

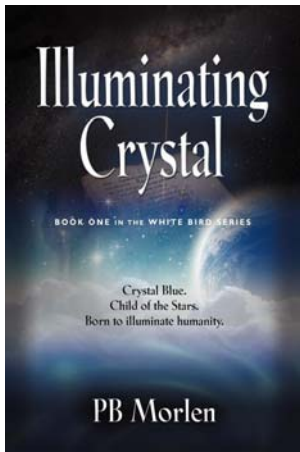


Illuminating Crystal

BOOK ONE IN THE WHITE BIRD SERIES

Crystal Blue.
Child of the Stars.
Born to illuminate humanity.

PB Morlen



Eighteen-year-old Crystal Blue was born for a purpose: to unveil ancient sacred knowledge that will illuminate humanity, thus fulfilling a primordial contract. When she discovers a mysterious manuscript in the basement of a bookstore, an intense transformation harnesses her with unique powers, yet makes her vulnerable to dark forces that have killed thousands to keep the sacred knowledge hidden. The Fifth Age is dawning; Crystal must reveal the ancient secrets before the darkness finds her.

ILLUMINATING CRYSTAL

by PB Morlen

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** Ÿ **

“Crystal Blue,” a grainy voice hissed.

Crystal couldn’t open her eyes—she swore they were glued shut. She gasped for breath and gratefully sucked oxygen into her aching lungs.

“Crystal Blue, d’ ye know who ye are?” the gritty voice asked.

Finally, Crystal was able to open her eyes. She gasped and was shocked to find herself in a room filled with soft blue light—an assortment of eerie animals surrounded her. Eerie because they were all the same color as the room: blue.

Holy Shmoly! She almost fainted when she spied the small blue dragon. She opened her mouth to scream, but the air whooshed out of her lungs. She scrambled backwards and squeezed her eyes tightly shut. Even though the dragon had gazed upon her with amazingly kind eyes, the creature terrified her.

Her heart hammered in her chest. Where was she? Was this a dream? She shook her head, rubbed her throat and slowly opened one eye. Jaypers! Where did the basement go?

“Crystal Blue, d’ ye know who ye are?” the dragon asked again.

“What do you mean?” Crystal squeaked. “Who are you? Where am I?”

“D’ ye know why ye are here, Crystal Blue?”

“Ah, no, I don’t. But this is a dream and I don’t have to answer you.” The dragon talked like her grandmother, so she knew it was a dream. She closed her eyes and pinched her arm. Wake up, Crystal! Wake up!

“Crystal Blue, ye are th’ child of th’ stars that we have been waitin’ for.”

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CRYSTAL

*** Ĵ ***

*To my daughters, Claire and Madelynn,
for letting me experience unconditional love.*

*To my mother, Judy, for sharing your love, your faith, your
support—and your home.*

*And to Shaumbra, for shining your light in the darkest of
places.*

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ILLUMINATING

CRYSTAL



PB MORLEN

BOOK ONE

THE BLUE CRYSTAL

Crystals hold the highest vibration in the mineral kingdom. The blue crystal, a powerful and rare specimen discovered in remote areas of the world—which only a half dozen cases of discovery have been reported—holds the highest.

Three of these specimens' whereabouts are known: NASA keeps one, the Vatican another and one particularly large specimen sits in a remote museum; the rest are as yet unaccounted for.

There is another one, however, that will never be found. Scientists speculate that the inner core of the earth is a primarily solid sphere—they are wrong. A giant blue crystal, smaller than the moon but more beautiful than the sun, makes up earth's inner core: The spirits of the ancients dwell there and they wait for the blue serpent, the one who has the power to release them.

Prologue

A WALK IN THE STARS

The sky was full of stars. Their bright light illuminated the path that the beautiful woman walked on. The colorful light emanating from her was even brighter than the stars as she glided effortlessly through the mist, and her soft-white gossamer gown billowed around her slender, regal form. A large blue serpent with iridescent scales wove its way alongside her, every so often disappearing into the mist. Over her head flew a great white bird, its wings stirred the air softly and gently brushed her face in its passing. She looked up and smiled fondly. And then, with a mighty downward thrust of its great wings, the white bird soared high up into the night sky and disappeared.

Six women and one man waited for the woman to arrive to complete their gathering. He stood with the sisters in a circle and watched the seventh sister, Akasha, appear out of the milky white mist; he thought she was the brightest and the loveliest of them all. Even though he'd known her for many, many years, the sight of her still took his breath away. She was an angel of the highest order.

Her smile lit up her lovely face as she greeted them one by one. She took her place at his side—he sat first and the sisters followed. They all shared their thoughts. Speaking was not necessary for them.

He heard her lovely voice in his head. "Adamas," Akasha's eyes sparkled and her lips lifted in a smile, "my sisters and I have decided that it is I who will be leaving."

Adamas hung his head; he did not want the sisters to witness his grief. He knew her departure was imminent, necessary and expected.

"The call has gone out," she cast her eyes upon all of her sisters, "and we have answered."

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“Must you really go?” He wished it was not her that would leave, but another sister.

“It was my name that was called,” she said softly.

“Do not forget that my name was also called,” Adamas said.

She smiled and nodded her head. “We knew this time would come.”

“But I did not know it would be you.” He hung his head once more. He no longer wished to look upon her face.

“You will forget your name upon your arrival, and you will not remember who you are. The energies are heavier than they once were – the veil is heavy and thick. Your light will diminish.”

“Yes,” she smiled, “I know. It seems like only yesterday that I visited the blue planet. They called for us then, we answered the call, and then we returned home. This time it will be different. This time I travel alone and I may not return.”

He knew this—they all did—it was expected of one of the sisters, and it would be her.

“The ancients will soon be leaving the blue planet and the care of earth will now be up to the humans,” Akasha said. “I do not travel to teach or to lead. This time I travel to witness something never seen in the history of the humans and to help anchor in the new energy they will most certainly need. The humans have passed the test and they are ready.”

She looked at each of her sisters. Their beautiful colors streamed off them, casting rainbows in the air. She looked at her beloved Adamas, the one her heart loved the most. “You cannot help me, Adamas,” her voice was but a whisper. She knew what he was thinking.

“I do what I please,” he responded.

Her twinkly laugh rang through the still air and the stars danced. “You may not find me, I am quite cunning. Besides, you will only be a distraction.”

She walked towards him and took both his hands. He gripped her hands tightly. "I will do what I must – I will not distract you," he said.

"I made a promise long ago and now it is time to make good on that promise. And, Adamas, I am of the sky and you are of the sun." Her blue eyes sparkled. "Together our energies will be too great for the planet to bear."

"I will give up my greatness. It is what I wish."

The sister, Alectra, interrupted their silent conversation. "You cannot govern what Adamas does, Akasha. He was a priest of Telos, do not forget that. The blue planet will remember him – he may return at any time. It is because of you that he has stayed with us so long."

He looked at her and nodded his head. It was time he returned. Besides, he had his own promise to keep.

Alectra said, "Akasha must travel alone, Adamas."

"That is why I must go." He set his chin stubbornly. "I will protect her."

"No!" Akasha's blue eyes flashed. "I do not need your protection. I am one of the seven sisters," her gaze softened, "I only need his love," she whispered, smiling softly at the man whom she adored and had loved since the beginning of time.

"Know this," said Athena. "There is a time for the reacquainting of love. Now is not that time. Now is the time for Akasha to visit the blue planet. She will forget who she is and will have to remember her greatness – just like the others – that is why she has been called. It is a time of great awakening for the humans. They will need her light."

The sister Anastasia stood and smoothed the folds of her long, green dress. "The energies of the blue planet are very strong, Adamas. Akasha's spirit is not of the earth, and neither is yours. But your spirit is tied to many lifetimes on earth; Akasha's spirit was only on earth for a short time. If you go, you must not let your

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emotions misguide her. If you do, she may turn away from her purpose. You must not let that happen."

Aurora joined in. "Find those that you love the most and keep them close, Akasha—the serpents will find you and so will he. The ancients must leave so they may set their energy in one of the new earths. They cannot give you the aid that they once did. Look to the heavens, Akasha, for it will be there you may seek counsel."

The wind picked up and the colors emanating from the seven sisters began swirling together. The man watched his beloved Akasha close her eyes and raise her arms high over her head. Her bright light leapt out of the array of colors and soared upward and in a blink she followed and then she was gone.

"Remember," Astra said to the man who looked to the sky, "our sister is strong, but her love for you is stronger. Do not interfere with her task as you fulfill your own journey's agenda. Remember what Akasha said, you are of the sun, she is of the sky. If your energies become reconnected, it could prove to be dangerous to those who live upon the blue planet."

He thrust his chin. "I said I would give up my greatness so that I could be close to her. I will do what I must."

The sisters nodded their heads; they knew what he spoke of.

"Once you have made your choice you cannot change it, Adamas," Alcoyne said. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

He nodded his head.

"You will have less than half your strength," Aurora said gently. "You will not be allowed to gain it back until your mission is done. And she may be gone by then."

"If I can be near her, then I choose this. I have made up my mind."

Once again the sisters nodded their heads. And slowly out of the white mist the blue serpent slithered slowly forward. Adamas smiled at his friend whom he knew would follow. After all, it was time for her to travel to the blue planet as well.

“We will be watching you, Adamas,” Alectra said. “We will be watching you both.”

He watched as all the sisters exploded into six colorful beams of light and danced into the night sky.

And then, for the first time in hundreds of years, the man sought out the energies of earth. He immediately felt the tug of her seductive energies; he remembered the feeling quite well. He knew the life he must live; he had an agreement to keep. Out of love for his Akasha, he prepared to give his power to the sun and return to Tara, the beautiful blue planet.

The man looked down and saw the large blue serpent winding its way between his feet. He smiled and nodded his head at the beautiful reptile whose multitude of blue-hued scales shimmered magnificently. Then he watched the serpent disappear into the mist; he knew he would see her again.

With arms upraised and eyes to the sky he called out the name of his ancestors. To them he gave his greatness – he knew that he, like her, would have to forget who he was so that he could experience the remembering. After all, it is what humans have to do in order to evolve.

And then he felt himself begin to tear apart, and in one last fiery display, he threw the sun’s power out of his hands and gave himself up to the energies of Gaia.

In a shower of sparks the man transformed into two beams of blue light and disappeared into the night sky.

** Ÿ **

Are you ready for your next journey?

Yes.

This is the one we have been waiting for.

Yes.

Remember...

PART ONE

SHE WALKS IN BEAUTY

*She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes:
Thus mellowed to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.*

One shade the more, one ray the less,

*Had half impaired the nameless grace
Which waves in every raven tress,
Or softly lightens o'er her face;
Where thoughts serenely sweet express
How pure, how dear their dwelling place.*

*And on that cheek, and o'er that brow,
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,
But tell of days in goodness spent,
A mind at peace with all below,
A heart whose love is innocent!*

"She Walks in Beauty" by Lord Byron.

ONE

*Need teaches a plan.
Irish Proverb*

The ice-encrusted snow crunched under the old woman's scuffed and worn boots. The only other sound that broke through the stillness of the night were small pops that came from her old and brittle knees when she crouched down behind a tall blue spruce tree.

"Shh!" she hissed. The giant black dog at her side halted abruptly. The cold air snapped in the brutal sub-zero temperatures, and her dark eyes, shadowed under a black hood, darted about furtively. The mangy dog's black muzzle was white with frost. Steam billowed out from his snout like dragon's breath. His eyes, a preternatural shade of red, gleamed in the darkness.

