

CHAPTER 1

Daniel fell to his knees atop the pyramid of Kukulkan and looked up into the dark heavens. “Where are you?” he whispered, twisted from within by a bewildering conflict of yearning and anger. “Where are you?”

Lightning cracked through the black and orange clouds across the sky. Deep waves of thunder rolled in from every direction. Torches still burned down the side of the pyramid, and more fires fed the glow of impenetrable smoke that hung over the ballcourt to the west. The smell of seared ions and sulfur filled the air. Daniel looked out over the wide field that glistened in the incessant rain. The bodies of most of the dancers and supplicants had begun to evaporate; their loincloths and axes, their headdresses and the jewelry they wore were strewn about in the mud. A small man wearing a gray cape slogged slowly from point to point with a stick, probing the remains.

Daniel breathed deeply, allowing his pain to flow through him. He could feel his soul expand and contract like a bellows, searching for relief while trying to exhale the conflict that surged like a sea within him. His heart raced. Beneath his drenched clothing, the surface of his entire body hummed like a tuning fork. He had been promised he would never be alone again. Yet it seemed that throughout his journey the gods had abandoned him at every crucial turn. Now in these final moments he wanted to shake his fist at the heavens and shout, “How dare you? How dare you?”

In a matter of hours, the sun would arise from its southernmost point, precisely aligned with the center of the Milky Way, as the Maya had prophesied more than two thousand years before. With it would come the end of the Fifth World age. But most important, the serpent Quetzalcoatl, later reborn as the immense white eagle Quetzal, had promised that if the Maya—indeed, mankind—would learn to transcend duality, humanity would once again become one with the All at this final hour. Whole!

“Will oneness ever prevail?” Daniel asked, the sound of his thoughts rimmed with doubt. Clinging to the taste of divinity the gleaming Quetzal had given him, for years Daniel had sought to understand in his heart the nature of Good and Evil, of Light and Dark, to find the wellspring of nonduality, oneness. He had journeyed across the land to share Quetzal’s vision with all who would listen. But not enough hearts had been reached, and now the struggle had brought them to the very edge of their lives. Even the guides who speak to him from within had said *Time has run out*.

It seemed as if the aroused earth was moving up through the pyramid and into his heart. Under growing pressure from the approaching alignment, volcanic fissures deep within the earth had begun to rupture. Already, fire and molten lava boiled over onto the land in other fractured parts of the world. Here, smoke darkened the sky, and sparks shot through the blackness, incandescent, blown by powerful winds. To the north, trees ignited with a burst as if drawing their first breath. This the Maya had not prophesied. It seemed a more terrible end was at hand.

Daniel fell against the outside of the temple that crowned the pyramid. A small fire burned within it. Rain cascaded over his body and onto the stones beneath him where pools of sacrificial blood had once collected. From somewhere among the charred trees beyond the playing field, a voice called *Auxilio! Auxilio!* The hollowness of the sound, the anguish it carried, sent a wave of sorrow through Daniel's body. The voice of one man calling for help, but surely the voice of all the world's suffering, which now would go on forever. Over the years, had Daniel spoken with greater passion, had he sooner accepted the intolerable mystery of darkness, had he embraced the divinity he had been shown, he might have helped free their souls.

He would willingly die to change that.

CHAPTER 2

The heat of the day had crested, and most of the tourists had found their way back to the main road into the city. Far to the east, a rainbow floated before a bank of dark clouds. Along with the lengthening shadows, a stillness began to descend over the land. Daniel opened his window to feel the cooling air and hear the crunch of pebbles under the tires. Rebecca, his wife, rolled down her window as well, and they drove up through the saguaros in silence. It was a route they knew well, as few others did, leading to their secret promontory overlooking a vast expanse of desert to the west. In a canyon along the way there was a metal gate that park rangers kept closed to divert outsiders from a dangerous stretch of road that had been washed away. Rebecca got out and simply swung the gate aside for Daniel to drive through, then closed it behind him. Early evening air had begun to push in along

the sides of the hills, carrying the smell of wildflowers and sage mixed with the sounds of birds feeding before the end of day. They steered a steady, wordless pace above a dry riverbed, around the washout, then up the steep and narrow route to the end of the road. With sweaters tied around their waists, they locked the vehicle and began the short hike out to their secret ledge. Already, a sliver of brilliant silver hung above the horizon, cradling a round, ghosted moon. Then, not far along the path, leaning in the brush, they saw a bright green mountain bike. Through a shared and intricately connected expectation, their hearts sank as one. They wanted to be out here alone to make a wish and blow out the sun.

