

Chapter One

The Infant Stone Voice

As usual, Lilibit woke that morning before the sunrise. Not as usual, however, she lay in bed and stared at the ceiling.

She had no choice, it would have to be the Temper Tantrum.

This was not a decision she made lightly. She had tried Logic. Reasoning. Charm. Humor. Cajoling. Whining. Insolence. And Bribery. She was now Desperate. It would have to be the Temper Tantrum. And she knew that to get her way, this could not be a normal temper tantrum. This would be a Gut Stone Tantrum.

It would not be pretty.

She lay in her bed making her plans, plotting her strategy, planning her war.

The opening volley of this battle had been fired the night before when the Stranger arrived and the Aunties sent her to bed. Even though she wasn't a bit tired.

Creeping back to the top of the stairs, she had lain on the floor. She peeked out between the rails and watched the whispered conversation of the grownups below. In her hand she clutched, Tosh, the nosy stone.

Only Lilibit knew that beneath Tosh's façade of mottled grey stone there hid a yellow crystal center of vanadinite. And Tosh had another secret. He liked to eavesdrop.

So when Lilibit pressed Tosh to her ear, she heard her Aunties and the Stranger as if she were sitting between them.

The Stranger was tall and stern looking. His skin was dark and his hair was darker. It hung in a thick black braid down his back. His pants were made of brown rawhide pulled tight over thighs that looked more like two tree trunks than legs. A tan leather shirt stretched over his barrel chest and a forest green cloak hung from his shoulders. His hands rested on a tall gnarled staff, its knobby surface worn from untold years of use, but Lilibit didn't think he needed it to walk. He was strong, she could tell, the whole house buzzed from his presence.

He smelled of leather and pine trees and grass after the rain. His name was Keotak-se, but to Lilibit he looked more like the big oak that grew in their backyard so when she talked about him to her stones, she called him Mr. Tree.

He stood looking down at the Aunties as they sat in the parlor. "We can wait no longer." His voice was low and deep. Tosh quivered in her ear. "We must leave tomorrow."

Auntie Shalla nodded sadly, but Auntie Wolla put up a proper fight.

"She's too young, Keotak-se! She's not even seven!" Auntie Wolla's voice chirped with distress. "And she's so small for her age!"

Auntie Shalla patted Auntie Wolla's arm as she looked at Mr. Tree. "I, too thought we would keep her here until she was twelve. That was the decision of the council when you first brought her to us. Since the death of her parents, we have been the only family she has known. Does the council think it wise to move her again before she is the proper age to send a child to Kiva?"

Lilibit pricked up her ears. The Aunties never talked about her parents. Whenever Lilibit would ask, all the Aunties would say was “a big brown bird left you on the front porch.” And they would never tell her anything more, no matter how many times she asked.

Lilibit didn't think the Aunties were her real aunts. Their hair was black like hers, but their skin was dark brown and tanned, like Mr. Tree's. Lilibit's skin was a pale gold. And her eyes were different too. The Aunties' eyes were round, like almost everyone else in the neighborhood, but Lilibit's eyes were slanted, like she was laughing all the time, even when she wasn't.

She pressed Tosh hard against her ear and hoped that, maybe this time, the grownups might let something slip.

“Her voice grows strong,” Mr. Tree rumbled. “The soil echoes with her words. Even from her hearth, the Flame Voice can hear her speaking to the stones.”

This startled the Aunties. After a quick glance at each other, they looked up the stairs toward Lilibit's bedroom, but they could not see Lilibit as she hugged the floor, safely hidden in the darkness on the landing.

“If the Flame Voice can hear her, then so can the Enemy. They seek her day and night. She is young, it is true. But the time has come for her to be moved to Kiva.” He turned to look at the top of the stairs. Lilibit didn't think he saw her, yet his eyes seemed to look directly into hers.

“Where she will be safe?” asked Auntie Shalla.

“Where she will be safer.” His voice offered no promises. “Where she can be trained to protect herself.”

Lilibit held her breath as it grew quiet in the parlor. Auntie Wolla sniffed a few times, yet it was Auntie Shalla who finally spoke.

“There are things we must see to before we leave. If tomorrow we were all to disappear from Hazeltown at the same time, it would be noticed.”

Mr. Tree nodded. “This is true. She and I will leave tomorrow. You two can follow when your tasks here are completed.”

The Aunties quickly looked at each other and then back to Mr. Tree..

