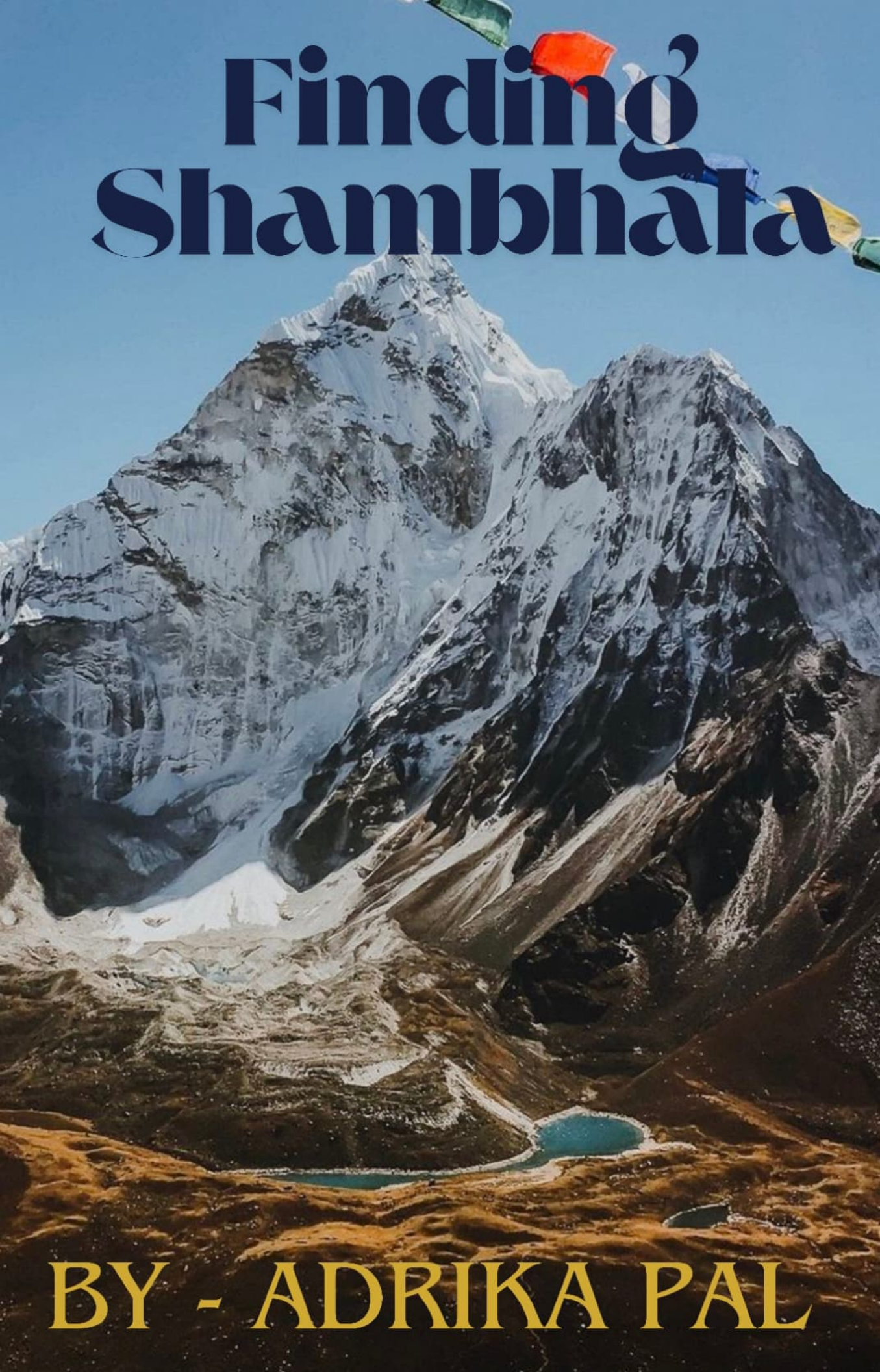




Finding Shambhala

BY - ADRIKA PAL

CHAPTER TWO: THE GIRL FROM KASHI

While sages spoke of lost kingdoms and divine reckonings, far from the mountains, a different kind of seeker walked the ghats of Banaras.



Aarya had always been different.

Drawn not to noise, but to silence. Not to the future, but to the stories left behind.

Born and raised in the timeless city of Kashi, where death was just another passage, Aarya lived among crumbling temples, sacred chants, and the ever-flowing Ganga. She was fascinated by everything ancient—old scriptures, forgotten crafts, temple architecture, and the whispers of the past etched into stone walls.

