

TWIN FLAMES



Debbie Christiana

Marc didn't remember a thing after the accident...not even her.

Natalia made it from her hospital room to Marc's without the nurses noticing. She tiptoed over to his bed and softly said, "Hello." If he *was* asleep, it shouldn't wake him.

He rolled over—and stared at her. It felt as if a tsunami had crashed over her. Her legs were shaking so badly, she didn't think they would hold her up. Stumbling backwards, she leaned against the wall so she wouldn't fall down.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "Do you want me to call the nurse?"

"No," she squeaked out. "I'm sorry. I should go."

"No. Wait, please come here."

She couldn't put one foot in front of the other, so she just stood there.

"You took the trouble to come to my room, why won't you come in? Who are you?"

"My name is Natalia."

He continued to stare. "You know, out of all the people who've come in here, you're the only one who seems familiar to me. Do I know you?"

"We were in the cab together when it had the accident."

"Oh. I'm sorry. Are you okay?"

She tried to pull herself together. The last thing she wanted was for him to see her like this. "I think I'm a little better than you."

"So, you know me. How about my wife?"

"I know your Aunt Mariella. I've never met your wife." She wasn't up to spending any more time with him and wanted to leave before she burst into tears. "Well, good night. I just wanted to see how you were."

"Will you come back and visit me again? I would like you to tell me how we know each other."

"I don't know. I'll try." She wasn't even out the door before the tears ran down her cheeks. The real sobbing didn't start until she was in back in her bed, alone in the dark.

She'd never met him before...or had she?

The last thing forty-year old Natalia Santagario expected was to be sitting on a Manhattan barstool ogling a man she's never met, but swears she knows.

He didn't know her at all...or did he?

The mysterious dark-haired woman at the end of the bar stops twenty-eight year old Marc Tremonti in his tracks. His head assures him she's a stranger, but his heart tells him otherwise.

Together they embark on an adventure that will change their lives forever.

Their attraction instant and enigmatic, they undergo past life regression and discover that, not only have they spent hundreds of lives together as lovers, Natalia holds the secret to Marc's puzzling birthmark.

But what should have been a joyful reunion is complicated by a kind, albeit confused, *almost* ex-wife, an unfortunate accident in a taxicab, and a bout of temporary amnesia that threatens to ruin everything. On top of all that, they must contend with a mischievous ghost from their past.

What else could possibly go wrong?

KUDOS FOR TWIN FLAMES

There is so much to enjoy in *Twin Flames*, by first-time author Debbie Christiana. This book is not a straight out romance. Sure, romance plays a part in the story, but the interesting thing is the way Christiana has fleshed out her story with the notion of past lives and their impact upon the central characters. *Twin Flames* grabbed my interest from page one with its tight storyline, and it held me in its thrall until the end...For those wanting some steam with their romance, you won't be disappointed. The sex is hot, and fits snugly into the plot. *Twin Flames* made me laugh, cry, and a few times growl in frustration—a stubborn woman suffering from the effects of insomnia will not always make the best of decisions. Special mention should be made of the level of research Christiana has obviously undertaken in regards to sleep therapy and past-life-regression. Both topics are handled with great skill, and the reader experiences each session with a sense of realism that is a credit to the author. – *Taylor, Reviewer*

Twin Flames by Debbie Christiana is an interesting book. Although, women's fiction is not a genre I normally read or care for, I thoroughly enjoyed *Twin Flames*. The book is fun to read and contains some very interesting and enlightening concepts. It made me laugh, made me scream at the characters in frustration, and it also made me think. Christiana did her homework, too. The techniques she describes in both the sleep clinic and the past-life regression sessions are accurately portrayed. I checked, of course, but more importantly, the story has a ring of truth that only comes from extensive research. *Twin Flames* is a keeper that will make you want to come back and read it again and again. – *Regan, Reviewer*

TWIN
FLAMES

By

DEBBIE CHRISTIANA

A BLACK OPAL BOOKS PUBLICATION



GENRE: Paranormal/Women's Fiction

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DEDICATION

To my husband Bill, my kids, Matt, AJ, Ellie and my dad.

and

To my mother, who is no longer here, for handing me my first book on reincarnation when I was twelve years old.

CHAPTER 1

“What is a soul? It’s like electricity – we don’t really know what it is, but it’s a force that can light up a room.” – *Ray Charles, 1930-2004 Pianist and Soul Musician*

“I thought you two came to cheer me up.” Natalia took a long sip of her eggnog, the warmth of the rum soothing her mood.

The three women were huddled in Natalia’s family room surrounded by boxes of Christmas decorations. Her two friends were visiting to help her decorate for the holidays or so she thought, but then, some sort of holiday “intervention” had begun. She loved them to death, but sometimes well-meaning friends were a pain in the ass.

“We did.” Christine gave her friend a moderately sympathetic look. “Listen, I know you’ve had a rough couple of months—with Jacob leaving you at the altar.”

“It was the Justice of the Peace,” Natalia said, upset Christine had even mentioned the bastard’s name. “I was a little late, and he overreacted.”

“That may be so, but it doesn’t change the fact that your fiancé was convicted of a felony a few days later.”

“Ex-fiancé.” Exasperated, Natalia began to rub her temples. “Can we change the subject? *Please.*”

“Sure, let’s talk about our annual trip to New York City.”

“I know your hearts are in the right place, but I’m not up going to New York this year.”

They had dragged her up to the attic, gathered all the Christmas things together and made her lug the boxes down all by herself. After at least twenty trips up and down the attic steps, everything labeled ‘Xmas’ was stacked on the family room floor. As a reward for all her hard work, Ellie handed her a glass of eggnog complete with rum. Then they plopped her on the couch.

“Nat, there’s only a few days until Christmas. You have to snap out of this funk and get some holiday spirit,” Christine said. “I think coming with us is just what you need.”

Ellie poked around in one of the boxes until she found what she was looking for. “Remember this?” she asked Natalia. It was a picture of them in New York last year.

“Yes.” She sat the frame on her fireplace mantel and smiled at the memory it brought to mind. “I remember. We had a lot of fun that day, but I don’t think I’ll be much fun this year.”

