

# Twelve

by

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# Prologue

## Bodhgaya, India Transformation

At first Deirdre grips the six-year-old twins' hands tightly, and at first Jared and Meghan are happy to press close. Jared twists to look back at the hotel sign and stares at the letters: Hotel Bodhgaya Ashok. He doesn't know what the last two words are. He doesn't know where he is, except this place is called India. Most of the buildings have signs, but the words are written in curly-cues and slants that his mother says is Indian writing.

Jared can't make it out.

This city makes him afraid, with its hot, hot air. Dust rises in the streets, so that when the wind blows he can see nothing but a reddish cloud. The crowded, smelly train had frightened him. Everyone shouted and laughed and talked in words he couldn't understand. The bus after that was worse –

more crowded and smellier.

When Deirdre pauses for a moment, Jared shuts his eyes and tries again to imagine the place that is green and safe with a pattern of pink flowers on the floor. But with a jab of fear, he remembers that even in the dream, there are shadows lurking in cupboards and behind stone walls. He opens his eyes again and looks at his twin, but she is busy staring at everything.

Meghan isn't afraid at all. Ever. She loves this hot, strange place and is determined to meet all the people and try all the food sold from roadside tents. She tugs loose her hand, and before Deirdre can stop her, darts away, disappearing into the crowd.

"Oh, drat her!" Deirdre exclaims. She stands Jared by a tree. "Don't move. Not one step!"

She runs in search of her daughter.

Jared looks in every direction. Kronos, The Man Who Watches is staring at them again. Jared can feel it. His mother won't notice him while she chases Meghan.

There. At the edge of the streaming crowd... Jared sees the burning eyes in the pale face. Despite the still air, Kronos' black hair looks like it has been thrashed by a storm. Jared knows that no one else in the pushing crowd

sees Kronos. If they did, their shadowed eyes would open wide with fear and their muttering voices would rise into screams. Kronos raises a hand to Jared, beckoning, commanding. Sunlight glimmers on his golden mark.

Jared squeezes his eyes shut, breathing hard, fighting the urge to follow the beckoning hand. His Mama told him to stay put.

“Jared!” Deirdre grabs his hand. He opens his eyes with relief. “At least one of you will stand still.” She glares at Meghan who laughs and tosses her fire-red hair.

“The grandpa was nice.” Meghan holds up a small orange that a toothless old man has given her.

Jared looks back to Kronos. He is gone now. With his mother and sister, Jared joins the mass of people walking down the road to the temple.

“This is the holiest place in India,” Deirdre tells them. “The monks know things we don’t understand. I hope...” She bites her lip. “I think they might help us...”

The temple rises like a pointed ant hill. Low walls of carved pinky-red rock direct the flow of the crowd. Most people swarm along a walkway. It looks like a parade with all the flowers and fluttering silk scarves. Deirdre pulls them forward, down stone steps and

past another stream of people walking round and round the temple. Jared nearly falls over a man lying on his stomach with his arms stretched out.

“Is he hurt?” He clutches his mother’s hand more tightly.

“No, he’s praying.” She steers them past more people lying on their stomachs and over to a wall, out of the press of people. “Shoes off, kids. We can’t wear them in the temple.”

His mom puts their shoes in her bag, and then in sock feet, they rejoin the crowd.

People pour through the gate and towards a huge open door. Jared, Meghan and Deirdre are swept along with them into a cool, dim room. Everyone sits on the floor.

An old man in baggy yellow clothes with a red shawl over one shoulder is speaking to the seated people. Deirdre leans forward, hands twisting in her lap. Jared’s eyes fix on a huge gold statue of a seated man. Buddha. Many of the people are bowing to the statue. Meghan elbows him and points around the room. Every wall and even the ceiling are decorated with vast pictures. While the old man talks and talks, Jared stares open-mouthed at the paintings of scenery, people, gods and demons. Some are happy; some are crying; some are writhing their many arms and showing fangs.

One picture draws his eyes. It is The Man Who Watches, riding a horse breathing fire from its mouth and striking flames from its hooves. Jared hears the hoof beats, smells the acrid smoke...

“No!” he whispers. The sounds and smells fade. He thinks the smiling statue of Buddha may have chased Kronos away.

The old man at the front stops talking. Their mother surges up from the pillows and taking each of them by hand, approaches a yellow-robed monk.

“Excuse me,” she says, “I have an appointment to see His Holiness Lama Choedak Jamyang.” She drops the twins’ hands to pull a letter from her purse. Her voice trembles. “I was told he can help me.”

The monk nods. “He expects you. Also, his Holiness Lama Satya asks permission to visit with your children.”

Deirdre looks at them doubtfully. “I don’t know...”

“I’m not going,” Meghan grips her mother’s hand. “I want to come with you, Mama, and give our presents to the llama.”

The monk looks calmly at Jared.

“I’ll go,” Jared says. Why did he say that?

The monk bows, hands pressed together. Another young monk appears at his side.

Deirdre and Meghan go with him. Nervously, Jared follows the older one along narrow corridors filled with weird smells and quiet footsteps.

“It is custom to bow three times when entering the presence of His Holiness,” the monk whispers and opens a door. Jared steps into a room ablaze with color. Red walls are highlighted by yellow cloth that hangs like curtains or drapes across the furniture. A soccer ball lies under a table. On a raised platform, a boy about ten, sits cross-legged. He is dressed like the monks.

Jared stares, then says, “Hi.” Behind him, the monk is bowing.

The boy smiles. “Hi, Jared,” he replies. “Didn’t Meghan come?”

Jared shakes his head. “She’s with my mother.”

The boy’s expression becomes serious again and he jumps down from the platform. “I am sorry she is not here. I have something important to show you.”

He heads out the room and down the hallway. Not knowing what else to do, Jared follows. They walk down several more of the narrow corridors scented like smoky flowers, then come into the sunlight in an open courtyard. A large twisted tree grows in

the center. Bits of gold glimmer on its trunk. Masses of flowers are strewn on the ground and white scarves tied to the branches lift and fall in the breeze.