But one legend called her more than any other—the prophecy of Kalki, the final avatar. The one who would rise when Kaliyug reached its darkest hour. The one who would bring back Satyug, the age of truth.

She had heard the stories since childhood, but never as myths. To her, they felt real—alive—waiting to unfold.

One day, while offering charity near Assi Ghat, she overheard a group of sages under an old banyan tree.

“...The land of Shambhala,” one of them said in a gravelly voice, “is where the final cycle will begin.”

Aarya's breath caught. She stepped closer, drawn like a moth to flame.



The sage spoke of a sacred realm, hidden in the Himalayas. Protected by divine forces. A place where Kalki would be born. Many had tried to find it—warriors, kings, monks, and madmen—but none had succeeded. Those driven by greed or ego were always turned away. Some never returned at all.

Her heart pounded. She felt the truth of it in her bones.

She asked the sage more—and though his words were few, his eyes held the weight of centuries.

That evening, as she walked back through the narrow lanes of Banaras, past incense smoke and the flicker of oil lamps, a thought echoed in her soul:

If Shambhala is real... I must find it.

Not to claim it.

Not to prove anything.

But to witness what the world had long forgotten.

And so, the girl from Kashi, lit by the fire of purpose, unknowingly took her first step toward the hidden land.

CHAPTER THREE: THE KEEPER OF THE FLAME

Aarya had always known there was something different about her family—but she could never quite explain it.

They lived humbly, without luxury or noise. Her father, a schoolteacher in Banaras, was kind but deeply attached to routine, success, and the material world. Her mother, however, carried a quiet depth. A softness that spoke of centuries. Her eyes always seemed to see a little more than what was in front of her.

Aarya often felt like a child of two worlds—her father's modern, structured mind, and her mother's silent, sacred strength.

What set her apart from everyone else was her pure fascination—not obsession—for the sacred. From a young age, while others played, she wandered into old temples, read worn scriptures, and sat with sadhus asking them about places that didn't exist on maps.

It was never about magic or miracles.

It was about truth.

About Kalki.

She didn't want to find Shambhala to be remembered—she wanted to witness what was written in the scriptures. She longed to see the birth of the final avatar. To feel the return of Satyug. Something in her soul believed she was born for this.

But nothing could have prepared her for what she was about to discover.

One night, as the monsoon whispered against the tiled rooftops, Aarya's mother asked her to help prepare for an unusual ritual—a hawan, scheduled for the following day. It wasn't linked to any festival. No guests were invited. The family's small ancestral temple, hidden behind the main house, had been cleaned after years.

Something felt... sacred. Ancient.

"Why are we performing this?" Aarya asked.

Her mother only smiled. "Some fires don't need reasons. They only need keepers."

That night, Aarya couldn't sleep. A strange pull guided her to the back of the house—



toward the temple room where her great-grandfather had once meditated. Aarya had never entered it alone before. But tonight, she did.

There, hidden beneath layers of folded cloth and timeworn books, she found a wooden box, sealed with symbols she didn't recognize. The moment her fingers touched it, something stirred in her chest—like a memory from a life she hadn't lived.

She opened it.

Inside was a manuscript, brittle with age, written in an ancient hand. And on the first page, drawn faintly in ink that had faded with time—was a map. Not of a city. Not of a road. But of something else.

Something hidden.

As she turned the pages, her mother appeared silently at the doorway.

"You were always meant to find it," she said softly.

Aarya looked up, breathless. "What is this?"

Her mother stepped closer, kneeling beside her.

“For generations, someone in our family is chosen—chosen not by us, but by God. Through this ritual, through the sacred fire, only the purest heart is revealed. The one who will keep the manuscript safe... until the time comes.”

“And Father...?”

“He was never meant to carry it. Not because he is not good. But because he is still bound by the world’s illusions. This manuscript must only rest in hands that seek truth—not power.”

Aarya’s eyes burned with tears she couldn’t explain. “So... it’s real. Shambhala is real.”

Her mother nodded. “And now, its path belongs to you.”

The fire had been lit.
The cycle had begun.
The keeper had been chosen.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE FIRE THAT CHOSE

The morning of the hawan dawned quiet, yet charged with an unseen energy. The skies above Banaras were painted in shades of saffron and silver, and even the birds seemed to move slower, as though something ancient was about to unfold.

Inside the small ancestral temple, the air was thick with incense, sandalwood, and the deep hum of mantras. The sacred fire—the agni—had been lit, its flames dancing with a life of their own.

