat—here his daughter sat, all grown up...ready to save the world. Thinking of the chain of events leading him to her, a sense of wonder and gratitude began easing in...First, Amin had introduced him to Cosmo and the manuscript; most likely this had been planned. Then he'd saved Crystal from those idiots who'd nabbed her off the street. He remembered the shot of adrenaline that had coursed through his body when he'd first touched her and how

she'd seemed to trust him. Then he'd introduced and explained her mission: The mission she was born to fulfill.

And he was her father, playing a huge part in her existence as Deloria had introduced him to Elizabeth...funny; he'd not even known it. He shook his head, eyeing Crystal's blue-streaked, exotic locks and he smiled. She was his daughter and they were a team; he could protect her now. Underneath his concern for his manipulated life, he was grateful for the reunion.

He wanted to grab her and squeeze her tightly but knew she'd think he was crazy, so he did the next best thing and grabbed her hand.

Surprised, she looked at him and his breath caught: He suddenly realized she had her mother's honey-brown eyes, slanting slightly up at the corners—the eyes that had captured his soul—then she dazzled him with one of her rare, radiant smiles that lit up her eyes like sunshine. She gripped his hand back just as tightly, suddenly sneezing, sending a lock of blue hair from its clip, falling over her forehead.

She reminded him of something magical he'd seen the night of the car accident, so long ago. As he'd laid on his back on his mother's lawn—having drunk too many beers—a bright star, high in the night sky, had twinkled at him brightly. He thought she was just like that star, all blue and twinkly. His little blue star warrior, he said to himself. That was what she was: A warrior of starlight.

"What?" asked Crystal, sneezing again then laughing at his dopey expression.

"You're like a star, all blue and twinkly," whispered Elijah softly.

She snorted, laughed and rolled her eyes. "A blue twinkly star? Dude."

He grinned and the fist that had clamped down on his heart, loosened.

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He knew she would face more dangers and hardships, but now he sensed she was even being protected by the stars themselves, and hopefully, would come through all this unscathed.

As the plane left the air over the Pacific and began throwing its tiny shadow over California, they sat there, father and daughter, just happy to be together.

~

*Minneapolis, MN
January 31, 2011*

IN HIS APARTMENT OVER *THE Blue Crystal* bookstore, Cosmo poured a cup of tea, lit his pipe and leaned back, enjoying the peace and quiet the early morning offered. After taking a few luxurious puffs and appreciating his first sip of Earl Gray, he opened the newspaper and scanned the front page, shaking his head over the article reporting the extreme and erratic weather patterns around the world:

“In Queensland, Australia, raging floodwaters swamped thousands of homes and businesses, leaving at least 25 people dead and dozens more missing since late November. Highways and rail lines have been swept away in what could be Australia's costliest natural disaster. Rainfall in Queensland and all of eastern Australia in December 2010 was the greatest on record, and the year 2010 was the rainiest year on record for Queensland.

“This disaster follows a wave of severe natural disasters over the past year; extreme weather that has killed thousands of people across the globe, including a scorching heat wave that nearly brought Russia to its knees last summer, and horrific floods that submerged more than 60,000 square miles in Pakistan. Droughts and floods are expected to become more severe as global temperatures climb.” [1]

He continued reading about the severe cold snap in India, bringing temperatures as cold as -10.5°F across northern India; the

ongoing drought intensifying across eastern Africa; freezing temperatures and winter precipitation across southern China, leading to the evacuation of nearly 60,000 people; a prolonged cold snap across the Korean peninsula; a rare snowfall across the U.S. southwest bringing snow to Las Vegas, Nevada; and unprecedented rainfalls across the globe.

Heavy rains were impacting southern Africa, killing dozens, forcing evacuations and damaging crops, and torrential flooding hit the western Saudi Arabian city of Jeddah. Torrential rainfalls, beginning on December 31st and continuing into early January in the Philippines, led to heavy flooding in Bhutan City, home to 270,000 people. Heavy monsoonal rains in eastern Sri Lanka, the heaviest on record to occur over such a short period of time, caused widespread flooding across the island nation, displacing over one million people. Heavy rainfall in southeast Brazil caused the worst flooding and landslides to affect the nation in decades. Flash floods killed hundreds and claimed to be Brazil's deadliest natural disaster in history. [2]

Cosmo gave a quick shudder, remembering Angel's words about 'chaos reigning around the world as mankind enters into the Fifth Age.' Scientists were attributing these weather anomalies to La Niña conditions and record-warm ocean temperatures. He wondered if maybe they were wrong. It was only the end of January, yet 2011 was already making quite a statement when it came to global weather events.

Cosmo sighed, folded the paper and moved it gently aside while he sipped his tea that had cooled while he read. It didn't surprise him that he sought out these kinds of every day distractions. The articles helped him appreciate the fact that he really did live in this world with its daily share of drama and problems. He realized that these earthly situations, even though heartbreaking and dramatic, were easy to identify and understand; much easier than the strange phenomena he'd experienced during the last month.

After tapping the ashes of his pipe into his palm, he walked to the sink, washed his cup and dried his hands. Flipping the towel over his shoulder, he leaned back against the counter, staring sightlessly, remembering the strange events that occurred in the blue room deep below the earth a few days before. The whole thing still unnerved him and he worried about Daniel. But more than that, he couldn't figure out if his brother was some sort of hellish puppet of Deloria's, or if the whole thing had been an illusion, or a nightmare.

He rolled his shoulders and chuckled, remembering Claire's frustration and confusion as they tried to recall what happened the night she'd disappeared with David. Of course, he'd been relieved when she'd waltzed into the bookstore the following morning; holding Vincent's cage in one hand and her purse in the other, cheeks reddened from the cold winter air and eyes blue as ever.

Before she'd uttered one word, she'd stared at him long and hard, finally confessing she was just as confused as he was as she released Vincent from his cage. She'd admitted she'd found herself in bed, in her pajamas, ten hours later, and she'd no idea how she'd gotten there. She'd even asked him if he knew what had happened. Of course he hadn't, so he'd patted her shoulder, suggesting she might remember, and then filled her in on what Grey Eyes had told him about Adam, the dog, Wyndon, and the man once known as Wyndon. He'd tried to explain how they were all connected, but he'd probably messed it up—it was just too baffling. He'd given her a quick hug and suggested they get to work as both found solace in simple things.

Ten minutes later, he'd found wandering through the travel section, pursing her lips, staring at various books intently, finally pulling down two heavy volumes both titled: *The Deserts of the World*. Then, she'd spent the whole morning poring over the books, not lifting her head until well past noon. Having no idea what she was looking for, and suspecting she needed a distraction from the

recent and strange events, he'd not asked any questions. Ever since, her manner had been slightly distant. He wondered if it was because of their strange journey or something she'd read.

Cosmo shook his head, a small smile playing about his lips as he folded the little blue hand towel, hanging it on its hook. Then, sighing deeply, he wondered what strange events today might bring. He'd invited Gina to lunch, knowing she needed entertainment as she too worried about Daniel. Afterwards, he'd go downstairs and visit Adam, see how he was doing. As yet, he was still in a deep sleep with Grey Eyes tending to him, vigilant as ever. Maybe tonight he'd visit Madelynn and the others. Find out if they'd heard anything from David and Crystal, or hopefully, Constantine.

His heart gave a quick tug at Daisy's grief over Marty's departure. He understood—he and Madelynn both—the deep, debilitating sadness losing a loved one could bring, how it could drag you down into the depths of despair if left untended. Cosmo smiled, realizing he could be of some help yet. Yes, he'd visit his friends tonight and offer Daisy some solace over a cup of tea, maybe even play a game of checkers with Levi and Angel. Maybe he'd even let Angel win. The little Columbian had yet to learn how to lose gracefully.

Cosmo smiled when Samantha began singing merrily in her cage, her bright, little yellow chest bobbing up and down as she sang. All the while cooing at her, he refreshed her water and refilled her food. Then, he closed the cage door, twisting the wire he'd secured the door with.

Ever since Vincent began spending time in his apartment, he was taking extra precautions. Unfortunately, the white cat was obsessed with bothering some of his customers—especially old man Murphy—and he spent many afternoons upstairs. Of course, Vincent wasn't your usual every-day cat, and he'd most likely leave

Samantha alone, but still, he loved his little bird and he wasn't going to take any chances.

γ

CLAIRE PEERED THROUGH THE WINDOW of the yellow taxi, eyeing the row of one-story houses snuggled close together lining the street. This was it; this was the neighborhood her family had lived in before her grandparents had taken her and Crystal to Ireland. She wondered if the brown house she looked at replaced the one that had burnt down seventeen years ago.

Quickly paying the driver, she stepped out into the cold, hauling up her collar, shivering and staring at the home she presumed her house had once stood.

Then, she turned and marched up the freshly-salted sidewalk to the tidy aqua-colored rambler, and rang the bell.

A young woman wearing dark glasses with a yellow lab standing at her side answered the door.

Claire put out her hand. "Hello, Jenny. I'm Claire Blue."

The sandy-haired woman smiled shyly but didn't take Claire's hand as she welcomed her into her home. Claire noticed her scarred and slightly deformed face and tried not to stare as she was ushered inside.

"Thank you." Claire gratefully accepted the cup of coffee the young woman offered after she took a seat at the kitchen table.

"This is Jasper," said Jenny, introducing the lab. "He helps me around the house and when I go out." The dog sat quietly at her side, wagging his tail when hearing his name.

Claire smiled. "Thank you for seeing me, Jenny."

The girl nodded her head and sipped her coffee.

Claire studied her face, taking a sip of coffee herself. This woman had grown up in this house and lived here still. Like her own family's house, this woman's house had also been destroyed the night of the fire, but they'd rebuilt. She'd found her family's

name when she'd gone over old stories in the newspaper written in the days after the fire. The reporter had learned that a girl had suffered severe injuries. Excitement had coursed through her veins when the young woman had answered the phone, saying her name, and agreeing to a meeting. Now, she saw and understood the extent of the woman's injuries and felt a bit guilty over her excitement. But she had questions and this woman might have answers.

"I would like to ask you some questions about that night long ago, the one I mentioned on the telephone when I called you yesterday. Is that all right?"

Jenny nodded again.

"Do you remember that night, the night the house across the street caught fire?"

"Course I do," answered Jenny softly. "That was the night my house caught fire and I got burned and," she whispered, "I lost my sight. And the house across the street didn't just catch fire and burn down, it exploded."

Exploded! thought Claire in horror. She'd not known that her home had exploded; the papers hadn't mentioned that.

"I'm sorry," whispered Claire. "I'm sorry that you were hurt."

Jenny shrugged. "It's okay. I live here with my mother and younger brother. We have a comfortable life, I guess. And, I have Jasper." She smiled and patted her dog's head. "He's been with me for ten years now and he's the best friend anyone could have." The yellow lab's tail slowly thumped the floor as his mistress stroked his head.

"Did you happen to see anything unusual that night, Jenny?" asked Claire. "Before...well...before the fire?"

"I saw plenty," replied Jenny. "Why do you want to know?" she asked slowly. "I mean, it's been a long time, and...well you don't sound like a detective to me."

Claire smiled. "That's because I'm not. I just found out about this fire a few weeks ago. I know the people who lived there."

Jenny sat up straighter in her chair. "You do? What do you mean you know them?" she asked after a moment. "I thought they'd all died."

Claire wondered if she should tell her who she was. Later, she thought. After she learned what the woman might have seen.

"I know the family," said Claire simply. "No one ever told me of this tragedy and I thought I could find out a bit more about what might have happened. If it's too upsetting to talk about, I'd understand."

Jenny shook her head. "I think it's finally time I told someone the truth."

"The truth?"

"Well, I was only eleven when it happened and I'd been very badly hurt so no one wanted to upset me and ask me questions. When they did ask me, I told them I hadn't seen anything because I knew no one would have believed me. I told my friends at the time, but I swore them to secrecy."

Claire set her coffee cup down, leaning forward, resting her elbows on the table. "What did you see, Jenny?"

"I remember it like it was yesterday," she began. "Like I said, I was eleven. I'd been at a birthday party all day and I didn't feel very well. I went to bed but I woke up in the middle of the night because I thought I was going to be sick, so I went into the bathroom. I left the light off because I didn't want my mother to know I was up, she would have gotten mad at me for eating chocolate cake, I wasn't supposed to eat chocolate," she said, shrugging her shoulders. "I have weird allergies.

"Anyway, I was sitting in the dark, feeling miserable and staring out the window because the moon was so bright, it was like it was daytime—it practically lit up the whole neighborhood, and it was really, really cold out, I remember that too. As I stared out the window, I noticed the smoke coming out the chimney from the house across the street, the one that blew up. The smoke went

straight up into the sky like a pencil. I thought it was so strange, I'd never seen smoke do that before, and it made scary shadows on the roof that looked like a snake and my imagination started going crazy because I was afraid for the two little girls who lived there. I thought the smoke would crawl down the chimney and eat them up.

"I loved those little girls," she whispered. "What happened to them was horrible."

"Did you know them?" asked Claire quickly.

Jenny nodded. "I babysat for them a half-dozen times. The littlest one was so quiet and so sweet, but the older one was a real bossy pants, even though she was absolutely adorable."

Claire raised her eyebrows. *Bossy pants*. "What happened next?"

"Well, this is where it gets weird, and I'll understand if you don't believe me, but I actually won't care," she added with a toss of her chin. "As I stared at the smoke—worrying about the little girls—the light around the house changed, and then a blue beam of light shot out the chimney, like a spot light it was so bright, and right after something shot out through the blue light, I don't know what it was, but it flew up and out of the chimney...and then it changed." Jenny stopped and took a deep breath. "It changed into a big white bird and flew away, and right after that, the house exploded. It was the most horrible thing ever—I'll never forget the sound of it. The force from the blast reached across the street and blew out the windows in the front of our house. Unfortunately, I'd been standing right in front of one. I don't remember anything else. But I'll never forget those two little girls," she whispered and added: "They say the family was vaporized."

Claire shuddered at the thought. Vaporized! How dreadful.

"Did you say your name was Claire?" asked Jenny after a few quiet moments.

"Yes."

"How old are you?" Jenny gripped the edge of the table.

"I'm twenty-one."

"You're the same age the little girl named Claire who died in the fire would be."

"Yes."

"What color are your eyes?"

"Blue."

"Your hair?"

"Blonde."

"Curly or straight?"

"Curly," answered Claire with a little smile.

"What's your sister's name?"

"Crystal."

Jenny sat up straighter and a shiver of excitement rippled through her. Jasper looked at his mistress expectantly.

"Are you the little girl who lived across the street?" Jenny's voice actually squeaked.