Jared thinks the place should be full of people, but he and the boy are alone.

“It is under the ancestor of this fig tree that Buddha received enlightenment,” the boy says. “And here,” he leads Jared to a slab of brick-red stone, “is the stone on which he sat. It is the only stone strong enough to have held the world together when the transformation came. It is the center of the universe.”

As though he had been told to do it, Jared steps forward and stands on the stone. Heat gathers in a pool, rises through his feet and floats up into his body, lifting him into the air.

“I’m flying!” he cries. “Can Meghan come and do this?”

The boy shakes his head. “There is only this one moment when the flow of time has stilled, and she did not come. You alone are chosen.”

Jared flaps his arms trying to rise higher.

The boy takes something from inside his robe — a stone, the same reddish color as the one Jared hovers over. He offers it. “I have guarded this for you through all my lifetimes. It is carved with the eyes of Buddha and holds



the key to transformation and enlightenment.”

“What’s that?” Jared’s hands close on the rock and his mind glows.

“The ancient gods cannot change. They are what they are. Neither love nor death nor suffering can transform their hearts and spirits. Only humans can become more than they were. One day people may become greater than the gods. They fear this.”

“Jared!” Deirdre’s voice pierces the air. Startled, Jared’s feet touch the ground and he jumps off the stone. Like ghosts melting back into reality, people and chatter fill the courtyard. The stone is now covered in bright cloth, with oranges, money, and bowls of rice heaped over it. The boy smiles, then walks back into the temple.

Deirdre and Meghan run to Jared. “Thank goodness!” Deirdre hugs him. “None of the other monks spoke English. I thought I’d lost you.”

“There wasn’t a llama,” Meghan complains as they put their shoes back on. “Just an old man with glasses. Did you see a llama?”

Jared shakes his head. “Just a boy. He gave me a stone.”

For the first time Jared really looks at it. The eyes of Buddha look back. Beneath is curly writing he can’t read.

“The old man gave me a handkerchief.” Meghan displays a small square of white silk with a faded picture and the same curly writing.

“Well, at least you two got something out of this trip.” Deirdre takes their hands and hauls them toward the gate. “Come on kids, we have hurry. If we’re lucky, we can still make it to New York by next Friday. Pat has an audition set up for me.”

“I thought we were staying,” Jared protests.

“No,” Deirdre says. “The Lama says he can’t protect me from my demons. We have to keep going.”



Part I

Seattle, Washington



# Chapter I

## The Song

March rain splattered down, cold and insistent, as fifteen-year-old Jared stepped off the San Francisco to Seattle bus and looked around. Another city, another bus station. He hefted his back pack onto his shoulders and took a couple of quick steps to catch up to his mom and Meghan. It had seemed like a miracle when this job came through — they'd been down to their last hundred dollars. If the job worked out, if they didn't have to run, the family might get a few dollars into a savings account again.

If they didn't have to run. Head down, eyelids slightly lowered, Jared scanned the milling crowds. A grandmother here, a homeless man there, a few kids running wild while their harassed parents groped through bags. Nothing to set the short hairs on his neck prickling. No hint of the hunters who never gave up, never seemed to rest.

Meghan and his Mom had paused in front of a snack bar, Meghan clearly arguing to immediately make up for their missed lunch; his mom just as clearly urging for her to wait, to conserve their few remaining dollars. Jared swept his eyes over the crowd again. Everything ordinary. He let out his pent-up breath and eased through the jostling crowd of travelers.

And then...*the Song*. Jared stopped cold. He could feel sweat forming on his forehead and upper lip. He could hear it — the singing had started again.

He lifted his head like a dog to a scent. The singing was clear, very clear. This time... surely this time, he would be able to make out the words. Jared shook his head, tried to separate the unearthly melody from noises surrounding him — the growl of traffic, shouting passengers, and drumming rain. But there was too much confusion.

Over there...the singing came from the end of the station. He ran through the crowd, dodging bags, boxes and people. At an empty loading platform, he stopped and shut his eyes tightly. This time he would arrow himself to the source of the singing — finally hear all the words.

A picture crowded into his mind. He

could hear everything in the bus terminal, but behind it, like a brightening movie screen, the thrumming began...

*Noise of a heart beating too fast...beating in terror....*

*Fist clutching....*

*Behind...red eyes...the red-eared dogs of night...howling...closer...closer....hunting through the woods...baying for blood...*

*Heart throbbing...*

*But the last Guardian will follow the lines of power and sing the Song of Light...He begins the chanting melody...it lifts into the wind.*

*Jared can hear it now...it fills him again... he can sing with the old man...*

A hard hand tugged his sleeve. “Hey kid, spare some change?”

The song shattered. Jared blinked, confused. A raggedy teenager, only a couple of years older than himself, held out her hand. Her eyes were grey nuggets in a white face.

“What?”

“Change,” the girl whined. “I got nowhere to sleep. Nothing to eat...you got some money? Something in your pack to help me out?”

Her hand inserted itself under the flap, fingers searching.

“No way,” Jared twisted away. “Hey! What do you think you’re doing?”



“I could trade,” the girl whispered. “I got this to trade...”

She held up her fist, so close to Jared’s face that he could scarcely make out the twisted shape of a tattoo above the knuckle of her middle finger. It seemed to be a distorted spider...shimmering in front of his eyes.

“Hey! Get away!” the girl shrieked.

A black and white dog pushed between Jared and the girl, growling deep in its throat. The girl faltered back, made shooing motions with her hands, then with a hoarse sob turned and ran. The dog’s growling stopped, his head raised and with an air of all business taken care of, scratched his ear with a hind foot. Without a glance at Jared, he turned and trotted through the crowds.

“Now, that was weird,” Jared muttered. Almost as weird, he thought, as trying to learn a song that no one else could hear. Or as weird as carrying ten heavy rocks in his back pack and one more stone in his pocket as his family gypsied around the world. The Song was silent again. Slowly, he wove back through the thinning crowd to his mom and sister.