From behind the large, snow-laden conifer, the old woman peered at the small white house with the tuck-under garage that was all aglow in the light of the winter's full moon. Like all the other houses in the small neighborhood, its windows were dark, and most likely, the young family that inhabited the home was long asleep. From the top of the house, a lazy stream of smoke escaped from the

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chimney and cast a serpentine shadow on the roof as it drifted up into the night sky.

The old woman's eyes blazed with intensity as she stared at the house, and with a rag-worn, woolen glove she stroked her dog's enormous head. "It's nasty cold out, Cerberus," she whispered casually, "it's not fit for man or beast out tonight. I gather it's twenty below zero," she said with a quick shiver. "Won't be long now though."

"What's this?" she hissed, slowly sliding her hood off her head and staring at the small white house with uncertainty. The giant dog at her side shifted uneasily as they watched a translucent beam of blue light stream out through the white house's chimney—it pierced through the night sky like a blade. The snowy white roofs and front yards of the quiet little neighborhood were no longer bathed in the soft, white light of the full moon, now the neighborhood lay quietly under a blanket of blue light. A low and ominous growl rumbled from the huge black dog's chest.

"What's this?" the old woman repeated as she narrowed her dark eyes suspiciously. "This isn't supposed to happen, Cerberus." The dog growled in response.

Suddenly a small object shot out through the blue light; an object the old woman had seen before. It sailed into the night sky and the woman sucked in her breath sharply as it changed into a beautiful white bird—the bird thrust its with mighty wings and soared high into the sky. Two seconds later the small white house exploded into a million pieces.

The old woman quickly crouched down, huddling close to her dog as debris rained down from the sky. Flying glass and wood splinters flew hundreds of feet into the air and neighboring yards were littered with the home's remains. The tidy little white house exploded so thoroughly that hardly any trace was left where it once stood. Only the tires from the family's car were left steaming on what was left of the garage's concrete floor.

The blast shook the little neighborhood. Two houses next door to the little white house, one home behind it, and one across the street were now ablaze. All along the street, lights flickered on behind windows and moments later, far off in the distance, sirens blared.

The old woman stood and lifted her black hood up and over her head. "Come along, Cerberus," she said, turning to leave. "Our work here is done."

The large black dog and the old woman quickly vanished into the night.

Seventeen years later:

Minneapolis, MN

November 29th

THE TALL young woman with the red knit hat and scarf shivered, beginning to fear that she'd never find a job in the dreadful, frozen city whose icy sidewalks were full of dirty, slushy snow. She'd arrived a little less than two weeks ago and for the better part of the week her attempts to find employment had been met with half-assed excuses. And now, she was freezing to death. If she didn't get inside fast, she feared her nose or her bloody frickin' toes would fall off.

What had possessed her to believe her sister? She wondered as she hurried down the sidewalk. Her sister had insistently begged her to move to this godforsaken city where the air was so cold that her nose hairs and every other extremity that wasn't covered froze. She couldn't even see clearly since her eyeglass lenses were perpetually frozen over.

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For years her sister had gushed about the city's beautiful lakes and trees, but she'd either forgotten or neglected to mention that Nanook of the frickin' North would most likely find this city a paradise. Her sister had promised that she'd be happy here. Fat bloody chance, she thought, pulling her scarf up over her nose. How could she be happy when she was frozen, jobless and half-blind? Bollocks.

With downcast eyes, the cold girl navigated on numb and frozen feet down the icy sidewalks, mumbling into her tightly woven red wool scarf about missing the hot desert winds of New Mexico. God, she missed the heat and the sun. She swore she'd only seen the sun twice in ten days. How could anyone live without the sun? And, why would anyone want to?

As she passed a storefront, she briefly lifted her gaze and shuffled to a stop. She took two steps back and stared. She swore she hadn't seen the purple door when she'd passed by earlier in the day or the old-fashioned lanterns that cast a warm and inviting glow to those who passed.

She blinked back tears that the cold air forced from her eyes and tried to read the sign on the door, but her frosty lenses and her blurry vision made it all but impossible to see.

"Bollocks," she muttered, pulling down her scarf. She knew the warm breath that escaped from the top of her scarf, mixed with the chill from the air had turned her glasses into a foggy mess. Maybe now she could see.

She began to make her way up the shop steps to get a better look at the door, but before she took another step, a cold gust of wind blew at her fiercely. And then she heard someone call out her name.

Surprised, she looked over her shoulder, but the cold wind swirled around her, picking her up and blowing her the rest of the way up the steps. She gasped as her feet flew over the steps, and she threw up her hands before she was blown into the door—fortunately for her, it flew open.

"Holy Christopher!" she burst out, stumbling through the doorway. She barely missed colliding into an old woman who was stepping through the doorway to leave. The old woman glared and shook her head as she headed out into the cold. The door closed behind her with a loud slam.

The breathless girl stared at the door. She didn't know that the wind could do that to a person! New Mexico winds were fierce, but never like this!

Outside, a long, bluish wisp of smoke curled its way up the brick walls of the entryway and wound itself up and into one of the old lanterns.

An old man turned his head towards the commotion at the front door and the book he had been holding fell to the floor with a loud *thud*. Slowly, without taking his eyes off the girl who had just burst into his shop, he bent over to retrieve the book and watched the girl turn and stare at his door, shaking her head. She unwound her red scarf and removed her bulky mittens, tucking them into her coat pocket. Then she turned her face toward him and he caught his breath and slowly took a step back to rest a shaky hand on the counter.

With a narrow-eyed gaze she removed her small, black eyeglasses and began to wipe them with her red scarf. She looked away and with a loud *whoosh* he released his breath. He hadn't known he'd been holding it.

The girl put her glasses back on, held her arms stiffly out in front of her and waggled her fingers as she walked toward a chair—the old man's eyes widened in surprise when she sat down on Mr. Putnam and his newspaper. The man in the chair choked out a yelp as she flew from his lap.

"Crikey! I'm so sorry!" Her eyes were wide with surprise. The shopkeeper could see a rosy blush spread across her face from where he stood, and watched with growing alarm as she felt her way over to another occupied chair and stepped on a young man's toes.

"Hey! Watch it!" the boy cried as he pulled his feet in under his chair.

"Bloody hell," she muttered with a hint of frustration. "Please excuse me. My glasses are fogged up, can't see. Pardon me."

With arms outstretched and eyes opened wide, she finally found an unoccupied chair, and with a small grunt, she sat down. She slipped off her little black loafers, which were completely inappropriate for the frigid outdoor temps and slush-filled sidewalks, and briskly rubbed her feet together while she chewed on her lip and searched her coat pockets. A triumphant little smile lit up her face when she pulled out a tissue, and once again she removed her glasses and began to rub them with a fierce intensity.

She certainly had made a commotion.

The man who had been watching the young woman abuse his customers decided it was time to approach her. He placed his hands firmly on his hips and attempted to look stern.

"Ahem, excuse me, miss," he said. "Were you looking for something in particular?"

She quickly slipped her feet into her shoes, stood up, put on her glasses and looked down into his weathered face. He peered up at her owlishly through his spectacles. Then she flashed a quick, tentative smile. "No, sir, I just came in for a minute to warm up. It's really cold out and the wind *literally* blew me in." She shook her head and glanced with uncertainty at the front door.

"Well, young lady," he said, staring up at her with hands on hips, "we don't like loiterers. You've bothered my customers enough for one day. If you're not interested in any of my books, then...." He was going to say, "Then be on your way," but he stopped when he saw the longing in her eyes as she gazed around his store.

She looked around the shop and eyed the high ceilings and the heavy ornate light fixtures lining the tops of the old wooden book cases. The wind had blown her into a very charming bookstore. What a glorious old place, she thought, breathing in deeply. Then she

smiled, the mixture of smells was familiar: musty old books and freshly printed new ones. Heaven. She forgot about her frozen feet and her fit of despair.

Slowly, she walked over to a tall bookshelf. A warm feeling, long buried, began to bubble to the surface and her toes tingled, but not from frostbite. She found herself reading the titles of some books she hadn't seen in years; not since... she squealed with delight: "Pride and Prejudice," "Mansfield Park" and "Sense and Sensibility." She ran her fingers lovingly over the soft leather bindings and her heart melted.

This was the place! She wanted to work *here*! She turned to find the little white-haired man with the wire-rimmed glasses still standing arms akimbo, and still wearing a very stern look. She smiled and walked towards him. "I wouldn't suppose you could use some help?" she asked.

"I'm quite capable of handling myself."

"What I mean is," she pulled off her red cap and tried to look pleasant as she watched the old man's eyes widen – this often happened when people saw her hair – she was used to it, "I'm looking for a job and this bookstore has brought back some very fond memories." She found herself rushing through her words. "I'm a very hard worker and I really need a job."

The old man looked at her sternly. "I told you, I don't need any help. If you need a book, I got it. If you need a job, I don't." With a flip of his hand and a shake of his head, the old man returned to the counter on the far side of the shop.

She was not one to be turned away easily, especially now when she *actually* felt happy. It had been so long. She knew she'd have to convince the crabby old gentlemen that he needed her – she wasn't leaving here without securing employment. She took a deep breath, straightened herself, patted her hair and squared her shoulders, then she marched up to the counter that the old man had headed toward and rang the little silver bell.

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Ding!

"Ah!" she gasped and jumped back when the old man popped up from behind the counter.

"You don't need to ring that thing when I'm right here," he scolded.

She blinked. "I'm...I'm very sorry. I didn't see you behind there." She reached over the counter, grabbed the old man's hand and held on tight. He staggered back when an electric current, strong enough to make his hair stand up, sizzled up his arm; he quickly withdrew his hand. "Are you all right?" Her large brown eyes widened in surprise.

He gripped the counter with both hands and nodded his head slowly. "I'm fine. You just startled me."

"Well, I'm sorry about that. My name is Crystal and..."

"Your name is Crystal!?"

She jumped again. With each word his voice had raised an octave and her name hung in the air like the echo of a bell's chime. Two or three heads turned to see what all the commotion was about.

"Your name is Crystal?" he asked, this time in a softer voice.

"Yes. Crystal. Crystal Blue. I think we got off on the wrong foot."

The old man's eyebrows raised and his mouth sagged open.

"I'm...dude, are you okay?"

He shook his head and pushed his glasses up his nose; then he indicated with a feeble flutter of his hand for her to continue.

"I'm sorry if you thought I was loitering in your store." She smiled and batted her long eyelashes at the odd little man. "I never loiter in bookstores. I love them. I love everything about them."

"Hmm..."

"You see, Mr...?" She waited patiently while the old man stared at her. His intense gaze made her slightly uncomfortable.

He cocked his head to the side and pursed his lips. "Name's Attis," he thrust his chin like he was challenging her, "Mr. Cosmo Attis. And don't call me dude."

"Oh, okay." She flashed him another bright smile. "You see, Mr. Attis, I can make myself very useful because I just love bookstores. I love everything about them, the way they smell, the way they sound...everything."

She knew she was rambling, but the words spilled out of her mouth. "Mr. Attis, you have a lovely shop and I'm sure you are well-staffed. I've never seen such a well-stocked bookstore in my life. I just love the smell of books, don't you?"

"Why, I..."

"The smell always reminds me of my grandfather." Crystal looked around the shop, smiling softly. "My grandfather, he always brought me along on the weekends when he went to the bookstore, his favorite place."