"Can you keep a secret?" whispered Claire.

Jenny nodded her head slowly up and down.

"Then, yes, I am."

"Is your sister alive too?"

"Yes."

"And your parents?"

Not wanting to divulge too much, she evaded the question. "No one was home that night," she answered. "I think my parents had been warned."

Jenny smiled, leaning back in her chair and sighing with relief. "I knew it. I knew you couldn't have been vaporized, it's just too dreadful. I'm glad I told you what happened. I knew there was something strange going on. I may be blind now, but that night I saw something magical.

"I think I was supposed to see it," she added. "I've dreamt of the white bird many times since that night. It's comforting to me somehow. It's been so long since I lost my sight that I don't remember what certain things look like anymore, but I remember

what I saw that night very well, and I remember the bird. I remember what the bird looked like flying away. It was very beautiful.”

Claire stared at the woman who had witnessed the destruction of her home and her life. She wondered if the bird the woman spoke of was the same white bird she too dreamt of.

Claire shivered, trying to shake off the ominous feeling that this young woman had seen something she wasn't supposed to. And, like she had so often since she'd heard her grandmother tell the story about the night of the fire, she thought of her memory of the dark-haired woman with the sad eyes, playing the guitar and singing so gently to her and her baby sister who'd hugged her little pink dog tightly, sucking on his tattered ear in the little bedroom with the pink rosebud wallpaper and matching curtains. The memory was elusive, coming in bits and spurts, now vividly etched into her brain, spurring her on, urging her to find the woman with the beautiful voice who'd sung them to sleep every night.

Now it was time to go.

“Please, don't tell anyone that I was here,” implored Claire as she stood. “The police detectives are no help. I'm going to try to figure out who destroyed my home and who tried to kill my family. I don't want you to be in any danger, Jenny. You might have seen something you weren't supposed to.” Claire took the woman's hands in hers. “Can you keep this a secret?”

Jenny nodded her head. “I have for seventeen years, what's another twenty or thirty?”

Claire smiled softly. “Thank you for your help, Jenny. And I'm sorry for what happened to you.”

Jenny smiled. “It's not your fault. I'm just glad you're not dead. You can't imagine the dreams I had after the fire,” she shook her head. “The thought of you and Crystal in that fire was almost too much to bear.”

PB MORLEN

Jenny showed Claire to the door and they gave each other a quick hug. As Jenny slowly closed the door, she thought of her visitor yesterday: The large detective named Eide. She was glad she'd not shared any of her information with him. He'd been a bit too pushy for her tastes.

TWO

Do not let anger poison you.

Hopi Proverb

Denver, Colorado

February 1, 2011

Denver was waist deep in snow with more on the way and already Crystal was homesick for the warm and gentle trade winds of Hawaii. As she and the others hurried through the terminal to their next gate, Crystal looked out the large airport windows, seeing the mountains covered in snow, sighing over the fact they were back to winter.

She sighed again: Right before they'd touched down, they'd gotten the local weather forecast. Unfortunately they would have some rough weather on their next flight. Crystal readjusted her guitar strap and continued walking.

Unlike Crystal who dreaded the next flight, an enthusiastic Leon, who'd never been off the islands, was excited and kept skipping ahead, staring out the large windows and gushing about the snow-capped peaks in the distance. Since he'd never been off the islands, he'd never flown over the rocky mountain chain and he

couldn't seem to get over the fact that they were so immense. Nita, smiled softly, appreciating his boyish gusto.

Leon's child-like eagerness lifted Crystal's sour mood—but only by a fraction...she was cranky because she'd caught a cold: her throat was dry and scratchy; she had a head ache; her eyes itched, and she was exhausted, having barely slept since leaving Hawaii eight hours before. Every time she tried sleeping, she'd dream about Adam and Wyndon and every dream was awful, filled with treachery and abandonment. So, she'd stayed awake, barely.

When the small group reached their gate, Crystal popped in her earphones and closed her eyes, losing herself in Philip Glass's *Violin Concerto*; a piece of music that could transport her like no other music could.

FINALLY, AFTER WAITING FOUR HOURS—their flight had been delayed due to the weather—they boarded the small and crowded airplane, Nita and Leon sitting together in the back and David and Crystal squeezing together in a narrow row near the front.

Immediately after take-off, the air became turbulent and the pilot's voice crackled over the speakers, reassuring the passengers in an exaggerated drawl: *"All right pilgrims, we're heading into some rough weather. But this here little plane is tough and mean as a snake. She'll see us to our destination. So hang on tight ladies and gentlemen and enjoy the ride. We'll be on the ground in thirty minutes."*

With one hand holding her throbbing head and the other gripping the armrest, Crystal rolled her eyes at the pilot's pathetic attempt to impersonate John Wayne.

She sniffed.

Bugger.

Not only were her eyes itching but now, they were watering like an open faucet. She grabbed her bag, digging out another tissue, dabbing at her eyes in frustration, irritated over the fact that she was now slightly nauseas and lightheaded.

“Bollocks,” muttered Crystal. This was not a good time to get sick.

“David,” Crystal peered at him through bloodshot-red eyes, “my head hurts so damn bad I can hardly see.”

He’d noticed her change of mood a few minutes before landing in Denver. She’d snapped at him before falling quiet and sullen. He’d tried offering her food, knowing it had helped lighten her mood before, but this time she’d made a sour face and turned him down. Now he knew why she was cranky: she didn’t feel well.

“Why didn’t you tell me before?” He rummaged through his bag.

“I don’t know. I get cranky when I don’t feel well, and—” she trailed off, wondering if she should tell him about her dreams.

“Here you go, two aspirins coming right up. Drink my water, honey. Are you getting sick?” he asked with concern.

Honey? She threw him a quizzical look, taking the small white pills from his hand and gulping them down.

A few moments later, Crystal heard a loud whistle and jumped in her seat, bringing her hands to her ears. She could have sworn someone had stuck a set of headphones on her head.

She turned, looking at David with wide eyes. “Did you hear that?”

“I hear a lot of things, Crystal, which *that* do you mean?”

“That whistling sound.”

“No.” After a moment he added: “I need to tell you about our destination, Crystal. We’re going to Durango. We’ll—Crystal what is the matter?”

She still had her hands over her ears and was now craning her neck around.

“David!” shouted Crystal, “I can’t hear what you’re saying. I...I think there’s something wrong with the airplane.”

He glanced around, hoping those sitting near didn’t hear her remark, but no one seemed concerned.

“Crystal, what is it that you’re hearing?” he asked.

“What?”

He pulled her hands from her ears, repeating his question.

Her eyes were wide. “An eerie-sounding whistle: like background music from a sci-fi movie.” Her eyes got bigger. “Now I hear something going, *beep, beep, beep...*”

By the wild look in her eyes, he knew he better do something before she caused a scene. “Hold on. I’ll go see if they’re doing anything up front, don’t go anywhere and don’t panic.” He got up from his seat and headed up the aisle.

Crystal startled when Leon hopped over her and plopped down into David’s seat. He stared at her for a moment before gently taking her hands away from her ears, placing his own over them. The strange whistle sounds immediately quieted and Crystal breathed a deep sigh of relief.

Leon grinned and dropped his hands. “I heard them too, Crystal. But I imagine that your hearing is much better than mine. How is it now?”

She closed her eyes, cocked her head and listened for any odd lingering sounds. She could still hear a droning hum, some quiet beeps and whines, but now they were very faint.

She opened her eyes. “You heard them too?”

Leon nodded his head. “I’ve always been able to hear sounds coming from the earth. Earth’s natural radio emissions, actually.” He smiled. “Our telluric environment literally sings with radio waves at audio frequencies people can’t hear unless they convert them to sound waves with the aid of a very low-frequency radio receiver. What scientists don’t realize, though, is that some people can hear these frequencies, like you and me.” He flashed a huge smile then leaned forward, peering at her intently. “Do you feel all right? Your eyes are really red.”

"I'm fine. Why do you think I can hear these weird sounds now?" she asked. "I mean, it's weird that I couldn't hear them before on the ground. Now, we're thousands of feet in the air."

Leon gave this some thought before checking his watch and looking out the window. "It's probably because we're flying over the Rio Grande Rift and the San Luis Valley in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. The Mountains are fault block mountains with major fault lines running along both the east and west sides, and the San Luis Valley is a huge gravel pit full of eroded materials with bedrock down about 30,000 feet. There's a lot of hot water stored under all that bedrock. Fault lines move and water amplifies sound," he shrugged his shoulders.

"Or, it might be an explosion in one of the underground tunnels our government insists upon digging. They say there's a huge underground city being built beneath the new airport linking it to the new CIA headquarters in Denver...maybe that's our sound..."

"Whoa!" Leon cried out as the plane lurched. He grabbed hold of the seat in front of him.

"Everyone please take their seats," squawked the flight attendant's voice over the speakers. *"We're turning the seatbelt sign back on as the captain has indicated some bumpy air up ahead. Please fasten your seatbelts, return your tray tables to their upright positions and remain seated for the rest of the flight. We'll be landing in 15 minutes."*

Leon smiled broadly into Crystal's face. "Don't worry Crystal; you've been greatly honored with your gift of audio and like me, you might be able to predict earthquakes."

Crystal's eyes went wide.

Leon smiled. "We'll talk later." He stood up, heading back to his seat as Elijah lurched back down the aisle.

"Everything is fine with the exception of this damn turbulence," he said, buckling himself in. "What did Leon say?"

Crystal blinked her reddened eyes and sniffed. "He heard the sounds too; says they're sounds of the earth or some kind of explosion in an underground tunnel beneath Denver."

Elijah raised his eyebrows.

"I hope the sounds hold off until he teaches me what to do." Crystal shook her head. "Oh, he also said he could predict earthquakes, of all things, and that I could too."

"Predict earthquakes?"

"That's what he said, David."

The plane pitched and rolled.

Crystal groaned.

"You okay?" Elijah stared at her pale face, noticing her red, watery eyes.

"My headache is gone but my ears are still buzzing. And my eyes, god, they won't quit watering." She took off her glasses, leaned back her head, wiped her itchy eyes once again, and closed them.

"Hmmm..." mused Elijah as he looked out the window. As far as he knew, no one could predict earthquakes. However, he'd read somewhere that sometimes people saw strange lights in the sky before or during earthquakes. However, Crystal hadn't seen lights; she'd heard a strange whistling sound.

The manuscript had mentioned something about how *'the telluric currents or terrestrial currents would be amplified'*, but he hadn't been able to decipher by whom or by what. Now he knew. It had been difficult deciphering the book in Hawaii; he'd struggled with the ancient script.

The book had told him about the young Hawaiian boy, Leon. It had been extremely difficult to muddle through that phase. He'd had to translate the deciphered glyph from its ancient text to the native tongue of the Polynesians and then try to translate it to English. Thank god he'd had a lot of patience and really did enjoy this type of work. He knew the Polynesian language of today had changed from the old tongue, and the Polynesians had no written

language before the intervention of the Europeans, and the language was very vague and could be quite contradicting.

He'd persevered and discovered that they were to bring "*the boy who listened to the sea.*" He spent hours going back through his transcripts to make sure he wasn't in error. Leon had been the boy who collected the sea shells—he'd seen his collection himself.

He shuddered, remembering the horrible headaches he'd experienced during his stay which only wine had relieved. Luckily, they'd stopped the morning they left the islands.

"So, we're going where?" Crystal asked after a moment, sniffing and poking through her carry-on bag, looking for more tissues.

"Durango." Elijah rummaged through his own bag, pulling his notebook out, flipping to the right page. "The town isn't far from the four corners area: a very sacred place an ancient race of peoples called the Anasazi or Ancestral Puebloans inhabited hundreds of years ago." He pulled a sheet of paper from his notebook and looked it over quickly.

"I've contacted a family in Durango by the name of Chosovi. Violet and her daughter, Heather, will meet us at the airport. It should be another interesting and enlightening stay."

Crystal blew out a tired sigh and closed her eyes. "Lovely."

LA PLATA COUNTY AIRPORT WAS SMALL in comparison to Denver's massive terminals, and as the small group made their way through the terminal, Crystal lagged behind, having a pity party because frankly, she felt horrible. She ached all over and the landing had been a feat of magic: the winds buffeting them about in their descent. On the ground, she'd pumped the pilot's hand in gratitude before walking off the plane, intending on telling him how much she'd liked his John Wayne impersonations, but thought better of it when the cold winter air blasted her from the open doorway.

Exhaustion had caught up with her and now her ears itched, but what was worse, her eyes were a complete mess—seeing clearly was

extremely difficult. Swerving into a small novelty shop, sniffing and blinking, she searched for cold medicine.

Nita and Leon—careful to watch her, aware of her obvious discomfort—saw her turn into the shop and waited patiently, giggling over an odd-shaped Kokopeli doll while Elijah used his phone.

At the counter, clutching a packet of allergy pills, Crystal glanced at the rack of magazines and suddenly gasped: There on the front cover of a well-known publication was a picture of that horrible woman who'd kidnapped her!

She grabbed the magazine, bringing it up to her face, sniffing and peering intently at the photograph. The woman in the photo was laughing and looking into the face of...*JAYPERS!* Crystal sucked in her breath, it was Adam! His face was in profile and his long hair covered some of it, but she knew it was him. The blonde had a firm hold of his arm and was laughing, looking up at him.

Crystal, feeling dizzy and beginning to shake, slowly slogged out of the store, clutching the magazine in one hand and the packet of tablets in the other. She headed to a bench, wanting to sit down before her knees gave out.

The young man behind the counter shouted: "Hey, ya gotta pay for that!"

Nita rushed in, quickly paying the store attendant before sitting next to Crystal, Leon taking a spot on her other side. They'd seen her eyes go wide before the blood drained from her face. And now, she sat frozen—lifeless and pale.

Nita gently pried the magazine from Crystal's grasp and looked at the cover. She saw the older woman, the younger man and the bold words: *HEIRESS TO WED IN JULY!*

Elijah finished his text and slowly approached the trio, first giving Crystal a quizzical look before turning to Nita who handed him the magazine.

"It's Adam with that horrible woman. Why—?" whispered Crystal in a shaky voice, looking defeated...deflated; her skin pasty white, her bloodshot, watery eyes enormous, her lips trembling.

"Crystal, are you sure?" Elijah peered at the magazine.

She nodded and fat tears fell from her eyes, plopping onto her tightly gripped hands.

"It was too good to be true." Crystal slowly got to her feet. "I want to go now," she added with a sniff before grabbing her bag, heading down the walkway in the wrong direction.

Nita grabbed her guitar and Leon quickly and gently grabbed her shoulders, steering her in the right direction.