“Perhaps Wolla should accompany you, Keotak-se.” Auntie Shalla sounded concerned. “To help look after the child.”

“No.” Mr. Tree did not encourage discussion. “We will travel faster if it just the two of us.”

“But---” started Auntie Wolla.

“No.” His eyes narrowed as he glanced between the two women. “For the love of the Stone, women. I have lived ten centuries. I have fought against the hordes of the headless dreads, have faced the assassins of Chee-tola. I have traveled through the Labyrinth of the Flame. I am the last of the True Stone Warriors. I think I can handle a six year old child.”

The looks on the Aunties’ faces echoed Lilibit’s words.

“We’ll see about that,” she whispered to the stones as she crawled silently from the landing back to her bed.



Chapter Two

Stopover

“What do you call it when a pair of crows crash into each other?”

In the backseat, Todd turned away from the window, ignoring the large black bird that followed the car.

“A two caw accident!” With a rawk, the bird answered its own riddle.

Todd bit back a snort of laughter. Crows always told really stupid jokes, but they still made him laugh. “That’s so lame!” he whispered.

“Stop talking to the birds, Todd,” said Ms. Burbank from the front seat.

Todd slouched deeper on the vinyl bench. Looking up, he saw the caseworker’s eyes in the rearview mirror as if she were peering through a floating window from another dimension.

“Yes, ma’am.” Todd turned his shoulder against the window and away from the bird outside.

“You’re a big boy now. You’re eight years old.” Ms. Burbank’s voice was not unkind. “You’re much too old for those sorts of pretending games. That’s what caused all that bother at the last home where we placed you.”

Bother? Mrs. Jenson thought he was an extraterrestrial spy and made him wear tinfoil on his head whenever he left his bedroom. Mrs. Jenson read the National Inquirer. Todd folded his arms across his chest and stared at his sneakers.

I bet if I had curly blond hair instead of straight black hair, thought Todd, Mrs. Jenson wouldn't have kicked me out. Maybe if I had blue eyes and freckles instead of brown eyes and brown skin, I could have stayed.

Maybe if I didn't talk to the birds...

"We're lucky there's an opening at Dalton Point," Ms. Burbank interrupted Todd's thoughts. "It's up in the mountains and you'll have a bedroom all to yourself."

"Yes, ma'am."

"But you need to behave yourself. No more nonsense about talking birds, do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

As the car wound its way up a mountain, Todd watched the houses and even the telephone poles disappear. Barren canyon walls broken by rocky gorges rose alongside the narrow road. Todd straightened and looked out the window. It had been a long time since he'd been in a place with so few people.

They turned onto a long gravel driveway and road in silence. The car slowed as it got to the last bend. As it rolled to a stop, Todd saw six kids, four boys and two girls, wearing jeans and tee shirts. They stood in a line, their arms crossed over their chests, glaring at him. Something nasty started to rise from his stomach into his throat. He swallowed hard and pushed it back down as he opened the car door. The paper bag with all his clothes spilled onto the gravel as he stepped out.

The tallest boy broke formation and bent to pick up a large duffel bag before walking toward the car.

Todd put out his hand to greet him but, without a word, the taller boy elbowed him hard. As Todd stumbled, the boy pushed past and climbed into the backseat. He glared straight ahead, ignoring everyone.

“Come along, Todd,” Ms. Burbank’s hand touched Todd’s shoulder lightly. “We’ll get you settled in.”

Todd turned to see the remaining five children staring at him without a hint of a smile or welcome. Ms. Burbank bent to whisper into Todd’s ear.

“Remember,” she hissed, “no talking birds.”

Todd gritted his teeth and nodded his head as he followed Ms. Burbank into the house.



Chapter Three

The Runaway

The room was rosy with the light of early dawn as Lilibit crawled under her bed to pull out her tatty pink bib overalls. Her closet brimmed with starched dresses and lacy pinafores, but she always wore the same pink bib overalls, the one with the eight pockets.

The talky stones always went in the top left pocket. Tosh went in the top left pocket too, not because he was a talky stone, but because he liked to listen. The quiet stones went into the top right pocket. They didn't say much, but Lilibit always kept an ear open, because when one of the quiet stones spoke, it was usually pretty important. Frando stayed in her left hand pocket by himself, partly because he was too big to share a pocket and partly because he was a bit of a bully and did not get along well with the other stones.

They were still working on that issue.