She was surprised at herself for being so candid. She felt giddy. The thought of her grandfather and bookstores hadn't made her happy in a long time. "When I was a little girl, my grandfather would spend time with me every Saturday morning, Mr. Attis, and my grandmother would make us both a huge stack of pancakes. Do you like pancakes, Mr. Attis?"

He nodded his head slowly.

"I just love pancakes," she gushed. "My Gran made the best. She claimed she was the best cook from County Clare." Crystal smiled as she thought of her fiery little grandmother. Then she leaned on her elbows and looked directly into the old man's befuddled face—he blinked and was mesmerized by her cat-like eyes that gently swept up at the corners. The honey-brown irises were flecked with gold and framed by lashes so long that when she blinked he swore they brushed the lenses of her small black glasses—the slender frames didn't distract but rather enhanced the exotic orbs. A tiny green gem sparkled brightly upon the side of her delicately

upturned nose and a small spray of freckles fanned out over her nose and her high cheekbones. He was enchanted and held prisoner by her wistful gaze.

Crystal sighed and continued with her reverie. "We'd eat our pancakes, and then my grandfather and I would hop into his silly old car and go to the *Fionn Tíogar* bookstore in Ennistymon. I'd be able to spend my whole Saturday reading mysteries, romance novels, thrillers, you name it—it was heavenly. I haven't been in a bookstore for many years."

Her eyes welled up and she sniffed. "My grandfather died a few years ago and, well, I must admit, this shop reminds me of him." She blew her nose into the tissue that had been balled up in her hand, and she looked around the shop hoping that she could spend more time in the charming place that had really stirred her up. She really felt happy, and she hadn't been happy in such a long time.

Their little moment together was interrupted by a woman wishing to purchase a book. He tore his gaze away, shook his head and held up one finger as he excused himself.

Crystal walked around the shop, glancing briefly every so often at the old shop owner. He certainly seemed to be taking his sweet time, she thought. She began to walk toward him, but then she stopped and turned around as she thought better of it. She shouldn't be too pushy. So she found a chair and plopped down, chewed her lip, twirled a long lock of dark hair and waited.

"You love books and their shops that much, eh?"

Crystal spun around and her now dry eyes lit up. The old man had taken a chair next to hers. "Oh, yes, I really do. I'd like to be going to college soon, Mr. Attis, to study literature." She hoped her nose wasn't growing, since this was an outright lie. There was absolutely no way in hell that she was going back to school, she had barely just escaped from that dreadful place. She was surprised at how easily the lie popped out.

"Do you have a sister, Miss Blue?"

Her defensive nature reared up and she narrowed her eyes a fraction. "Why?"

"I'm just curious, that's all."

"Oh, okay. Yes, I do."

"What's her name?"

"Her name is Lucy," she lied again. She used her sister's nickname in case she'd done something in the store that had made this unusual little man mad. She really wanted to work here! "Did she do something she shouldn't have?"

He blinked and it actually looked like his bottom lip quivered. Was his nose starting to turn red?

Crystal sighed. Claire must have done something to this poor old man and she was going to have to pay the price by leaving and not returning to this wonderful place. Ever. She stood up, pulled her knitted cap down over her hair and moved towards the front door. "I'm very sorry to have taken up your time."

"Wait!" He jumped up from his chair. "No, no, come back here, young lady."

She turned around and watched him approach her with his arm outstretched, wearing a look of, well, she supposed, a look of regret, like he didn't want her to go. What a funny old man, she thought as she took a few tentative steps back. She was so confused.

"I'm terribly sorry. Forgive me for being such a goose. I'm an old man and your exuberance took me off guard."

"Did my sister do something to you, Mr. Attis?"

"No, no. I've never met her. I just asked a silly question. I'm not sure why, you just remind me so much of someone. May I ask you another question?"

She looked at him warily. "Sure." She hoped her answer wouldn't make his lip quiver and his nose turn red.

"May I ask you what your grandparent's names are? It's just that you remind me of someone, and I'm trying to figure out whom."

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"Madelynn and Piers Blue," Crystal said. "My grandfather, he died four years ago, but my grandmother still lives in Albuquerque. Do you know them?" Her eyes lit up. If he did, maybe it would help her get the job.

"No, I don't."

Her heart sank.

Cosmo gave her a brief smile and nodded his head curtly. "Come with me."

He turned away, and with an old hand painted with age spots, gestured for her to follow him back to the counter.

Desperation kept her from running out the front door; desperation to stay warm and nab the job she'd probably never get, even here with this very odd, old man who thought she looked like someone.

Cosmo looked at Crystal as he stepped behind the counter. He seemed to have pulled himself together and was once again acting normal. "Well then, Miss Blue. I believe you could be an asset to my shop. I have just started a project down in my basement that I'd like you to work on. I will pay you six-fifty an hour to start. If I find you are prompt, reliable and knowledgeable with my books, I will consider giving you a raise—but you must prove your worth. Is that fair to you?"

Even after all that had just happened she was ecstatic! She nodded her head up and down enthusiastically and grabbed Mr. Attis's hand shaking it vigorously.

He was grateful; there was no shock this time.

"Dude. Oh crickey, sorry, I mean, Mr. Attis, cheers, thank you," Crystal stammered in her excitement. "Believe me, you won't be sorry. When should I start?"

"Tomorrow. Starting time is eight-thirty a.m. sharp."

He handed her a sheet of paper. "Fill this out and bring it back tomorrow morning. I don't tolerate tardiness, Miss Blue. My partner, Adam, will let you in. Now run along, I'm a very busy man."

She shook his hand again and started for the front door. She turned around as she drew her scarf around her neck. "Is there a cafe or a restaurant close by? I'm mad with starvation!"

The old man's eyes widened. *Mad with starvation?* She certainly was a dramatic little thing, he thought. He motioned with his head to the right. "I believe there's a coffee shop just down the way. I hear they have good soup."

With a skip in her step she flew out the door. A good bowl of soup and a blazing hot cup of coffee would be welcomed on this blustery day in the north. She headed down the frozen sidewalk in the direction the old man had pointed and suddenly stopped. She had no idea what the name of the bookstore was. She turned back and read the words painted on the window of the door that she'd tried to read earlier. Before, the letters had seemed quite small and unimpressive and had been hard to read. But now they were large and bold and artistically painted in blues and shades of gold. They rested within the pages of a large book painted on the door's window.

She raised her eyebrows and shivered. "The Blue Crystal," she whispered. The name of the store was almost identical to hers. No wonder the old man had looked at her so oddly. She furrowed her brow when she noticed the store's exterior lights. She could have sworn they'd looked different before. The lamp's bright light spilled out of the entryway and the modern fixtures blended unobtrusively into the brick exterior. And the door wasn't purple, it was dark brown.

"Bloody freaky," she mumbled as she turned away. Her stomach growled and she shook her head as she headed down the sidewalk. She looked back once more and shook off her imaginings, blaming it on being cold and half-blind.

COSMO WATCHED her from the shop window. You hopeful old fool, he thought, shaking his head and wiping his tired eyes. He was

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too old for this. He was still reeling from the shock of her actually standing there in front of him, and he was still a bit woozy from the electric shock from her handshake. What had that been all about? It had almost made him fall over.

His dear, departed wife had told him that this day might happen. He closed his eyes and his favorite image of his wife Deloris floated before him. Her clear blue eyes snapped and the wind caught her soft-brown hair and blew it gently across her face as she laughed into the wind. He smiled. That particular trip to Cape Cod had been spectacular.

Cosmo thought of the young girl and his heart leapt. She reminded him of another young woman who he'd comforted more than fifteen years ago as she cried out her heart to him. Their beautiful honey-brown, cat-like eyes were identical.

But it couldn't be her, he thought. His old disbelieving heart shouldn't allow him to trust a hope. Yet her presence had begun to give him a feeling of déjà vu—and her name. He'd almost choked when she'd said her name. He loved the name of his bookstore because it reminded him of a little girl he'd once known: Crystal, his brother's granddaughter, who had died in a fire along with the rest of her family. The bookstore had the name long before he'd bought it.

Earlier, when he had taken a little extra time with the female customer, he'd watched her. He hadn't had feelings like this in years. She had him a little flustered—first her appearance, then her enthusiasm, and finally her tears. But her sister's and grandparent's names weren't the ones he'd hoped to hear. He should have known, shouldn't have gotten his hopes up.

He'd looked her over as he'd slowly walked back to where she had taken a seat in the front of his shop. He'd watched her twirl a long lock of black hair. He'd seen this style many times before, worn by various students who'd wandered through his shop and he'd presumed they were potheads or derelicts as the dreadlocks

appeared quite messy. Hers, on the other hand, were tidy and so artfully done they seemed almost, well, cheerful—and, he thought, quite attractive. He'd never understood why anyone would let their hair get into this state, but when Crystal had leaned against the counter and spoke into his face, he'd eyed the locks up close and had realized there was a practical art to this style; her locks were anything but random and messy.

As he'd approached her and watched her twirl her hair, he saw her chew her bottom lip nervously; that act had softened him up even more. She was young, probably seventeen or eighteen, making her age about right. She was very tall, almost regal, just like...well, he thought, maybe her presence around the shop would be therapeutic for his old soul even if she did look like she'd just come straight from Woodstock.

He considered her voice. It had a sing-song quality to it—certain words she softened slightly and others were clipped short. When she'd mentioned the name of the town and the bookstore she'd gone to on the weekends with her grandfather, the words came naturally, like she'd spoken them often. He couldn't remember the name of the town, but she had called the bookstore the 'fin che-gar.' He shook his head, struggling to place her accent.

He knew he'd been brusque with the girl, but she'd caught him off guard. He snorted. Nobody had ever called him a "dude," at least not to his face. All the young college kids who came into his shop steered clear of him. She certainly wasn't afraid of him though. He shook his head and smiled. She was like a ray of sunshine in his lonely life.

He remembered when she'd put her hat back on, pulling it gracefully over her thick head of hair, he'd been afraid she would leave. That's when he decided he wanted her around.

And so he had surprised himself. He had given her the job he was holding for his grandson, Daniel. His brother's letter that had come with the shipment of books had said he would need to hire a

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relative for this particular job. But it was his store and he could do anything he wanted. In all probability, she wasn't who he thought she was, but an old man could hope, couldn't he? She certainly was a persistent little thing, he thought with a grin.

With a glint in his eye that hadn't shown up in years, he made his way back to his office in search of his pipe. "Dude," he shook his head and laughed as he closed the door softly behind him.

TWO

No time like the present.

Unknown Proverb

*C*rystal dreamed of him, the fair-haired man with the sad, blue eyes that she'd dreamt of her whole life. But now he lay still and pale as death. She laid her hand on his heart; it wasn't beating and her own felt like it was breaking. Around her stood the group of men and women who had also inhabited her dreams for years, she knew them all; they stood with closed eyes and their faces seemed to be made of stone. Why wouldn't they help him? She began to panic. The man needed them!

A soft blue light swirled around her as soft music flowed. A small white lion walked over to the man and sat down, turning its luminous green eyes towards her. "We will have to go back," the cat's deep voice rumbled. She felt something nudge her leg and she looked down, a huge, black dog with soft brown eyes peered up at her. She stroked the dog's head and the peace and calm that she knew would follow this intimate gesture flowed through her.

And then everyone disappeared, even the dog, and suddenly, a huge gold snake with monstrous fangs lunged toward her.