They looked at each other and wondered if they should go on. For weeks Daniel had looked forward to being out in the desert, to watch the sunset far from the noise and fumes of the city, to lie on the earth as close to nature as he could get. Already the bike contaminated the purity of that experience.

At last Rebecca said, "Come on. We'll make the best of it."

Her words felt good.

They walked on and soon cleared the ridge above the promontory. Looking down on the flat rock that hung out over the desert, they saw the long shadow of a young man sitting with his legs crossed facing west. Again their hearts fell. Of all the places there were in the desert to watch the sunset, this stranger, this invader, had taken the very spot that was theirs. This was too much. As they were about to turn back, Rebecca's heel dislodged small stones that cascaded down the hillside and onto the stone outcropping. The man seemed to jump. He glanced to each side, then twisted and looked up to see the couple holding hands, their faces orange in the sun. The man surveyed around himself for a long moment, then with a cocked head looked back up at the couple. "This is your place, isn't it?"

"No," Rebecca said. "This is a public place."

"Yes, it is," Daniel blurted out.

"Here, come on down. I have to be leaving anyway."

"But you'll miss the sunset," Rebecca said.

"If it gets too dark, I'll miss the whole way back," the young man said. "Besides, I've been sitting long enough."

Holding hands, Daniel and Rebecca skidded down the narrow path to their lookout. The young man held out his hand to help Rebecca onto the platform. He was shorter than she, with broad shoulders and a firm grip.

“Is that your bike back there?” Daniel asked.

“Yeah.”

“Do you live near here?”

“No, unfortunately. I’m at the university.”

“You’re a long way from home,” Rebecca said.

“I left this morning just to explore the western side of the monument. I found this ledge about two hours ago. It’s beautiful,” he said, looking out at the distant clouds now becoming like fire.

“You’ve got a bit of a ride back,” Daniel said. “This place gets dark when it’s dark. And the moon is about to go down as well.”

“I’m on my way. Enjoy your sunset.” The man scrambled up to the top of the ridge, then looked back and waved.

“Thanks,” Daniel said, and the man disappeared from the glow of the sun.

“If I were he, I’d stay out here all night,” Daniel said.

“Scorpions and all?” Rebecca wondered.

“Well, maybe I would sleep standing up with my boots on,” he said with a smile. Then they turned their gaze toward the setting sun.

There was nothing else like it. Sunset and moonset over the Arizona desert, now only moments away. Holding each other in their arms, they watched the immense round fireball descend toward the black mountain edges to the west. As the sun touched the horizon, it seemed to sink even faster, as if pulled from below. Down it went. When only the smallest arc of brilliance remained, Daniel and Rebecca each took a deep gulp of air, made a wish, then blew a long breath outward until the last speck of sun popped out of sight. For a suspended moment, their yearning drifted out into the eternity that made wishes come true. Minutes later, textured clouds of glowing purple, green, violet, orange, and red exploded over the horizon, swept by the wind.

Now the shadowed moon, like a translucent pearl set in the thinnest cradle of light, hung in full dimension over the horizon. Following it, only a hand width higher, Venus shone like a chip of diamond. Soon the moon swam through the molten clouds and rested for a moment

above the jagged mountain edges. Then it, too, like the sun, was pulled down and out of sight.

As was their custom, soon after the sun set, they made their way back to the vehicle, then followed a narrow dirt road that wound along the edges of steep hills and climbed gradually up to a bald outcrop that offered not only a view of the desert around them but also a vast and unobstructed expanse of the darkening sky. The year before, they had built a small fire and within a half hour were being escorted down the mountain by a park ranger, his headlights and red and blue flashers pulsing in the rearview mirror. Tonight they would settle for a blanket, along with some Cabernet and Brie by the light of the stars.