As Natalia spoke, a familiar cool breeze swept past her. She looked over at her friends who didn’t seem to feel the gentle gust go by. Just like always. Why did she think this time would be any different? A string of lights lying on the coffee table crashed to the floor.

“Stop it, right now,” she growled under her breath.

“Be careful Nat, you don’t want those lights to break,” Ellie warned. “Anyway, I know once you get to the city and start shopping, you’ll have fun. If you’re not having a good time, you can hop on the train and come home.”

Natalia was about to refuse the offer one last time when her glass of eggnog tipped over and spilled onto the table.

“I said stop it and I mean it,” she hissed, louder than she should have. She quickly turned to make sure her friends hadn’t heard her. They had their backs to her, busily attaching gold garland and red ribbons to her staircase. Natalia watched them and groaned. These two were not going to leave one spot undecorated. Hadn’t they ever heard “less is more”?

“I spilled my eggnog,” she called to them. “I’ll be right back.” As she walked into the kitchen, a chill tingled at her neck. “Why do you want me to go to New York so badly?” she asked, standing completely alone in the middle of the kitchen.

The hanging light over the table rattled.

“How could I possibly meet someone while shopping with Christine and Ellie? Anyway, I’m not ready for that yet. Please, just leave me alone about it.”

The kitchen drawers opened and slammed shut.

“Be quiet!” she hissed. “They’ll hear you.” Her irritation grew as the refrigerator door flew open. “I know you don’t care if they hear you or not. You’re not the one who has to come up with an explanation of what’s going on in here. I do.”

Water spit out of the faucet into the sink.

“Fine. Have your temper tantrum.” She leaned back against the counter and crossed her arms over her chest. “Let me know when you’re through.” Natalia had lived with Giovanna, a mischievous apparition, long enough to know when she couldn’t win.

When Giovanna’s outburst was over, Natalia began closing the open drawers. A picture of her and her brother Robbie, which she kept on the counter, inched toward her.

“Yes, I know. I have to get him a present.” Natalia shook her head in defeat. Between her friends and Giovanna, she hadn’t stood a ghost of a chance. “You always get your way, don’t you?” Grabbing a towel, she headed back to the family room. “It seems I’m always cleaning up your mess.”

Christine and Ellie were spraying fake snow over snowman stencils on the windows around her front door. Natalia rolled her eyes. This is what happens when your friends have kids and you do not. She wasn’t sure how much more of their decorating she could take.

“I think you both have done more than enough for me. I appreciate it. I really do. I’m at least an eight on the holiday spirit meter.” Leading them back to the family room, she said, “Let’s have some more eggnog.”

“Oh my God, look at the time!” Christine hurried to the closet, grabbed her coat, and handed Ellie hers. “Nat, I’m sorry but we can’t.”

“I wish you’d reconsider and come with us on Saturday,” Ellie said, trying to persuade her one last time.

She smiled. “Okay, you two. I’ll come. I have to get Robbie a present. He’s coming home for Christmas.”

“Good.” Christine hugged her. “You won’t regret it, we promise. We found a good restaurant. Bring your famous appetite.”

Ellie took a turn hugging her goodbye, and they rushed out the door.

Once Natalia saw their car back down her driveway, she got out the window cleaner and sprayed her front door windows. Within a few minutes, all the snowmen had melted away.



With a hot cup of coffee and a donut in hand, Natalia and her two friends boarded a train for the hour ride to New York City. Grand Central Terminal was jammed with people, most of whom were watching a holiday light show flashing onto the ceiling. Having seen it plenty of times, the three women worked their way through the massive crowd on to Forty-Second Street. After taking in the obligatory holiday sights, the Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center, and a quick stroll down Fifth Avenue, they were ready to move on. They hopped on the subway to Christopher Street in the Village to their favorite out of the way stores for a day of shopping.

“Nat, are you almost ready?” Ellie asked.

“Yeah, and I’m hungry.”

“Should we take Nat to that Italian restaurant we found last time?” Christine asked.

“Sure,” Ellie said. “Want to try it, Nat?”

“Do you both think with a name like Natalia Santagario I don’t get enough Italian food? I was hoping for a big juicy steak and bottle of red wine.”

“I guess we could have steak, but this place is really good. Plus all the waiters are cute.”

“You’re both married,” said Natalia.

“But you’re not,” Christine said, pointing a finger at her.

“Whatever. I don’t care. I’m starving. Let’s go.”

A crowded subway ride later, they arrived at Tremonti’s restaurant on West Fifty-Fourth Street.

Before they went inside, Natalia stopped her two friends. “Thank you,” she said. “I really needed this. I’m glad you kept harassing me about coming with you.”

“We told you so,” said Ellie with a smile.

As they entered the restaurant, they were swallowed by a crowd of shoppers, tourists, and people reveling in the holiday season. Sandwiched between her friends and the other hungry inhabitants of the restaurant, Natalia couldn’t help but notice the wonderful aromas swirling around the room. For a moment, she was a little girl in her grandmother’s Brooklyn apartment, having Sunday dinner.

As she inhaled once more, a strange sensation took hold of her. Her body temperature seemed to shoot to a hundred degrees. Sweat formed on her brow. Light headed, she could feel the color drain from her face.

“Nat, what’s wrong?” Christine asked, resting her hand on Natalia’s shoulder. “You look like you saw a ghost.”

No, I’m used to seeing ghosts. “I’m fine. It’s hot in here, that’s all. Let’s try to work our way to the bar so I can get some water.”

They started to push their way through the crowd when Natalia felt Ellie take her hand. “Hurry, those people are getting up,” she said, dragging Natalia behind her.

No sooner had they hopped up on their barstools than a young waiter appeared.

“What can I get you ladies this evening?”

“Hi,” said Natalia. “I would love a glass of wa—” She sat completely still, staring past the waiter.

“We’ll have three glasses of Merlot, please,” Christine chimed in. “Could you bring my friend some water? She isn’t feeling well.”

“Sure,” the young man said and left.

“Nat, what are you looking at?” Christine asked.

“The man over there making drinks,” she said, pointing to the side of the bar.

“Looking? Ogling is more like it,” scoffed Ellie. “She’s practically drooling.”

“I know him from somewhere,” Natalia said.

“His back is to us. You can’t see his face.”

“I don’t need to see his face.”