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The ringing of the phone woke her and the shrill sound sent the cat, Vincent, flying off the couch. Her heart hammered in her chest and for a moment she didn't know where she was. The phone rang once again; her hand shook as she brought the phone to her ear. "Lo?"

"Hey Crys, it's me," her sister said softly. "You okay? You sound funny."

"Yeah, yeah. I fell asleep. Where are you?"

"Phillip and I are still at school studying. I may not be home tonight. Can you feed Vincent for me?"

She wished her sister would come home. The dream had shaken her up. "Don't you think it's a bit soon to be spending the night? Didn't you just meet this guy?" She couldn't believe her sister—the one who preached celibacy – was staying overnight at a guy's house.

"Oh, for heaven's sakes, it's nothing like that. We're not gonna, you know," Claire whispered, "do anything. I'm going to stay because it's so darn cold out tonight. Don't get yer undies in a wee bunch. I'll see you tomorrow."

"But I got a...." Crystal tried to tell Claire about her new job at the *Blue Crystal*, but Claire had already hung up. She needed to know if Claire had done something to Mr. Attis to make him mad. The whole thing was a puzzle she needed to figure out. He certainly had been curious about her family. She felt guilty about lying to him.

THE ALARM went off at five a.m. as planned. She stumbled out of bed, threw on her robe and slid into Claire's old and tattered elephant slippers. One of the slippers ears was missing, Crystal was amazed her sister hung on to them—they must be ten years old.

Coffee. She needed coffee. Where was the blasted coffee?

She rummaged through the cupboards and finally found Claire's yellow canister filled with the shiny black and very fragrant coffee beans. She poured the beans into the grinder. "Bollocks," she grumbled when a few fell to the floor. Claire had made the coffee

every morning since she'd moved in a little over a week ago, and this was the first morning she'd had to make it herself. Waking up was not an easy thing for her. Mornings had never been her favorite time of day.

She caught the bus and approached the bookstore exactly at eight-thirty. A new day at her new job, Crystal was excited. She was also in a jovial mood because today it was supposed to be sunny and reach thirty degrees! A regular heat wave.

Dinkytown, the small and vibrant community just north of Minneapolis near the city's college campus, was active this morning. Fourth Street was clogged with traffic and buses were backed up at stop lights. Cars honked in desperation to get to their destinations on time and hurried pedestrians—most likely students heading to class—rushed down the frozen sidewalk, heads bent low against the brisk wind.

Crystal's glasses were beginning to freeze up again as she peered for the third or fourth time through the door's window. She had already knocked several times, but no one had come. She sipped her coffee and stamped her feet. She was getting cold. Where in the hell was everyone? She glanced at her watch and then peered up and down the sidewalk. It didn't look as if anyone was coming.

"Oh!" she gasped when she turned back toward the door. The fantastic looking young man who was now struggling to unlock the front door had appeared out of nowhere.

Her knees practically gave way as she stared and she clung to her cherished coffee mug for support. But since that didn't help, she casually leaned against the wall to steady herself. "Hi. I'm Crystal. I just got a job here. This is my first day and I think I'm a bit early. I'm glad you're here; I was starting to get pretty cold. My coffee is cold. I hate cold coffee."

Quite babbling, she chastised herself as she stared. But Holy Moly! His profile was incredible!

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He briefly glanced her way. His piercing and amazingly clear, arctic-blue eyes caused her stomach to do a quick little flip—and his thick black lashes accentuated their iciness. His black hair, now a bit disheveled from the wind, was pulled back into a thick pony tail allowing her to admire his trim side-burns and strong jaw, which he clenched and unclenched while struggling with the lock. His long, black leather coat, caught by the chilly wind, blew out behind him, and his upturned collar and dark sideburns put him right into the “hotty” category. He was basically perfect.

Crystal snapped her mouth shut which had sagged open.

Unfortunately however, it seemed that her presence annoyed him since he was leaning away from her. Did she have bad breath? Did she smell funny? Whatever it was, she wished he’d hurry before she froze to death.

He gave her another brief glance, and with a quick push on the door, he let them both in. He turned, locking the door behind them, and then he disappeared into the back of the shop without another glance her way.

“Well”, she huffed as she watched him saunter away, he may look hot but his personality was anything but. She shrugged off his rude affront—she’d dealt with boys like him before.

While she waited, she removed her hat and various other warm articles of clothing, patted her hair and tried valiantly to thaw her feet and her glasses. And now, standing in the front of the bookstore with nothing to do, she felt a little self-conscious and caught herself twirling her hair again—something she’d done her whole life when she was either content or nervous—basically always. She immediately dropped her hand when she heard a door slam.

“Good morning, Miss Blue.” Mr. Attis headed towards her. “I trust you are ready to get started?”

“I’m ready and able, Mr. Attis. I hope you don’t mind if I brought my own coffee.” She held up her large mug. “Can’t get a jump start in the morning without it, you know?”

"Hate the stuff," he grumbled.

Crystal slowly lowered her arm when she spied the young man who she'd ogled earlier approach them. His graceful, fluid gait reminded her of a panther's. Gulp. 'Delicious' and 'sinister,' were the words that came to mind as she stared, trying not to fidget as her eyes roamed over his black, V-necked, sweater and black pants. His blue eyes bored into hers as he strode toward her. She froze, now she knew what prey felt like as they waited to be devoured. She pulled her gaze away before did something stupid, like throw herself at his feet, or drool—she grabbed a lock of hair and began to twirl.

Cosmo thrust his chin toward the dark-haired young man. "This is my partner, Adam Walker."

Adam smiled lazily as he leaned against the counter and acknowledged Crystal with a slight nod.

"He suggested I should ask you a few questions," Cosmo said. "I guess I forget about all that stuff. Just want to get work done around here." He was waving one arm around. "Did you fill out your application?"

Crystal, still breathless, didn't trust herself to speak, so she thrust the sheet of paper at Cosmo. Without looking at it, he handed it over to Adam. He quickly looked it over before lifting eyes in surprise. He stared at Crystal, and with a small shake of his head, he folded his arms across his chest and gave her another lazy, sardonic smile.

She squirmed under his heated stare. Why did the good-looking ones always have to wear black? She groaned, dragging her eyes away once again. She wore a pair of faded jeans and one of Claire's silly pink sweaters. She should have dressed better. She rubbed her sweaty palms on her pants and tried to remain calm.

"Ahem." Mr. Attis cleared his throat.

Crystal startled and her eyes flew to Cosmo. "I'm sorry?"

He scowled. "I said how many languages do you speak?"

"Umm...one?" *Why would he ask her that?*

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"Have you ever been arrested?"

Her background consisted of one arrest, but she quickly decided not to mention it. "No sir," she lied with a smile.

"What inspires you, Crystal?"

She thought for a moment before she answered.

"Music," she said, surprising herself a little. She hadn't thought about Elton John's music in a long time. His music had helped lift her out of a very deep depression; she'd worked hard to forget those dark years.

"Music and a really good book," she added after a moment.

"Music?" Cosmo raised his eyebrows. "What kind of music? You don't like that head-banging stuff do you?"

Not anymore. "No, I don't like that head-banging stuff. I like different kinds of music, all kinds really. Why?"

"Have you read War and Peace?" Cosmo had no idea what to ask the girl, her presence still unnerved him.

"I started to, but it bored me," Crystal replied.

"What do you like to read then?"

Everything!

"I read the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, twice." She'd fallen in love with the mysterious Stryder, who was really Aragorn, and had spent hours watching the movies with her grandfather. They'd cried together when Borimir died and cheered when Gollum fell into the lava. They'd both loved the giant eagles, the *olephants* and the white wizard, Gandalf. She wished she looked like Arwen except for her ears and....

"You're a reader, eh?" Cosmo asked her again.

Crystal looked at him with a blank stare and blinked. She'd done it again. What was it about this place that was bringing back so many of her memories? They kept distracting her.

"I asked you if you liked to read," he said slowly.

Crystal's face brightened and she nodded her head. "Yes, I am."

She thought of the books she'd fallen in love with that had lined her grandfather's bookshelves. "I love the classics," she sighed, "Hemingway, Forsythe, Bronte, Shelley, Dickens, Twain."

She smiled as she thought of her hero Atticus Finch. "I'm mad about *To Kill a Mockingbird*; I read it every summer. I think Harper Lee is brilliant. I adored Ludlum's *Bourne* trilogy, and Le Carre's, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*."

Her confidence began to return. She knew her books well.

"I've read all of Grisham's, Follett's, Conroy's, Stephen King's, and Dan Brown's novels, to name a few," she said, "and I think Ann Rice is a genius—she's great, great vampire stuff, love Lestat and Louis."

She twirled a lock of hair. "Phillip Pullman's *Dark Materials* series are fantastic. Oh," she smiled as she thought of the fabulously desperate Mr. Rochester, "and, of course, I adored *Jane Eyre*."

"I loved the intimacy of the *Twilight* books—you just gotta love Edward, Jacob and Bella." She raised her fist. "Go, team Edward!" She blinked and lowered her hand when she realized Adam and Cosmo probably had no idea what she was talking about.

"I was a huge fan of the *Potter* books," Crystal continued. "I'm sorry that they're done, though. I'll really miss reading those books," she said, remembering Harry, Ron, Hermione, Dumbledore and Professor Snape fondly. She'd grown up with them, cried and laughed with them. The books had provided a form of escapism through her troubled years – she'd imagined living in Harry's world with the dragons, the magic, the ghosts, and, of course, Harry's adventures. It was bittersweet, really, she thought, an end of an era.

Cosmo cleared his throat and Crystal jumped. She'd been daydreaming again. Bollocks. The two men must think her a real lala.

But then her eyes lit up as she thought of her all-time favorite authoress. The writer who could transport her to a time that was quiet and still, poetic yet brutally unfair, but full of life's simple pleasures – although a bit too misogynistic for her tastes. "But, above

all else there's Jane," she said softly. "She is most definitely my favorite."

The men looked at her not comprehending.

"Jane, Jane Austen. She understands people, women. How they think. She knew how to write a good love story." Crystal found herself speaking quite rapidly and passionately, which was a bit unusual as she was not accustomed to revealing her book knowledge. Nobody had ever really given a crap. It had felt good to talk about her favorite writers.

She glanced at Adam who watched her with a bland, rather bored expression. She folded her arms in front of her and lifted her chin. Books were her passion and his bored appraisal stung.

"That's an impressive list, Miss Blue." Cosmo nodded his head. "You really do love to read." He stared at her for a moment before he asked, "What year was *Jane Eyre* published?"

Without hesitation, Crystal replied, "1847."

Cosmo raised an eyebrow. "And the author?"

"Charlotte Bronte, Emily's older sister."

Cosmo nodded his head, duly impressed.

"What was her pen name?"

Crystal twirled a lock of hair and chewed her lip. She knew the Bronte sisters adopted pen names to hide the sex, because in those days, men needed their women to be submissive, pious and self-sacrificing: all of which they were not. Her eyes lit when she finally remembered. "Charlotte's pen name was, Currer Bell. Emily's was, Ellis Bell, and their sister, Anne's pseudonym was, Acton Bell."

The two men stared, both amazed that she knew this. Not many people did. Crystal shrugged her shoulders. "I happen to like English Literature."

"Right," Cosmo nodded his head, "you certainly do. But I have one more question. Do you read ancient Sanskrit?"

"Ancient what?"

He waved his bony hand in surrender. "Never mind, that will do. It's not that important. I can see that you love books and writers. You mentioned that yesterday, but I had to be sure. You see, Adam here was paranoid that I hired a dimwit."