“Jared,” his mom’s voice rose over the hubbub. “Get the bags, hon.”

They had not paid any attention to his dash through the crowd. Jared wasn’t really

surprised – he had long since become aware that the Song sometimes suppressed time, or memory, or just plain noticing. With a nod to his mom, he picked up two suitcases; Meghan dropped the bag she'd held to push back her long red hair with both hands.

“The rain’s turning me into a fuzball.” She pulled an elastic from her pocket and caught her hair into a fat ponytail. Like her brother, she carried a bulging, frayed backpack over her shoulders. Hers was weighted down with books, music and a flute; Jared’s shoulders ached with the weight of his fist-sized rocks.

“Now, if you just turn left, Mrs. Singer,” the ticket agent was telling their mother, “and go along Stewart about two blocks, there’s the Regency Inn right there.” He beamed at her. “It’s a nice place. Better than that Carmen Hotel you were talking about.”

“Thank you, so much.” Deirdre smiled charmingly and turned back to her children.

“Another guy?” Meghan teased softly. She hoisted her bag higher on her shoulders.

“Oh, don’t be silly,” her mom shushed her. “He’s just a nice person trying to be helpful.” She picked up her own suitcase and led them toward the street.

Outside the station, an old man with a curling white beard sat with a sign:

Real Change, Seattle's Homeless Newspaper.

Help the Homeless Help Themselves.

Jared eyed at the man's tattered clothes, and turned his head away. His stomach knotted. Homeless came after broke. Their family was awfully close to broke...

Meghan's gaze slid past the dirt and rips, up to the man's face. She smiled. "Wet today," she said.

His clear eyes sparkled. "Not so bad as yesterday. It'll come onto sun in a bit. Have a good afternoon."

"Thank you," she called back.

"Why'd you talk to him?" Jared hissed.

"Why didn't you?" she retorted. "He's broke. That's hard enough without being invisible, too."

Jared flushed and glanced back. The black and white dog stood with its front paws propped on the old man's knees. His master was talking to him and gently rubbing his ears.

The family trudged down Stewart Street, giving the Regency Inn only a brief look of regret. The Seattle Space Needle, built for the '62 World's Fair, towered in the distance. Above, city crows wheeled and squawked. At Sixth Avenue they turned left, away from the

Space Needle, and kept on walking. Expensive shops gave way to shabby stores. To his right, down a steep hill, Jared could see the rippling glint of Puget Sound.

“How far is it?” Meghan grunted.

“Another couple of blocks. It’s very central — close to Pike Place Market and the historic part of town,” Deirdre Singer said.

Jared and Meghan exchanged depressed glances. Historic always meant old and run down when it came to their rooms.

Rain fell more heavily. Jared’s dark hair slicked down and hung in his eyes. Despite the ponytail, Meghan’s writhed into tight corkscrews. Finally, they cut through a parking lot to a grey hotel crouched behind an office building.

“Sweet,” Meghan muttered.

The door squealed. Light barely penetrated the lobby. Behind the counter, a young man put down a magazine, and stood to greet them with a wide smile.

Jared dropped the bags. An air of mildew and dust drifted upward from the threadbare carpet. An ancient elevator clanked open. No one got out.

“Ghosts,” Meghan whispered.

Their mom headed to the desk.

“Welcome to The Carmen,” the clerk said.

“Marquis is my name, and I’m here to make your stay as comfortable as your favorite dream. Your name, please, Ma’am?”

“Deirdre Singer. My children and I have a reservation.”

Marquis typed something into a computer.

“Yes, Ma’am, here it is.” Marquis smiled widely again. “Six weeks. That’s a long time to be sightseeing.”

“I’ll be working. I have a role in *The Phantom of the Opera* revival.”

“No way!” Marquis exclaimed. “I thought they all was staying at the Warwick.”

“The main players are. I have a small part a friend arranged for me.”

“You sing then?”

“Whenever I can.”

“Well, well!” Marquis rubbed his hands together. “A star staying at our hotel. I’ll give you the best efficiency suite in the house. Big and at the back. None of that traffic noise. Fully equipped with a range top, fridge and dishes. And no extra charge!”

“Thank you.” Mrs. Singer smiled. “We appreciate it.”

“Yes, Ma’am. Comfortable as a dream. Take the elevator to sixth floor then turn right. Corner room on your left.”

The twins picked up the bags and followed

their mom into the elevator.

“I think this dream’s going to be a nightmare,” Meghan said. The doors crashed shut, opened a couple of inches, and then banged shut again.

“At least there’s a nice desk clerk,” Mrs. Singer pointed out. “That makes it more pleasant.”

“And the hotel’s in a business area,” Jared added. “We can go sightseeing without getting mugged.”

Over the last few years, the hotels had gotten worse and worse as their mom struggled harder and harder for bit parts in the operas and traveling musical productions that supported them. Most big cities had their own opera companies and regular theater players. Deirdre picked up the leavings — this time taking a part in the chorus. The contracted actor had broken her leg.

That was the way it always was now. Sometimes a singer would get sick, or take time off for a baby, or quarrel with the director. The production company would frantically call the agents, and Pat, their mom’s agent would call Deirdre, telling her what city she had to get to — right away.

“I fill in for disaster,” Deirdre had said wryly.

The elevator clanged to a stop. The doors squealed open.

A young man, unshaven with greasy hair, eyed them from the hall.

“Up or down?” he demanded.

“Up,” Deirdre said.

He grunted. Deirdre pushed the “Close Door” button. Nothing happened. They stared at the man in the hall and he stared at them. His eyes slid over to Meghan and his expression changed. Jared stepped in front of his sister. She elbowed him.

“What floor...” Deirdre began to ask. The doors clanged shut.

“I know I’m going to just love this place,” Meghan said.

“Only six weeks, sweetie. Seattle’s a great city. When the weather clears we can rent a car and drive to the ocean beaches. They’re spectacular.”