Having no logical answers to give them, Natalia ignored the rest of her friend’s questions and continued to watch the fascinating man behind the bar. He was tall with broad shoulders and dark curly hair. His sleeves were rolled up, his strong arms and hands visible. He was good at his job. Quickly dipping his hand in the ice and dropping the cubes into the glasses, he had three drinks made in a just few moments.

Then something changed.



“Hey, Marc. I need two Absolute Martinis and two Cosmos,” the older waiter said patting him on the back.

“Okay, give me a minute.”

Marc reached for Martini glasses on the shelf. The regular bartender couldn’t have picked a worse night to call in sick, although Marc didn’t mind helping out. It beat sitting home alone on a Saturday night, which had become customary as of late. He put the three drinks aside and started on the next order.

Getting four new glasses down, he suddenly felt warm and woozy. Leaning over, he reached into the ice with his right

hand, relishing its coolness. He straightened abruptly and stopped what he was doing, as the same odd affliction he'd felt a month ago hit him once more. Within seconds, first his left, then his right shoulder burned as if hot coals were blistering his skin. He took a few deep breathes and the throbbing subsided a bit. Feeling startled, but not knowing why, his whole body twisted to the left knocking over the glasses.

Clutching a fistful of ice, he turned and gazed into the considerable crowd at the bar. What was he looking for? He didn't have clue, but when he saw it, he would know. Of that, he was sure.

He moved in a near-full circle. Then he saw her. She had a bewildered expression on her face but an intense gleam in her eyes. He cocked his head and gave her a curious look, knowing she had been watching him.

As he walked toward her, the pain in his shoulders all but disappeared. Feeling his whole body relax, the ice fell out of his hand onto the floor, but he kept moving.

"Marc! What are you doing?" asked one of the servers. "Someone is going to slip on the ice."

"Oh, sorry, I'll get it in a minute," Marc responded, never taking his eyes off the woman he was approaching.

When he reached his destination, he was at a loss at what to say. "Hi," he said, unsure of himself. "Don't take this the wrong way, but have we met before?"

When she hesitated, the woman beside her spoke. "You'll have to excuse her. She's not feeling well tonight. Nat, tell him you thought he looked familiar to you too."

"I thought you reminded me of someone I knew. That's all. My friend is overreacting. It was warm in here, and I was light-headed. I feel fine now." She gave him a kind smile.

"Yes, it can get warm in here. Do I know you from school? I went here in the city."

She looked amused. "Listen, hon. I'm a little older than you, don't you think? I grew up in Connecticut."

"I went to summer camp in Connecticut for two years." Her words and smile put him at ease, and he felt confident and

even a bit flirtatious. “You could have been my camp counselor. Maybe I didn’t appreciate you in your bikini when I was ten and you were...”

“I don’t know. How many years ago were you ten?”

“Eighteen years ago.”

“Oh.”

“Like I said maybe I didn’t appreciate you in your bikini when I was ten and you were...”

“I was twenty-two when you were ten. And I did look good in a bikini back then,” she said with a smirk. “Sorry, I never worked as a camp counselor. Try again.”

“I will. You have me intrigued. Anyway, they say forty is the new thirty.”

“Does your wife know you flirt with all the women?”

He looked down at his wedding ring. “If it brings in good tips, she doesn’t mind,” he said, not knowing how his wife felt about much of anything lately.

“Good for her.”

“I’m Marcos, but please call me Marc,” he said, offering his hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“I’m Natalia. Same here.”

The minute their hands met, a powerful shock traveled from his hand up his arm. He forced himself not to jump.

“Ouch!” she exclaimed.

“Sorry. It’s that time of the year I guess,” he said, concluding she received the same jolt.

“These are my friends, Christine and Ellie.”

“It’s nice to meet you.” Marc shook their hands. “Can I get you something to eat?”

“Sure,” Christine said. “We’re starving. We had a busy day of shopping. We already ordered drinks.”

They chose a few appetizers to share. Marc took their orders, gave Natalia another long look, and walked away. A safe distance from her in the kitchen, with his heart pounding, he rubbed his arm, still tingling from the shock. Amber, the cute, blond waitress walked by and winked at him. She had made it clear more than once she was available to help him

through the present impasse with his wife. He'd rejected her advances and tried to convince her—as well as himself—he and his wife were on their way to working it out. With his wife off to find herself, it had been difficult for Marc, living alone these past eight months. Through bouts of loneliness and sadness, he had always remained faithful. However, the mysterious, dark-haired woman at the bar stirred something in him he had never felt before.



“Nat, we have to go to the ladies room,” Ellie said.

“Go ahead, I’ll stay here. Put your coats on the seats to save them.”

Glad to have a few minutes by herself, Natalia shook the arm that received the shock. It was prickly, as if asleep. She took a gulp of water and tried to relax. This was totally out of character for her, letting someone have this effect on her. He was just a man, albeit an extremely good-looking man. She sighed. An extremely good-looking *younger* man she swore she knew, who turned her insides to jelly, and was married. *Shit*.

To pass the time, Natalia picked up a pen and doodled on a napkin. As she watched her strange drawing come to life, she began to see things clearly. In an hour or so, they would leave, and she’d never see Marc again. It was harmless flirting. She enjoyed having some innocent attention from a man. It had been awhile. There was no need to read anything else into it. She would be herself and enjoy the food and wine.

Looking up, she saw him walking toward her, his hands laden with plates. She moved the napkin and pen aside to make room for their food.

“What’s that you’re drawing?” he asked.

“Nothing. I’m doodling until my friends get back from the bathroom.”

“Can I see it?”

“Sure, I guess.” She slid it across the bar toward him.

He studied the napkin for a minute and gave her a hard look.

“What’s the matter?” she asked.

“What made you draw *that*?”

Natalia was surprised at the harshness in his voice. “I don’t know. Why?”

“Are you trying to tell me you don’t know what this is?” It sounded to her more like an accusation than a question.

“No, I really don’t. What’s the problem?”

“Nothing.” He dropped their plates down harder than he should have and walked away.

Natalia sat there stunned. *I guess I can add uptight to the list.*



“Angelo, can you cover for me for a few minutes? I need a break.”

“Sure, Marc.”

“Thanks.”

