



BEACON
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SECRETS
OF THE
HIGHLANDS



D. J. WILLIAMS

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Praise for *Secrets of the Highlands*

The Beacon Hill series just keeps getting better! *Secrets of the Highlands* is a sequel worth the wait.

JESS CORBAN, author of *A Gentle Tyranny*

As with *Hunt for Eden's Star*, this next installment in the Beacon Hill series promises a continuation of characters quickly becoming fast favorites for my bookshelf! The intoxicating story takes me places I didn't expect to go with intense adventure, supernatural allegory, and characters that resonate with a warrior's soul. This sweeping series will enthrall readers of all ages and give you a serious book hangover. Get ready!

JAIME JO WRIGHT, author of *The Vanishing at Castle Moreau* and *The House on Foster Hill*, winner of the Christy Award and Daphne du Maurier Award

Praise for *Hunt for Eden's Star*

An imaginative, immersive story with strong characters worth rooting for. I honestly couldn't put it down!

JESS CORBAN, author of *A Gentle Tyranny*

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D. J. WILLIAMS



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Secrets of the Highlands is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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“An ounce of courage is stronger than an ocean of fear.”

真理 1

KARACHI, PAKISTAN

EMMA AND AMINA EMERGED ONTO a balcony of a clock tower steeple looming over brightly colored umbrellas scattered around a market square. An armed security guard in plain clothes casually stood near an entrance to the square while the two girls peered down on pushcarts and stalls. Pakistanis bustled and bargained for almonds, pistachios, cashews, chickens, lambs, goats, and fresh fish.

A bronze haze hovered over the City of Lights, muting the sea of stark-white high-rises. Nearly a month had passed since Eden's Star blazed within the chapel on Karābu Island, transporting them to these streets only a few miles from the Arabian Sea.

"No fruit left here either," Amina pointed out. "Maybe some garlic, if we are lucky."

“When I prayed over Jack in Nightingale, it was out of desperation—and Elyon heard my prayer. But since we arrived in Karachi, he has not gotten better.” Emma’s amber eyes scanned the marketplace. “He needs an experienced healer.”

“We have traveled here daily since we arrived. No one has appeared.”

“Healers are known to linger near gateways.” From her pocket, Emma retrieved a silver coin etched with a moon and stars. “It is time we revealed ourselves.”

Amina squeezed Emma’s arm. “You have more to consider.”

“Today, we try to save one—then tomorrow, we worry about the others.”

From the steeple they took a flight of stairs down to the market square. As they walked between pushcarts and stalls, their dusty boots kicked up dirt. Emma glanced between vendors and shoppers bargaining for the best deal. Without her gifts, she’d become more cautious, yet strangely her connection to Jack had only grown stronger. She felt his pain and guilt. And she was willing to risk revealing herself as one of the chosen, knowing there was more at stake than losing him. As a child, she’d been taught by the highest Cherub to believe in miracles. But she worried that before her eighteenth birthday, Eden’s Star would vanish in death before the compass led them to the light.

Amina asked under her breath, “Who do we give the coin to, then?”

“Many Cherub follow in the rituals of old.” Emma nodded toward a stall where young goats and lambs were corralled in a pen. “The Eternal speaks of unblemished atonement.”

Amina’s nose wrinkled. “Animal sacrifices are a horrible idea.”

“Most are symbolic these days.” Emma approached a weathered

elderly man with a thick graying beard, who was busy tending to one of his goats. “Peace be upon you.”

“Peace also be with you.” His curious stare narrowed as he nodded toward the clock tower. “You never buy, only watch.”

“We are searching for our brothers and sisters.” Pulling her sleeve up, Emma turned her wrist and revealed a symbol. 勇氣. *Courage*. At the same time, Amina turned her head sideways to reveal an identical tattoo behind her left ear. Watching the man closely, Emma held out the silver coin in the palm of her hand. “Perhaps you are one of us.”

He eyed the silver coin, then stepped back. “I cannot help you.”

“Then make an introduction to someone who will,” Amina pressed.

“A dangerous request.” He glanced past them and continued in a lowered voice. “Since the great Elder’s death, most have remained in Kati Pahari.” He gazed at the coin long and hard. “You must be more careful—Merikh rule Karachi.”

Emma slipped the silver coin into her pocket and leaned in close. “We need a healer.”

“A healer?” His brows raised as he shifted uncomfortably. “You speak of Faizan Khalid.”

“Will we find Faizan in Kati Pahari?” Amina asked.

The man nodded slowly. “He is the one you seek.”

A weak high-pitched noise interrupted them as the young goats and sheep grew agitated in the corral. Emma’s eyes darted around before she noticed two men talking with the security guard at the entrance. The guard pointed in her direction. Stepping back from the stall, she grabbed Amina’s arm and pulled her alongside. They walked briskly through the market, neither one looking back.

“How could anyone possibly know we are here?” Emma whispered.

“This way,” Amina urged. “Quickly.”

A commotion erupted behind them as goats and sheep escaped the corral and scurried through the crowd, the elderly man chasing after them. Emma glanced over her shoulder at the bottleneck where their pursuers struggled to force their way through. Taking advantage of the distraction, Emma and Amina darted between stalls and climbed a rickety wooden ladder. Reaching the top of a wall, they moved swiftly across a ledge as the two men appeared below.

Amina blurted, “We forgot the garlic.”

“That is the least of our worries.”

Concrete exploded behind them, sending fragments scattering across the marketplace. Emma and Amina sprinted along the top of the wall, their steps creeping closer to the edge. Without slowing stride, they leapt off the ledge and slammed against bamboo scaffolding surrounding a Roman Catholic church under renovation. Emma climbed up to an open window and pulled herself through, then helped Amina inside and caught her breath.

Across from the church was a gaping hole in the marketplace wall where the two men stood glaring in her direction. Emma stepped back a split second before a supernatural percussive force ripped through the side of the church. With the floor crumbling beneath her, she chased Amina across the room before bursting into an empty corridor. The force hunted after them as they bounded down the stairs and darted into a main sanctuary that had been totally gutted.

“We are powerless to fight back,” Emma said.

“A day will come,” Amina replied. “But it is not today.”

Exiting through a side door, they found themselves standing in a vacant parking lot. They headed down the street, racing between bulldozers and cranes—as if they were leading Rowell and Crozier in a dance at the Sword and Fan. Traffic flowed steadily across five lanes while Emma flagged down a chingchi—an auto-rickshaw.

“Seven Tides Hostel near Rojhan Street,” Amina instructed the driver as she and Emma slipped into a passenger seat. “Five hundred rupees if you get us there in the next twenty minutes.”

Emma glanced back through a glassless window of the passenger carriage as the chingchi revved and whined through traffic. She watched the men enter the church, knowing she and Amina would never be able to return to Empress Market again.

“At least we have a name,” she whispered.

Amina turned toward her. “Hopefully Faizan Khalid is a true healer.”

Dark clouds loomed over the city as a torrential downpour washed away clues of where they’d been and where they were going. A war waged in the shadows for centuries now left the fate of all who believed in the beating heart of an outlier.