A sudden memory of sound...pounding waves...pounding footsteps. Jared stiffened. The call was from a place by the ocean. But, how could his whole family have been maneuvered here from hundreds of miles away? Did the magic in the rocks completely control their lives? Automatically, Jared closed his fingers around the rock in his pocket...remembering.

# Athens, Greece

## Hope

*Seven years old. Alone with his sister in the hotel room on the outskirts of Athens. An ear infection aching like a stabbing spike. The thrumming starts. Must be the pain...*

*“Mama, it’s calling me...” He’d forgotten... Mama is at rehearsal. Meghan is asleep.*

*Still in pajamas, he stumbles out of the seedy hotel.*

*“Kali mara!” calls a white-haired old man sitting by the front door. “That way, good playing for you...maybe you will find a treasure...”*

*“Thank you... Efharisto...” Jared mumbles. A few dirty streets. Some puzzled looks from residents. Then a parched pasture littered with broken stones.*

*In his head, voices are singing, then shouting and crying, piercing his mind. He claps his hands to his ears but that does not block out the shrieking.*



*“What do you want?” he cries. The skinny goat in the distance stares a moment and goes back to cropping the bare ground.*

*He turns, and a house, shining white and gold in the sunlight, rises before him. Where the field was dried up and brown, plants nod in the breeze and waterfalls gurgles from basins of gleaming white rock.*

*Jared goes up stone steps. All the doors and windows are open so he goes in, glad to be out of the sun and heat. In the center is a garden, cool and delicious smelling. A lady sits at a table with a stone vase in front of her. She stares at it, sometimes running her fingers over the surface. Shyly, Jared comes over.*

*“Hi!” he says. The lady does not even look up. She just stares and stares at the vase, so Jared looks at it too. The stone is the color of rich blood and sunny clouds blended together. Streaks of pure white branch through it. A black lid seals the mouth.*

*“This vase must hold a treasure...or else why would the container be fashioned with such rare marble?” the woman says to herself. “And why should I not simply peek? I won’t touch or take. The gods surely do not mean that I should not look. Other people perhaps... but I am Pandora and am blessed above other women. I am sure their rule is not intended for*

*me....”*

*She stands, strokes the rich marble once more, and then smiling uses both hands to pull the stopper from the vase. It comes free with a hiss so loud Pandora drops it on the stone floor.*

*Crack! The lid shatters into a thousand thousand pieces.*

*Jared cries out. Smoke, the color of rotting flesh seeps out the top of the vase. The stench makes him want to throw up. The shrieking, crying, and shouting pierces his mind again.*

*Pandora screams. She tries to cover the top of the vase with her hands but the thick vapor oozes between her fingers.*

*“Help me,” she cries out. “Great gods, mothers and fathers please help me! Someone help me!”*

*Jared falters back. He won’t put his hands on the smoke. It is bad...*

*The smoke curls into shapes that weave back and forth in front of his eyes...sick people, dying animals, dead fields, fighting men, hungry children, empty, empty eyes. There is a sound now...laughing.*

*Jared screams and steps back again, but trips and falls.*

*Pandora pleads again and again with the gods. But there is no answer except the terrible*

*laugh. The smoke crawls across the courtyard. It never seems to stop. The wind gusts in through the open windows and carries the smog out the doors and across the fields. Jared sees the beautiful garden wither and die.*

*Finally the jar is empty. Pandora lays her head on the table and sobs. The smoke has smudged her face and wrinkled her hands so that she is no longer beautiful. Jared sits on the flagstones trying not to cry. His ear throbs with pain.*

*The woman suddenly strikes out. The vase falls to the stone floor and shatters.*

*“Is there no help for us?” she whispers. The laughing fades away. Instead Jared hears a Song. It is the most beautiful Song he has ever heard, all joy and goodness. From the shards of the broken vase comes a whirring of soft wings. A pure white bird flutters to the table edge and perches a moment cooing softly to Pandora.*

*“Hope,” she breathes.*

*The bird takes flight and soars through the open window. A feather drifts down to Jared’s feet. When he touches it, Pandora and her house fade away.*

*He looks around. He is sitting in the prickly field. The goat still munches on dry grass. The feather is gone, but Jared spies a piece of the*

*red and blue marble. When he touches it, it is so cool and smooth that he feels the pain drain from his ear. With his thumb he rubs away dirt and dead lichen. The marble is streaked with a white vein, shaped like the wing of a bird.*



# Chapter 2

## Kronos

The elevator door clanked to another stop. They waited. The doors squealed open. Cautiously Meghan stuck out her head.

“Sixth floor,” she announced. “We made it!”

They trudged out into the dim hall. The elevator doors banged shut. Jared just missed having his backpack caught in the crack.

“Six-Ten, Six-O-Eight...” Deirdre read off the numbers as they walked down the corridor. “Here we are, six hundred.”

She unlocked the door and pushed it open. As always, the stale-disinfected-other-people smell bubbled out. Jared wrinkled his nose.

They trooped inside. Jared strode forward and pulled back the heavy curtains. It seemed that the clouds parted at the same time. Light flooded through the dusty window, highlighting the crammed furniture — double bed, shabby sofa-bed and chipped table and chairs.

“I’m glad they didn’t give us a small room,” Meghan said. “There wouldn’t have been room for a bed.”

Deirdre dropped her purse on the miniature counter beside a two burner range top, and stooped to inspect the tiny fridge below.

“It makes ice,” she announced with satisfaction.

“I bet it freezes everything,” Meghan replied.

Jared wriggled his shoulders and shed the backpack. At practically the same time Meghan stepped toward him. The bag landed square on her toe.

“Yeow! Can’t you at least keep those rocks out of the way?” She hobbled past him and yanked open the window. City smells and sounds flooded in, mingling with the odor of disinfectant and distant clang of the elevator. Over everything echoed the clamor of a school bell, and then children’s shouts and laughter.