Soon purple skies turned indigo, then cobalt against a background of velvet. There was a time when the emerging dome of stars on a moonless night had been Daniel's favorite cosmic event. Even as a child, the sheer vastness that expanded in all directions had filled him with awe. He could feel the part of himself that belonged more up there than down here. Now he struggled to regain any sense of connection to the empty expanse that had once held him in its embrace.

They lay back on the ground, looking up. There were moments when the canopy, laced with moving, ghost-like clouds, seemed to invert itself, becoming convex, as if they were looking down onto the darkening earth from somewhere in space, instead of gazing up through the stratosphere. The emerging stars could have been the first lights of distant cities edging into deepening night.

As the darkness expanded out before them, the yearning began to grow within Daniel, the reaching to be whole once again. He tried to recall the feelings of rapture that had been awakened in him when the god Quetzal took him on a journey to the center of the universe, a journey far within himself. He thought then that he wouldn't die. Couldn't die. He remembered the infinite feeling he had had, the endless connectedness he had felt with everything. It reached out and out, and from it emerged a sense of comfort and security he wished everyone could know. He called it *the platform*, a plane of safety that invited him forward, a condition of being in relation to the universe that could not fail. It first appeared on the high ledge in Mexico when he surrendered his life

to Quetzal, and for a long time afterward he could invoke it at will. Or sometimes it would simply deliver itself to him, bringing with it a profound sense of peace. Then, two or three years ago, it left him completely. The world had gone crazy, and he felt a wound growing inside of himself. Now he longed for the heavens to reach down in some way, any way, and invite him into its arms once again. He could never stop trying.

Rebecca reached out to hold his hand. She knew the increasing doubt, the helplessness, the abandonment he felt, and it was out here under the night sky where he struggled most to reconnect. “I’m alone in the universe,” he had said to her one night. The remark offended her, but she tried to comfort him nevertheless.

He gazed up into the endless darkness strewn with stars, his heart filled with yearning. *Touch me, touch me*, his heart pleaded.

So much had come to blunt the joy between him and the heavens. The mood of the whole country—the world even—had darkened so. A nightmare. Millions without homes and out of work. Families torn apart, hopeless, consumed by fear. Unbridled greed. Arrogance. Raw anger and despair as never before, pitted against itself. And abroad, endless atrocities, and always the growing, open wound between rich and poor. Everything was stretched so thin, so vulnerable. While in the background the relentless engine of climate change, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods, entire cities in ruin. All this he carried with him. There were moments, scenes, that brought him to his knees. And each time his connection to the divine seemed further away. More than anything, he wanted it to be the way it had been: whole, open, touched by the eternal.

It was in this moment of longing that a meteorite skipped three times over the outer edges of the stratosphere like a stone on a pond. In less than a second, three long successive streaks of light spanned nearly half the heavens from the south to the north. Zoom, zoom, zoom! It took their breath away.

“Did you see that!” Rebecca exclaimed.

They both shot up. Daniel’s eyes were wide. “It must have been a meteor. A triple shooting star!”

“You saw it! You saw it!”

Daniel stood squinting up into the heavens, shaking his head in amazement. “You could almost hear it hiss.”

“It’s incredible,” Rebecca exclaimed. “Millions must have seen it, don’t you think?”

Daniel still gazed up into the darkness, searching for some further proof, but the gash across the great canopy had sealed closed, silent, unmoving, as if nothing had ever happened. “Talk about making a wish,” he said.

“I *was* making a wish,” Rebecca responded. “I was wishing it would all open up to you.”

They stood, looking up, searching for some trace of evidence of what had occurred, something to hold on to. There was only utter stillness among countless stars.

“Wasn’t that amazing,” Rebecca said.

Daniel had gone to a farther place, his face lifted upward, eyes wide, searching the heavens. His lips moved as if speaking, but no words came out. At first it felt as if a crust was falling away from his body. He began to feel a lightness, an expansion of his being. Thin, ephemeral, but it was there. A space was growing out around him, opening up. He wanted to breathe it all in. The night sky was as vast and endless as ever, but now it carried a freshness, an intimacy, a sweetness he had not felt for so long. As he tested its presence, a swelling of sadness and joy filled his throat to the rim of tears.