Elijah watched Crystal sniff and wipe away a tear as she walked down the terminal's hallway. Now was not the right time to question her, he thought, and once again looked at the cover of the magazine—he wasn't sure who the woman was or the young man at her side. It couldn't be Adam though, he knew that for certain. After leaving Minnesota, he'd spoken with Cosmo once, the old gentleman informing him that Adam had been secreted away to a retreat far removed from society. The man in the picture did not appear to be retreated anywhere.

Elijah studied the photo as they walked. Who was the woman? She was older and apparently enjoyed being in the sun: her brown skin was wrinkled like a raisin. He peered at the picture more closely, studying the man, thinking he looked more like a tennis pro than a half-blooded Lakota man. Oh well, he thought, tucking the magazine into his coat pocket, the magazine was a tabloid and not to be trusted anyway.

Elijah saw the two women first. Violet had told him that they'd be waiting together near the baggage claim, holding a sign that said: *Welcome to here.*

Elijah waved and they waved back, smiling, and one stepping forward to greet them, her face very familiar.

“You must be David and this must be Crystal,” she said, embracing Crystal warmly.

“Oh,” gasped Crystal, “hello.” Lost in her feelings about Adam, she hadn’t noticed them.

Crystal looked down into the cheerful face of an older woman who barely reached her shoulder. Her laughing-brown eyes creased into little slits when she smiled and Crystal’s heart skipped a beat as she stared at the woman in wonderment: She looked just like her Aunt Daisy. This had happened before, when she’d met Mike and the old priest in Hawaii. They’d both resembled Daisy’s husband, Marty. Her brain scrambled around as she tried making sense of these odd coincidences, but the betrayal she felt over Adam dragged her down and wouldn’t let go.

The woman noticed the spark of recognition in Crystal’s eyes before they’d clouded over with grief. She kept hold of Crystal’s arms, taking a step back, looking her over with a sharp eye, smiling warmly and holding on tightly until the girl’s clouded gaze cleared. Seeming satisfied, she smiled again. “I’m Violet, and this is my daughter, Heather Chosovi.”

The younger woman approached, looking almost identical to her mother who was now smiling and shaking Nita’s and Leon’s hands: she had the same twinkling brown eyes and the same iron grip. She too looked Crystal over, hesitating for a fleeting moment when she saw the tattoo encircled around Crystal’s throat. Then she looked Crystal in the eye, winked and laughed joyfully as she gave Leon a big bear hug.

Crystal felt a bit of sadness leave watching their obvious joy. The two women—dressed in their National Park Service uniforms—were bouncing between the foursome, exclaiming how excited they were at their visit.

“Where’s your dog then?” Violet looked around, expecting to see an animal crate somewhere. “We hear he’s a handsome one.”

Crystal looked at Elijah with teary brown eyes, silently begging him to answer. She couldn't bear to talk about Wyndon. Not now— not yet.

"Well," he began, not knowing where to start. "He's not with us. He, well, he's lost."

Startled, Violet blinked quickly.

"What do you mean lost?"

"Actually, I don't really know." Elijah put his arm around Crystal whose bottom lip quivered, looking like she was about to cry. "Strange events happened on the islands while we visited, one being the disappearance of Wyndon. But," he hugged Crystal to his side, "we intend on finding him, don't we Crystal?"

Crystal nodded and sniffed.

"Lost him did you?" Violet took Crystal's hands. "You didn't lose him. You wouldn't have lost him for the world."

Crystal managed to smile at this woman who seemed to understand.

"One thing I know...the dog is bound to you, Crystal," said Violet, smiling warmly. "He may be lost but you'll find him."

"You all must be so tired from your long journey," declared Heather as she led them through the airport's small terminal.

"Chayton, my son, will help you with your bags. Just show him which ones are yours and he'll put them into Magical Marjorie. He's right over there." Heather pointed to a tall, dark-haired youth waiting patiently by the baggage carousel.

"Who's Magical Marjorie?" asked Leon.

"Our bus! We name everything so we can honor it."

Nita giggled and Crystal blinked, feeling more of her sadness leave, but she wasn't entirely ready to let it all go.

Violet took her hand, leading her and the others outside toward the oldest bus she'd ever seen, looking ready to fall apart and even older than Mike's beat up, blue bus. An airport security officer was standing next it, writing out a ticket.

Violet dropped Crystal's hand and marched ahead, stopping in front of the surprised guard, waving her arms wildly about as she spoke. As the group drew closer, she pointed their way and the officer's eyes followed her hand. When he saw the group his mouth slowly sagged open, then, he fumbled with his pad before putting it away, watching silently as they boarded the bus. He seemed very interested in Crystal and couldn't take his eyes off her. Heather patted the officer's cheek, telling him to go back to work. He closed his mouth then his eyes, shook his head and wandered off.

"Silly job really," said Violet as everyone boarded the bus. "Everyone around here knows everyone else so why do they need these pretend policemen?"

Crystal sank down in a seat, breathing in the smells of the old bus. It smelled wonderful. She wasn't very far from where she'd spent the last eight years of her life, and this place reminded her of home. The smells were familiar: a mixture of garlic, wool, leather, spices and something she couldn't quite make out. She smiled at the ladies who were busy showing Chayton where to put the luggage and getting into each other's way. Then she found her tissue, dabbed at her watery eyes, and sniffed.

"So exciting, isn't it, Heather? I can't believe they're really here. I hope Jasmine has finished cooking—our guests are probably half-starved. You know they don't feed them much on those airplanes anymore."

"Do you feel all right, dear?" Heather sat down in the seat in front of Crystal who stared forlornly out the window. "Looks like you're coming down with a cold."

Crystal smiled weakly and shrugged her shoulders. "I'll be all right."

Heather reached over the seat, taking Crystal's hand and giving it a tight squeeze. "'Don't you worry about a thing, we'll take good care of you, and Magical Marjorie will see us safely home. She's kind

of noisy, but don't you worry, she's seen some winter storms that would have scared the hide off an old grizzly bear."

"Winter storm?" squeaked Crystal.

"A whopper's coming in. You must have been thrown out of your seats coming in on that little airplane. The winds picked up an hour or so ago and we're gonna get clobbered. Chayton has had his license for a whole month now and handles Marjorie like a pro. Don't you Chayton?"

Chayton took the driver's seat. "Yes mother," he said as he ground the gears of the bus and it lurched ahead.

"How far do we have to go?" asked Crystal, glad she'd taken a seat near the front of the bus.

"We have to go the longer way today because they've already closed some main roads," exclaimed Heather loudly as the bus was making a huge racket. "But it shouldn't take more than an hour."

The winds picked up and Crystal peered out the window into the leaden skies. She groaned and breathed in deeply, wishing she were anywhere but in a bus, in a snowstorm, with a cold and a broken heart.

Violet piped in. "They closed some roads because our locals know that tourists tend not to use chains and end up in the ditch or worse. Saves them the trouble of hauling their butts out. Silly tourists."

Nita giggled and Crystal sighed, praying silently that Magical Marjorie wouldn't magically fall apart.

HEAVY FLAKES OF SNOW FELL thick and fast and Leon popped up from his seat, running down the aisle.

"Cool! Wow, look at this stuff! I gotta take pictures and send them home. Whoa!" he cried when the bus was buffeted by a blast.

Crystal cringed, holding on tightly to the seat in front of her, groaning and taking deep gulps of air, wishing she were dead.

She turned around. Elijah and Nita sat serenely in their seats, seemingly un-phased by the racket the storm caused. Crystal turned back with a sniff and pouted. It was so unfair! Why did she have to be sick now? Sick and angry! She closed her eyes and willed the niggling discomfort in her stomach down; concentrating on ways she could take revenge on the woman who'd stolen her man.

An hour later they headed down into a valley, the roads all but barren as the bus passed by stores and gas stations appearing like apparitions out of the gloom. Even though it was only mid-afternoon, the storm had sucked all the daylight out of the sky.

Soon, Chayton turned left and adeptly navigated the old bus through an intersection and over a bridge spanning a rapidly flowing river, and slowly the bus began making its way up into the hills.

After another fifteen minutes of very slow going—the roads were quickly becoming snow-caked—Heather cheerfully announced they were almost there. Crystal sighed gratefully; relieved she hadn't needed a bucket. Through her rapidly-worsening impaired vision, she looked out the window and rubbed a circle through the foggy glass, gasping at the blurry, yet beautiful scene: White snowy patches, interlaced with patches of green and black, spread out all around.

As they turned into the forest, Magical Marjorie slowed down, lurching through heavy snow drifts, almost getting stuck once or twice, but the bus managed to finally pull up alongside a large log cabin tucked into the woods. Two dogs came bursting through the trees and bounded through the snow barking furiously with tails wagging.

"Jasmine must still be here, there's Santiago and Juneau," said Chayton over his shoulder before throwing open the doors.

The dogs flew up the steps and bounded down the aisle, Violet trying to stop the dogs from jumping in Crystal's lap.

“Goodness gracious, you two mangy mongrels.” Violet laughed as the bigger dog jumped into Crystal’s seat squishing her into the corner. Soon she was accosted by the dog’s large tongue and her eyes misted up: he was big and black like Wyndon.

“Santi you beast, get down!” Violet slapped the dog’s rump.

Unfazed, he merrily turned his great bulk around and Crystal became the target of his huge tail. “Ach!” she cried, covering her head.

The dog jumped down and proceeded to greet everyone on the bus. Leon laughed, Nita quietly petted the dog’s huge head and Elijah looked skeptically at the dog’s large teeth as it smiled at him.

The other dog, Juneau, was smaller with a beautiful thick coat of white fur. Happily, she greeted everyone with an offered paw. Bright red scarves with little white snowflakes were wrapped around both dog’s necks.

The two women shooed them off the bus with half-hearted scoldings and they romped through the snow, circled the bus and again resumed their joyful barking.

Crystal was grateful they were back outside as their presence reminded her of her dog’s absence. She looked out of the window, peering through the heavy snow to see huge pines towering over them and a handful of small structures tucked under the trees. She heard Heather tell David that the trees were Ponderosa Pines. He’d marveled at their impressive height as he’d left the bus.

Crystal sat quietly as a wave of sorrow swept through her. She looked into her lap, once again despairing of her journey. The one person she had met and fallen in love with had betrayed her. She didn’t think she could handle this: it brought up too many feelings from her past. Thoughts of betrayal were so great she feared she might jump out of her skin. They began to consume her and she felt as if she were falling into a black hole.

Once again, her thoughts turned to ways of revenge, but this time she thought of all manner of ways she could hurt Adam. She

could bash him in the head or stab him! Better yet, chopping his head off would be fun!

Suddenly, without warning as it had done before, her neck seized and she could barely breathe. Trying not to panic she took great gulps of air. It didn't help. Oh no! Her wide eyes were frantic, searching for someone to help her, but no one remained on the bus.

Help!

Gasping for breath like a fish out of water Crystal struggled to remain calm. Why did this keep happening? She didn't deserve this! Suddenly she was furious! With eyes squeezed shut she poured every ounce of hate in her heart at the one who kept hurting her. Who kept such a heavy hand on her throat!

Breathe...relax...breathe....Do not hate whom you fear, only love.

Crystal sank down into her seat, hearing the soothing words uttered in the sultry voice she'd heard before, drawing in deep, shuddering breaths, gasping when a wizened face suddenly appeared before her. The old woman's long, silky gray hair spread over the red shawl draped over her shoulders and her wise eyes bore into hers as she took her hands.

"It is not as you think," whispered the old woman, her voice thin and raspy with age. "Your eyes have deceived you. Please put those thoughts away; they do not serve you for you are stronger than he thinks you are."

As the image disappeared a hand squeezed her shoulder gently. Crystal shook her head and tried to slap the hand away.

"It's all right, honey." The soothing voice was low and strong.

The hate in Crystal's heart began to recede and with teary eyes she looked up into Violet's smiling face. Not only did she look like Daisy, she looked a great deal like the old woman in her vision.

"Do not let the stories of your past consume you, young Crystal. I can see what is in your heart and I felt your pain. But you have important things to do and must not let yourself be distracted by

these very old feelings. This area will bring up strong memories for you. Come, let's go inside and get you a nice hot cup of tea."

She took Crystal's hand and led her off the bus onto a trail shoveled in the snow that meandered up to the cozy cabin. The dogs circled them before bouncing merrily through the deep snow, barking and yipping as they disappeared behind the trees.

Crystal felt herself come around and was amazed. Bloody hell, she thought. She didn't know she had that kind of hate in her. Such dedicated hate. The feelings and the thoughts had felt separate from her, like they were someone else's. She didn't like them. She didn't like them at all.

SITTING AROUND VIOLET'S KITCHEN TABLE, drinking strong, black tea, waiting for Heather's daughter, Jasmine, to finish preparing the aromatic meal she'd spent the better part of the day preparing, their stomachs growled in anticipation.

"I have been a Park Ranger at the Mesa for as long as I've lived here; Heather joined me twenty years back," explained Violet, pouring her guests more tea.

"We'll be going to Mesa Verde soon, an area sacred to many, but we certainly can't go when it's snowing. We don't want to go in bad weather; it's not safe, even for us."

Violet shook her head. "The road leading to the Mesa is steep and treacherous, especially in the winter. While we wait, we'll show you around our area and we'll stay busy as there'll be plenty to do. Jasmine, Heather and Chayton need to go now before it gets dark. We'll do their chores."

"But how—?" wondered Leon.

"Skis of course." Violet put her arm around his shoulders. "Magical Marjorie has to stay here. They can't risk getting her stuck in the snow."

"Skis?"

“Look out the window, young man,” said Violet, nudging Leon toward the front window. “And take note because some day you may be putting those things on your feet too!”

“Me?” He made his way to the window and looked out, seeing the three stepping into very long, narrow skis. Soon, they headed off down the driveway with the two dogs leading the way and disappeared into the swirling snow.

“Wow, what if they get lost?” Leon’s breath steamed the glass as he peered through the window.

Violet laughed and began clearing the table of teacups. “They’ve been skiing here their whole lives. They won’t get lost; anyway, the dogs wouldn’t let them.” She wiped her hands on a kitchen towel. “It’s the best way to travel in this weather and much more dependable than tires.”

Violet then set about serving the delicious meal: Pan fried trout, steamed basmati rice flavored with ginger, a loaf of homemade bread only minutes from having been pulled from the oven, and a fresh Caesar salad complete with anchovies.

“These are the San Juan mountains, part of the Rockies,” explained Violet as they enjoyed their meal. “The town we passed through on our way here is Durango. It sits in the Animas River Valley; the only free-flowing river left in the United States,” she proclaimed proudly.

“The Animas River has a two-mile stretch that is gold medal water. Gold medal water has the highest quality of fishing for large trout. You can only use lures and flies in this stretch.