“Look.” Meghan pointed. Through a gap in the office buildings, they could just make out a whipping flag in front of a school. Trees and small apartment buildings flowed up the hill behind it.

“We could walk over there tomorrow,” Jared said. “Check it out.”

Meghan shrugged. “If there’s nothing else to do.”

They always did. In every city. The first day, they found the closest school and walked by. It had been a long time though since Meghan and Jared talked about what it would be like to have friends and a classroom and a teacher. To walk down a sidewalk in their own neighborhood. To have a key to a door that opened into their own home, with a bedroom for each of them. To have more belongings than could fit into a backpack and suitcase.

Once they had almost gone to school... hadn’t they? Jared’s mind seemed foggy... Maybe they hadn’t...

A spider, disturbed by the opened window crawled across the sill. Jared stared, puzzled. The spider had something to do with going to school...with a man... Kronos...

With a wrench of fear, Jared groped for the First Rock. A tingling crept from the rock, up through his fingers, vibrating through his body, burning the mists from his memory. He had to remember!

Before the First Rock...their mom had found a job at a TV station. The family had started looking at apartments and gone to tour a couple of schools.

Jared remembered how the three of them



had been walking away from the school, swinging hands, chattering about the kids and the artwork on the walls and the math lesson. A man with pale skin, black hair and burning eyes, wearing a steel grey business suit watched them leave the school, watched them stop for ice cream. When Jared stared at him, he came across the road toward them.

“Mrs. Singer? Perhaps you remember me? I’m Kronos. I’m here to help you.” He smiled and held out his hand.

It hung in the air in front of six-year-old eyes. Like sunshine on an oil slick, a spidery tattoo glittered on the man’s palm. Then the tattoo seemed to be alive, to be crawling through the air toward them. At the same instant as Meghan screamed, Jared smashed the man’s hand away from his mother. The trance shattered.

“Run! *Run!*” Deirdre cried.

They ran. Like all howling hell was after them. They never even went back to the hotel. Just tore onto a bus. Found a connection to a train station. At the next city, they took a shuttle to an airport.

They had flown to Calcutta, without any of them ever talking about Kronos or why they had run. And even now, Jared thought, the incident was like a nightmare, vividly

remembered and somehow forgotten, too. As though the memory had been hidden by a mist that oozed into their minds.

“Do you remember the time we almost went to school?” he asked Meghan.

Meghan frowned. “We’ve never been inside a school. Don’t start that again.”

In his pocket, Jared’s hand held fast to the rock with Buddha’s eyes. “We were little. Around six, and there was this guy who scared us.”

“It never happened, Jared.” Meghan turned away, face flushed. “And I don’t know why you keep talking about it. Just don’t get weird on me, okay?” She went into the bathroom and shut the door.

“Mom,” Jared tried again. “Remember when you took that TV job and this weird guy named Kronos scared us all.”

Deirdre frowned and paused in the middle of hanging up a skirt. “I remember my friend, Ian, tried to arrange a job like that for me,” she said. “But it never materialized. Jared, it’s not good for you, sweetie, to cling to the might-have-beens back when you were small. I’ve never met anyone named...what was it? Cracken?”

She turned away and hung up the skirt.

Jared gripped the rock so tightly that his

fingers ached. Something cold and sickly had made his mother and sister forget. Only the First Rock carved with Buddha's eyes, kept his own memory strong — let him see clearly. He had to remember everything. Forgetting would let the evil in. Most of all, he had to remember the slick, spidery mark on the palm of Kronos' hand.

With a start he realized he'd seen it again. Today, tattooed on the street girl's knuckle.

"Jared, honey," his mom called. "We're going to need some provisions."

Jared sighed. Kronos and the rocks would have to wait. The usual, settling-in routine and purchase of something for dinner took precedence. Jared checked his pocket for money and left the room.

At the corner mini-mart, he chose a box of mac and cheese, a loaf of bread, a quart of milk and a very small package of butter. Jared eyed a wilted head of lettuce but passed it up. Tomorrow, he would find a real market and buy something better for less money.

When he got back to the room, the peanut butter and other non-perishables were in the cupboard. Their clothes were in the closet and Meghan was helping their mom pick out what to wear for her meeting with the director.

"Maybe this time, you'll get the lead,"

Meghan told her mother. “This time they’ll figure out that you have the most amazing voice on stage and they’ll make you an offer you can’t give up!”

She twirled around with their mom’s best sweater held up against her.

Deirdre shook her head, “It won’t happen, sweetie.”

“Why not?” Meghan demanded. “When you sing to us, your music is like magic. It is so gloriously perfect it cuts through my heart. But when you audition, all that comes out is a little voice that never gets you more than the smallest part. It’s not right!”

“Stage fright.” Deirdre turned back to the closet and pulled out a long black skirt. “What about this?”

Meghan threw herself back in the chair. “What difference does it make if you don’t try?”

“Meghan, no one gets to be a star unless she wants it more than anything. I don’t care about it enough.”

“Is there anything you do care about enough?”

Deirdre smiled at her. “Oh, yes.”

“Well, if it isn’t a chance to sing where it matters, I don’t know what it is. I’d fight for that chance.” Meghan slapped her hands

against the arms of the chair. “I’d give up anything for it.”

“I used to feel that way,” Deirdre said.

“And you gave up,” Meghan exclaimed. “When I get my chance, and I *will* get my chance, I won’t throw it away. I’m going to be a star with a big house, and friends and a lot of money. I’m sick of this third-rate life.”

Their mom’s lips pressed together and she turned away from them. Meghan glared out the window.

Jared knew enough to stay out of it, to not ask the questions Deirdre would never answer. Instead, he picked up a book of legends he’d unofficially borrowed from a library. He’d tried everything else. Maybe there would be some answers here.