Marc couldn’t fathom how in one short hour his evening had turned so...*weird*. Nor could he explain the strange effect she had on him. It was no ordinary shock she had given him. And now the drawing! How could she have possibly known?

For the sake of his sanity, she needed to leave. He’d give them time to finish their meal and take them the check. Then she’d be gone, and things would be back to normal.

After a little while, he peeked out the kitchen door and saw her staring at him. He made his way over to her and started to say something when she interrupted him.

“I’ll have a whiskey on the rocks.”

“What?” he asked.

“You heard me.”

“You drink whiskey straight up?”

“Yes.”

He turned his back to them and reached for the first bottle of whiskey he saw.

“Excuse me. Is there something wrong with the Johnnie Walker Gold?”

He didn't turn around to acknowledge he'd heard her but grabbed the whiskey she wanted and poured her a drink. As he handed her the glass, their fingertips briefly touched. Shocks ignited between them. Their eyes locked.

“Who the hell are you, lady?”

He heard her mutter “*Faccia di stronzo*” under her breath.

“Natalia.” Ellie nudged her. “Stop it. That isn't going to help, and you'll only regret it. You always do.”

Marc was impressed as Natalia took a good size gulp of her whiskey and, without flinching, swallowed it. Setting the glass down, she said, “How about we stop with the silent treatment, and you tell me why my sketch made you so angry?”

He snatched the napkin off the bar and walked to the register, tabulated their bill, and handed her the check. “Someone will take this for you when you're ready.”

“We aren't going anywhere until you explain to me what the problem is,” she said.

“No.”

She sipped her whiskey. “Fine. We're staying. Please send someone else over to wait on us. Your attitude has pretty much sucked tonight. I hope you're not expecting a tip.”

He glared at her. She retaliated with a defiant stare. Now what the hell was he supposed to do? If showing her would get her to leave, that's what he would do.

“All right, ladies, follow me. What you want to see is in the back.” When they hesitated he asked, “Change of heart?”

“No,” said Natalia.

They were following him through the kitchen when Giuseppe approached them. “Marcos, what's going on?”

Marc ushered the three women into a small office and told them he'd be right back. Reaching in his pocket, he handed the older man the napkin. “This is the drawing I told you about, and the woman who drew it is in the office. I was upset when I saw it and didn't handle it well. Now she won't leave until she

gets an explanation. But *I'm* the one who needs an explanation.”

“Marcos, you’ve always been too sensitive about it, even as a child. Let me see that.” He gazed down at the napkin then back up to Marc. “It’s perfect,” he said carefully. “It’s exact.”

“I’ll show her, and maybe she’ll tell me how she knew. Then can you please ask them to leave?”

“Of course, Marcos.” The two men walked into the office.

“This is Giuseppe,” said Marc.

“It’s nice to meet you.” Giuseppe extended his hand to the women.

Marc stood self-conscious and unsure. He gave Giuseppe a look, asking for some reassurance. When he nodded, Marc started to unbutton his shirt and take it off.

Natalia whistled at him.

Marc spun around angrily. “Jesus Christ, can’t you control you forty-year old mid-life hormones?”

“What? Don’t you dare, you—”

“Natalia!” yelled Christine.

She lowered her head, apologetically. “I’m sorry. I was only joking.”

“Ladies,” Giuseppe said, leading the women toward the door. “This way out. This is not a joke to him. Please leave him alone now. We’ll have your check ready by the bar. Good night.”

CHAPTER 2

“A soul mate encounter brings about a stirring of soul memory and one recognizes a soul mate intuitively from the very recesses of the soul.” – *Jaime T. Licauco, 1940-Parapsychologist and Author*

The women walked up Fifty-Ninth Street to Columbus Circle. The temperature had plummeted and the wind was howling. Attempting to hail a cab proved fruitless. Every cab whizzed by, full of warm and content passengers.

Natalia played the evening over in her head. Knowing she'd contributed to the last part of the night's debacle, she felt a twinge of remorse. Still feeling, she knew him—and worse—was perplexingly attracted to him, she didn't want to leave things the way they were.

“Hey, will you guys come back to Tremonti's with me? I feel terrible about what happened and I think I should apologize. Then I can put the whole thing behind me.”

“Nat, it's freezing! I don't want to walk all the way back there,” whined Ellie. “It's over and done with. Can't we just go home? Look, there's a subway station.”

“I don't know if that Giuseppe guy is going to let us back in, much less see Marc,” said Christine.

“I need to try. Please,” Natalia pleaded with them. They grudgingly agreed and began their trek back to the restaurant.

Natalia pushed her way through the large bar crowd. Christine and Ellie let her go and stopped to order a drink. She marched up to the kitchen door and looked in. When Marc saw her, he reluctantly walked over and cracked open the door.

“Hi. Can you come out here for a minute, please?” she asked.

“You’re not shy, are you?”

“No. I would like to talk to you.” She waited. “Do I have to beg?”

“Let me guess. You aren’t leaving unless I come out and talk to you, right?”

“Right.”

He walked out, grabbed her hand, and pulled her to the corner of the restaurant. Natalia felt the shock the second he touched her. “Sorry,” they both half mumbled, and Natalia assumed he’d been stung again as well.

“So?” he asked.

“Look. What I did was inappropriate, and I’m sorry. I didn’t realize it was such a sensitive subject. I was trying to lighten up a tense situation, but it came out wrong. I’d still like to see whatever you were going to show us. If you agree, I’ll be considerate. I promise.”

While he stood staring at her, she nearly melted into a puddle. His deep brown eyes moved slowly, up and down her body. She didn’t mind and followed his lead. Beginning at his shoes, she let her eyes gradually wander up to meet his. He looked good in his white shirt that showed off his wonderful Mediterranean coloring. His open collar button revealed a long, sexy neck. When an amused look crossed his face, she knew he liked playing this little game with her.

But as much as she enjoyed gawking at handsome men, she didn’t have all night. “Can I still see it? I’ll come by myself, not with my friends or Georgio.”

“His name is Giuseppe,” said Marc. “Are you sober now? No whistling?”

“I wasn’t drunk. It wasn’t the whiskey. I probably would have whistled at you, anyway.” She shrugged her shoulders and

smiled at him. He raised his eyebrows. “Oh, come on!” she grumped. “Are you always this serious?”