“Now I can understand why tourists would like that,” she chirped, standing to clear away the dishes. “Course not now, but come spring, mmm...good fish!”

As she dished out huge servings of apple cobbler, she told her guests about the Trimble Hot Springs, the legend of the River of Lost Souls, and Purgatory Resort.

“The Animas River’s official name is *El Rio de las Animas Perdidas*, meaning roughly the River of Lost Souls. Spanish explorers named the river after several explorers traveled on the river and were lost. The Spanish Catholics couldn’t deliver last rites and they believed the dead men’s souls could not enter heaven and would be relegated to Purgatory. Purgatory Creek is up near lift Four at Purgatory Resort, a ski resort, thus the name.

“Our town is also the home of the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad which founded our town in 1880. The railroad still carries thousands of passengers each year and still employs a coal fed engine. People come from miles around to see the locomotives. I don’t know what the hullabaloo is all about, but you never know with these silly tourists.” She waved her fork in the air and laughed.

Soon, Violet saw Crystal’s eyes began to droop and Elijah’s shoulders start to sag. She knew it was time for them to retire.

“Nita, you may help with these dishes.” Violet pushed away from the table. “Leon, please go get more firewood. It’s in a bin right outside the back door. Bring it into the kitchen and put it in that box.” She pointed to a large wooden crate next to the stove.

“Crystal, you go on to bed. David, I’d like to speak to you for a moment.”

Elijah and Crystal walked out of the kitchen together and he gave her a quick hug.

“Are you all right?” He looked into her bloodshot eyes swimming in tears.

She smiled tiredly and sniffed. “I thing I’m gedding a bloody gold.”

Elijah smiled, sending her off down the hallway, his smile fading as he headed back to the kitchen where Violet waited for him.

“The dog’s disappearance concerns me,” blurted Violet abruptly.

“Yes. It concerns me too.” Elijah sat down at the table and played with a paper napkin.

“He’s very important in seeing to her safety both in our world and the others. Where do you think he could have gone?” she asked.

“He was obviously taken,” said Elijah, having given this problem much thought. “I think it has something to do with me. I can’t explain it though,” he said with a shake of his head. “I know something happened to me on the island: something significant, significant enough to trigger a full recovery of the memory loss I’ve struggled with for many years. You see, I was in a car accident many years ago and—”

Violet took his hand in hers.

“I know of your struggles. We all do,” her dark eyes shone with compassion, “and it has made you stronger.”

Elijah nodded his head. “Yes...stronger. Back on the island, a few nights ago, I had a strange dream where I met a little blond-haired girl.” He smiled and shook his head. “She...she helped me remember a great deal about myself—who I really am. I think that because of this, Wyndon was somehow sacrificed so that I would remember. I can’t be sure, but I have a gut feeling about this. I asked Crystal, but she wouldn’t say.”

He looked at Violet hopefully. “What do you think? You know things. Can you find out?”

Violet shook her head. “If what you say is true, then Crystal needs to find him and bring him back. It is imperative that she find him.” She took Elijah’s hand and gripped it firmly. “We cannot stop what she’s been sent here to do. She must make her journey whether or not the dog is with her. I fear for her without the protection of the dog. His energies are tied to hers in a profound way. Without him, she may be in great danger.”

Elijah groaned and dropped his head in his hands.

“We must have faith.” Her voice was low and strong. “We must trust our sisters and brothers in the animal kingdom to help guide Crystal and Wyndon toward each other. We will pray to Father Sky

and Mother Earth to see to her safety. That is all we can do. Now go to bed. Tomorrow promises to be a great day.”

CRYSTAL SHRUGGED OFF HER TRAVELING clothes and wrapped herself in her thick bathrobe, quickly finding the guest bathroom down the hall. She drew a hot bath and with a soft sigh sank into the steaming water. Purposefully, she didn't allow herself to think about Adam or Wyndon; it was too painful.

She thought about the stories Violet had shared around the dinner table, amazed she'd never heard of this place. Even though Albuquerque was merely a few hundred miles away, she felt she was thousands of miles away from anything she knew. Her life was so different now.

She thought of her friends in Hawaii and all she'd learned there, humming the tune of the Huna the old priest from the Order of Kane had taught her, trying valiantly to recall the words. They'd given her strength and joy before; she was certain they would again.

With her eyes squeezed tightly shut, she held her breath and leaned back, sliding under the warm water. Her long black locks floated around her like hollow reeds as she tried to retrieve the message of the Huna. The only sound she could hear under the water was the rhythmic beating of her heart: *thump, thump, thump*. She surfaced, taking a deep gulp of air, submerging herself again. Suddenly the words flowed into her being effortlessly. She was amazed: She'd never had a good memory for words.

“*Ike*, the world is what you think it is,” sang Crystal to herself. “*Kala*, there are no limits, everything is possible. *Makia*, energy flows where attention goes. *Manawa*, now is the moment of power. *Aloha*, to love is to be happy with. *Mana*, all power comes from within. *Pona*, effectiveness is the measure of truth.” [3] The message of the seven principles of Huna reminded her that everything was up to her now; no longer was she a victim affected by other's choices.

She sat up and let the warm water cascade down her body, washing her long hair with a lighter heart. Carefully stepping from the tub, she found the oversized bath towel, wrapping up in its folds. Let's see what tomorrow brings, she thought, as she squeezed her damp locks in a towel before wrapping it around her head.

She sniffed, drew her nightgown over her head, slid on her glasses and lifted her chin, narrowing her eyes as she peered into the mirror at the snakes around her throat, their blurry forms eerily reminding her of what had happened on the bus a short time ago. She blew out a sigh as her fingers trailed over the serpents' form—someday she'd find out how they'd gotten there and what they meant. And, she realized with chagrin, she'd have to learn to control her temper.

Then she thought of Wyndon: like the serpents around her throat, he too had come into her life by way of some mystery. The loneliness she felt without his solid form at her side made her stagger. Gripping the counter, she heaved back a heavy sob.

Bloody hell, she missed her dog.

She made her way back to her room and plopped down on the soft bed. Wyndon had been such a steady companion and she needed him now more than ever. A tear escaped, coursing down her cheek as she unwound the towel from her hair. Then she snuggled under the covers.

As the wind howled outside, she thought about Wyndon and Adam's betrayal with a heavy heart, but the howling wind somehow comforted her as did the message of the Ho'ala Huna. She would need to quit feeling sorry for herself and deal with whatever came at her next with a bit more dignity.

"Goodnight Wyndon. Goodnight Adam," she murmured, immediately falling into a deep, deep sleep filled with dreams of bears, snakes and huge black dogs with red eyes.

THREE

When the grandmothers speak, the earth will be healed.

Hopi Proverb

S mells of coffee and bacon wafted from Violet's kitchen, swirling around Crystal as she dreamt of Ireland and her gran's cooking. As she drifted out of a heavy sleep, her grandfather's face appeared before her, smiling sweetly, giving her a quick wink. Crystal's throat tightened and tears welled from her sleepy eyes. He was near and this gave her great comfort. Suddenly her eyes flew open and she awoke, feeling fully refreshed and famished!

Grabbing her glasses she sat up and looked out the window, her mouth dropping open in awe of the beautiful morning. The sun was already shining through the trees and sparkling everywhere, on snow-laden tree branches and rooftops, and casting long shadows over the snow.

After a good-long stretch, she hopped out of bed, threw on her bathrobe and slippers and padded into the kitchen. David, Nita, Violet and Heather sat at the table, drinking coffee and talking in hushed tones.

“Good morning!” chirped Violet, springing out of her chair with curls bouncing and leading Crystal to a chair before bringing her a plate of eggs, toast and sausage.

“We thought you’d sleep the day away,” said Heather once Crystal started eating. “And you look much better today, dear. Yesterday you looked like you’d been kicked in the belly by Sarah the mule.”

She did feel better. Even her eyes had stopped watering and her head wasn’t throbbing. Unfortunately, her vision was still blurry, attributing it to the possible head cold that seemed to have found her on the airplane.

“Snowstorm dumped fourteen inches on us and it will be a perfect day for a walk,” announced Heather as she began clearing the dishes. “We’ve got plenty of snow shoes so the lot of you won’t have any reason to stay in. What with you being cooped up in that old airplane for hours on end yesterday, you’ll need the exercise.”

Elijah was already dressed for the outdoors having donned his heavy plaid shirt and thick wool slacks. Crystal wasn’t so lucky in her winter attire. Secretly she hoped her lack of proper clothing might get her out of having to trudge through the snow and the cold—her eyes were beginning to bother her again.

“You come with me and we’ll set you up right. I’ve got just the thing.” Violet cheerfully dragged Crystal toward her room.

“Oh but—”

“Now, don’t you worry about a thing. Heather and I’ve got more outdoor clothes than we know what to do with.” Violet rummaged through some drawers while Crystal stood hesitantly inside the doorway, not feeling up to the journey—the last thing she wanted to do was go off into the woods half-blind.

“I don’t want to be a drag,” Crystal said, “but I really don’t think I should go. My eyes—”

"Bah," the old woman pulled some clothes from the drawer, "of course you should. Here you go." She dropped the load into Crystal's arms, peering up into her face. "What about your eyes?"

"Never mind," sighed Crystal setting off for her room.

"Just you wait and see what we have in store for you," Violet called after her. "It's beautiful...just beautiful."

"Bugger," muttered Crystal under her breath. "Won't matter though, 'cause I can't see anything."

After donning their snowshoes, they began trudging into the woods. Elijah, Nita and Leon quickly mastered the art of walking with snow shoes. Crystal didn't. She'd broken a sweat only ten minutes after leaving the house.

"Crap," mumbled Crystal, falling awkwardly to the side.

"Here you go." Leon walked back and offered her his hand, seeing her frustration. "Don't try so hard, Crystal. It's really quite simple."

"Maybe for you, dude, but I can't see a blasted thing. You'd all better go on without me. I'll stay here by this tree and wait till you come back."

Puzzled, Leon and Nita looked at each other as Crystal began to unbuckle her shoes.

Seeing this Violet stomped over. "I know it's hard at first, but you'll get the hang of it. Now come on, you are making too much out of a simple thing!"

Crystal looked at her with watery eyes, cringing at the harshness of her words.

"Now, now, don't go looking like I just kicked you in the gut," chirped Violet, helping Crystal stand. "Just feel your body following in your footsteps and imagine walking on water, light as a feather. Get out of your head...quit trying to control everything."

"I can't see!"

Elijah trudged over and took Crystal's chin in his hand, lifting up her face. He thought her eyes looked sore as she squinted at him through her glasses.

"What is it, Crystal?"

"I can't see, David. Everything is blurry and my eyes won't stop watering. It's really quite awful. I feel like I'm looking at the world through the bottom of a coke bottle." She blinked and sniffed.

Violet stared at Crystal intently. "Take your glasses off Crystal," she said after a moment.

"What good will that do?" asked Crystal miserably.

"Trust me," she smiled, "take your glasses off."

Crystal reached up and pulled off her glasses. She gasped: Her vision was crystal clear!

"What—?"

Even though her eyes still watered, she could see perfectly. She looked at Violet. "How'd you know?"

"I didn't," stated Violet matter-of-factly. "Come, we still have a ways to go and we don't want to miss out on what's waiting for us on top."

As everyone began their trek through the snow, Crystal slid her glasses back on and her blurry vision returned. Shaking her head in wonder, she slid them off and tucked them into the pocket of her coat, gazing at the world for the first time without the need for glasses. It was incredible! She'd worn glasses her whole life.

Laughing, she scooped up a handful of snow, took aim, and with deadly accuracy hit her mark. Elijah practically fell over from the force of the snowball as it made contact with his back. He turned to find Crystal standing with her arms raised high in the air.

"Yes!" She clenched her fists and pulled her arms down. Elijah laughed as she headed his way, her step light and her eyes sparkling.

"Hurry up old man." Crystal smiled happily. "We're way behind."

TRUE TO VIOLET'S WORDS, THE view was not just beautiful: it was breathtaking. A gorgeous, snow-covered valley surrounded by snow-capped mountains spread itself out underneath a clear, cobalt-blue sky. They'd been trekking a good hour before clearing the trees and the panoramic view had appeared before them without warning. Above their heads, golden eagles and red hawks cut lazy circles in the currents, while around them little birds trilled madly in the trees, and rustling about on the forest floor was a variety of wildlife, poking about, curious to discover what lay beneath the new snow.

The group drank in the beauty of nature as large patches of snow began dropping off branches in the tall trees behind them; the high altitude taking care to warm the air.

Crystal tried to remember when she'd seen anything like this. Hawaii had its own beauty, but this was different; silent and clear, crisp and cold. Beautiful...Absolutely beautiful.

"We try to come here as often as we can," said Heather after a moment, sitting on a log and unclipping her snow shoes. "We think our valley is the most beautiful place in the world."

Soon Heather and Violet began unpacking the lunches and everyone set about enjoying a perfect meal in the cool, clean air of the San Juan Mountains. As they ate, the wind picked up, singing through the tall trees surrounding them and from high above the cry of an eagle sounded through the valley. Everyone looked up, watching the eagle circle high in its lonely flight, its mournful cry carrying on the wind.

As Crystal watched the bird, she thought of the beautiful golden eagle that had helped her when the soldiers of Pa'ao tried to kill her. She wondered if it were the same bird: its cry was sorrowful and familiar.

Violet smiled into the sky as the beautiful bird soared away. "We have some time before we need to head back," she said. "I'd

like to tell you about my ancestors here in this beautiful land where we can hear their whispers.”

She stood, spreading her arms wide. “Where we are sitting is not far from the sacred Four Corners, crossed by the modern borders of four states: Arizona, New Mexico, Utah and Colorado.” With her arm outstretched, she pointed out their locations.

“The Four Corners area is bordered by four sacred mountains: Blanca Peak in Colorado, Mount Taylor in New Mexico, the San Francisco Peaks in Arizona, and Hesperus Peak in Colorado. The spiritual center within is a sacred site that Hopi prophecies say will have special purpose in the future for mankind to survive, and now, should be left in its natural state.

“My people, the Hopi, claim this high desert area was chosen for us by the creator. The ancient beings who lived on this land many, many years ago claimed the creator put them there and provided everything for them.