Veranda and Winnie ("the Girls") lived in her right hand pocket. These were Lilibit's favorites; two egg-shaped quartz stones polished smooth by countless decades of ocean waves. They reminded her of the Aunties. They were a little bit bossy, but they

could do lots of special things and sometimes they remembered stuff that Lilibit forgot. The bottom two pockets on the legs she kept empty in case she found any new stones during her travels. Lilibit considered back pockets pretty stupid since they weren't any good for storing stones in, not even pebbles because they hurt when you sat down. Lilibit couldn't figure out how anyone ever used back pockets.

Grownups were weird.

Lilibit's bare feet made no sound as she pattered across the gleaming hardwood floors in the pre-dawn glow. Her purple panda backpack hung heavily on her shoulders and the weight of its contents pressed hard against the small of her back. As usual, the kitchen was sweet with the smells of drying herbs, fresh bread and homemade cheese. Lilibit's giggled as she packed her provisions for the mission. She didn't waste a thought on any possible punishment. The Auntie's never got angry. They just tutted and huffed and fussed. And Lilibit knew she could always wheedle them out of their miffs.

The soft green smell of the morning dew met her as she walked out the back door from the kitchen. She wiggled her bare toes in the mud and grass and stopped to pat Caddock, the massive mottled boulder that guarded the backyard.

"I'm off to have an adventure, Caddock," Lilibit whispered to the stone. "I don't know when I'll be back, but if I find any friends for you, I'll bring them."

The rock buzzed briefly in response.

"Oh Caddock, don't be silly!" Lilibit giggled and patted it farewell before climbing over the back fence and dropping onto the path beyond.

Lilibit knew exactly where she wanted to go. In the east, her mountain, the one that looked misty and blue in the morning, called to her, as it had for months. She did not

know how long it would take her to walk to her misty blue mountain, but she knew that's where she wanted to go. She made up a song about her stones and their Mother and she sang it as she pattered along the path through the woods.

*The grass, it is so cold,
My feet, they are so hot,
The Stones, they warm my toes,
The Earth, it warms my heart;*

*Though I'm all by myself,
I'm never all alone.
For deep inside my pockets,
I've always got my stones.*

The song may not have sounded very good to grownups, but under her toes, the Earth hummed along.

The path opened out on Willow Creek Road. She trotted down the street and, with a sigh, paused before the Lin Su house.

Now, as far as grownups in the neighborhood were concerned, the Lin Sus' house was very grand and impressive.

Lilibit was not impressed.

As far as the grownups were concerned, the Lin Sus' yard was a major disappointment. Lilibit was not disappointed, but she was disturbed. When the Lin Sus

purchased the house a year ago, they'd torn up the luxurious green lawn, and replaced it with an "architect-designed" rock garden. The neighbors might sniff and roll their eyes at the "foreignness" of the landscaping, but what bothered Lilibit was the large grey stone they placed near one of the bedroom windows. The stone, a twisted and contorted lump of pumice, was more than half Lilibit's height, but, like a sponge, was so riddled with airholes, it weighed no more than a few pounds.

Four times now, Lilibit had walked by the house and heard the stone screaming. Four times now, she had dragged the stone away from the window, as far from the house as she could manage. Then gathering soothing stones from here and there amidst the rock garden and adding several from her knapsack, she made a circle of friends around the screaming stone.

Today the stone was back under the bedroom window. From inside, Lilibit heard a baby crying as he echoed the pain of the screaming stone.

Lilibit veered off course to rescue the stone. Again.

As she wrapped her arms around the stone, she caught the vision of a soft warm island in the middle of a bright aqua sea and felt the stone's pain as it longed to return to the arms of its mother there among the enveloping black sand. She hummed to the stone, a gentle promise that one day it would return to its faraway home. After dragging the stone away from the house, she gathered those grownup stones that knew who they were and would whisper comfort to the lonely baby stone and snuggled them together.

Lilibit was purring soothingly to the sobbing stone when she heard voices from the house, sharp staccato voices speaking angry words she couldn't understand. She saw Mrs. Lin Su's head in the window of the house, yelling at her, her finger jabbing toward

her like a lizard's tongue. Lilibit patted the sobbing stone a rushed farewell and ran like a squirrel back to her path.

She ran down Willow Creek Road and took the corner onto Phillip Terrace at such a tear that she slammed into what, at first, seemed to her to be a brick wall. Her next thought, as she bounced back and fell on her behind, was that sometime during the night someone had planted a towering oak in the middle of the sidewalk.