From this edge he had to move back slowly. As wonderful as it would feel to surrender to it, he knew it could consume him, an ecstasy he could not contain. Better to caress its edges than to fully embrace it on the first dance. He took in a series of short breaths, then gradually deeper and deeper ones until he could feel himself begin to stabilize. After a while he and Rebecca started to gather their things, moving slowly, quietly, trying to preserve the mystery, the wondrous event that had taken place.

The experience began to crumble when with a dull thud the remote key unlocked the vehicle. Then the heavy doors were pulled open and closed, the hatch slammed shut, and the engine burst into life. These intruders swallowed the subtle sweetness that remained and

left only the memory of a rare celestial event that played over and over in their heads.

But for Daniel it was more than a rare celestial event. God had returned!

They wove their way down along the edges of their hill, the headlights shining off into black emptiness. Finally Daniel spoke. "Do you remember I told you I'd have to go back to Mexico?"

Rebecca seemed pulled back from a far-off place into a present she didn't understand. "What do you mean?"

"Do you remember?"

"Of course I remember. But what is this about?"

"Do you remember what I said Quetzal told me, about the lights in the sky? The sign?"

Rebecca drew a sudden breath and stared out into the night. "Oh my God," she whispered.

There will come a time when you will see three lights in the night sky, Quetzal had said. *They will point you to where you must return.*

Suddenly it all seemed so complicated. And frightening.

"There's one problem," Daniel said. "The shooting star streaked to the north, not to the south."

"Well, it was still the three lights. Coming exactly from the south where Quetzal lives. What would you be doing going north? It doesn't make sense."

Daniel mused for a moment. "'They will point you to where you must return,' Quetzal said."

"Return to where?" Rebecca wanted to know. "Canada?"

Daniel's eyes searched the road ahead. "I don't know."

They crept through the darkness in silence, finding their way down to the valley floor as if the vehicle steered itself. The night disappeared. The saguaros and shrubs, even the chattering of the dirt road beneath the tires disappeared. All the man-made *things* that had interrupted their earlier reverie evaporated, replaced by a cloak of inevitability that now hung over them.

They'd driven for what seemed like only a few minutes when something moved ahead, a man guiding his bicycle along the side of the road. As they steered around him, they saw the bright green mountain

bike and the young man from the promontory. Daniel lowered the passenger window and stopped. "What are *you* still doing out here?"

"Hi there! I just thought I'd spend a little more time with the rocks and the scorpions," the man said with a twisted smile.

"Are you all right?" Rebecca asked.

"Not really. First I got lost, then I fell and wrecked my chain and the gears. As you said, it gets dark out here."

Daniel got out and went around the SUV. "Come on, we'll get you back into town." He opened the hatch, folded the rear seat, then he and the young man fit the bike into the space. "Did you hurt yourself?" Daniel asked, climbing into the front seat.

"Just a scrape on the knee. I really appreciate this."

"By the way, I'm Daniel Bancroft, and this is my wife, Rebecca."

"I'm Jeremy Berman," the young man said, reaching forward to shake Rebecca's hand.

"You said you were at the university. We can go right by there."

"You guys are angels in the night, let me tell you."

Rebecca glanced out the window, then back to Jeremy. "Did you see the triple shooting star?"

"I *did*! Wasn't that fantastic! I never knew there could be such a thing."

Rebecca looked at Daniel, then allowed her gaze to drift out into the night.

"I wonder if it'll be in the paper tomorrow. Or maybe on some of the skywatch websites."

"Are you studying astronomy?" Daniel asked.

"No. I'm afraid my interests go down instead of up. I'm working on my doctorate in Mesoamerican archaeology."

"You don't say! Do you know a Dr. Scholtoff?" Daniel asked.

"I do indeed. He's my advisor. How do you know him?"

Daniel cocked his head, looking for an answer. "I think he did some explorations down in southern Mexico a few years back."