“The Hopi call these ancient ones I speak of the *Hisatsinom*, the Navajo call them *Anasazi*, and the Utes call them *Mukuch*. Today, modern Puebloan descendants object to the use of this term because Anasazi is a Navajo, or more correctly ‘*Diné*’ word which, depending on pronunciation, means either “enemy ancestors” or “ancient people who are not us.” I will refer to them as simply ‘the old ones.’ The Zuni, Acoma and Pueblo peoples of New Mexico are also direct descendants of these ancient beings.” ”

Violet sat down on the log next to Heather. “Our ancestors were very clever at adapting to their environment and that is why our ancestral lineage goes back thousands and thousands of years,” she continued. “We know that many changes occurred throughout history in their lifestyles. Our clan histories speak of tremendous migrations from this area around the time they began to disappear.

“The civilized world and their scientists joined forces, making many presumptions about why they disappeared so suddenly. The white man presumed our ancestors mysteriously disappeared. We

know better. For hundreds of years, our clan histories have been passed on orally from one generation to the next, and we know where the ancient builders of Chaco Canyon and Mesa Verde have gone. They did not starve like some presume, nor did their trade suffer, they merely moved on following instructions from their creator.”

Violet smiled, nodding her head at Heather and continued: “Before they moved on, those who lived in the pueblos of Chaco Canyon lived in a society completely dominated by a strict religious order. They were skilled observers of the sky and quite attentive to movement in the heavens—timing ceremonies was vital to them. Devising a type of knotted cord allowed them to keep track of the solar cycles and the summer solstice was a particularly important time for them. An individual known as the Sun Priest would watch for the summer solstice through a notch in the wall of a ‘sun tower’ and at the proper time, he would warn the people, speaking words which were thought to come directly from the sun.”

Violet looked at Crystal. “Even though we know much about this ancient culture, there remains a slight bit of mystery in our stories of the *Sky Watchers* as some call them. Our people feel that a piece of the story about a particular event during the time of their migrations has not yet been shared. We believe the Sun Priest may have given our ancestors a warning, causing some to flee to a place they thought was safe. We fear they are now stuck there, back in the Third World, in a dimension we left long ago. This is only a supposition however, as the mystery surrounding White Feather’s flock has never been solved. The earth and the stars have chosen to keep a part of our ancestor’s story a mystery.

“And this is why you are here. You will journey to meet our ancestors, Crystal. You will find them and you will lead them home. You must do this so our brothers and sisters stuck in the Third World can join us as we enter into the Fifth World.”

“The Fourth World is passing away,” explained Heather. “At this moment in history, we’re passing into the Fifth World where the human race will begin transitioning from the current pattern of civilization to a radically-different way of living.”

“A world,” added Violet with a smile, “where society will be shaped by the feminine paths of cooperation and non-aggression: living in conscious harmony with nature’s ways. [4]

“*Wakinyan Oyate*, the Thunder Beings—our powerful messengers from the Star Nations—have returned, giving us this message.”

Crystal twirled a blue lock of hair. “Warren Sun Bear, Nita’s grandfather, the Elder we met in South Dakota, spoke of a Star Knowledge Conference where a Lakota-Dakota spiritual advisor named Standing Elk, and numerous other speakers convened, sharing stories about our imminent transition from the current Fourth World to a new Fifth World. He spoke of these beings from the Star Nations and how these times will be announced by the birth of the female white buffalo calf. He said the Fifth World will be marked by positive female energy marked by men as equals.”

Violet nodded. “This is also a time in history where we have the opportunity to heal the great wounds of our ancestors. You, Crystal,” said Violet, “have come to the four corners area to find the lost flock and heal an ancient wound that has lain deep within the earth for centuries. Once this wound has been healed, we can, as an ancestral family, evolve into the next world together.

“My family and I are direct descendants of the ancient ones that lived in this area thousands of years ago, and who still live among us in spirit and told us of your coming. We weren’t surprised when you contacted us.”

“We’ve been kept in the loop,” chirped Heather, smiling at her mother. “Most people in the civilized world think that indigenous people are ignorant and don’t know what’s happening in the current world. Just because we’re living close to the land and not in big

neighborhoods and cities, some of us living without computers and cell phones, that doesn't mean we don't know things. Actually, we know more than most—we have other ways of communicating."

Violet smiled and her eyes twinkled. "We've heard tell of your coming for many years now. It is a secret to many, but not to all. The serpents on Crystal's neck and her blue-streaked hair have been spoken of in prophesy. She will need great courage and clear vision for where she will travel."

Crystal hesitantly touched her tattooed neck and opened her mouth to speak, hoping for answers.

"I have no answers for you, young Crystal Blue Sky," declared Violet, once again looking up into the sky. "You more than anyone can understand how you've changed as your new sight is not your first gift. For now, though, no questions should be asked. No doubt you will soon understand why your vision has been restored.

"Remember this, Crystal," she added passionately as they made ready to leave. "On your journey to find White Feather, remember your gifts and be grateful to those who have given them to you. If you forget what you are about, and if you do not heed those who will come to your aid, then you will be in danger. Remember what you have learned so far, who you've met and where you've been. That will be a great asset to you on all your journeys, and I believe on your next one in the ruins of Cliff Palace where you will descend into the earth through the sipapu."

"What's a sipapu?" asked Crystal, struggling with the strange word.

"It is the place of emergence," answered Violet looking into the sky and noticing the heavy gray clouds accumulating overhead. "You will learn more of this later, my dear," she said, throwing her a half glance. "Now we must leave."

Caution had Violet rushing everyone along: she'd never seen storm clouds gather so quickly.

As the group began heading back down the mountain, the weather took a turn. Great gusts of wind blew in followed by dark and angry clouds. It took all their energy to get back to the cabin before the next storm hit. The wind began howling angrily, sometimes sounding like a dog's woeful cry.

And far up within the moisture laden clouds, one beautiful white bird soared blindly into the heavens. Its keen eyesight now hindered by a gray mist that had settled into its once-focused gaze. Only the sounds of the earth and its innate relationship to the earth's magnetic grid kept the bird on course.

Suddenly, the bird burst through the gray clouds and soared through a crystal blue sky high over a pine forest, dense with trees. Its cry carried on the wind as it continued on its journey.

And then something happened causing the bird to divert from its path: An arrow, long and straight, shot up from the earth, its gleaming tip piercing through the side of the great bird. As it fell from the sky, a pair of brown eyes watched regretfully from below. The young girl lowered her bow and then her head. She'd had no choice. The great bird had made her promise. It was meant to be.

IN THE SNOW-COVERED WOODS surrounding Violet's cabin, Crystal finally mastered the art of walking in snow shoes, enjoying many a trek through the deep snow with Leon, Nita and Elijah as they waited for the day they would head to Mesa Verde. Quite often, Crystal wished Wyndon were along, knowing he'd love romping through the fresh snow, looking for the largest stick, holding it proudly in his mouth.

Heather, Chayton and Jasmine came over every day to help with chores, often joining them on their treks, with Santiago and Juneau galloping merrily alongside. The dogs adored Crystal, immediately seeking her out the moment they burst through Violet's front door. One day Santiago managed to knock Crystal down in his excitement. Chayton had been horrified. Crystal merely laughed,

patting the dog on the head. Chayton swore he'd never seen his dog so happy.

And for this adoration Crystal was grateful. Their presence filled the hole left by Wyndon's absence. They could never replace the intimacy she'd shared with her dog, but their solid, furry bodies seemed to be there when she'd needed them most.

And, during this time Elijah was more accessible than he'd ever been. Crystal took advantage of this, seeking out his company above anyone else's and by the end of the first week, they became staunch opponents over their nightly Chess matches—Crystal managing to set him back over fifty dollars, insisting they play for money as that is what she'd done with her grandfather.

One afternoon, she finally remembered to ask him what he knew of quantum physics. He looked at her oddly and Crystal explained what the ancient priest in Hawaii—the one called Kahuna—had told her. Elijah smiled, thinking about his love of charged particles, electric fields and all that good stuff. He'd studied quantum mechanical theories, putting his studies aside when deciphering codes began appealing to him more. Granted, he made a living teaching physics, but his mind had two loves, and the love of deciphering codes overshadowed his love of solving mathematical calculations.

Seeing how eager Crystal looked, he attempted to explain: "The principles of quantum mechanics are difficult for the human mind to understand, Crystal, because humans are accustomed to reasoning about the world on a scale where classical physics is an excellent approximation. Classical physics explained the nineteenth century world, but due to certain limitations, it led to the development of quantum mechanics in the early decades of the twentieth century in order to explain certain phenomenon.

"Quantum mechanics is counterintuitive," explained Elijah, "probably the closest science has come to a fundamental description

of the underlying nature of reality. And yet, it is totally bizarre—going against our intuition and common sense.

“Quantum physics became a major revolution in physical theory. Because of general relativity, much of the universe on the largest scale does not neatly conform to classical physics. Similarly, quantum mechanics means that the universe in the small also does not neatly conform to classical mechanics. When one studies quantum physics, you can begin to understand how everything in the universe is all connected—”

Elijah saw Crystal’s eyes glaze over and laughed.

“I’m sorry—I know its heavy stuff, Crystal. Someday when you and I have all the time in the world to spend together, I promise I’ll take you through a crash course. It really is amazing how fast the scientific world is advancing.”

He shook his head, thinking about all that he and Crystal had gone through and how, like quantum physics, it seemed like a mad science fiction experiment.

“Considering where we are, my colleagues would be impressed.” Elijah grinned.

Crystal laughed. Her head was spinning. Isn’t this what her sister studied? Physics? She thought of the books in Claire’s apartment: *Introduction to Physics*, *The Double Slit Experiment*, *What is Light?* Now, she had a taste of what her sister had studied and she realized she didn’t have the head for it.

“Let’s play chess.” Crystal slid the pieces into place. “I don’t know about you, but I’d rather figure out how to take your queen rather than how the world works any day.”

Elijah figured she didn’t need to understand how the world worked: Her job was to ensure that it kept working.

A WEEK LATER, ANOTHER STORM raged fiercely outside—fierce enough to take down a few power lines and trees—and the group huddled in front of Violet’s stone fireplace, the heat from the

fireplace keeping them warm. Crystal pulled out her guitar and the music flowing from the instrument soon held them spellbound.

Earlier that afternoon, when she'd been curled up reading one of Violet's books, the 2nd movement from *The Concierto de Aranjuez* had flowed into her head and she'd not been able to let it go. She'd picked up her guitar, figuring she'd play a few bars—not believing that she'd remember how to play the piece as it was difficult and challenging—yet it had come back easily. Years ago, she'd learned this particular adagio from Carlos, one of her friends she'd played with back in Albuquerque.

In front of the warm fire, after Crystal strummed the last note of the hauntingly beautiful piece, everyone sat quietly, letting the chords linger—no one wanted to speak, not wishing to break the enchanting moment. No one noticed that the lights had flickered off and the furnace had shut down.

Elijah struggled to remain calm as tendrils of excitement sizzled up his spine. This was the piece of music his wife had played for him many times. The fact that Crystal had played it just as beautifully somehow gave him hope that his wife was still alive. Then, as he stared at Crystal and her guitar, he realized something: he would swear on his mother's grave that her guitar was Elizabeth's, even the blue-flowered strap looked familiar. There was the same faded floral design around the sound hole and the tuning pegs were black, not silver, like his wife's had been. Mere coincidence, he wondered? Probably not. He'd have to check it out, and then ask Crystal where she'd gotten it, nonchalantly of course.

As Elijah stared at Crystal, Violet had slowly opened her eyes, looking around the room into the darkened corners.

"Well I'll be," she claimed after a moment, heading to the thermostat on the wall and giving it a tap. "Power's out.

"Your music is medicine for the soul, Crystal." She looked at her wrist watch. "Power's been out for over thirty minutes and we didn't even notice. Chayton and Leon, we'll need more firewood.

Jasmine and Nita, grab as many blankets and pillows as you can find. This will be the only warm room in the house until the power's restored.

She turned to Crystal, smiling softly. "Would you play again?"

Crystal nodded her head, picking up her guitar. She never tired of playing; it helped to keep the dark thoughts away that were trying to talk to her again: The thoughts of Adam's betrayal and Wyndon's abandonment. The music also quieted the strange sounds she'd begun hearing again; the eerie whistles, the beeps and hums.

AFTER THE ROADS WERE CLEARED of the massive amounts of snow that had fallen—dumping nearly three feet of snow—Crystal, along with everyone else, piled into Magical Marjorie and headed down the mountain toward the town of Durango. Violet had informed them the night before that they'd been invited to a sacred ceremony honoring Crystal for her bravery as a warrior. The Eagle Dance, Violet had said, was often performed when there was a need for divine intervention. Many Native Americans traditionally believe, she'd explained, that the eagle is the most important animal there is, symbolizing wisdom, strength and power, and having the supernatural ability to transport prayers to the gods. Because they would leave for Mesa Verde the following day, where Crystal would descend through the sipapu to find White Feather's flock, the ceremony would send Crystal off with all things good and powerful.

Crystal had smiled, thinking of the beautiful golden eagle that had swooped down from the heavens, saving her life when she walked as Pele, her Hawaiian ancestor. She suddenly realized—like the bear and the mountain lion—that the eagle was one of her protectors. She'd seen the magnificent animal with the others in the blue cave. She'd closed her eyes, remembering each one, even the blue dragon that had at first terrified her. A sense of ease had settled in, knowing these animals were her protectors...like the bear and the lion, this bird would be there for her when she needed it to be.

She only needed to heed Violet's advice given to her that first day on the mountain: To remember her gifts and be grateful to those who had given them to her. If she forgot what she was about, and if she did not heed those who came to her aid, most likely she'd be in danger. She had to remember what she'd learned, who she'd met, and where she'd been.

Once the bus pulled up to a large school on the north side of town, they filed off the bus, quickly heading inside where they and the rest of the thirty-or-so guests, both young and old, were ushered into the school's large auditorium. Violet and Heather immediately began bustling about, greeting their friends, pointing to Crystal with pride, and finally taking their seats when the house lights dimmed. Because Crystal was the guest of honor, they sat in the front row.

Soon, three men walked on stage wearing the traditional clothing of the Hopi, one carrying a large drum held in front of him attached to a strap thrown over his shoulder, another carrying a hand drum, and the third holding shaking-gourds, one in each hand.

Two male dancers followed the drummers, both dancers wearing costumes representing the eagle. The men's lower arms, lower legs and bare feet were yellow as the legs and talons of the eagle and their faces were yellow with a patch of brilliant red swiped across their chins. Their hair hung loose, and a long, yellow beak protruded just above the dancer's nose attached to a deep, snug cap made of white down. Their crème-colored, buckskin kilts, held on with beaded turquoise waist belts, were trimmed with strips of blue, yellow, and black, while tiny bells formed the fringe. Red straps of small brass bells wrapped around their knees, sweeping, fan-shaped tails of eagle feathers were attached to their backs, and across their shoulders and arms were perfectly fashioned wings made of long, eagle feathers bound to a strip of heavy buckskin, spreading from fingertip to fingertip so when they moved their arms, the long feathers would give off the illusion of wings,

faithfully imitating the eagle's movements when in flight or strutting along the ground.