# Beijing, China

## Mercy

*Running...breath tearing at his lungs... Meghan falling...Eight-year-old Jared grabs her arm and pulls her to her feet. He looks behind. The Chinese police pour from cars, leap low fences, teem from shaded buildings, all shouting. Street vendors erupt into a flood of fleeing bodies. The tourists at Tiananmen Square stare open-mouthed at the police raid on the horde of unlicensed vendors.*

*“Run!” Jared cries.*

*Meghan takes a deep breath like a sob and they dart between cars and bicycles, tearing down a narrow street. People sitting in the shade of crumbling brick walls and leafy trees stare, but no one tries to stop them.*

*They turn another corner and another and another. In the distance they can still hear the police. They twist down one last lane and at the end, a gate opens. A tall Chinese lady dressed in bright silk, stands beside it as*

*though waiting for them. A breeze lifts a light veil draped over the hair piled high on her head. Her face is calm and gentle. Desperate, the children stumble to a stop.*

*“Help us!” Meghan cries. “Please, help us.”*

*“Don’t let them put us in jail!” Jared pants.*

*“I will help you,” the lady says. “The police will not come into my garden. Come with me.”*

*They follow her inside. Graceful plants fringe a stone-paved courtyard. Small statues peek between them. The top of the wall is molded to imitate the curves of dragon bodies, with the heads resting at the top of the gate. The lady leads them over a small bridge that arches over a pond where gold and white fish swirl in calm water. Pink edged flowers drift on wide lily pads. Even the buzz of insects seems peaceful here. She takes the children into a red-roofed, open-walled building beside the pond. The breeze cools the air.*

*The lady sits on a carved wooden chair and gestures for the children to sit on pillows at her feet. On a table beside her, wait a small teapot and three small cups. She pours tea into the small cups and offers one to each twin. Jared sniffs it hesitantly, but Meghan takes a deep sip, then sighs with pleasure.*

*“It tastes just like flowers smell,” she announces.*

*Jared grips the cup tightly. The lady is being so nice. "Please..." He feels his face go hot. "We didn't do anything bad..."*

*"Honest, we didn't," Meghan interrupts. "We just tried to sell things from the hotel so we could buy puppets at the gift shop. It was the stuff hotels give away. We weren't stealing it. Our mom is singing at the American embassy. I'm Meghan and this is my brother, Jared. We're twins. And I don't know why they chased us. May I have more tea, please?"*

*The woman smiles and pours Meghan more tea. "All children who are hurt or frightened are welcome in my house. My name is Kwan Yin. To pass the time until you go back to your mother, I will tell you a story. It is a story about my sister."*

*The twins wriggle themselves comfortable and Kwan Yin begins...*

*In the time that came after time was born, a poor farmer wished for a wife. All he had in the world was his small house, his small field and a small water buffalo.*

*This water buffalo was really a good spirit in disguise. Because the farmer was a kind man, the water buffalo said to him, "Master, if you go down to the river, you will see a maiden bathing. Take her robe, and hide it in a safe place. I promise you will get a perfect wife."*



*The farmer did as the water buffalo advised. When the robe was hidden, he sat down and waited. Soon, a knock came at his door. A beautiful young woman stood before him.*

*"I am searching for my robe," she said.*

*"I have it, but I will not return it," said the farmer.*

*"Then what shall I do? Where shall I go?" the woman cried.*

*"Marry me," begged the farmer. "I will make you happy."*

*She agreed. They married the next day. In time they had two beautiful children.*

*The young woman was not an ordinary woman. She was Chih-Nii, the youngest daughter of the god, Jade. She had been bored with her life and so had come to swim in the river like a mortal girl. Without her robe, Chih-Nii could not fly back to the heavens.*

*For a long time she was happy with her family and life on earth, but little by little she began to miss her old home in the skies.*

*"Please give me back my robe," she begged.*

*"Whatever you wish, I will give you," the farmer replied, for now he only wanted her to be happy. He fetched the robe from its hiding place. As soon as Chih-Nii put it on, she floated up to the heavens.*

*Her husband and children cried miserably in their loneliness.*

*The water buffalo then said, "Master, if you and your children climb onto my back, I will take you to your wife."*

*The farmer did as the water buffalo told him, and before long he was standing before the great god, Jade.*

*Jade said, "You cannot be married to my daughter unless you too become a god."*

*The farmer agreed and so Jade turned him into a deity.*

*"And now," Jade said, "you must be punished for tricking my daughter." Jade ordered the farmer to be the god of a distant western star, while Chih-Nii stayed in the east.*

*The couple wept bitterly, but Jade would not change his mind. The farmer god was sent to the distant star. Chih-Nii pleaded with her father to release her husband. Again and again, Jade refused. At last however, the weeping of his daughter and grandchildren softened his heart, and he said, "I will show you mercy. You may meet with your husband for one day each year on the seventh day of the seventh month."*

*And so it was. Each year, magpies build a footbridge across the sky for the couple. It almost always rains on the seventh day of*

*the seventh month because Chih-Nii and the farmer weep for joy as they embrace each other again. Their tears are so many that they fall to Earth.”*

*Kwan Yin stands and goes to the edge of the gazebo.*

*“And you see,” she says, “it is the seventh day of the seventh month, and my sister’s joyful tears fall down upon the just and the unjust, blessing us all.”*

*The children go and stand beside her, watching rain fall on the quiet water of the pond. The water flowers shine even more brightly with the droplets shimmering on their petals.*

*She turns back to the children. “Your mother is back in the hotel. If you go out the front gate of my garden and turn right at the first street, you will see your hotel in front of you. As you leave, you may each take one thing from my garden.”*

*As they step into the soft rain, Meghan looks up at Kwan Yin. “May I have a flower for my mother?”*

*The lady leans over the edge of the pond to break off a flower. “You may have a lotus for her.”*

*Jared’s eye is caught by a single rock shining in the earth, so he picks it up. It ripples*

*in his hand, shimmering white like the flower's reflection in the green pond. On one side there is a carving of a lotus with seven drops of water clinging to its petals. And it sings like the soft patter of rain. Listening, he follows Meghan out of the garden gate. Remembering his manners, he looks back to thank Kwan Yin.*

*But the house is gone and only an old apartment building stands in its place.*



# Chapter 3

## Thief!

The next morning, their mom was up and out early — extra rehearsal and costume fittings. She roused Jared and Meghan just before she left.