"He sure did. His team found the site with the ice age man and the modern man buried together. We just received all the artifacts last month from the Mexican government. And there were the bones of a saber-toothed tiger as well."

“You got the bones?” Daniel asked. “Here in Tucson?”

“Yeah. The whole dig is on loan to us for a couple of years.”

“Can anyone get to see them?”

“Someday. Sure. They’re just not ready to be presented. We have a lot of our own research to do before going public.”

Daniel looked at Rebecca, then back to the road. After a long silence, Daniel asked, “In the findings, was there a leather pouch hanging from a necklace of blue and yellow seeds?”

“They’re black and white seeds, but yeah! How did you know?”

“They weren’t blue and yellow?” Daniel asked.

“They probably were,” Jeremy said, “but buried over time they probably turned color. How do you know about them?”

“I think I remember reading about it.”

Jeremy shook his head, trying to clear his mind. “To my knowledge, no one has written anything about the pouch. We’re not even sure what to call it. It’s attached to a string of several kinds of seeds. And what do you know about the thread that held them together?”

Daniel had no idea. “Nothing.”

“It doesn’t decompose, that’s what. It’s organic, but it doesn’t decompose.”

Daniel took a deep breath, and for a long moment the words stuck in his throat. “Was there also a piece of red pumice, lava, and an odd piece of metal that looked like a flattened flower?”

Jeremy’s head shot through the gap to the front seat, turning back and forth between Daniel and Rebecca, looking for some explanation. “Were you with the Mexican team? How do you know about the piece of metal? Nothing has been written up about it.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“It’s a hoax, isn’t it? The whole site. I knew it! And you know about it.”

“Why would it be a hoax?” Rebecca asked.

“Because you don’t go finding Pleistocene artifacts and present-day artifacts in the same burial site. Something’s wrong.”

As if no time had passed at all, Daniel saw every detail open up before him. The pouch around his neck. The blinding light of Quetzal, the thousand feet of emptiness beneath the ledge, the vision of safety

that stretched out ahead of him, and the shimmering white volcano. Then the final step off the ledge and into the light.

His mind was racing. He shouldn't have said anything. It didn't come out the way it should have. But clearly Jeremy knew about the amulets. At least that much was not a secret between them. But how much should remain a secret? How much would Jeremy understand? *He's an archaeologist. A scientist! He deals in facts.* In the years since Daniel's transformation and through his countless seminars and teachings, he'd found that the final step, the leap from this reality to another, was difficult for so many to understand, let alone for someone who might be a hard-nosed scientist. How far to go? How much to reveal?

He could tell that Rebecca was ready to let it all spill out. After all, this time he'd been the one to let the cat out of the bag. But she knew it wasn't hers to reveal, and there had been some heated words over that point. People just weren't ready to receive what lay ahead, and it often required a careful presentation to avoid denial or even scorn and anger.

Rebecca leaned forward to look back into Jeremy's eyes. "Maybe there's a different explanation," she said.



They rounded a curve off the mountain, and there before them stretched the endless grid of city lights. There were those who remembered a small downtown area with short streets that wandered from one edge of the city to the other. The core was still the most interesting part of the city, with original buildings, wrought iron, and beveled glass. It was also where the university had put down its roots and grown in practically every direction.

Daniel looked over his shoulder at Jeremy. "Why don't we get a bite to eat before we drop you off. You must be hungry."

Even in the dim dashboard light Daniel could see Jeremy's eyes widen. "So long as we don't exceed my per diem," he said with a smile.

"We've been hungry students," Rebecca said. "We'll go easy. Besides, it will be our treat."

“Then we’ll have to go for the big linen,” Jeremy said. “Lucky for you guys, there’s no big linen in my neck of the woods. I mean really big linen.”

“I wouldn’t know, but I suspect grad students carry a special kind of hunger,” Daniel said.

“We do. We do,” Jeremy said. “Doc students even more so.”

A parking space appeared near a restaurant with a brass lantern hanging outside. A small bell tinkled as they went in.

Jeremy held a seat for Rebecca, and they sat down. The waiter left with their orders, and a heavy silence hung over the table. “It’s a hoax, isn’t it?” Jeremy finally said. “There’s no other explanation.”