Her mouth fell open. *Dimwit!?* She looked at Adam with an upturned slender eyebrow and quickly stuck out her tongue. He could go to hell.

Adam choked out a surprised cough and turned away. Was he smiling? Crystal could have kicked herself. What was she thinking? She'd always been a bit impulsive and somewhat of a hot-head. She'd have to watch that. But his arrogance—and the fact that he made her weak in the knees—were beginning to irritate her.

"I have a phone call to make and then I'll show you around," Cosmo said with a shake of his head. "Look around if you'd like." He turned and disappeared through a door behind the counter.

Crystal strolled through the aisles of the shop and marveled at its diverse inventory. Little threads of excitement trembled through her as she began to grasp the idea that she would be spending a lot of time here. Her very own bookstore, she sighed and stroked the bindings of an older edition of Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. She was blissfully happy. It had been so long.

My dear Cosmo,

April 20

I am entrusting my most cherished collection of books to you as I intend on traveling for the next few years. I sold my shop and its inventory of books; these are the books that I couldn't bear to part with. I know that they are many and I hope that you can find a place to store them. I trust no one other than you. Mind you, I would keep them here in Athens if I felt they would be safe, but I fear there are those that covet these books and if

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they fell into their hands, they would sell them off piecemeal for a profit and not keep them together as I would wish. I will leave it up to you how you would wish to deal with the books; you may sell them if you wish or you may donate them. I only ask that when you do this, that you keep particular books together so that the owner understands their value. Some of these books are not meant to stand alone.

There is one manuscript within my collection, however, that is very important and that I implore you not to sell or donate. I would ask that you find this book and keep it close. It comes from Africa, from a secret place that only a few know exists. This book has powers, Cosmo, powers that neither of us could ever understand. I know, I know, we've always been, you and I, scholars of the material world, that which we can see. But in the last few years, I have come to believe more in the world we cannot see with our physical eye. This book has within its pages powers that can heal, transform, manifest and destroy. You must find this book, and find it quickly. If it falls into the wrong hands, there will be anarchy. Do not fear, dear brother, I have not lost my senses; I have gained them.

There is one thing that you must promise me. You must have someone in our bloodline find the book. It hides in my collection; I could not find it before I sent it to you, but I know that it is there. This person must...

Adam knocked on the door. "Cosmo?"

Cosmo set the letter down and dragged a shaky hand through his hair.

"Crystal is ready for you now," Adam said, before heading to the back of the shop.

Cosmo stood up from his desk and tucked the letter back into its envelope. He hoped he hadn't made a mistake.

THREE

Instinct is stronger than upbringing.
Irish Proverb

Crystal became impatient and went to find her new employer. She found him standing at the counter with a vacant look in his eye, drumming his fingers on a stack of papers and whistling under his breath. Oh, oh, she thought, not again. She hoped for his sake that he wasn't senile. She patted his hand. "Mr. Attis. We can get started whenever you're ready," she said quietly.

With a little jump he gave her a vacant look. "Ah yes." He stopped drumming his fingers and looked down at his hands for a moment in frustration.

Crystal patted his hand once again. She wondered if he regretted giving her the job, or if he found out she'd lied to him. Her lack of self-confidence was rearing its ugly head. She'd been so confident and happy a moment ago, she'd obviously been too pushy... again. Her nerves were getting the best of her. Butterflies were scrambling around in her stomach and her palms were getting sweaty again.

Had they both thought her too stupid? Maybe Adam had tried to convince him that he'd made a mistake. After all, she'd stated on

the application that this was her first job. "I'll go wait out front." Crystal headed for the chairs.

"Bollocks," she whispered as she sat down. She closed her eyes while taking deep breaths and tried to compose herself. This is what her shrink back in Santa Fe had suggested she do whenever she felt anxious. She hoped an anxiety attack wasn't imminent. She didn't want to take those pills anymore—they made her stomach hurt—she'd left them back in Albuquerque. She'd had an attack two hours before her plane left because flying made her tweaky, but she hadn't had one since.

From the counter, Cosmo watched her walk away and wondered if he could go through with this. It might be unfair that he wanted her to be someone other than who she was. But after a few moments, he pulled himself together and remembered why he'd hired her in the first place. It really didn't matter if she wasn't who he'd first presumed; she was the breath of fresh air he'd been longing for.

He found her sitting in one of his reading chairs looking rather ill. "All right Crystal, I'll show you where you'll be working." It didn't appear that she had heard him. She didn't move. Was she hard of hearing? Or maybe, he thought as he watched her, she was just scared at starting a new job in a new town. He'd glanced at her application and had seen that she'd only just moved from here from New Mexico.

Again the feeling of protection swept through him. He shouldn't have doubted himself, and he reprimanded himself for making her wait so long. He didn't know why, but he knew that she was very sensitive and could be easily upset. And for another strange reason, this made sense to him and it didn't bother him one bit. So, he waited a few moments and cleared his throat.

Crystal jumped up and knocked over a small table. "Dude, oh sorry, Mr. Attis," she stammered as she righted the table. "Sorry 'bout that. Bloody hell," she muttered under her breath.

"Humph," he snorted and turned away, hoping she didn't see his amusement. The girl certainly used colorful language. "Come on," he said. "I'll show you where you'll be working."

At the end of an aisle of bookshelves he disappeared through a non-descript doorway. He flipped on the switch and a single light bulb lit up the old stairway leading down to a musty-smelling basement.

"Jaypers," Crystal mumbled as she followed the old man down the stairs. She hoped there weren't any spiders down there; another anxiety attack would for sure be coming if she saw one. She didn't mind bugs in general, but spiders – like airplanes – freaked her out. She shuddered and found herself peering around corners hoping not to see the cobwebs that would definitely indicate the presence of arachnids.

"Here's where I am storing some very, very special books," Cosmo said with an air of importance. "They're still packed away: I've only begun to unpack them. I found it's taking a lot longer than I expected and I'm needed upstairs." He rummaged through a box and pulled out a ledger, handing it to Crystal. "This is a list of the inventory stored down here. I have to be sure it's all accounted for. I've only opened three boxes out of sixty-five. This is what you're on the payroll for."

Cosmo was walking through a maze of tables loaded with boxes and Crystal followed him closely wearing a look of disdain. The boxes smelled musty and the lighting was horrible. She peered with uncertainty into the dark corners.

"I have enough tables down here so that you can work efficiently," Cosmo said. "Keep the inventory sheets in order and when you find the books, check them off and place them on these shelves I've had put up. Once we've opened all the boxes we can re-shelve the books correctly."

Cosmo tapped the ledger that Crystal held with his finger. "I've looked through the list and there are over eighteen hundred books:

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one in particular is going to be kept at the store and we won't be selling it. I'm not sure what the title of this book is, but I know I'll recognize it when I see it."

"Mr. Attis, do you think we could get more light down here? I'm happy to do this work for you, but I don't want to permanently ruin my eyes."

"Bah, I can see fine, and I'm seventy-eight years old. You'll be fine, girl, just concentrate on the job at hand. Remember to check all the books off when you find them. I believe this inventory list is alphabetical, but there are numerous foreign titles, so just be careful to check the right ones. These books belonged to my brother and they have traveled all the way from Greece. I must be sure of the contents of this delivery. I must be sure that there are no missing books and that the titles match the catalog."

Crystal stared at him with a blank look. This is what she was hired for?

"I'll come downstairs and check on you in a few hours." With that Cosmo left and Crystal was alone. She looked around the room; it was a bit damp, a bit cool and quite drafty.

With a heavy sigh she buttoned up her sweater and pulled the sleeves down over her hands. She didn't want to work down here, she wanted to be upstairs where it was warm and cheery and smelled like old books. She should have left her hat on. But who knows, she thought as she peered into the corners and up to the ceiling looking for where the draft might be coming from, maybe Adam would come down and help. That lifted her spirits and she decided to go over the inventory list.

"Bugger," she muttered after a few minutes. Mr. Attis had been wrong when he'd said numerous titles were foreign: all the titles were foreign.

Two hours later Crystal was still rummaging through the boxes and getting absolutely nowhere. She didn't want to let on to Mr. Attis that she was useless at this job. She couldn't make out the titles of the

books. She'd never studied foreign languages. She didn't know if what she was looking at was French, Italian or Spanish.

Good God, she thought, what a nightmare. She'd studied the inventory sheets as best she could. Now her eyes were sore and it was time for a break, and hopefully, a glimpse of sunshine.

Walking up the staircase was enlightening. On the way down, she hadn't noticed all the graffiti on the walls, including a few old gobs of dried gum. She was surprised Mr. Attis hadn't had these walls cleaned and repainted.

I love Samantha, D. Loves M., A dog can outrun a horse, but only when the sun is high. On eagles wings I fly, and in a cage I cry. I love dragons when they're sleeping. This is a dog eat dog world, and I'm wearing milk bone under shorts.

She read the inscriptions that she could see in the dim light; some made her giggle, others made her sigh. There must be a reason they were still on the walls, she thought. And there were many more that she couldn't make out. They must have been on these walls for ages. She was surprised Mr. Attis had left them here.

As she reached the top step, the door opened quickly and Adam stepped through. His entrance threw her off guard and she teetered on the top stop, almost falling down the stairs. Help!

Quick with his reflexes, he grabbed her around the waist before she tumbled backward, and she found herself pressed up close to him; a faint musky scent filled her senses. She looked up into his ice-blue eyes and felt herself being drawn in.

Uh oh. Her heart raced, her ears hammered and her knees began to buckle.

Adam blinked and quickly stepped back, releasing his tight grip.

Crystal stumbled forward and noticed his scowl. Well hell, she thought, it wasn't her fault that she'd almost crashed to her death! She pulled herself together by taking a deep breath and straightening her sweater.

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"Cheers," she croaked. She could have kicked herself for letting her voice shake. She'd be damned if she let him know that she was probably already in love with him. His eyes, she thought, his eyes were beautiful, blue orbs of cerulean light...*uh oh*. She blinked and shook her head.

He backed up a few more paces to let her by. "You okay?" His voice was rich and deep. These were the first words she'd heard him speak.

"Sure, sure." She took a deep breath, straightened her sweater and squinted into the bright light of the shop.

"Hey, Adam," Crystal said as he began to descend the stairs. *I think I love you*. "Watch your step."

He grunted and headed down into her musty workplace.

Crystal decided she'd need to figure out a way to get through the day – through forever – without throwing herself at the man who she now truly believed, although a bit rude was the hottest living creature on the entire planet who, for some idiotic reason, detested her. But now, it was time for coffee.

"Greetings, earthlings," Crystal muttered under her breath as she set out to look for Mr. Attis, hoping he'd let her go out to buy another cup.

ADAM GRUMBLED. Damn, she smelled like spring, he thought. This would not do. He continued down the stairs while he questioned Cosmo's sanity—hell, he questioned his own. He knew his old friend felt Crystal was needed in the store and might be someone from his past, but she was certainly a distraction. He'd thought of nothing else but her since he'd met her earlier at the front door. She'd looked like a lovely, tall, porcelain doll waiting agitatedly in front of the shop; a doll that was bundled for colder weather than it had been this morning.

From down the street before he'd approached the door, he'd watched her and had been amazed. Even though she was wrapped in

an over-sized red scarf that covered half her face, and her hat was pulled down tightly, he could tell she was stunning. It was her energy; her lovely blue aura that had his interest piqued. She'd been looking around, hopping in place, taking little sips of coffee and banging the hell out of the door, yet the serenity and intelligence emanating from her had leapt off of her like flames.