He didn’t answer but didn’t stop her when she waved Christine and Ellie over.

“Can you wait here for me? I promised to behave, so Marc is going to show me whatever this thing is. It might be better without a crowd.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” Christine said, looking at Marc. “You two back there all by yourselves.”

“I’m not going to hurt her. I’m not *that* upset with her.”

“Oh, we aren’t worried about her. We’re worried about you.”

The two women laughed and walked away.



Marc and Natalia went back through the kitchen. A few men were still working and eyed her as she walked past.

“Hi, guys,” she said.

The men whistled, obviously teasing him about going into the office with Natalia.

“Sorry,” he said. “Just ignore them.”

She followed him to the office door. Instead of going in, she looked back at the men, gave them the thumbs up, winked, smiled, and then went inside. They laughed and clapped at her as Marc shut the door behind them.

“Are you always like this?” he asked her.

“Like what?”

He chuckled to himself. Most women he knew would be offended or embarrassed by the men’s catcalls. She seemed to enjoy it. At the very least, it didn’t bother her. He wanted to be angry with her, but he wasn’t. In fact, since she came back to the restaurant, he found himself even more captivated with her than before.

“Whose office is this?” she asked.

“Mine. Why?”

“I didn’t think bartenders got private offices at restaurants.”

“What if the bartender’s last name is Tremonti?”

“So, you own the restaurant?”

“It’s a family owned restaurant.”

He leaned against the wall as she strolled curiously around his office. As far as he was concerned, she could walk around all night in fitted jeans that revealed her long legs and other *assets*. She was exceptionally pretty, with shoulder length, jet-black hair. She had big brown eyes with long lashes, a smooth olive complexion, and curves in all the right places. She did not look her age. His mind started to drift to a place it shouldn’t, and he was somewhat annoyed when her voice took him from his daydream of her.

“I know this is awkward, but I want to help. Why don’t you tell me about it before you show me? Maybe it’ll be easier.”

“I have a birthmark with a tattoo around it.”

“And it looks a little something like what I drew?”

He didn’t answer her.

“Where is your birthmark?”

“On my left shoulder.”

“What if I turn my back while you take your left arm out of your shirt then show me.” She faced the back of the office.

He sighed loudly, and removed his shirt. “Okay.”

Marc felt her behind him and his stomach quivered. He looked down and was stunned to see he was holding the napkin in his hands. He didn’t remember taking it out of his pocket.

He froze as she touched each of the six odd shaped marks on his shoulder. Her finger followed the ragged edge of the large port-wine birthmark that enclosed the six marks. A procession of shocks followed her moving finger.

Staring at the napkin, he went along on her journey as if he were reading a map. She began at the top of his tattoo, with one finger. First, she outlined the small yellow flame on the left and then the larger red flame on the right. She added a second

finger and used both hands to trace the two colorful ropes that extended from each flame and met at the bottom.

Oddly, he didn't mind her touching him. In fact, it was the opposite. He found it quite soothing. He was no longer surprised at the shocks only she seemed to give him, but he didn't think it was appropriate. He was married, and even though he felt he knew her, she was a complete stranger.

"Wow," she said. "Can I see the napkin?"

He handed it to her.

"It's exactly what I drew. I can't believe it," she said touching his shoulder again.

"What are you doing? Please stop it."

"I'm trying to take it all in." Then out of nowhere, she got on her toes and kissed his shoulder.

Marc whipped his shirt on and turned to face her.

"You said, this time would be different," he snapped, raising his voice to her.

"No wait, I'm sorry. I don't know why I did that. It just happened. Please. I'm as surprised as you are. Don't be upset. It was almost like...I couldn't help myself."

"How were you able to draw it so well?"

"I don't know. It's so beautiful, especially the tattoo. I love it."

"You *do*?"

"Of course, I drew it, didn't I?" She smirked. He sat on the chair behind the desk. Without another chair available, Natalia jumped up on the edge of the desk. "Why did you get that particular tattoo around it?"

"I don't know. I had a burning sensation in my shoulder the day I got it. You really like it?"

He couldn't believe she wasn't put off by it. He knew it was unattractive. Some people tried to be nice about it. Others did not. He wished he had a dime for every time someone asked him why he didn't get it removed.

"I think it's pretty cool. Why does it bother you so much?"

"When I was kid, I got teased a lot. I'm still self-conscious whenever I have to take my shirt off. "

“A lot of people have birthmarks. It’s a part of who you are.”

“Yes, they have birthmarks, but not strange women drawing them on napkins.”

“Yeah. I don’t know what to tell you about that. I thought I could help you, but I guess I can’t.” Neither of them spoke for a few minutes.

“Now what?” he asked.

“I guess we have to put it down as one of life’s mysteries. Sometimes there are things you can’t explain. You just have to live with them.”

“I don’t willingly show too many people. I meant what I said before. I feel like I know you.”

“I know. Me, too. You’re easy to talk to, except when you get angry at people who sit at the bar and doodle a little.”

“I get angry? *Faccia di stronzo?*” he said, repeating Natalia’s Italian insult.

She looked surprised. “You speak Italian? I didn’t mean to call you a—”

“SOB? I think you did.”

“The literal translation is—“

“I know very well what the literal translation is.”

“Well, at the time I meant it, but I take it back now.”

“You’re a strange woman.”

“And you’re being ridiculous. If having a birthmark is your biggest problem, you shouldn’t complain. There are people in the world with real problems they have to deal with.”

“You get right to the point, don’t you?”

“Life is short. Why waste it pretending to be something you’re not?”

“I guess you’re right.”

“Of course, I’m right. I’m old and with age comes wisdom.”

He cracked a small smile.

“And you finally smiled again,” she said. “You haven’t done that since you thought I was your camp counselor. I’m glad. You have a nice smile.”

She hopped off the desk and picked up the napkin. "It's a pretty good piece of artwork if you ask me." Reaching for a pen on his desk, she signed it.

Natalia, December nineteen, two-thousand-nine.

"A keepsake from a very unusual evening." She handed it back to him.

"Thanks."

"I should be going," she said. "I don't want to miss the last train out."