From flat on her butt, Lilibit looked up and sighed. It was Mr. Tree. She rolled over to get to her feet, but Mr. Tree reached down and lifted her by her purple panda knapsack until her eyes met his and her bare feet dangled in the air.

“Put Me Down!” Lilibit squeaked with rage, her fists and feet flailing in the air.

Mr. Tree did not speak. This enraged Lilibit even more.

“You listen here, Mr. Tree!” she said. “If you don't put me down right now, you're going to be very sorry!”

Mr. Tree did not smile, but Lilibit felt he was laughing at her.

Fine! she thought, I warned you!

Then, from out of her left pocket, she pulled the Temper Tantrum.

Gripping Frando between her fingers. She whipped the large stone at Mr. Tree's head with a movement so quick, most grownups wouldn't have even seen her hand, never mind the stone.

Yet, with a swift twitch, Mr. Tree moved his head and the stone sped past his ear. Lilibit glared as she gave a silent order. Frando stopped in mid-air then veered around, aiming right for the back of Mr. Tree's head.

As if by itself, Mr. Tree's staff leapt from his hands, spun behind his back, and struck the stone to the ground.

Well, so much for the Temper Tantrum. Evidently Mr. Tree had a couple of tricks of his own.

Well, her pockets weren't exactly empty either. She reached in and pulled out *The Girls*. She did not throw these stones, but holding one in each hand, she glared into his face. Then, with a squeak of defiance, she slammed them together.

Suddenly, an icy gust of wind blew out of the east, building power as it buffeted the two of them. Leaves and branches flew off nearby trees. Trash barrels ricocheted off lampposts and a hail of dirt and sand pounded the cars parked in the early morning hush of Phillip Terrace.

Mr. Tree stood without moving, his eyes staring calmly at the girl. Then he lifted his staff and with one swift motion, stabbed the ground with a resounding crack. As quickly as it started, the wind stopped. Grains of sand fell gently like an early snow.

"That will be enough," Mr. Tree said at last as he lowered Lilibit to the ground. "I did not walk from beyond the mountains to play silly games with a child."

Lilibit decided to change tactics. She'd never met a grownup that could stop the Temper Tantrum. Brushing the sand off her clothes, she eyed him warily.

"Well Mr. Tree," said Lilibit in her most grown-up voice, "I'm sorry that you came all this way, but if you'd asked me first, I could have saved you the trouble. I'm not going to Kiva."

She stooped to pick up Frando where he'd landed in the gutter.

"It doesn't sound like it's going to be the least bit fun," she added.

Mr. Tree did not blink.

“Thank you anyway,” she said, belatedly remembering her manners.

Mr. Tree stood. Lilibit fidgeted. They both waited. Finally, Lilibit decided that she had waited long enough.

“Thank you anyway,” she repeated, “and goodbye.”

She walked about a half dozen steps and then peeked behind her to see Mr. Tree standing calmly, as if he was planted in the middle of the sidewalk on Phillip Terrace. She walked another dozen steps before risking a second glance behind.

Mr. Tree had disappeared.

Lilibit walked backwards, her eyes searching everywhere, trying to figure out where Mr. Tree might have gone. She gave a little yelp as she collided with him again when he reappeared behind her on the sidewalk. Once more, Lilibit ended up on her butt.

“Oh, for all the stars in heaven!” she exclaimed, sounding just like her Auntie Shalla. “If you’re going to move like that, you can at least look where I’m going!”

“Where you are going,” said Mr. Tree, “is back to your aunts’ house. Would you like to walk there, or should I carry you?”

Picking herself up off the ground, Lilibit wrapped the shreds of her dignity about her.

“I will walk.” Like any good general, Lilibit knew when a strategic retreat and regrouping might be necessary to achieve ultimate victory, and as she marched back to the Aunties’ house, she was already planning her next coup.

Stopping at the curb at Willow Creek Road, she reached up and grabbed Mr. Tree's hand. The Aunties always told her to hold their hands when they crossed the street, so Lilibit assumed Mr. Tree, like all adults, needed her help to cross a busy street.

Lilibit scrambled over the rear fence and landed with a splat in the back yard. She turned back to see how Mr. Tree was managing, only to find him standing beside her on the grass. She sniffed and marched defiantly into the house.

Inside, Lilibit discovered the Aunties in a tither. Mrs. Lin Su was there, with a police officer.

"Oh Lilibit!" Auntie Wolla said with a sigh. "What have you been up to this morning?"