He'd always been able to see people's auras; nobody's had compared to hers. Intense was the word that came to mind. He was almost going to turn around and go home. But Cosmo wasn't going to open the store; that was his job. He had to approach her and let her in; she was obviously cold.

He'd steeled himself as he'd approached her, trying to look nonchalant. He'd then congratulated himself because he'd felt that she hadn't picked up on the fact that she'd intimidated the hell out of him as she'd peered at him through her frosty lenses.

His ears burned, his hands shook, his heart slammed into his ribs so hard it hurt and his mouth had dried up like a sponge in the desert. Hell, that had never happened before. He didn't like it; he didn't like it at all. But, after she'd surprised him by sticking out her tongue at him, he realized she was probably human like everyone else, not superhuman as her aura indicated.

When Cosmo was questioning her, he'd noticed her aura change umpteen times. He'd watched intently as her blue aura changed and fluctuated in intensity. At one point it turned black; an indication she'd been lying. She had been arrested at some time in her life. But when she'd spoken of music and her books her blue aura had gently spread out from her like a soft, billowing sheath; she'd been truthful about that. And it was obvious she knew a helluva lot about English Literature. He wondered about the depth of her knowledge—what else she knew. But she'd seemed a bit distracted. What had she been thinking about?

Adam grumbled again when he thought about their close encounter on the stair—he'd sensed her desire for him and it had

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startled him. She was a force that he would have no control over if she decided he was to be hers. Frankly, he didn't mind that one tiny bit. What made her more powerful was the fact that she had no idea of her exotic pull. He groaned when he thought of her amazing hair; he'd never been attracted to dreadlocks before. But now...well. He'd have to think of some way to get her out of his mind.

He shook his head as he unlocked the door that led to another storage room. He'd read her application and had been surprised when he'd read her name, that was certainly a coincidence. "Crystal Blue," he whispered as he rummaged around on a shelf and found what he was looking for. Then he took a deep breath and realized she may be the one after all. She certainly was a compelling creature. He groaned. How was he supposed to get any work done now?

CRYSTAL STROLLED down the aisles of the shop, casually looking for Mr. Attis while she admired the store. It was warm and smelled good compared to that horrid basement, she thought as she wrinkled her nose. But she knew she would have to tolerate the basement's damp conditions or she might lose the only job she really cared to have in this frigid city.

"Oomph." Crystal grunted, running into a rather large young man who had stepped out from around a bookcase. "Excuse me."

"Hey, I know you," he said. "I saw you in the Java Grinder yesterday and my pal Dean wasn't too polite. Sorry about that. He doesn't have very good manners." His smile was sincere.

She folded her arms and eyed the tall young man with the curly brown hair. Yesterday in the coffee shop, he and his friend had practically tossed her off the stool she'd taken at the counter. She hadn't realized it had already been claimed. They had been extremely rude, but before she could leave, a nice man who worked at the café had politely escorted her to a booth. And now, she didn't feel inclined to accept his apology. She turned to walk away.

"Hey do you work here?" he asked.

Crystal turned around. "Yes, yes, I do."

"Then maybe you can find Mr. Attis for me. I'm Daniel Attis. He's my grandpa. I said I'd be in today to talk to him about my new job. I've been here a few minutes and I can't find the old guy."

"I'm sure Mr. Attis is around here somewhere. I'll go and find him." Crystal had a bad feeling as she headed for the counter. She'd only just managed to convince the old man that he needed her.

She quickly rapped on his office door.

"Who is it?"

"Mr. Attis. It's me, Crystal. I know you're probably busy, but your grandson is out here and he wants to speak with you. I would also like to go grab a cup of coffee. Would you like me to get anything for you?"

"Bah." Crystal heard the squeak of a chair and Cosmo flung open the door. He walked out with the faint, sweet smell of pipe smoke lingering behind him. "Where's the lad?"

"He's sitting over there." Crystal pointed to one of the reading chairs by the front window.

Mr. Attis snorted in disgust and walked over to his grandson. "Tell your mother, boy, that I won't need you in my shop. I hired someone yesterday and I can't have two more on my payroll. Give your mother my best." He waved his hand and headed back to his office.

"But I need this job. I gotta get my car fixed so I can drive it to Michigan next month," Daniel sputtered and shouted to his grandfather's back.

Cosmo kept walking and grunted at Crystal as he passed her. She was still standing by the check-out counter feeling quite out of place—she knew she had pilfered this guy's job, and she knew he was also aware of it as he was now looking directly at her with narrowed eyes.

She smiled and turned around, following Mr. Attis into his office. She quietly closed the door behind her and leaned back

against the door. She crossed her fingers behind her back. "Mr. Attis, I really had no idea that I was imposing on anyone's promised position. If you would like me to leave I would understand."

Cosmo looked at her like he'd seen a ghost. "To begin with," he said, "who invited you in? I don't believe I did. These are *my* private quarters and I declare them off limits to everyone."

Mr. Attis, now walking back-and-forth in the small office with his head bent down, reminded her of a duck in a shooting gallery. She bit her lip, trying not to laugh.

"I will let it go this once because I believe you to be ignorant of these restrictions. As for your job, you keep it. I never did want that juvenile working in my shop. His mother is too persistent for her own good. You just do the job, and I'll decide who I want to employ."

The old man stopped, put his hands on his hips and looked up at her sternly. "What are you doing upstairs?"

"I thought I could go out and grab another cup of coffee."

"What are you, addicted? We have perfectly good coffee in the back. Adam always has some on hand. I guess we forgot to show you around the place this morning. Now off you go before I change my mind about your job."

He shoved her out the door, unfortunately shoving her right into the hulking form of his grandson. If looks could kill Crystal would be dead.

She threw her chin up. "Sorry, dude, but I gave your grandfather the chance to let me go and he declined my offer. I need this job very badly so I didn't press. I have to get back to work now."

She turned to walk away and then she stopped. She remembered how yesterday he had been wearing a ragged leather jacket and torn jeans, with a red scarf tied tightly around his head.

She twirled around. "The music store on University is looking for help. Wear what you wore yesterday and act like you did and you'll fit right in."

She turned back around but Daniel grabbed her arm. With eyes blazing she jerked her arm away. "Piss off, ya bloody bugger!" she shouted.

He dropped his mouth and watched her storm off – her anger had startled him. Hell, he didn't mean to grab her arm so hard, he only meant to plead with her to reconsider because he knew his mother was going to kill him! He dreaded the thought of facing her. His hot-headed mother was going to wig out when she learned he didn't get the job, and, of course, she'd presume it was because of something that he did.

Daniel turned to leave and stopped short. The hairs on the back of his neck stood straight up when he saw the look on Adam's face. Adam's eyes gleamed lethally as he leaned casually against the wall by the front door. He had obviously seen what had happened and he obviously hadn't approved.

Daniel set his shoulders and tried to look mean. Ever since he'd met him, Adam had intimidated the hell out of him.

"I don't want you near her, Attis," Adam growled when Daniel neared the door. "Actually I don't ever want to see you in here again."

"The job was meant for me and you know it, Walker," Daniel sneered. "That bitch just waltzed in and...ah!"

Adam grabbed Daniel's wrist and held it at an odd angle. "You heard what I said," Adam's voice was low. "If you or your mother touch one hair on her head, I'll find you and you'll wish you were dead. Do you understand?" He put more pressure on Daniel's wrist and the boy grunted in pain. His face paled and sweat beaded on his forehead. "Do you understand?" Adam asked again.

"Yes," Daniel hissed. "Now let me go."

Adam calmly released his grip and watched the pale boy leave. That one was a menace, he thought, as he watched Daniel put his hands in his pockets and saunter away without a backward glance, but his mother even more so. They'd both caused Cosmo great

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heartache and he would do whatever it took to keep them both away from Cosmo and now Crystal.

Although, he thought as he headed toward the back, Crystal could obviously take care of herself. He'd thought she might take off Daniel's head when he'd grabbed her arm and the force behind her words had obviously startled him; he'd dropped her arm like a hot potato. There was strength to her, he thought. He hoped she knew it.

FOUR

*In baiting a mousetrap with cheese, always leave room for the mouse.
Greek Proverb*

Rummaging through the old books down in the drafty and musty basement was not the most glamorous of jobs, but, Crystal thought as she twirled a lock of hair and tried valiantly to interpret the title to a large, brown book, it would have to do.

She'd emptied fifty-eight of the sixty-five large boxes of foreign books, and she was finally becoming quite adept at reading the titles. It had taken awhile to get the feel of it, but Mr. Attis was right: The list was in alphabetical order and so far it seemed all the books were there. Since most of the books were quite large and the printing was faded and small, it was taking a long time. Considering the fact that she wasn't sure what Mr. Attis would have her do once she finished with this project, she wasn't in any hurry.

She had borrowed one of his magnifying glasses to read some of the print. He'd laughed at her when she made the request and his eyes had twinkled merrily, but he had asked no questions. It was for this reason that she decided not to mention anything about his grandson's odd behavior the day he'd learned she'd taken his job.

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She didn't want to upset him by telling him that his grandson was a bloody brute. She'd felt threatened when he had grabbed her arm, and he'd frightened her.

She'd handled him though. Maybe next time he'd think twice before he messed with her. She'd been amazed at how angry she'd become. She'd wanted to rip his head off. The hot energy that had flowed through her when he'd grabbed her arm was unnerving. It had taken her an hour to settle down afterward.

She thought of the old man and smiled. She had made a friend in Cosmo Attis. He was gruff on the outside, but once the surface was scratched he was quite amiable and made for good, solid company. He hadn't said the same to her in so many words, but she knew he enjoyed her company almost as much as she did his and for this she was grateful – it had been a long time since she'd had a friend.

Crystal thought back to the dark day eight years ago when her grandparents had moved her and her sister thousands of miles from all they'd known and plopped them in the middle of the ugly, brown desert—away from the Cliffs of Moher and the Liscannor fishing harbor. They'd given them no reason why they'd suddenly left Ireland. She'd hated it, just hated it—it had taken years for her to overcome the grief she'd felt when they'd left the misty green hills and seaside villages of County Clare.

She'd found it hard to make friends—her new classmates had made fun of her accent—and so she'd spent time alone with her books, her movies and her music. She could never seem to fully shake the heavy cloud which had resided over her head and no one—it seemed—wanted to spend time with someone who was always depressed, except, of course, her grandfather.

Crystal realized that her friendship with Mr. Attis and her re-kindled relationship with her sister filled the hole her grandfather's death had left.

Five years ago when he became ill, and then dying six months later, she'd felt a little of herself die with him. She'd gone quickly downhill after that and her poor grandmother hadn't known how to comfort her; she'd been too preoccupied with her own grief. She'd left the confines of her room and had managed to find trouble in the form of drugs and had hung out with imbecilic juveniles to escape the pain. She knew she had caused her grandmother all sorts of grief, especially when...she rubbed her wrists and stared blankly at the wall.

She shook her head and thought of her sister during those years when she should have used her as a friend. For much of her life she'd resented her sister's light-hearted happiness; it drove her crazy. Nothing ever seemed to faze her sister—not even the move to New Mexico.

She remembered when she'd turned twelve, how she'd grown five inches in six months and had towered over her older sister. She'd felt like a lumbering giant with arms so long they practically swept the ground, and she swore her skinny, knobby-kneed legs looked just like Olive Oyl's, Popeye's girlfriend. For this reason she had resented her sister's small, perfectly proportioned stature as much as her sunny disposition.