The man carrying the large drum stepped forward, introducing himself before greeting the audience. The man then explained the nature and drama expressed with the eagle dance, how the eagles are messengers, carrying prayers from the heart on their wings with strength to the creator. In return the Creator tells father sun, Tawa, to distribute all the prayers throughout the world with its rays. After giving these explanations, the man looked directly at Crystal. [5]

"The dancers are honoring you by representing the great eagle and they also honor themselves by wearing the eagle feathers. The eagle is a sky warrior, and we honor you with this dance, showing you how to protect yourself, also paying respect to those warriors who have fallen in battle. Four eagles have given themselves to the dancers so they can portray them better and carry on the culture and the unity that needs to be in this world."

After a quiet moment, the drummers began a slow, steady beat, accompanied by rhythmic chanting and the dancers began moving about, slowly at first, softly waving their arms up then down, bending and turning while lifting their knees and gently tapping their feet to the beat of the drums. As the drumbeats strengthened, their movements quickened, becoming more exaggerated, and the bells around their knees and fringed skirts tinkled with the dramatic dance.

Crystal, hearing the steady drumbeats, chanting and tinkling bells, was mesmerized by the dancer's fluid, graceful movements imitating the eagle in flight. A lump rose in her throat—they were dancing for her, honoring her. It was humbling, overwhelming, and beautiful. Drawing in a deep breath, she smiled, drinking in the beautiful movement of the dancers and the drumbeats, willing the image to stay with her forever. It was hers, the music and the eagle's dance. She closed her eyes, imagining how it felt, soaring through the sky and the clouds, carrying prayers to the Creator.

When the drumming stopped and the dance was done, Crystal stood up to clap with the others, realizing the dance had been a gift, giving her strength. When she left the auditorium, she knew tomorrow would be better for it.

THE NEXT MORNING THEY READIED to leave for Mesa Verde. Heather and Violet barking out orders; Leon and Chayton loading coolers, bags and blankets into the bus—their stay could be lengthy; Nita and Jasmine straightening the kitchen; and Elijah filling the woodbin while Crystal threw sticks for the dogs.

Finally, after everything was done, they gathered together in a small circle holding hands, listening to the merry sounds of winter birds trilling in the winter air. Violet smiled and looked to the sky. “To this day and to the sun we trust with you our beloved daughter, Crystal, who has come to us with her wisdom and bravery. We ask the grandfathers and grandmothers to come to young Crystal’s aid.

“She was born for this and we have waited many years for her to find us. Her life has been a life of pain and loneliness and for this we are greatly honored by her presence.”

Crystal’s throat tightened as she watched this woman in wonder. How could she know this? The loneliness and pain she had felt almost every day of her life since she left Ireland. Much of the sadness had been eased in South Dakota and Hawaii, yet pieces still remained, lingering around her like particles of dust.

Elijah hung his head and despaired. He wished he could have been with her during her lonely years.

Heather raised her arms and, with a golden eagle feather in each hand given to her by one of the dancer’s last evening, she closed her eyes and tipped back her head.

“We ask the spirits of our ancestors to come to us and help guide Crystal through her journey, and we ask the four directions to give young Crystal aid.

“To the fire in the east, I ask you to give her energy and the tools for transformation. We ask you to help her connect to her personal power and inner strength.”

She turned again. “To the water of the south, I ask you to support her emotional release, her intuition and inner reflection.

“To the earth in the west,” she said, turning once again, “I ask you to share your ground which is the foundation of life, and help her to connect to her life path.

Heather turned once again. “And, to the air of the north, I ask you to grant her clear intellect, mental intention, and a connection to the universal life force.” [6]

“We ask the eagle to give her aid to find our lost ancestors so they, like us, can claim their heritage among the spirits in the stars.”

As Heather spoke, Crystal felt deep tremors within her that she had tried valiantly to hold off since the day they’d arrived. Along with the tremors, she felt something dark and sinister, like something had sprung from the ground and now crawled up her body like fast-growing vines.

Elijah kept his eyes on Crystal, suddenly sensing her unease, praying he’d have the faith not to interfere; he knew he wasn’t allowed. They all knew this would be a particularly dangerous trip for Crystal without Wyndon, and he prayed she would be kept safe.

Crystal felt the tremors deep within the earth and clenched her fists, trying with every fiber of her being to will them away. An evil whisper called to her, begging her to listen.

“Look to the sssky,” hissed a voice darkly. *“It’s...coming!”*

Crystal looked up and gasped: the sky had turned a dark and angry shade of gray and the trees swayed wildly about in the sudden, gusty winds. Staring up, she saw the lone bird burst through the clouds, soaring straight at her like she were its prey. Unable to move or scream, she watched helplessly as the black bird rapidly approached.

The rest of the group also noticed a change in the weather. However, unlike Crystal's angry sky, their sky displayed a beautiful spray of colors from the sun's ascent. Their eyes widened at the beautiful display and then the white eagle came—flying in from the east, circling high overhead—magnificent. The clearing around Violet's home amid the forest allowed the group a clear sight of the glorious bird flying through the heavens.

As the smoke from the fireplace spiraled up through the clearing and the swaying pines whispered their song, the eagle danced in the air giving the group great hope.

Crystal hadn't seen the white eagle, nor had she seen the colorful sky, she only saw the lone bird, watching wide-eyed as it got closer and closer until it was close enough for her to see its gleaming black eyes—and then she heard its message inside her head: *"Your canine companion walks near the blue caves where only the bravest of shaman dare tread. To find him, you must see as the flyer sees."* Suddenly the large black bird lunged, swiping her face with its sharp talons.

Bloody hell! Crystal screamed and covered her face with her hands. The bloody bird had ripped out her eyes! She fell to her knees and then to her side with her hands covering the soft torn flesh.

"David, help me, please!" she groaned and suddenly, a pair of strong hands lifted her up.

She grabbed hold of him. "It took my eyes, David!" she screamed. "My God—" She stopped, her chest heaving, suddenly realizing the pain was gone. Her hands flew over her face and she realized her skin was unmarred. Her eyes flew open and with a horrified expression she looked around, expecting to find another bird ready to attack. She saw nothing: Nothing but black—

"David?!" she screamed again as she groped him. "David, I can't see!"

And then, in slow motion, her eyes rolled back and she slumped over, falling into his arms.

Elijah stared at his daughter. He'd never heard such screams in his life. One moment they'd been watching the beautiful bird soaring high in a circle overhead, and the next moment, Crystal was on the ground, screaming so painfully he felt her pain himself.

He carried her into the house, laying her down gently on her bed, worrying over her plight. Damn the rules, he swore to himself. Damn the goddamn rules! He was definitely going to interfere this time! He would not let her go to the Mesa on this day. Still feeling awful for not having been there for her the past seventeen years, it would be a cold day in hell if he ever let her out of his sight again.

Paternal extinct kicked in and a lump rose in his throat as he lifted a wayward blue-streaked lock from her pale face. He thought of her as the baby he'd known seventeen years ago...she'd been crying in her crib, red-faced and miserable, crying for the little pink stuffed animal he'd hidden from her. His father had called, insisting he hide the toy and bring his family to Florida. It was there that his life had changed...where his brother had taken his identity...where he'd lost his family, and then his memories of them. Lying on the bed next to Crystal, wrapping his arms around her, he remembered the dream where he'd learned the truth about himself.

FOUR

When I discover who I am, I'll be free.

Ralph Ellison

December 28, 1993

In the early morning hours of a cold winter's day, a small private jet flew east out of Minneapolis toward the rising sun. Elijah looked over the top of Claire's golden head at his wife who stared out of the plane's small window. The sun, having just peeked over the distant horizon, flung its rays over the clouds like a net, painting the tops in glorious shades of pink, casting her profile in its pink glow. She looked like a delicate, dark-haired angel. He eyed her cap of dark hair curling daintily about the nape of her neck and an intense love for her swept through him. Breathing deeply, he wished she wasn't so angry with him.

He drew his attention to the two young girls settled between them; they handled the plane ride like pros. Claire kept herself busy, dumping out the crayons from the box and replacing them—point-side up and grouped by color—before choosing which one to use in her new Barney coloring book. And baby Crystal slept in his lap,

although a bit fitfully because the little stuffed animal she'd never been without had been left behind in their rushed state. Once they'd taken their seats, she'd fretted, finally closing her eyes, inserting her thumb into her tiny rosebud mouth. His heart tugged as he watched her bottom lip quiver, knowing he was guilty for causing her distress. The man gripped the armrests tightly: Some turbulence had him a little nervous, but his little family seemed unfazed.

He stared at his wife again as she peered out the window, absently answering her daughter's many questions.

"Why can't I go say hi to that lady, mommy? Why does Cryssie get to be in daddy's lap? I want to sit in your lap. I want to talk on that loud thing so everyone can hear me. Let's sing Baby Beluga again...please, mommy?"

His daughter chattered happily, coloring and swinging her legs, bumping them into the seat in front of her.

He'd asked her to stop—which she did—then had started up again, not intentionally of course, she just had so much energy. Luckily no one occupied the seat in front of her. Then she began to sing: "Baby beluga in the deep blue sea, swim so wild and you swim so free, heaven above and the sea below, and a little white whale on the go. Baby Beluga..." His daughter's legs bounced rhythmically on her seat as she sang.

Elijah stared at the stop of his daughter's dark curly head, thinking of the phone call less than twelve hours ago, setting the events into motion. Nothing could have prepared him for that phone call.

Nothing.

His father had an edge to his voice he'd never heard before. He started sweating just thinking about it:

"Just get them on a plane, Elijah," said his father in quick, hushed tones. "You've got to get the girls out of there. Leave the car. I'll send one for you."

Send us a car? he wondered. How would his folks know how to do that? He'd not been able to ask any questions other than: "Why?"

"Can't trust the phone, just trust me. I chartered a private plane that will be at the Humphrey Terminal early tomorrow morning. Don't talk about this, Elijah, not to anyone. Don't tell Elizabeth anything. Surprise her; tell her it's a late Christmas present, anything. Don't scare her or she won't want to leave, and if she doesn't leave it'll be bad. Oh, and do not, I repeat do not let her find Crystal's pink stuffed animal. Hide it. Hide it so no one can ever find it. If you don't do this, son, something terrible is going to happen."

"But...."

"Do not let it come with you, Elijah. I'll explain later. I promise."

Crystal stirred, startling him out of his reverie, and soon began to fret. Liz finally turned from the plane's window, holding out her arms for the baby who'd turned to reach for her first. He kissed her dark, curly head and handed her over, watching as she drank thirstily from her bottle, knowing when she was done she would want her little stuffed dog—his wife knew this too. She'd been frantic when they couldn't find it. Frantic and confused as she'd put it in the baby's crib when she'd gone to bed. He couldn't remember a time when she'd been without it; he felt like he'd betrayed her when he'd crept in and stolen it out of her little baby hands, hiding it in a place he'd hoped no one would ever find it; leaving it behind.

Hopefully, after they landed, his father's strange request and behavior would soon be revealed.

A long black limousine—complete with capped chauffeur in uniform—waited for them at curbside, whisking them away from the Clearwater International airport. They had huddled in the back with the two girls on their laps, and his father, James, sat across from them, looking tired and old. He still hadn't gotten any answers and knew Liz was still angry with him: She hadn't looked at him since they'd been picked up from their house early this morning.

She'd been civil, answering simple questions, not making eye contact.

Secretly he was glad: he was just as clueless as she was.

"Papa, where's grandma?" Claire chirped, happily scooping Cheerios from a little yellow dish with her stubby fingers and sticking them in her mouth. "Mama, why are you so sad?"

Liz kissed her daughter's golden head. "I'm not sad, sweetie. I'm just tired. We've already had a very busy day, haven't we?"

"Yes," chirped Claire before popping a Cheerio into her mouth. "First we rode in that big car with the big floor, and now we are doing it again!" She pointed to the floor of the limousine. Somehow she had forgotten the plane ride in between.

"Papa, where's grandma?"

"Shhh." Her chattering was beginning to grate on his already frayed nerves.

Liz finally made eye contact with him and he shirked under her heated glare.

"Grandma is waiting for us at home," said the older man gently. "She's making cookies so she couldn't come with me to pick you up."

Claire squealed and began bouncing in her mother's lap, sending her curls springing about like little golden sausages.

"Cookies! Chocolate chip?"

"Of course." His father grinned. "Grandma knows they're your favorite. And your sister's too."

Claire stopped bouncing and replied flatly, "No, she won't eat them. She doesn't like cookies."

The baby looked seriously at the group, and spit up all over him.

As the car pulled into the driveway, James said, "You go on in and get cleaned up, son. I'd like to talk to Elizabeth."

He looked at his father with alarm.

"It's okay, son. You go on inside. Your mother will see to your soiled clothes and give this little imp her cookies," he said, giving

Claire a quick wink. "Elizabeth and I are going to take a little drive. I'd also like Crystal to stay with us."

Claire bounced on the seat next to him, waiting to get out of the car. "Cookies! Hurry daddy, grandma might eat all the cookies before we get inside!" She shoved him from the limousine after he opened the door and as they walked hand-in-hand toward the house, they looked over their shoulders, watching as the long black car pulled away.

At the door his mother, Josephine, greeted them, she too looking tired and drawn.

"Elijah, me boy, I'm glad yer here." She hugged him tightly before looking up into his eyes—he saw a hint of worry flicker in her own. He had so many questions to ask her he didn't know where to begin. His daughter had other plans.

"Hello, grandmother." Claire marched into the house. "Grandpa said you had cookies. I would like one now please." The stout little golden-haired girl beamed at her grandmother and Josephine's face lit up with delight. She took her pudgy little hand and led her into the bright kitchen.

He followed, sitting at the counter, gratefully accepting the cup of hot tea his mother offered. He'd been raised on tea and had missed its therapeutic aroma and flavor. He drank and sighed deeply while Claire cheerfully ate her cookie.

"Grandmother," she chirped happily, "Grandpa drove away with mommy and baby Cryssie and our bags. I can't put on my pool suit so I would like to play." She scooped a melted chocolate chip from the cookie, sucking it from her finger. "Would you play a game with me?"

"Of course, my love." Josephine wiped Claire's hands with a towel. "We'll play a game that I played with yer father. It's called Hynny-Pynny. Run along out t' th' porch an' see what I've got fer ye in there. I'll follow along in a wee bit."