"It is not just this morning!" Mrs. Lin Su trembled like a mosquito. "She is always vandalizing my garden! She tears apart my landscaping over and over again, but today I caught her in the act, you evil child!"

Auntie Shalla moved to place herself between Lilibit and the shrieking Mrs. Lin Su, but Lilibit would have none of that. She stepped around her Aunt and peered up into the angry woman's face, her head tilted in curiosity. This seemed to infuriate Mrs. Lin Su even more and she lunged towards the child as if to slap her.

Officer Garcia stepped in at this point, restraining Mrs. Lin Su with a word and bending to speak to Lilibit, eye to eye.

"Lilibit," asked the police officer gently, "can you tell me why you keep moving Mrs. Lin Su's rocks around?"

Behind her, Lilibit felt Auntie Shalla's body tense as she reached out her arm to draw Lilibit closer. Lilibit would have told the officer about the weeping stone that

wanted to go back to its island home, but it was difficult for a six-year-old to put the feelings she heard from the stone into words. She thought hard for a moment, and then settled for the words that would make sense to the grownups.

“It’s making the baby sick,” she said.

As one, the Aunties’ eyes darted to the suddenly rigid form of their neighbor.

“What?” gasped Mrs. Lin Su.

Lilibit tried to find better words, but since she wasn’t quite sure how she knew this, she gave up with a shrug.

“Well, well, well,” Officer Garcia said as shook his head. “You know, I wasn’t sure if we were dealing with a hardened criminal or just a malicious vandal...”

The Aunties held their breath, but Lilibit saw the smile hiding behind his eyes and grinned back.

Officer Garcia chuckled as he straightened, reaching out to tousle Lilibit’s hair. His smile stopped, however when he looked at Mrs. Lin Su. Her hands grasped the back of a chair as if the bones had been removed from her legs.

“It’s just a case of an overactive imagination,” he said, watching her pale face. “I’m sure she won’t do it again, right Lilibit?”

Lilibit opened her mouth to argue the point, but Auntie Shalla silenced her with a squeeze on her shoulder.

“Lilibit will be going off to school soon, Officer Garcia,” said Auntie Shalla. “We can assure Mrs. Lin Su it will not happen again.”

Auntie Shalla’s eyes locked with Mrs. Lin Su’s, who nodded blankly, her eyes unfocused. She then turned and walked out of the house without saying another word.



Mrs. Lin Su waddled quickly down the street and through her front door. She barked at the nanny to move the baby out of his bedroom. While the woman scampered to obey, Mrs. Lin Su dialed her husband at his office, hysteria working her voice into a squeaky whisper.

Minutes later, a large gleaming car screeched into the driveway. Mr. Lin Su did not question why he must take his wife's favorite landscaping stone far away from their home. He never argued with her when she got herself like this. At first, it was his intention just to throw it off to the side of the road into the nearest ditch. Twice he slowed down to pull over, but something pushed him onward and he found himself driving eighty miles to the ocean. He wrestled the stone out of his trunk, carried it to the peak of the cliff, and grunted as he flung it over the edge.

A strong gypsy breeze rose, caught the falling pumice stone, and sent it sailing over the rocky shore.

The man looked down, expecting to see the stone smashed against the craggy beach below, but instead it bobbed merrily on the waves. And then, as if propelled by some invisible sail, it floated west, homeward at last.

Mr. Lin Su returned home to find his son sleeping peacefully in his mother's arm, neither squirming with discomfort nor crying in pain. He stood and watched them for a long moment before calling the office and canceling the rest of his appointments for that day.



From the foyer, Lilibit looked at her Aunties as they watched the police car drive down the street. Mr. Tree entered from the kitchen where he had stood, still and silent, unnoticed by the visitors.

“That was unfortunate. We must leave now,” he said.

The Aunties turned to Keotak-se and nodded sadly.

Lilibit’s eyes darted from her Aunties to the tall man.

“No!” Lilibit folded her arms and plopped to the floor. “I won’t go!”

Auntie Shalla moved to the stairs. “I’ll finish packing her things.”

Auntie Wolla lowered herself to speak into Lilibit’s eyes.

“You will like Kiva,” she told Lilibit as she pulled her to her feet. “There will be other children there to play with and lots of aunties and uncles to take care of you.

Auntie Shalla and I shall come there too, as soon as we are able. Now you be a good girl and obey Keotak-se. He will take you there safely.”

Lilibit read nothing in Keotak-se’s face as he glanced down at her. She stuck out her lower lip as she met his gaze before turning and stomping upstairs.