Crystal stared at a large, dark-green book with faded gold lettering on its cover, lying in the bottom of a box and remembered how Claire had tried to console her after her grandfather's death, but she'd been so full of hurt and built-up resentments that she'd not let her in. She'd made it a point to let her sister know that her company wasn't wanted, and once she'd flaunted her drug use right in her sister's face. She'd known then that she'd caused her sister to believe her drug use was worse than it really was, but she wanted to see pain, *something*, in her fair-haired, perfect sister's blue eyes.

After that, Claire had for the most part stayed away from the house, hung out with friends, worked two jobs and continued to overachieve in school. Then she graduated and had moved to

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Minnesota to go to college, only to return home once or twice for short weekends. When she left, she had taken the cat. End of story.

Crystal sighed and blew a wayward dreadlock out of her eyes – for a brief moment she thought of heeding her sister’s suggestion to trim her hair or remove the dreads, but then she dismissed the notion. Her hair was fine as it was.

Naturally, almost accidentally, her hair had turned into the dreads—she hadn’t had them put in professionally nor had she paid for them like many were now doing. After her grandfather had died she’d let her hair go. She’d wash it—although not often—but she had no desire to comb the knots out. She just pulled a scarf or a hat over her head and that was that. Not until Sophie got her hands on her head did she realize that she’d naturally begun forming dreadlocks. Sophie, the old woman who lived next door, whose skin was the color of caramels and whose black eyes could look deep into her soul, wore dreads herself.

One morning the old woman had pulled her into her home and pulled off her scarf, inspected her hair while nodding her head, and then she went to work. While she’d worked on her hair, Sophie had proceeded to tell her the history about dreadlocks—how they were the natural way many women in native cultures wore their hair and how many spiritual men and women wore their hair this way. She taught her how to care for them without permanently damaging her hair, and most importantly, how to style them.

She’d begun – slowly at first – to go out without her hat or scarf, and after a while she began to feel much, much more comfortable with the stares of others. And now, well, her locks were a part of her and they represented a time in her life when she’d gone through such intense pain that they were almost a badge of some kind of valor – she’d never part with them. Ever. She took pride in them. She loved to style them, to play with them. She figured they completed her personality, her nature, her character and she intended to keep them. She’d keep them in memory of her grandfather and Sophie. The old

woman had died shortly after she'd helped with her hair; her death had thrown her deeper into despair as the two had started to become friends.

Sophie would listen quietly as Crystal told her some of her feelings – her grief and her desperate attempts to make friends. By now, desperately lonely, she'd begun to venture out at night and had found herself lured into the drug scene. She didn't share this part with Sophie, but she sensed the old woman knew. Sophie had smiled and, with her 'all-knowing' black eyes, she had told her that she was special and had a very old soul, that only those who possessed a strong spirit and a courageous heart chose a life of pain.

At the time the old woman's words had angered her, she'd not chosen anything, but then her words had stuck with her and they'd helped her through some of her darkest moments that were yet to come.

"Bollocks," Crystal muttered and wiped away a tear that slowly coursed down her cheek. It had been a long time since she'd thought of the kind old woman who'd died peacefully in her bed. She sighed—again she found her mind wandering and her hands non-productive. She realized she did a lot of this lately.

She looked at her watch and was surprised to see that she'd missed her morning break. Bugger. Adam was probably back to work by now. She looked forward to their interludes, although brief and pretty impersonal, she enjoyed their new little game. It made her believe that he was possibly attracted to her. Well, she hoped he was anyway. Every time she saw him her mouth would go dry and her ears would itch; which was very bizarre. He, on the other hand, would remain cool as a bloody friggin' cucumber. Oh hell, he wasn't attracted to her.

But a girl could hope. Right?

She stood up, stretched her long body and headed towards the stairs, hoping to find a message she hadn't seen before. She'd been highly entertained by the writings on the staircase wall. Crystal kept

this discovery to herself fearing that if Mr. Attis found them he might destroy them. Sometimes she felt like a voyeur reading the messages, but she hoped for juicy tidbits of gossip. She purposefully read only five or six a day so that she'd have something to look forward to; she didn't want to read them all at once. Working down in the smelly, old, drafty basement was lonely and the messages in a quirky way became her friends.

Twinkle, twinkle, little mouse; go away this ain't your house. She smiled. Whenever she read this one she always hummed the tune and it took a while for the melody to stop playing over and over in her head. She thought the one about the cats was very clever: *Thousands of years ago cats were worshipped as gods. Cats have never forgotten this.*

But her favorite by far was the beautiful passage about a girl:

*She walks in beauty, like the night,
Of cloudless climes and starry skies
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes:
Thus mellowed to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.*

She re-read this one every day before she left for home. She pictured herself walking beneath nighttime's cloudless sky full of bright and twinkly stars. It was such a romantic vision that sometimes she'd imagine Adam walking with her, holding her hand and whispering in her ear. She'd 'googled' the poem and had found it was written by Lord Byron in the 18th century. He'd written many romantic sonnets.

Yes. She was a sucker for romance.

ENTERING THE bookshop from the basement was always a welcome respite. She loved the muted sounds: lowered voices and

flipping pages, and the mingled smells of musty old books with the freshly printed new ones. And it seemed the shop was never without customers. They were either reading in one of the comfortable chairs or browsing in the long aisles between the book shelves. Mr. Attis had a thriving business and she was proud to work here. It reminded her of a place that was very near and dear to her heart.

"Hello, Mr. Putman," Crystal happily chirped to the man who she had sat on the day she'd blown into the shop.

He was reading in his usual chair. "Is it time for that three o'clock cup of coffee, Crystal Blue?"

"You know I have to have the coffee to keep up with Mr. Attis's heavy work demands."

The old man chuckled and waved her off.

She smiled. He always said her full name, followed by a much exaggerated one-eyed wink. She knew that he, like many patrons she'd come to know, loved the fact that her name was akin to the stores. She greeted various other frequent customers and headed to the small workroom where her coffee was stashed and where she could grab a snack.

"Crystal?"

"Bloody hell!" Crystal yelped, leaping one foot in the air—she swore at the scalding coffee on her chin. Adam, as always, silently entered the room, scaring the wits out of her. She wiped her chin with her sleeve. She'd been daydreaming about walking under starry skies with him. She blushed and ignored her now-itchy ears. "Really, Adam, can't you enter a room like every other loud person?" She hoped he hadn't noticed her rosy cheeks. "I swear I've aged ten years here working with you. You creep around like a bloomin' cat."

His mouth twitched. "Probably inherited that from my ancestors." He crossed his arms and looked at her closely. "I bet you can't answer this one."

Crystal shrugged. "I bet I can."

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"Okay then," Adam said, leaning back against the counter. "What was the last book that C. S. Lewis wrote in *The Chronicles of Narnia* series?"

This was their little game. Yesterday he'd asked her if she knew who'd written, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. "Gabriel García Márquez," she'd answered. The day before that he'd asked, "What's Mark Twain's real name?" She'd replied sweetly, "Samuel Langhorne Clemens." He'd grumbled and she'd laughed and told him to go away. And now, she was delighted. She knew this one too. "The Magician's Nephew," she said with a little smile.

Adam narrowed his eyes. "Oh, but isn't that the first book in the series?"

"Yes, but it's the last one that he wrote, and the second to the last to be published."

Adam shook his head. She'd done it again. Amazing.

Crystal's eyes sparkled as she sipped her coffee.

"Anyway," Adam grabbed his sandwich from the fridge, "Cosmo had to go on an errand and needs you to work upstairs for the rest of the day. Is that okay with you?"

Yes!!!! "Are you kidding? That's the best news I've heard since I got this job. You can't imagine what it was like down there today. I swear I'm beginning to talk to myself."

Adam's lips twitched as he un-wrapped his sandwich. He wondered if she was aware that she talked to herself all the time. He'd heard her downstairs swear on various occasions, he'd presumed she'd seen a spider.

"Do you know how to work the register?"

Crystal raised her eyebrows and crossed her arms. Hadn't she convinced him that she wasn't a dimwit? "Dude."

Adam coughed. "Okay, I guess that was a stupid question."

"Cosmo showed me the computer a few days ago. It seems pretty simple."

"Good, stay out front then," Adam said. "A new shipment of books came in this morning and I'm up to my eyeballs in 'em," he explained. "The holiday season is always crazy around here and we ordered big this year. I'll be here in the back if you need me."

With that Adam was done conversing and took a bite out of his double-decker ham and turkey on rye.

Happily, Crystal went back out front and stepped behind the counter, busying herself by straightening things up, answering questions and ringing up customer purchases. She was grateful for her good fortune, she loved this work.

"Crystal, thank God you're here!"

Surprised, Crystal watched as her sister ran toward her. Claire's large blue eyes swam out of her reddened face from either exertion or the cold. Her long, curly blonde hair, which was usually well-kept, curled madly about her face and shoulders.

Crystal rushed out from behind the counter and hauled her sister into Mr. Attis's office. She knew she'd pay for this invasion, but that would have to wait. She was also grateful that Cosmo was gone; she'd yet confessed her lie and didn't want him to see Claire, he might recognize her. Even though her sister had professed that she'd not done anything horrible to him, Crystal was still nervous.

"What is the matter, Claire? What happened?"

"Oh, Crys, it was awful. Someone was following me around all day. I'd see him waiting in the halls after my classes and I saw him in the library watching me! He was on the bus when I was going home and I was too much of a chicken to ask him what he was doing following me. I decided to come here instead. I don't want him to know where we live."

"Well, I'm glad you did." Crystal put her arm around her older sister and led her to Mr. Attis's small sofa. Her older sister, although bright and sunny, had always spooked rather easily—she knew this

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because when they were younger she'd made a concerted effort to scare her sister by hiding behind doors and under the bed.

"What does he look like?"

"He's tall and kind of a mess. He has a red scarf on his head, tied in the back, his jacket is full of holes and his jeans are ripped in the knees."

"Stay here," Crystal said. "I'll look around and see if anyone out there fits that description."

According to Claire's description, the guy could easily be Cosmo's grandson. He was probably mad at her for stealing his job and was somehow trying to get back at her. She looked towards the front door when the door's bell tinkled expecting to see Claire's follower, and instead saw Mr. Attis blow in with a gust of frigid Minnesota wind.

Uh, oh. "Mr. Attis!" Crystal rushed to greet the older man. "Did you have a nice time?"

"Nice time, shmice time. It's cold as hell out and I hate being outside when I can be in my shop. I did what I needed to do and now I need my pipe."

Oh God, Claire was in his office! She frantically thought of how she could distract him, and then she howled in pretended pain and landed in a heap on the floor.

Cosmo hunched over her with a worried look on his face. "Good heavens, girl, what is it?"

"I, I don't really know. I had a real bad pain in my side. It's kind of hard to breathe. Could you just get me a glass of water?" She tried to look pathetic.

"Hold still, now, I'll be right back with water and Adam."

"No, don't bother him. I think I just have real bad heartburn." She knew that Adam would see through her trickery.

With a look of concern Cosmo headed towards the back. Crystal ran to the office and grabbed Claire, shoving her out the door all in a matter of seconds.

"What *are* you doing, Crys? Did you see the guy?" Claire asked as Crystal dragged her over to a chair.

"Just keep quiet and sit down. Don't ask any questions. Don't let him see you."