From the moment she touched his birthmark, Marc had an incredibly peaceful feeling wash over him. Earlier, he wanted her to leave, but now he was afraid this calmness would leave with her.

"They run more trains during the holiday." He didn't know what else to say.

"I know. I think we'll be okay." She didn't move.

If she had to go, he at least wanted to touch her again, to feel the electricity between them. As if she was reading his mind, she extended her hand to him.

"So," she asked. "Friends?"

"Friends," he said and slowly put his hand in hers, holding it longer and tighter than he should have.

"Ouch!" She jerked her hand from his. "Get a damn humidifier in here, will you?"

"Sure," he told her but knew it wouldn't help. He'd touched plenty of people tonight, and she was the only one who gave him a shock.

"Have a Merry Christmas."

"You, too," he said. "Will you come back and visit sometime?"

"I don't think that's a good idea," she said. "Good night."

He agreed. In fact, it was a dangerous idea, but Marc promised himself he would see Natalia again, one way or another. He wasn't a believer in life's mysteries. There had to be a reasonable explanation.

CHAPTER 3

“When my grandmother was alive, she used to tell me that every time God creates a soul in heaven, he creates another to be its special soul mate. And that once we’re born we begin to search for our soul mate, the one person who’s the perfect fit for our mind and body. The lucky ones find each other.” – *Lurlene McDaniel, 1944 – Author*

Natalia was coming in the door when she heard the phone ring. ‘Hello.’
“Natalia?”

“Yes.” A shiver of excitement and apprehension traveled down her spine at the sound of his voice.

“Hi. This is Marc. You know, the guy who acted ridiculous over his birthmark.”

“Sorry, doesn’t ring a bell,” she joked, hoping to cover any trepidation in her tone.

“Excuse me?”

“Yes, Marc. How are you?” She laughed a little. “How did you get my number?”

“I got your name off the debit receipt and called information for Connecticut.”

“Are you like, a stalker?”

“No. I didn’t know any other way to find out your last name. Do you own Santagario Vineyards?”

“Like yours, it’s a family business.”

“Oh. First, I’d like to apologize for my *intense* behavior the last time you were here. It was an unusual evening, and I didn’t handle it well. I would like you to come to the restaurant and have lunch. My treat.”

“That’s not necessary. I understand. It was strange for both of us.”

“I would like you to meet my aunt. She owns Tremonti Dream and Sleep Center here in Manhattan. Have you heard of it?”

“No, I’m sorry I haven’t.”

“She’d like to put a complimentary bottle of wine in each guest room, and I thought your vineyard might be interested.”

“We’re a very small operation. I could never supply a large business in New York, but thanks for thinking of us.”

“I would still like you to come for lunch. When you came back to the restaurant that night, I let you apologize. You owe me the same courtesy.”

Natalia hesitated but in the end relented. “I guess I could do a little shopping and pop my head in for lunch. I’ll call you in a few weeks and arrange it.”

“No! The weeks immediately following the holidays are slow for restaurants. It would be better for me sooner rather than later.”

“Oh—well, I don’t know.”

“I bought a humidifier.”

“How can I say no, then?”

“Good. Can you come on Thursday?”

“Sure. What time?”

“Be at the restaurant at 11:30 when we open for lunch. I’ll be waiting for you.”



When Natalia arrived at the restaurant, Marc was outside pacing anxiously. “There you are. I thought you weren’t coming.”

Extending his arm out to her, she put her hand in his. They looked at each other briefly then down at their clasped hands. There was no shock, but she wore leather gloves.

“The train was a little late. I decided to walk instead of taking a cab.”

“Come on in. I want you to meet my aunt.”

She walked into the empty restaurant. The atmosphere was quiet and tranquil, unlike her last visit.

Marc led her to a table near the window. Sitting there was an attractive woman in what Natalia assumed was her early sixties. Her dark hair, sprinkled with grey, was swept up in a loose bun. Her skin was smooth, and her eyes were so deep brown they were almost black. She reminded Natalia of an older Audrey Hepburn.

“Natalia Santagario, this is my Zia Mariella Tremonti.”

“It’s very nice to meet you,” said Natalia, offering her hand.

“The pleasure is mine, dear. Please have a seat.”

“Thank you. Your family owns a wonderful restaurant.”

“My brother opened it originally. Marcos’ father. Now, a lot of the family has their hands in it.”

“You two get to know each other,” said Marc. “I’ll be right back.”

“I told Marc this wasn’t necessary,” Natalia protested. “But he insisted.”

“I understand you two had a very interesting evening.”

“He told you?”

“Marcos mentioned a little of what happened. We’re very close.”

Marc came back with a bottle of wine. “Is this okay, or do you want a whiskey?”

“Am I going to need a whiskey?” she asked.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Good because I brought two bottles of our wine. I thought it was the least I could do since you’re providing lunch.” She pulled a bottle of Cabernet and a bottle Chianti out of her bag.

“That was very thoughtful of you. I would love to taste your wine,” Mariella said.

“Natalia, what would you like for lunch?” asked Marc. “Please, anything you want.”

“I don’t want anyone to go to any trouble. I’ll eat anything.”

“Okay.”

“Can you leave the corkscrew?”

“Sure, let me open the bottle.”

“No. I have it, thanks. I do own a vineyard you know.” She laughed a little, watched Marc walk away, and turned her attention to Mariella. “So, Marc tells me you own a sleep and dream center here in Manhattan.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Maybe you’re just the person I should talk to. I haven’t been sleeping well the last few months.” Natalia pulled the cork out of the bottle.

“I’m sorry to hear that. Sleep deprivation is a huge problem in this country. With all the technology, everyone is always on the go. No one gives their brain or body time to relax.”

“I don’t think that’s my problem. Shall we?” she asked Mariella as she poured the wine.

“Minor sleep issues usually last a week or two, not months.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing, and I’ll be back to sleeping like my old self in no time.” The two women put their glasses together and in unison chimed, “Salute.”

“Natalia, your wine is very good. I wish you would reconsider. Marcos mentioned you believe your vineyard is too small to handle supplying my center. I don’t think it would be as much of a strain as you think.”

“I don’t know. I’ve never ventured out of our local area.”