"You talk funny," said Claire, staring at her grandmother before hopping off her stool and skipping out to the porch, singing her favorite song at the top of her lungs: "Itsy bitsy spider crawled up the water spout! Down came the rain and washed the spider out!" As her head disappeared into the chest of toys and books on the screened porch, her voice became muffled.

"She's precious, Elijah." Josephine watched Claire's golden head disappear into the chest. "She's a wee jewel an' I'm glad yer all here."

"What's going on mother? Pop sent a car and chartered a plane. Where'd he get the money to do that? Are you two in some sort of trouble? Pop told me not to say anything to Liz. She thinks I'm nuts. Tell me please, what is going on?"

Josephine put up a hand as she slid onto a stool, pouring herself a cup of tea before refilling his.

"One question at a time, boyo." She smiled, sipping her tea. "But I fear that you an' yer little family may be in danger."

His mouth dropped open. *Danger!?* "Why? Why are we in danger? I haven't done anything that would—"

Josephine held up her hand again. "I cannot tell ye why, me lad. Yer father made me promise t' let him tell ye everythin'."

He watched his daughter—now sitting on the floor with a very large book in her lap—moving her lips as she read.

"Fer now, ye are safe, that much I know," said Josephine quietly. "I don't know why yer father insisted on drivin' Elizabeth an' th' bairn around. I don't know what he's up t' there." Her voice trailed off and her blue eyes became troubled.

"Grandma!" Claire's voice carried in from the porch. "I'm ready to play now."

Josephine laughed and shook her head, opening a drawer and pulling out a small blue pouch. "D' ye remember when we used t' play?" She tossed the little blue bag in the air, catching it and throwing him a wink.

He smiled, remembering his mother's beautiful marbles. "She'll kick your butt once she knows the rules, mom. Claire's smarter than a whip."

"Course she is, me boy, she's got O'Cuilleain blood runnin' through her veins." She smiled proudly. "Now go an' change yer shirt, Eli, an' when ye come back, ye can play th' winner then."

ALMOST TWO HOURS LATER, THE limousine pulled up in front of the house and the little girl at the window squealed. "They're back daddy. They were gone a long time, but I saved Cryssie a cookie. Grandma made me," she added with a pout.

He headed out and opened the door to the long car. Liz—looking annoyed, holding a pale-faced and teary-eyed Crystal—got out giving him a long look.

"Hi. Sorry we were gone so long." Liz shifted Crystal onto her hip. "Your dad has something to tell you. Now it's your turn to ride around and around. I'm going to go in, pour myself a big glass of wine, sit at the pool and try to calm Crystal down. I hope you fed our always hungry daughter."

"She ate most of the cookies; I don't think she'll be hungry for a while. You okay?"

"No. I'm not okay. I'm tired. Crystal, poor thing, is nauseous and your father has a very vivid imagination. You let me know what you think when you get back. Oh, and don't stop anywhere, Eli." She poked him in the chest. "Just stay in the car and hear him out. You can drink a beer when you get back. And then," she hissed under her breath, "we are going to talk."

"Whatever, Liz." He hated how she nagged about his drinking. He jumped in the limo and his father gave him a tired smile as the long car once again pulled away from the curb.

"Beer?" James opened the small refrigerator next to his seat.

"Course." He could always use a beer. It was, after all, five p.m. somewhere in the world. He took a long pull off the cold ale and settled back into the seat.

"What's up, pop? Why are we here? Why did you have to drive Liz around without me? Why are we—?"

"Hold on, son, one question at a time."

"Mom said you think we're in danger. What's going on?" He had another long pull off his beer. It tasted great. He was already contemplating how the second one would taste.

"Well, son..." The older man paused, looking out the tinted window. "Your grandmother has died and left you a grand treasure."

"But—"

"Please don't interrupt, Elijah." His voice was stern and his eyes furtive. "You're in danger because someone knows about the treasure buried in the center of the earth: The treasure that now belongs to you."

He looked at his father with raised eyebrows. "A treasure?"

"That's right," said his father, nodding his head, "a real buried treasure that your great, great grandfather buried many, many years ago."

"The map is in here," he said, holding up a briefcase.

"You're a rich, rich man now, my boy. You've inherited millions of dollars from your grandmother, Ingrid. First you have to go to Iran and dig up the buried treasure."

Dig up buried treasure? His eyes widened. No wonder Liz had looked wretched. "Why me?" he asked, raising a skeptical eyebrow; then narrowing his eyes. "Why not David, pop? Does he know about this?" Elijah wondered where his twin brother was—David had always been his father's favorite. In fact, his father had barely acknowledged Elijah in his youth. For this fact, and of course the story of a buried treasure, he found it hard to believe that his father had chosen him over David.

James waved his hand as if his comment didn't matter. "David doesn't have a family to support. He doesn't have two very special daughters who deserve to be spoiled and pampered. Your daughters are very special, Elijah—especially Crystal."

He considered what his father had said. But it still didn't make much sense; especially the part about his grandmother dying.

"But pop," he'd finished his beer and was reaching for another, "Grandmother Ingrid has been dead for over ten years. Why—?"

James slapped his hand down on the seat making Elijah jump. "Why would you say that, boy? Are you stupid? Has the booze finally caught up with you?"

He recoiled at the intensity of his father's accusations.

"Your grandmother has died and left her inheritance to you. Do you want it or not?!"

Suddenly, he began questioning his father's sanity. He hadn't seen a lot of him in the past decade since leaving for college. His father had acted strangely in the past; ranting about him not marrying Elizabeth. He'd made such a fuss they'd decided not to invite him to the wedding. He knew it had hurt his mother; she never went anywhere without him. And his father had always been a bit of a tyrant; now he was acting crazy, offering money to him, not to his brother. Best to go along with it until he got back home, he thought.

"Sure pop," he said, putting back the beer he'd retrieved from the refrigerator and trying to appease his now-agitated father. "Let's go back home and hang out at the pool. We'll talk about this later, okay?"

"We can't talk about this anywhere but in this car," hissed James. "Don't you understand the danger you and your family are in? There are those that would kill you for this treasure."

Then why drag me into it? "God, dad, why me? Why don't you go get it then? I don't understand why you made me bring my family here. This is crazy. What did you tell Liz?"

James looked at his son, smiling triumphantly. "I told her what she needed to know. I told her that her daughters needed protection; especially Crystal because she is special. She is the true inheritor of your grandmother's fortune. You and Liz will keep it for her until she turns twenty-one, therefore, you must watch her closely so that she comes to no harm. Liz seemed very happy about this money, Elijah. You can both do a lot with this much money; a lot of good."

"I've got enough money, pop."

"Bah," spat his father. "You've hardly got a pot to piss in and you know it. Now here's what we're going to do to keep you safe. I'm bringing my friend by tonight after dinner. He's a police officer and I've asked him to protect your family while you go get your treasure. Another friend of mine will escort you to the airport. I've got it all planned out. Just trust me son, I know what I'm doing."

He needed to see his family. "Take me back to the house pop, right now," he said, his voice shaking with nerves. "I've heard what you had to say and we'll talk later. Right now, I need to talk to my wife."

LATER THAT EVENING, DINNER WAS quiet, save for Claire's singing and questions. Soon, Claire would go to bed and he could ask his own questions; demand answers. He noticed how his parents wouldn't make eye contact or talk to each other and it made him nervous. They'd always had a close bond. Now the bond seemed strained and the tension between them was palpable. He also saw his wife cast furtive glances between the two as she attempted to make small talk. It hadn't worked. His father left once dinner was over, saying he had some business to tend to.

While Liz stayed busy helping Josephine with the dinner dishes, he played marbles in the backyard with Claire. Even though she was only four, she'd picked up on the game's strategy, proving to be a worthy opponent. She lay on the ground, and with a mature intensity which didn't surprise him one bit, she had popped out her

tongue and focused on her marble, flicking it with her stubby little finger. She had almost put her marble into the hole three times; he'd only done it once as the beer's affects messed with his aim.

"Good job, daddy," proclaimed Claire when his marble almost made it in. "Don't worry, I'll let you win."

He laughed and poked her in the stomach which threw her into a fit of giggles. Liz walked out into the backyard where they were playing and bent to scoop the little girl up into her arms.

"Okay, young lady, it...is your bedtime," she grunted—Claire was quite stout and too big to be picked up easily. Then she glared at Elijah, furious because he'd had too much to drink. He grinned sloppily and then burped.

"I am not ready for bed." Claire took her mother's face in her little hands. "I haven't put my marble in the hole yet."

"There will be plenty of time for that tomorrow," said Liz as they walked into the house.

"Okay." Claire began singing again as they disappeared through the doorway: "The wheels on the bus go round and round, round and round—"

Elijah rolled onto his back and gazed up at the stars. He stared into the night sky, surprised at how bright and clear the stars were. One star appeared brighter and bigger than all the rest, seeming to wink at him, and he gasped when blue beams shot out from it. Was he seeing things? He blinked hard, focusing on the little blue star. It twinkled and sparkled, shooting out blue rays like it was trying to say 'pay attention to me!' He smiled, thinking how magical it seemed.

Soon, the ground began spinning and he closed his eyes, turning on his side, breathing deeply and hoping the world would quit spinning and that his father would return soon.

Suddenly, a voice called to him from the other side of his parent's small backyard.

"Eli. Over here!"

Dave?

He rolled over, squinting into the darkness. "Dave, is that you, man? What are you—?"

"Shhh!" hissed the voice. "Get over here."

He stood up slowly and a bit unsteadily, glancing toward the house before stumbling over to his mother's lemon trees where he found his brother crouching down under a tree, holding something in his hand. David grabbed his arm and pulled him down.

"What the—?" Elijah fell to his knees.

"Shhh," repeated his brother. "God, Eli, ya stink like a brewery."

He snorted, looking hard at his twin whose face was so much like his own. He wore a baseball cap and the top part of his face was in shadow. His presence in the dark under the trees was unsettling. He'd lost touch with him a few years before.

"You've got to leave," said David, his eyes darting about furtively. "Dad's convinced that you've done something illegal again, Eli."

"I didn't—"

"Listen to me," his brother grabbed his arm, "he plans on having you and Liz arrested. He plans on hiding the girls from you. He believes they are some sort of angels and you and Liz are going to corrupt them."

"What?!" he cried, quickly sobering up. He blinked and shook his head. His father was going to steal the girls? Have him arrested? He found this hard to believe.

"What are you talking about?"

"Pop's changed, Eli. I think he's totally whacked out. He's been talking about the girls and some stone. Mom's told me his plans. There are things about this family that you don't know about, Eli: Things I've only just discovered. You've been gone, but I stuck around. Eli, he plans on doing this tonight."

His head was spinning. He had to do something! He started to stand but his brother held him down.

“Go get Liz and meet me around the corner. You’ve got to get her out of the house. He’s going to have her arrested too. Someone’s been feeding him false information again; just like before you guys were married.”

He remembered the year he’d been engaged to Liz and his father had begged him not to marry her; that she was no good. It was happening again.

“Mom knows what she is supposed to do,” said David. “She knows what he’s planning and she’s agreed to go along with my plan. You must trust us.”

He shook his arm free. “How long have you known about all of this?” He didn’t trust his brother. And what did he mean by ‘something illegal’?

“Not long. We knew once you got here—mom and me—that we could convince you. He was going to do this one way or another, Eli. I figured once he got you here, I could help. He’ll be back soon.”

He thought about his wife, knowing she’d fight him on this one. There was no way she’d leave without their girls.

“Why can’t we just confront him in the house? I won’t let him take the girls.”

“He has help, Eli. He’s coming back with help.”

“Help? Who?”

“His friend is a cop.”

He narrowed his eyes, staring at his brother. “He said there was an inheritance and wants me to go to the airport.”

“That’s how he plans on getting you away from the girls.”

Away from the girls!

He stood up, almost knocking himself out on one of the tree’s branches.

David quickly got to his feet, putting his hand on his arm and handing him the piece of paper he’d been holding. Elijah’s blood went cold: Two pictures stared back at him; one of Liz and one of himself. The paper said they were wanted by the FBI! Their names

were printed in bold, black ink. His hand shook as he read the missive: They were wanted for drug smuggling! Who made this?

"Where did you get this?" he whispered, feeling like he was going to vomit.

"Mom slipped it to me. She found it with some of pop's things. He really believes you're part of this and he went to get his cop friend. He'll have your asses hauled off and the girls will be alone. He means to do this, Eli."

"Who made this? This isn't me. This isn't Liz."

"You know they'll find something on you, Eli."

His stomach dropped as he eyed his brother fearfully. His brother's sordid past just may catch up to him yet. He'd taken the fall for his brother years ago in a drug bust and had spent five months in jail. He'd served the time; it had only been a little bit of pot they'd gotten caught with. Could they really use that?

"Who made this!?" he asked again, shaking the paper in his brother's face.

"That doesn't matter right now," hissed David.

His temper flared and he gritted his teeth. "Why should I trust you, Dave? You screwed me over once before. Why should I believe you this time?"

"I'm sorry, Eli. I've been sorry ever since you did the time. You're such a stubborn son-of-a-bitch you'd never let me apologize. I'm trying to do what's right for your family, Eli. Put your resentments about the past aside and think of your family. Let me help you, brother. Please!"

His brother's frightened eyes and pleading tone knocked some sense into him and he believed him. "I'm not taking Liz away from Claire and Crystal. We'll bring them with us." He began heading toward the house.

"No!" David grabbed his arm. "You two get out of the house. Just drag her out, Eli. Tell her you need to talk outside. Tell her you're sorry for being such a drunk."

He cringed and his brother said in a softer voice. "Believe me, mom knows what to do. Do it now Eli, you can explain to Liz later. Pop means to keep you both in jail until he's hidden the girls. He really thinks it's what's best for them. He believes that Liz is the anti-Christ, for god's sakes. I swear!"

"Hurry, Elijah dear." His mother stood just outside the house. "Liz knows ye wish t' speak with her. She's waitin'."

David gently took the paper out of his hand and nudged him toward the house. "We'll not let anything happen to your daughters, Eli. Mom will guard them with her very life. Now go. I'll meet you out front. Go that way," he said, sweeping his arm to the right as he retreated into the darkness.

He walked to his mother who waited calmly and she gave his arm a reassuring squeeze.

"Why didn't you mention this before, mom," he whispered, feeling betrayed at her deception.

"I couldn't, Elijah. Ye would have asked too many questions. Trust yer brother; trust me," she said quietly. "We know what we're doin'. I'll not let anythin' happen to the bairns." He saw the same passion in her eyes that he'd seen his whole life when his father had bullied him and she'd stood up for him. He knew his mother meant what she said.

Liz stood at the front door with arms crossed, watching him with tired eyes.

"What's going on, Elijah? Your mother said you wanted to go for a walk."