“Are we okay for cash?” she asked her son. “I’ve got a ten dollar bill and a sandwich in my purse, but I don’t know what the cast will be doing.”

Jared forced his sleepy mind to focus. Money. He’d been handling their money for a couple of years now. “Don’t spend it if you don’t have to,” he advised.

Deirdre quirked a smile. “Do I ever?”

“Yes.” Jared smiled at her and she brushed the hair back from his eyes.

“See you around four. I’ll expect to see at least two lessons done from each subject — exams in three weeks, you know.”

Jared groaned. He and Meghan had gotten seriously behind in their studies from the

correspondence school. “Right,” he muttered.

“Time to get up, Meghan,” Deirdre called. “Have a good day, you two.” And she was gone.

Jared threw his legs out of bed and sat up. He wriggled his back and shoulders — this was one of the worst beds ever. Meghan was sinking back into sleep already, an arm flung over her face to blot out the day. He’d get her up later, *after* he got his own shower and some peace in the bathroom.

In half an hour, Jared slathered peanut butter on toast while Meghan crawled out of bed.

“Coffee?” he asked. Meghan nodded and lurched into the bathroom. Jared took down a mug, then poured a bit of milk into a pan to heat. Too bad there was no microwave, but the range worked and the coffee pot was still half full.

He could hear the shower clank as it turned on. In about ten minutes Meghan would emerge, almost human. Methodically, Jared drew back the curtains, cleared the small table, then searched out their lesson books and assignment pages. He turned on their ancient laptop, searched out the wi fi connection and found the education site they used. Meghan was nearly a year ahead of him in math and French, but he was way beyond

her in literature and history. That was because of the rocks. He'd once thought that if he read enough, he'd find someone else, somewhere, who had seen or heard the same things he had. It hadn't happened.

The pipes squealed as the shower turned off. Jared poured the waiting mug half full of coffee, and then filled it with heated milk and two spoonfuls of sugar.

The bathroom door opened in a cloud of fragrant steam. Meghan, her hair twisted into a wildly frizzing ponytail on top of her head, emerged. She accepted the mug Jared offered and took a long, rapturous sip.

"Ahhhh....thank you!"

He let her have a couple more long draughts of coffee before trying to talk to her. She was *not* a morning person.

"So what's the plan?" he asked when her eyes seemed to be more or less open.

"Mom said we had to study," she mumbled.

"Never put off 'til later what you can ignore altogether." Jared grinned. "How about a tour of Pike Place Market? It's been years since we've been in Seattle. Do you remember those juggling sticks I got from a street vendor?"

Meghan winced. "I have a horrible memory of a flight attendant taking them away from you for bopping all the passengers — and me



— on the head.”

Jared laughed. “I was just getting good. If I can find another set, you’ll be amazed.”

“Spare me.” She pulled a sweater over her T-shirt. “Let’s go.”

They clattered down the stairs and with a wave at Marquis at the desk, headed out the front door. The morning was cloudy but pleasant. Meghan squinted up at the sky. “Think it will rain?”

Jared shrugged. “This is Seattle. Who knows?”

Then, without another word they turned toward the low hills.

The Saturday morning schoolyard was empty except for a young mother pushing a toddler on a tire swing. Jared and Meghan circled the flat-roofed building peering in the windows. Jared wished he could read the kids’ stories and poems stapled to the classroom walls. In one room, living luxuriously in a large cage below a crayoned mobile, a rusty orange guinea pig peered up through the window at them. His little mouth twitched as he leaned his front paws up on the side of the cage and squealed his starvation, despite a full food dish and his very plump body.

Meghan laughed. “That looks like one spoiled little pig.”

They made another round of the playground, climbed the big toys, slid down the corkscrew slide, and did flips on the monkey bars. After a while, they walked away from the school and headed back toward the businesses and market.

The shops were interesting — a blend of tourist fare and fashion. Meghan paused in front of a window where hand-crafted Native American silver necklaces, bracelets and ear rings were draped over jade and soapstone carvings.

“I sure wish we were rich,” she said.

Jared waited until she was done wishing and then they ran, laughing and dodging pedestrians, down to Pike Place Market overlooking the salt water of Puget Sound. For a while they watched clerks huckstering seafood in the fish market. With all the other tourists they laughed when one clerk picked up a salmon as long as his arm and hurled it like a javelin to another clerk to be packaged.

“Sockeye flying at you!” he yelled. The other clerk caught it deftly. A moment later a bag of oysters was tossed and caught as well.

The twins moved past stall after stall of hand-crafted goods — everything from carved wood to tie-dyed baby clothes to home-made jams and jellies. Jared examined the

fresh vegetables, choosing a bunch of baby lettuce and a half-dozen apples while Meghan lingered in front of huge bouquets of vibrant flowers.

“Ten dollars!” an elderly Asian woman coaxed.

Meghan shook her head and they went on. At a stall of brightly painted juggling sticks, Jared stared for a long time.

“We can’t even think about affording those,” Meghan reminded him.

“I know...but they’re only eight dollars. Maybe I miscounted how much we have.” Without much hope, Jared took out his wallet. What if there was a stray ten dollar bill he’d forgotten about. Nope. \$82. Barely food money until their mom got paid. One of their two credit cards wouldn’t accept any more charges. The other was nearly maxed out, too.

Even if he had found a forgotten \$10 or \$20, he couldn’t spend it on juggling sticks.

Jared was sliding the wallet back into his pocket when it happened. He felt a jolt against his arm. The wallet was wrenched from his hand. The teenage girl took to her heels, weaving between the shoppers.

“Stop her!” Jared yelled.

Meghan, five stalls up, turned her head sharply at her twin’s voice.