Daniel glanced at Rebecca. “There is another explanation,” he said, drawing a deep breath. He arranged his silverware. “A number of years ago, I was down in Mexico on a mission to find myself, as people today might describe it. My life was messed up. I’d been through a divorce, a stream of job losses, heart failure. I was a mess. The only thing that was any good was Rebecca, here, who kept telling me I had to find out what was wrong. Through a series of messages that I won’t bother you with, I found myself down in the jungles of Veracruz, looking to meet with an entity named Quetzal. I had no idea who or what it was, and to this day I can’t tell you whether I dreamed it or what, but I’m pretty sure the bones your people found were mine.”

Jeremy’s head shot back in total disbelief.

“That’s how I know what was in the pouch. It had been given to me in Acapec, and I’d been wearing it around my neck for about a week. Yes, it was made from leather and seeds, and it was hung around my neck by a priest named Bartolomeo, along with the piece of red pumice. The pumice represents my centeredness in the universe. What I call the flower key, the metal talisman, I had found years earlier near my mailbox back East. That’s a story in itself.”

“I know a little about that,” Jeremy said. “It’s in the shape of the painting of the four-fingered hand inside the cave. And it was the hand of the ancient remains found buried next to you.” Jeremy rolled his eyes. “Listen to me, ‘buried next to you,’ like it was, ‘yeah, these two guys who lived twelve thousand years apart were buried together. Next case.’”

“How do these things happen?” Daniel wondered, still.

“Hoax, that’s how. And whose bones are you carrying around inside you now? Quetzal’s, or whoever it was?”

“No, not a hoax,” Daniel said, his eyes focusing on Jeremy. “Transformation.”

Rebecca looked down and smoothed the napkin on her lap.

“The old me died down below, and the new me was born high up there on the ledge in front of the cave.” Daniel’s head twitched slightly as if caught between two memories. “I stepped off that ledge. And you know, it has to be over a thousand feet down. And here I am.”

Jeremy’s vacant eyes looked out over the restaurant.

“It’s faith. It’s trust.” Daniel searched for more words.

The young man’s mouth twisted with doubt.

“Jeremy,” Daniel said, holding the edge of the table with one hand and knocking on the arm of his chair with the other, “this stuff isn’t the ultimate reality. I know that’s hard for a scientist like yourself to believe, but it’s true. Life, the world, is made up of different stuff than what most people think. Stuff that’s ten, twelve dimensions beyond all this. Energy. Consciousness. It’s an incredible confluence that can take any form, be any thing you can possibly imagine. There’s no time. All things are. No past or future. Just presence. Being.”

Rebecca explored Jeremy’s face for his reaction. It was as if his mind had left him.

“That four-fingered man you found? That was also me,” Daniel said. “That’s why you found us together.” He paused. “I think the tiger might have attacked us in some earlier life, as you say, twelve thousand years ago.”

They finished their meal in relative silence. Daniel and Rebecca took Jeremy to a tall dormitory where he was a proctor. He chained his disabled bike to a stand alongside the building. and they said their thank-yous and good-byes. On the way home, Daniel said to Rebecca, “About the shooting stars: I think there is something wrong. I’m going to go north tomorrow. I think I know where I have to be.”

The next morning in the early light of dawn, as Daniel was about to leave, a bedraggled Jeremy appeared at the front door. “This is for you,” he said, and handed Daniel a ziplock plastic bag. In it was a small mud-encrusted leather pouch attached to a string of seeds that had

turned black and white, a piece of red pumice, and the odd-looking piece of metal that Daniel had called a flower key. There was also a small piece of bone. “I took them from the lab. They’re yours. I was up all night. And I’ve added this fragment of Australopithecine skull. It was just sitting there. And it felt right.”

Daniel examined the encrusted specimen. “Is it from the ancient man found at the site?”

“No. This is at least a million years older, from somewhere in Africa. Early man becoming human.” He looked up at Daniel. Then, as if to explain his behavior, he said, “I don’t know why, but I believe everything you’ve said.”