Marc returned to the table carrying three plates of food, placing one in front of Natalia and one in front of his aunt. The table had an empty seat next to each woman. Instead of sitting next to his aunt, Marc put his plate down next to Natalia's and sat beside her. She felt the heat of his closeness and inconspicuously shifted away from him toward the window. Taking a whiff of the wonderful food in front of her, she relaxed. "This is *not* Risotto Smeralda!"

"It is. Do you like it?" asked Marc.

"It's my favorite," Natalia groaned, taking a bite. "Oh, this is delicious. Can I meet the chef? I would like to marry him and have his children."

"I'm sorry. I'm already married, but maybe we could work something out." Marc winked at her.

His comment and the sparkle in his eyes when he said it had her heart racing. She managed to ask, "You made this?"

"Yes. I'm glad you're enjoying it."

"I love it, but I'm a little embarrassed. I thought you were the bartender."

"I don't get the impression you ever get embarrassed about anything, but no, I graduated from the Culinary Institute in Hyde Park, New York." He picked up his wine glass and raised it toward her. "Let me return the compliment, Natalia. Your wine is excellent. We could be good together."

With a curious look, she mused over the handsome man next to her and their peculiar circumstances. Her gaze turned to his wedding ring, and she said, "No, I don't think so."



Marc rammed the swinging kitchen door with his right shoulder and walked in. For him, being a chef and having someone enjoy his meal was the highest form of flattery. And Natalia enjoyed her meal. His experience was, the female sex usually picked at their food when in the company of a man they didn't know well. Not her. In fact, she took the last piece

of bread and wiped her dish clean. He smiled as he put her plate in the sink. Yes, she was unlike any woman he'd met before. She said and did what she wanted, not conforming to any rules of conduct—especially those expected of her gender.

Marc's problem was how he could touch her without being obvious. He refused to let her leave without knowing if her touch still resulted in a shock. He also had unanswered questions about his birthmark. That was the key to their strange puzzle, but he didn't know how to approach the subject.

While pacing around the kitchen, he realized he was playing with his wedding ring. Were his feelings for Natalia a result of being alone for so long? No, he didn't think so. There were too many coincidences to ignore. Either way, he should leave well enough alone. He told himself after Natalia left today, there was no logical reason to see her again. However, he wasn't sure he'd be able to heed his own advice.

He fixed two cups of espresso and went back to the dining room. He placed a cup in front of Natalia.

"Thank you. I think the coffee and a nice brisk walk back to the train station is just what I need. Otherwise, I may fall asleep."

Mariella pushed her chair back and excused herself from the table. "Natalia, please don't leave yet. I'll be right back."

Marc turned to Natalia, trying to make small talk. Her phone went off. As she bent down to reach into her purse, he knocked a spoon off the table onto the floor. Leaning over to pick it up, he deliberately brushed his hand against hers, aware of the spark between them. Together, they slowly straightened in their seats, staring at each other.

She glanced at her phone. "Oh, I have two messages. I never heard the phone ring." She gave him a half-smile as they sat in an awkward silence.

"Natalia, I'm sorry, but I have to ask. Have you given any thought as to how you drew my birthmark?"

"No. I think we should forget about it. I'm not going to magically wake up one morning and know how I drew it."

She looked away from him, this time out the window. With her back slightly turned to him, he leaned in closer. Her scent was intoxicating. He was content to sit there, savoring her nearness. Finally, he spoke into her ear.

“Well, I *have* thought about it. Drawing a complicated design you’ve never seen before is not an everyday occurrence. It’s not something I can forget about. I think we should—”

“Natalia,” Mariella said, suddenly appearing at the table. “Before you leave, I would like to introduce you to the rest of the family.”

Marc, irritated by the interruption, reluctantly stood, let Natalia out, and followed them into the kitchen.

Mariella made the introductions. Giuseppe still looked at Natalia with some annoyance. Since Giuseppe was his uncle, and he’d always been a little overprotective, Marc forgave him.

His cousins, Angelo and Tony, recognized her as well. “Hey, Natalia, are you going behind closed doors with Marc again?”

“That was the original plan,” she said, smiling. “But then I found out he could cook. Now I only want him for his culinary skills.”

“Are you saying he cooks better than he—”

“Tony!” Mariella glared at him. “Mind your manners.”

“I’m not saying anything,” said Natalia. “You guys do the math.”

“If you were to ask me,” joked Marc. “I’d say I do both very well.”

“That’s enough,” said Mariella. “You’re all behaving like children.” She led Natalia out the kitchen door. “I’m sorry about that, dear. Don’t mind them.”

When the women were gone, Tony walked up to Marc. “Hey, we really like her. She’s a good sport. Who is she?”

“Her family owns a vineyard in Connecticut. Mariella would like to put a bottle of her wine in each of her guest rooms at the center.”

“She’ll be back, then?”

“I don’t know. We’ll see. I hope so.”



Mark caught up with Natalia and Mariella at the door as they were saying, “Goodbye.”

“It was nice to meet you,” Natalia said to Mariella. “But I want to make the three-thirty train.”

“Please take my card. Go online and look at my center’s website. I enjoyed your wine and it could be a good business opportunity for you. Maybe it’s time you branched out a little. Just think about it.”

“Okay, I will.” Natalia hugged Mariella then turned to him. “Thank you for a delicious lunch.”

“You’re welcome.” He offered his hand and closed it firmly around hers. She jerked—ever so slightly. He’d gotten his answer. The shocks were not a coincidence. When he felt her pull away, he let go.

“I thought you bought a humidifier,” she said.

His lips curved in a playful grin. “I lied.”

“Very funny.” She checked her watch. “I’m sorry, but I have to go if I’m going to make my train. Good-bye.”

And she was gone.

“Marcos, she was lovely,” said Mariella. “I liked her very much.”

“I know,” he said softly. “I really like her, too.”

“Marcos, what are you saying?”

“I don’t know what I’m saying, much less what I’m feeling.” He sighed and flopped down in a chair. “Every time I touch her, I get a shock. It doesn’t happen with anyone else. Did you get a shock when you kissed her good-bye?”

“No.” She sat next to her nephew. “Is there anything else you didn’t tell me about the night you met?”

“We thought we knew each other and had met before.”

“Do you have her drawing? I would like to see it.”

He reached into his pocket and handed her the folded napkin.