He looked at his mother who'd followed him into the house; she motioned with her chin for him to go.

"Come on, Liz." He hoped his nerves weren't showing—his insides were doing double flips. "I have a few things to tell you." He hated leaving the girls, but he had no choice, he had to trust his mother.

They walked outside and he put his arm through his wife's, leading her down the sidewalk. His blood was pounding in his ears and his throat was dry. The alcohol was still swirling through his bloodstream and he hoped he wouldn't fall over. Why'd he have to drink that last beer? It was always the last one that did him in.

"Lez jus walk a bit," he slurred, licking his lips, hoping his wife didn't notice.

As they turned the corner, two cars headed down the street toward them from behind. He hurried his pace, quickly looking over his shoulder. The cars had stopped in front of his parent's house! One was the limousine that had picked them up from the airport; the other was a police car. He saw his father step out of the limousine as two police officers emerged from their car. He gripped Liz's elbow and hurried her along.

"Elijah," she cried. "What are you doing? You're hurting me!" She tried to yank her arm free. He wouldn't let go.

"Come on, Dave," he hissed under his breath, scouring the street for his brother.

Suddenly, the sound of screeching tires came from behind and David darted out from behind a tree. He clung to Liz's arm, hoping she wouldn't try to run, and she screamed as David grabbed her other arm. The long black limousine pulled up alongside them and the two men hauled Liz into the limo.

As the black car pulled away from the curb, flying down the road at break-neck speed, Liz was speechless, staring wide-eyed at her husband.

"What in the hell is going on?!" she yelled, turning to stare at David. "And when did you get here?"

Liz screamed as they flew around a corner and she fell off her seat.

Who was driving the car? In shock, Elijah stared at his brother who'd helped Liz up before carefully strapping her in. She glared

back at him with dark and frightened eyes. His nerves had gotten the best of him and he was paralyzed. What had he done?

“Is this some sort of prank?” hissed Elizabeth as the car once again screeched around a corner. “Are you both mad? Stop this car right now!”

David handed her the crumpled piece of paper he’d handed Elijah earlier before turning to look out of the back window. His face was bathed in the red and blue glow from the patrol car’s flashing lights: They were being followed.

Elijah gulped. This wouldn’t end well, he thought as he strapped himself in, wishing he could grab a beer out of the little refrigerator.

One last drink before they died.

“What in the hell is this?” Liz shook the paper furiously in his face. “Elijah, what is this?”

He didn’t know what to say, where to start. He looked at his brother imploringly, quietly begging him to explain.

“Our father is ill, Liz,” explained David. “He was planning on turning you two in to the FBI. He believes you are part of a drug-ring and he’s trying to protect Claire and Crystal.”

Liz’s eyes went wide and the color drained from her face.

“Turn this car around!” she screamed. “We have to go back. Elijah! We have to go back—the babies! He’s going to take them! He said something about this in the car when he drove me around this morning,” she cried, grabbing her seatbelt. “I thought his story was strange. He said he worried about you, Eli. He told me some crazy story about going somewhere in the center of the earth, for god’s sakes, and finding a blue stone!”

Her wild eyes swiveled between the two brothers as she struggled with the seatbelt. “I thought maybe he was getting senile. I thought—god damnit,” she cried, furious that she couldn’t undo her seatbelt.” Then she began to cry. “Elijah, he-he said Crystal was some sort of savior,” she sobbed. “What if he hurts them? They’re just babies!”

“Liz,” David tried to calm her down, “the kids are safe. It’s you and Eli that are in danger right now.” David grabbed the piece of paper out of her hand. “If you two are caught, you will go to prison.”

“Where are we going?” she cried. “Elijah, why did you bring us here?” His wife looked at him like he was a monster.

His head hurt and his stomach ached. “Dad told me we were in danger and we had to come here or else it would be bad,” he whispered. “He made me promise not to say anything to you. I’m so sorry!” He felt like an idiot.

The car flew down the freeway and David leaned forward, speaking quickly and softly to the driver. Elijah noticed that it was the same driver that had picked them up from the airport. The little man responded in hushed tones and David turned around.

“Pop was telling the truth, Eli,” said David. “If you hadn’t left when you had, you’d all be dead.”

“DEAD!?” roared Liz.

“There was an explosion. Your house is gone. They found you, hoping to kill you, but somehow dad was warned. He got you out of there for the girl’s sakes. And now that he’s got the girls, he plans on getting rid of the both of you.”

“Who found us?” pleaded Elijah. “Who found us?” He felt lightheaded, as if he was out of his body.

“Turn this car around now!” screamed Liz. “I don’t give a good god damn if we’re in danger. I’m not going to prison. That thing,” she flicked her hand at the paper with her face on it, “is a fake.” She struggled with her seatbelt again. “If you don’t stop this car this instant, David Lange, I am going to open the door and throw myself out. *Do...you...understand?!*” she leaned forward, screaming at the top of her lungs into his face.

The moment she finally managed to unbuckle her seatbelt, David whipped something out of his pocket and quickly grabbed her arm, plunging a needle in. Her eyes went wide and she looked

at him with desperate eyes before they fluttered closed and she slowly fell over onto the seat.

Elijah lunged at his brother. David shoved him away and he slumped back down. He was definitely going to be ill.

"I knew she'd cause trouble," said David. "She's always been a fighter. I only gave her a sedative, Eli. She'll be all right."

The big car—now with at least a half-a-dozen police cars chasing them—flew down the dark road.

"So here's the plan, Eli," proclaimed David, slipping off his jacket and pulling his shirt over his head. "You saved my ass back in '84, now it's my turn to save yours. I know what they're after, Eli. Take your shirt off and put mine on, and my coat. You're going to be me for a while."

Elijah stared at him in disbelief. Was he serious?

"Come on man!" shouted David. "We don't have much time, we're almost there. I know you don't understand, but ya gotta believe me on this one. I'm trying to save your life!"

"Who's trying to kill me!? Who's behind all this?" Elijah pulled his shirt over his head and slipped his brother's on, all the while staring at his wife lying motionless and pale on the seat.

"I can't tell you that. Here, take my wallet and give me yours," said David, pulling his own from his back pocket.

"God, Dave. I'm not giving you my wallet. And why can't you tell me?"

"Give it to me!" hissed his brother violently. "For once in your life do something right for her." David looked at Liz. "She's put up with your sorry ass with hardly a complaint. Do this for her, Eli. If you don't, you'll both die and he'll get the girls and that won't be good. Now come on!" he shouted, thrusting his wallet at Eli.

As if in a dream, he slowly pulled out his wallet and took his brother's, wondering how his brother knew how he'd treated his wife and his family.

"Now put this on." David pulled off his cap and handed it to him. "Pull it down tight," he said as the car swerved around a corner.

Elijah thought they were going to crash for sure as he listened to the sirens screaming from far behind. The big black car seemed to be propelled by a jet.

"Mom's got the girls now," explained David. "She knows how to handle pop, what to say to him so the girls won't be harmed. You and mom can take care of them until it's safe for us to return. Liz and I are bailing the country, Eli."

"You're what?" he cried, leaning forward and grabbing Liz's limp hand. "You can't—"

"I've got pop's papers, Eli, and I have connections," announced David, lifting his father's briefcase off the floor. "I'll get Liz to see the danger she's in. We have to go into hiding and I know where she'll be safe."

Elijah shook his head, still trying to shake off the effects of the beer. "What's in pop's briefcase?"

David pulled a cell phone out of the briefcase and handed it to Elijah. "I'll contact you in a couple of days so Liz can talk to you and the girls and then we'll make plans on how we'll re-connect."

Elijah took the phone, putting it into his coat pocket.

"You're going to pretend to be me, Eli," informed David softly, staring into his brother's eyes. "And you're going to tell them you know nothing. Tell them you tried to help us see the reason in turning ourselves in. Say this, Eli, if you want to save your family. Otherwise, they'll get wise to us and they'll kill you. The police are not the only ones after you and Liz."

Elijah looked at his wife, knowing he had to trust his brother.

"The car's going to slow down and I'm going to push you out."

Push me out!? Elijah's eyes went wide.

"Do you understand? Do you understand, Eli?" shouted David as the car began to slow down.

Elijah shook his head slowly back and forth—No. He didn't understand.

"I won't let them take you like I did last time," said David. "Trust me, brother." Elijah saw something flicker in his twin brother's eyes akin to deception just before he threw the door open and literally shoved him from the car.

He rolled off the street and down a small hill, knocking into rocks and debris as the huge black car sped away. Seconds later, the police cars sped by at a dizzyingly fast speed. Then he struggled to his knees and threw up.

Except for the cicadas chirping in the trees around him, the night was quiet. He was amazed that he hadn't been seen by the many cars that had been following them or that he hadn't smashed his head against a tree. His brother and the driver had obviously planned this well.

Feeling something warm and wet trickle down his neck; he reached up, gently touching the side of his face, pulling away a bloody hand. He'd taken quite a beating when he'd flown from the car—amazingly enough, he still wore the hat that his brother had given him.

His vision blurred and he blinked, shaking his head, fearing he probably suffered from a concussion. As he struggled to regain his eyesight, a pair of headlights shone down the road. He ducked down in fear when the car slowed, then he heard his name being called.

"Elijah. Where are ye then?" His mother's voice broke through the cicada's song. "Come on out, lad."

He poked his head up and saw his mother peering from the car's window. She pulled over to the side of the road and slowly stepped out, shining a flashlight into the trees. Fear began mingling with nerves. Who was watching his girls?

He stood up and stumbled as she shined the flashlight into his face. "Goodness, my boy, yer hurt." She walked toward him. "Did he even stop the damn car before he tossed ye out?" she hissed.

"Mom, where are the girls? Who's watching Claire and Crystal?" He held his aching head and blinked, wishing the world would stop spinning.

"I've got me own sister here t' watch th' lassies while we go after yer wife an' brother. I had t' go along with his plan, Eli, yet I fear for them, my boy."

They climbed into the car.

"Yer father is off after chasin' them in one of th' police cars. Bloody Nora," she hissed as they pulled away, heading down the dark road in the same direction as the police cars and the limousine. "He thinks Liz is th' devil herself. Now strap yerself in, my boy. I'm gonna drive hard."

Drive hard? His eyes flew to his mother. She gripped the steering wheel tightly as they sped down the road. She seemed different somehow, and she had sworn. In his whole life, he'd never heard her use profanity.

"Do you know where they're going?" he asked his mother, eyeing her nervously.

"Aye that I do."

"So, you double crossed me, have you?" asked a dark voice from the back seat.

Josephine's eyes flew to the rearview mirror and Elijah jumped, whirling around, staring at his father who peered at them from the back seat.

"Christ on a bike," yelled Josephine. "What are ye doin' back there then, ye wee crazy old man! I thought ye'd be chasin' after Liz."

He felt like he was in a horrible nightmare as his parents were acting quite oddly. His saintly mother had sworn again and his father's eyes were wild.

"I'm not that stupid," stated his father casually. "I have no intention of letting them out of my sight. He's done wrong and needs to pay! He'll get caught and burn in hell for what he's done."

He looked at his father who stared straight ahead, eyes wild, wearing a crazy grin. His mother looked at him and shook her head quickly and sharply. She continued to drive very fast down the deserted road.

He was so confused!

"Turn the car around, Josie," whispered his father. "We need to go get the girls now. You know you've always wanted to raise them yourself. We can do that now, Josie. They are mine to protect as they always have been. I'm the chosen one, Josie: The chosen one, mind you!"

She continued driving wildly down the dark road at break neck speed. Soon, Elijah noticed lights coming at them from the other direction, far down the road.

"Turn the car around, Josie," repeated James. "We can go home now and watch them grow into the lovely angels they will become. She will wish to see them too, Josie. She has asked for them."

Eli looked at his father who leaned back in his seat, tears coursing down his face. Who and what was his father talking about?

His mother stared straight ahead, pushing on the gas pedal harder.

And then he heard the sirens. Elijah whipped around and saw the lights of the police car gaining ground on them fast. His mother continued driving as if she'd not noticed them and his father kept repeating:

"Turn the car around, Josie; the angels are waiting for us."

He looked back. The police car was going to pass them on the left! He swung his head around and saw the headlights approaching. His blood turned to ice when he realized the oncoming car was now in their lane, heading straight for them.

His mother's face was pinched and her cheeks were flushed.

"I'll not let them touch the bairns," she hissed right before their car flew off the road.

"Mother!" he cried out, grabbing the dashboard as their car swerved sharply to the right. The police car also swerved and flew off the road as the oncoming car zoomed past. The Lange's car flipped end over end, no fewer than five times, until it rested thirty feet down the road in a mass of twisted and smoking steel. On the other side of the road, the police car burst into flames.

Elijah's body had been thrown from the car and lay broken and battered a dozen or so feet away—the phone in his coat pocket now completely shattered.

The minutes ticked by as the cars burned with fiery little explosions every few seconds. And then it was quiet, and once again, the cicadas began their nightly song.

Ten minutes later, an old truck came across the gruesome scene and two men flew out, looking for any survivors. They only found one man who had been thrown from the car; he was barely alive. They found him lying face down in a pool of blood, his body bent at odd angles. They did not see the snake-like wisp of smoke that had lingered over his body slither away toward the wreckage of the car the man had flown from.

The ambulance came and took him away.

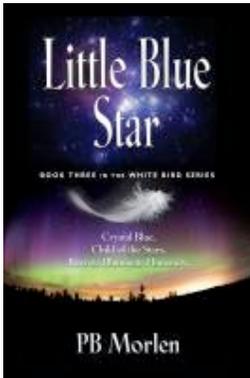
His ID said his name was David E. Lange.

PART TWO

WHITE BIRD

White Bird, in a Golden Cage
On a winter's day
In the rain
White bird, in a Golden Cage
Alone
The leaves blow
Cross the long black road
To the darkened skies
In its rage
But the white bird
Just sits in her cage
Unknown
White bird must fly
Or she will die
White bird, dreams of the Aspen Tree
With their dying leaves turning gold
But the white bird
Just sits in her cage
Growing old
White bird must fly
Or she will die
The sunsets come
The sunsets go
The clouds Float by
And The Earth Turns slow
And the Young Bird's Eyes
Do always Glow
And She must fly

White Bird by David LaFlame



Crystal Blue, the reluctant avatar in the White Bird series, sets off for the sacred Four Corners to meet with the Hopi. Still unconvinced of her shamanic powers, and without Wyndon, her protector who disappeared in Kauai, Crystal becomes vulnerable to dark energies following her. As a result, when she travels to a world mankind has left behind, the unthinkable happens. Only one can save her, but he, as she, has forgotten who he is.

Little Blue Star

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