Only Aarya, her parents, and an elderly priest were present. The priest had been called from a distant village. He knew only that this was an ancestral ritual—one meant to maintain the family's spiritual protection.

But in truth, not even he knew what was truly being summoned.

Aarya sat before the fire, her heart beating like a drum. In her lap lay the sealed manuscript, now uncovered and breathing after generations of silence.

As the ritual progressed, she repeated every chant with a clarity that surprised even her. She felt something opening inside her, a channel between her and something far beyond human understanding.

Then, as the final mantra echoed through the air, the flames rose high—twisting, spiraling, forming a shape.

A white lotus.

The priest gasped. Her father stepped back. Even her mother looked stunned.

The smoke shifted again—this time, forming the outline of a conch shell and then a trishul.

Signs.

Sacred symbols.

Unmistakable.



The priest's voice trembled as he spoke.
"These are not ordinary signs... These are the marks of Vishnu... and Shiva... appearing together in fire. This girl... she has been chosen."

Aarya's hands clutched the manuscript tightly. She could feel its pulse, like it had awakened—recognizing its keeper.

Her mother stepped forward and placed her hand gently on Aarya's head. "Your ancestors protected this, not just for its knowledge, but for you. It was always going to be you."

Tears welled in her eyes—not of fear, but of a powerful calling.

This wasn't just about finding a place. It was about fulfilling a promise made long before she was born.

Outside, the bells of Kashi rang louder than usual. The city seemed to bow in silence.

The signs had spoken.
The fire had chosen.
And the path to Shambhala had finally begun to reveal itself.

As the flames slowly calmed into a gentle flicker, the priest packed away his offerings in silence, still shaken by the signs he had witnessed. Aarya sat in front of the hawan kund, her thoughts a storm of questions, awe, and an ache she couldn't explain.

Her grandfather, who had remained quietly in the background all this time, finally stepped forward. In his frail hands, he held the manuscript box—the same one Aarya had uncovered the night before.

"I believe," he said softly, "this belongs to you now."

He placed the manuscript into her hands with great care, as though it were a living being.

With trembling fingers, Aarya unwrapped the cloth and opened it—only to freeze.

It was blank.

Every single page.

Not a word. Not a symbol.

Just ancient, empty paper staring back at her.

Her heart dropped. A chill swept through her body.

"I—I don't understand," she whispered. "Why is it empty? Did I make a mistake? Maybe I'm not the one..."

Her voice cracked with doubt, eyes beginning to burn.

Her grandfather knelt beside her, his eyes filled with the calmness of knowing.

"No, child," he said gently. "It's not empty. It's just not ready."

Aarya looked at him, confused.

He pointed toward the fire, now glowing steady with warm embers. "This manuscript cannot be read by just anyone. It does not respond to curiosity alone. It demands commitment... a piece of the soul."

He reached into the folds of his kurta and handed her a small, ancient copper needle. "Drop just two drops of your blood into the fire. If you are truly chosen, the manuscript will reveal itself—but only to your eyes. No one else can see what you are meant to see."

Aarya hesitated, then nodded. She pricked her finger, wincing slightly, and let two

crimson drops fall into the sacred flames.

The fire stirred instantly—its color deepened, and a soft gust of wind passed through the temple. The manuscript in her lap shivered, like it had taken a breath.

She gasped.

Letters began to bloom.

Lines of script unfurled like flowers in sunlight, glowing faintly in a golden ink that only she could see. Each symbol felt alive—whispering, singing, humming with truth.

She turned to her grandfather, eyes wide with wonder and disbelief.

“Can you help me understand it?” she asked.
“I don’t want anything from it. I just... want to know what it’s trying to say.”

Her grandfather gave a soft, knowing chuckle.
“If you had asked for power, I’d have taken it back right now. But I know you. And I know the fire wouldn’t have accepted anyone else.”

He looked at the glowing manuscript, a mixture of reverence and exhaustion in his gaze.

“In my entire life, I could only decode half of it,” he admitted. “It’s written in layers. The lines you see now are only the first. Most of it is not instructions—it’s in the form of quotes, riddles, and spiritual verses. Only the one who is destined to find Shambhala can truly understand them... over time.”

Aarya turned the pages slowly, each verse speaking to something deep within her. Not in plain words, but in echoes—like memories she had never lived.

Her path had begun. Not with a map, but with a question.

Not with direction, but with destiny.

And deep inside, she knew—this was not a quest to conquer Shambhala. This was a pilgrimage to become worthy of reaching it.