Crystal quickly took her place on the floor as Mr. Attis headed toward her carrying a glass of water. She smiled sweetly and drank the water down. "I don't know what happened and I sure hope it doesn't happen again. I'll be alright now," Crystal said, standing up and throwing Claire a look to keep quiet.

Cosmo looked at her with a puzzled expression, and then he shook his head and disappeared into his office.

"Jaypers, Crystal. What was that all about?" Claire whispered.

"That was a distraction to get you out of his office. He'd have blown a gasket if he'd found you in there. It's strictly off limits to all, including me. I had one warning so far and want to keep my job."

"You know I still can't believe you work here. The last time I was in here he nearly threw me out because I spilled a little coffee on his floor. I apologized, but I thought he was going to have a heart attack. He kind of scares..."

Crystal grabbed her sister's arm. "I thought you said that you didn't do anything to him!"

Claire's blue eyes blinked innocently as she shook her sister's hand off her arm. "Crystal, I spilled a little coffee. I did apologize. I even offered to clean it up, but he shooed me away."

Crystal felt like a heel for making such a fuss. But she wanted to keep her sister's identity a secret, just in case.

"So," Claire looked around tentatively, "did you see anyone?"

"No. Unless the guy was hiding behind a bookshelf or something, I didn't see anything. Tell you what; I'll see if Mr. Attis will let me go a little early. It's almost five o'clock and he thinks I'm feeble right now anyway. I'll be right back."

Minutes later looking pleased, Crystal held up a finger and headed toward the back of the store. She grabbed her things and

guided Claire out the front door and down the sidewalk toward *The Java Grinder* for a little snack before they headed home. If her gut was right, she'd know shortly who had been following her sister around all day.

During the day the weather had taken a turn for the worse. Mr. Attis was right; it was freezing, almost unbearable. Drawing her scarf tighter around her throat she hurried her pace. Claire was a good two feet in front of her already. She had to grab her arm or else she would have walked right past the coffee shop. "Come on Claire; let's stop in here. Vincent can wait another hour for his mixed grill."

They blew into the coffee shop and Crystal took off her glasses. She was getting used to this and learned that she could see better in these situations without them.

"Crystal, you look radiant as always," Berry breathed as he ushered them to a booth. "And who's your adorable friend?"

Crystal laughed and introduced her sister to Berry before he sailed off. The café was crowded and he happily filled coffee cups, delivered food and busily chatted with all his regular customers.

"I adore that man." Crystal squeezed into the booth and smiled. By now she was a fairly frequent customer and from the first day when he'd saved her from Cosmo's grandson and his ill-mannered friend, she and Berry had hit it off. "I come here to see Berry most every day," Crystal said, smiling at the round man who breezed efficiently past their booth. "Sometimes he gives me free coffee." Crystal waggled her eyebrows and Claire laughed.

Then Claire looked around the café, wondering if she'd spot the boy who'd followed her around all day. "That's him!" Claire gasped and tried to hide behind something. Not finding anything, she ducked her head and put her hands over her face.

"Who him?"

"That boy that just came in...I don't think he saw me. Oh, he probably did and followed us here. What do we do?"

"Excuse me a minute." Crystal got up from the booth and Claire grabbed her arm.

"Don't go over there," Claire hissed. "Maybe we can sneak out and catch the next bus before he sees us. He gives me the willies."

"Trust me, Claire. I know the bleedin' sod."

"You know him?!"

"Let's say we're casual acquaintances. I'll be right back. Order me some black bean soup and a toasted tuna on rye. I'm starved."

Crystal headed toward Claire's stalker and casually tapped him on the shoulder. He had already taken his usual seat at the counter and she towered over him with hands on her hips.

"Dude...what the hell are ye doin' following my sister around all day?"

Daniel blanched at his discovery. "What do you mean?" he stammered. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I don't know what you're trying to pull," Crystal responded, "but I had a feeling it was you. You're mad at me because I have your job. It wasn't my fault and you know it. He didn't want to hire you in the first place."

Daniel stood up and faced Crystal—nose to nose.

"If you hadn't bulldozed your way into my grandfather's shop and sweet-talked your way into my job, I'd be employed now. I don't have any idea what you're talking about. I've been looking for a job all day and just got done pounding the pavement. Tell your sister she needs glasses, like her sister."

He sat back down and turned his back on her.

"Just remember I can call the cops for harassment if you bloody well do it again," Crystal shot back as she walked away.

Claire watched with her mouth hanging open. "Gosh Crystal, you probably made him even madder now."

Crystal thought of how he'd grabbed her arm and her temper flared. "That kid has bugged me from the start," Crystal sat down with a toss of her head. "He's sore because I nicked his job. I think

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he's trying to scare me through you." She picked up her coffee and glared at Daniel's back.

"It's okay." Claire knew her sister was mad and she didn't want her to make a scene. "He seems harmless enough now. Let's just forget about it." Claire smiled and patted her sister's hand.

"Fine," Crystal grunted and then she laughed. "I wish you could have seen yourself when you came into the store, Claire. Your eyes were huge. You looked like you did that year when you saw that bloody banshee on Halloween!"

"I was a wee bit scared." Claire's blue eyes twinkled and the two girls laughed.

At the counter, Daniel's face flushed and he rubbed his still-sore wrist. He remembered Adam's warning as the sisters' laughter sent shivers up his spine.

FIVE

*A bird does not sing because it has an answer. It sings because it has a song.
Chinese Proverb*

Why anyone lived in this God forsaken place was way beyond Crystal's comprehension. November was balmy compared to this month of Yule. But even though the temps were frigid, the holiday season seemed to warm everything up. Everything except Adam, she thought miserably as she hefted a thickly-bound manuscript up onto a shelf. He was so bleedin' hard to talk to. He was brooding, dark and mysterious—everything a girl could hope for. She wanted to get through that tough veneer and find out what he was all about. That's what seemed to be on her mind a lot lately.

She heard footsteps on the stairs and looked up to find Mr. Attis coming around the corner.

"Well, young Crystal, have you found anything interesting today?"

She shook her head. "A lot of the books look quite similar, Mr. Attis, and they're all on the list."

"Have you recognized the language of all the titles?"

ILLUMINATING CRYSTAL

"I guess. I think most are in Italian and French. There were a few in some weird language, but I found them on the list so I didn't pay much attention. You know, Mr. Attis. I am almost done down here, and I would love to continue working for you."

"Haven't you found a book that was really different from the others?" He seemed to be unaware of her remark.

"No, not really. Mr. Attis, did you hear me?"

"I'm not deaf, girl. Course I heard you. I know most of the books are foreign. My brother lived in Greece and operated his bookstore in Athens. He was the owner for ten years before he, well, before he sent me these books. He told me of a special text that is in with all these books that came all the way from Africa. I need to find this book, Crystal. I'm asking you to find this book for me."

He looked pitiable, hunched up over a box of books, picking them out randomly and looking at the titles, and there was a plea in his voice that she had never heard before.

"Don't worry, Mr. Attis. If you could only give me a little more to work with, I'm sure I can find this book for you."

"All I know," Cosmo peered at her, "is that my brother said that it is written in an ancient script; one I'm not familiar with. I'm familiar with most, mind you, but not this one, this one is ancient. I tell you what," Cosmo's face lit up, "we'll keep this box for all the unusual texts you find. You may have to start over, but I'll give you a raise. How does ten dollars an hour sound?"

Crystal almost fell over.

"You're a good worker and I appreciate your dedication. I started you out at that poverty pay to see if you'd stick with me. You proved yourself, girl, and I trust you. Is it a deal?"

She was elated. She'd be earning more money, she was guaranteed her job, and Adam would be close at hand. Life was good.

A few hours later, she was rummaging through the same books she had disliked rummaging through before—nothing unusual here,

nothing unusual there. Nothing unusual until she touched a large volume bound in dark red leather that she hadn't seen before; something gold shimmered on its cover.

She picked the book up. "Crikey!" she yelped, dropping the book back into the box. Something had stung her hand!

She peered at the book and then at her hand and began to panic. Had a spider had bitten her? She looked at her hand again but didn't see anything unusual. The stinging sensation had stopped right after she'd let go of the book so she bent down and peered at the book again. On the cover of the red book were two gold, intertwined snakes. As she stared, a smoky white mist with an odd, sulfuric smell covered the book, making Crystal sneeze. She straightened up and gasped as two large snakes lashed out through the white mist—they snapped their fangs, missing her face by mere inches. Holy hell!

She threw her up her hands and screamed as she fell back against one of the tables. She scrambled backwards, falling to the floor as the snakes once again lunged towards her, and right before they reached her, the white mist covered the snakes—in an instant, both the mist and the snakes disappeared and all that remained was the cardboard box in which the book lay.

Crystal tried to stand up, but her knees gave away and her throat seized up. Help! Suddenly, a blue light streamed out of the box. Crystal blinked and narrowed her eyes when she saw something in the blue light: faces, familiar faces, wavering in and out. What the...?

Her heart began to race and she tried to scream for help, but no sound escaped. Black spots appeared before her frightened eyes as her vision dimmed. And then, she felt the floor beneath her give away and the lights in her world went out.

“Crystal Blue,” a grainy voice hissed.

Crystal couldn’t open her eyes—she swore they were glued shut. She gasped for breath and gratefully sucked oxygen into her aching lungs.

“Crystal Blue, d’ ye know who ye are?” the gritty voice asked.

Finally, she was able to open her eyes and she gasped. She was shocked to find herself in a room filled with soft blue light and an assortment of eerie animals surrounded her. Eerie because they were they were all the same color as the room: blue.

Holy Shmoly! She almost fainted when she spied the small blue dragon. She opened her mouth to scream, but the air whooshed out of her lungs. She scrambled backwards and squeezed her eyes tightly shut. Even though the dragon had gazed upon her with amazingly kind eyes, the creature terrified her. Her heart hammered in her chest. Where was she? Was this a dream? She shook her head, rubbed her throat and slowly opened one eye. Jaypers! Where did the basement go?

“Crystal Blue, d’ ye know who ye are?” the dragon hissed again.

“What do you mean?” Crystal squeaked. “Who are you? Where am I?”

“D’ ye know why ye are here, Crystal Blue?”

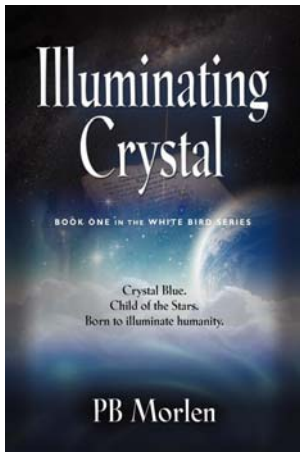
“Ah, no, I don’t. But this is a dream and I don’t have to answer you.”

She closed her eyes and pinched her arm. The dragon talked like her grandmother, so she knew it was a dream. Wake up, Crystal! Wake up!

“Ye have awakened th’ manuscript, Crystal Blue, therefore yer journey has begun.”

Journey? “What journey? What do you mean?” she asked. Why was this dragon talking like her grandmother!?

“Ye have opened th’ door t’ th’ other worlds an’ they now await yer arrival.”



Eighteen-year-old Crystal Blue was born for a purpose: to unveil ancient sacred knowledge that will illuminate humanity, thus fulfilling a primordial contract. When she discovers a mysterious manuscript in the basement of a bookstore, an intense transformation harnesses her with unique powers, yet makes her vulnerable to dark forces that have killed thousands to keep the sacred knowledge hidden. The Fifth Age is dawning; Crystal must reveal the ancient secrets before the darkness finds her.

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