“She stole our wallet!” He was running full out, but the girl had too much of a head start. She didn’t count on Meghan.

Dropping the bracelet she’d been fingering, Meghan launched herself at the thief in a full body tackle. The girl went down, Meghan on top of her.

A woman in the crowd screamed. The girl writhed from beneath Meghan, but Jared grabbed the thief by both arms and hauled her, twisting and swearing, to her feet.

“Meghan! You okay?”

“Fine,” his sister said, getting up and rubbing the greasy dirt from her elbows and jeans. “What’s the big idea?” The girl hunched back, scowling. “Don’t you ever think you can swipe our money!” Enraged, Meghan waved her fist in the girl’s face. “When you don’t have much, you fight to keep it. Understand!”

“Ah, I’m so scared,” the thief sneered back. Her voice was curiously flat. With a shock, Jared recognized her as the girl in the bus station, the one who had interrupted his attempt to get control of the song that was haunting him. The one with the tattoo on her knuckle.

“What’s going on?” A police officer towered over them.

“It’s a fight, officer,” the screaming woman cried. “These teenagers!”

“This witch stole our wallet,” Meghan retorted. She snatched the leather billfold from the girl’s hand and held it up. “This is our grocery money and she just whammed into my brother and yanked it out of his hand. She ran toward me so I tackled her.”

“Really?” the police officer said. “And so you two got into a fight?”

“You think?” Meghan handed the wallet to Jared. “Maybe I should point out that it’s your job, not mine, to tackle thieves.”

“And what if she’d had a knife?”

“Then you really should have hurried up, instead of leaving it to us.”

“Meghan, cool it!” Jared hissed.

But the officer seemed to be amused by Meghan. “I’m here now.”

Meghan smiled sunnily. “Then why don’t you take her away to jail or something?”

Until now the girl had been glaring sullenly at the police officer. Abruptly, she began to swear at them. The words were hoarse, harsh words — more terrible for being uttered in such a flat voice.

The officer’s face hardened, and he gripped her arm.

“Watch your mouth,” he ordered. “I’ve had my eye on you.”

“You can’t do nothin’ to me.” The girl

smiled, but her eyes were as cold and lifeless as the thrown salmon's.

"I can at least get you off the street for a few days." The officer looked around at the staring crowd. "Show's over folks. Enjoy your shopping."

Jared's eyes had riveted to the girl's blank face. She wasn't that old...seventeen maybe. Why were her eyes so dead, like the life had been sucked out?

"We need our money," Meghan was still lecturing the girl. "You've got no right to rip people off. I don't care how broke you are — you aren't the only one."

As Jared watched, the girl's eyes changed. The dead look was replaced by fear...terror. As the officer groped for his handcuffs, his grip loosened. The girl wrenched free and ran. But Jared was ready. She hadn't gotten more than fifteen feet before he had her again, caught by both arms. She twisted frantically.

"Let me go...let me go..." she panted. Abruptly she froze, eyes hunted, body quivering. Jared followed her line of sight. A tall, elegant woman moved gracefully toward them.

"Now, Emma," she chided. "This isn't what we agreed to, is it?"

Emma cowered back against Jared. Her

mouth opened and closed without sound. The woman carelessly patted the girl's cheek. Jared felt a shudder run through her body.

The woman went to the police officer, and half turned, gesturing sadly toward the culprit. Light glinted on the large brooch pinned to her suit. The ornament was a curious design, shaped like a twisting spider.

"I'm Rhea," she told the policeman, "Emma's parole officer. This morning I'm afraid I didn't do a very effective job of supervising her. If you'll release her into my custody, I guarantee she won't trouble you again."

"Release her!" Meghan interrupted. "She should have her butt hauled off to jail!"

They paid no attention to her. The police officer seemed mesmerized by the woman's words. "I'll release her to your custody, Miss Rhea," he repeated. "She won't bother us..."

The girl uttered an animal cry of despair. Jared looked down at her, still angry. Meghan was right. Let her get everything she deserved!

"Please..." the girl's flat voice cracked with fear.

"I'll take her off your hands," the woman murmured. The officer nodded mutely. The sky darkened.

"What? Are you all nuts?" Meghan demanded.

It began to rain, gentle drops that lay on the girl's cheeks like tears.

Jared looked back at Rhea. The spider broach seemed to glow dully. A shimmering mist oozed into the air. Its fingers coiled around Meghan's angry face, and stretched toward Jared and his captive. It was the evil...

With a gasp, he released the girl's arms and gave her a push. "Run," he hissed. "Run!"

She darted a look of wonder at him, and then took to her heels, disappearing into the crowd.

A shiver of dread crawled over Jared. They had to get away. He edged toward Meghan, avoiding the misty tendrils. He took her arm and squeezed it meaningfully.

"Ow..." She looked sharply at him, then without another word, followed him into the crowd. Before they turned the corner, away from the market, Jared steeled himself to look back. Rhea's eyes followed him. Even from this distance, he could see the glint of the spider broach.

"Why'd you let that little jerk get away," Meghan demanded. "You know she deserved everything she'd get."

"It was that woman," Jared said. "There was something really bad about her."

"What woman?"



Jared stopped in dismay. “Rhea!”

“Who?” Meghan looked bewildered.

“The woman who said she was that girl’s parole officer. She had this broach...”

“Oh,” Meghan puzzled. “I didn’t see any broaches. But I did see these really sweet earrings. Silver! Nineteen dollars! Is there *any* way we can afford them?”

“No,” Jared forced out, “even though our money wasn’t stolen.”

“What are you talking about?” Meghan demanded with a toss of her head. “Who’d bother to rip *us* off? We don’t have coffee money hardly.” She started walking quickly up the hill. “C’mon Jared. We’ve got time for more window shopping before we absolutely positively, must go back to the room and study.”

Jared followed. Above, the clouds thickened and the drops fell faster and faster. While Meghan hungrily eyed the goods in the store windows, Jared held out his hand and watched the rain roll over his skin like drops on a lotus petal.