“Marcos, it’s a perfect match. You gave me the impression it was *somewhat* similar. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Please. I need you to get her back down here,” he pleaded, knowing his aunt would do anything for him.

“Her wine was exceptional. It’s a small, relatively unknown vineyard, and I may be able to get her wine at a more reasonable price than a larger name. I’ll call her in a few days and see if she has thought about my offer.”



Natalia unlocked the door, walked in, and threw her purse on the couch. Although she was relieved to be off the crowded train and in the coziness of her family room, there was no solace from the chaos spinning in her head. Since that cold December evening, Marc and his birthmark haunted her thoughts day and night. As handsome as he was, it wasn’t reason she was attracted to him. There was something else, something deeper—something she didn’t understand.

He was an exciting, but dangerous enigma, and she was tired of behaving like a teenager with a forbidden crush. Enough was enough. It was time to act her age and be sensible. She didn’t need any more strange occurrences in her life. Living with Giovanna was plenty. There was no need for further contact with Marc. Fumbling through her purse, she found Mariella’s business card and threw it in the garbage.

Later that evening, sitting at her computer, she spotted Mariella’s card on the keyboard. “I know you’re here, Giovanna.” She felt a cool breeze blow past. “Why do you want me to go online and look at her Center?”

Natalia often wondered how and why she was able to have these conversations with Giovanna. It was telepathic, one-sided, but telepathic, nevertheless. She understood Giovanna’s communication but heard it *in* her head, not with her ears. *She*, on the other hand, always had to speak aloud. Another unsolved mystery with no resolution in sight.

“Do you really have no one else to bother?”

The small garbage can next to her desk tipped over.

“I know I haven’t been sleeping, but I don’t think I need to check myself into a facility.”

The computer booted up all by itself.

“You’re a pushy ghost, aren’t you?”

Typing the website into her browser, Natalia checked out the site. Mariella, as well as the other doctors on staff, were licensed sleep therapists, all accredited by the American Academy of Sleep Medicine. She clicked on *therapies* and thoroughly read about the services the center offered their clients.

“Okay, I read the whole thing.”

She felt a slight nudge on her arm.

“No, I don’t want to read that. It has nothing to do with me.”

Giovanna prodded her harder. Giving in as usual to her unseen houseguest, she clicked on *hypnotic regressions*. Mariella had hired two new doctors specializing in hypnotic regression. Usually, the regressions only went as far back as childhood, using the procedure to uncover some trauma that had occurred during a person’s younger days. Occasionally, though, it was used to go back farther—to look into past lives of clients.

This was not a new phenomenon. People had believed in reincarnation for thousands of years. However, the therapy *was* new to Tremonti’s Sleep and Dream Center, and they were asking anyone interested to contact them.

When she was through reading, Natalia heard Giovanna in her head and spun her chair around.

“What did you say? How do you know about Marc?”

The door to the library slammed shut.

Natalia got up, darted to the door, and opened it. “Come back here, right now!” She ran into her family room but didn’t feel Giovanna anywhere. “I asked you a question and I want an answer.”

Silence.

Walking over to the steps, she shouted up the empty staircase.

“You want to screw with me? Fine, you know there are certain individuals that can make unruly ghosts leave a person’s home. We’ll see how quiet you are when you’re being shoved out the damn door.”

She stood there, fuming, with her fists clutched at her sides. The threat was meaningless, she would never make Giovanna leave.

They needed each other too much and they both knew it.

CHAPTER 4

“One never consciously seeks out one’s soul mate...The soul mate finds you. He or she merely appears in one’s life when the right time and circumstances come.” – *Jaime T. Licauco, 1940- Parapsychologist and Author*

It was a cold, miserable January day with the precipitation changing back and forth from sleet to snow. Due to the weather, Natalia couldn’t go for her daily walk through the vineyard—which these days provided her the only respite from her embarrassing fixation with the young chef in New York. A week had passed since their lunch, and she hadn’t had much success banishing Marc from her thoughts. She wanted to see him and his birthmark again, and that scared her.

Thankfully, Giovanna hadn’t mentioned Marc again. Natalia still had no idea how she knew about him. “Great, I live with a ghost who reads mind,” she mumbled.

What she needed was a vacation. What she *didn’t* need was both Giovanna and Marc in her head. She went to her library and found a book about the ten places you should visit before you die. Curled up next to the fire, she looked for an exotic location that would make her forget Marc.

The phone rang.

“Hello, dear,” said Mariella. “How are you?”

“I’m good,” she replied slowly.

“Wonderful, but let me get to the point. Did you look at my website?”

“Yes. It looks like a very professional, state-of-the-art facility. I was impressed.”

“Do you think we could help you with your insomnia?”

“I don’t know, Mariella. I’ve never done anything like this before.” The book she was reading fell off the chair, and she knew the cool breeze was eminent. “I’m not in the mood for you today,” she muttered.

“Did you say something, dear?”

“No. Sorry.”

“Why don’t you come for a visit?” Mariella suggested. “We could kill two birds with one stone. Maybe I could convince you having your wine here would be good for your business *and* mine. Then you could look around and decide if our facility can help you. No pressure, I promise.”

“Can I have another day to think about it?” A vase filled with flowers fell over with a crash and water spilled out onto the table. “Okay, now I’m pissed. Was that necessary?” Natalia growled through gritted teeth.

“Was what necessary? Are you angry with me?”

“No, not at all. Um...my cat knocked over a vase of flowers.”

“So, what do you say?”

Creating a commotion, Giovanna swirled wildly around the room. Natalia knew her disruptive friend wouldn’t stop until she agreed to Mariella’s invitation. Against her better judgment, she heard herself telling Mariella she would meet her at the restaurant, and they could walk from there.



Natalia arrived at Tremonti’s a little before eleven a.m. The restaurant looked dark so she knocked, looked in the window, and saw Giuseppe walking toward the door.

“Good Morning, Giuseppe.”

“*Buongiorno*, Natalia. How can I help you?”

“I’m supposed to meet Mariella here this morning. Is she here yet?”

“No. Please come inside and wait. It’s cold outside.”

She followed him into the kitchen. Tony and Angelo were sitting at a table with cards strewn across the top. She didn’t notice Marc anywhere and was both relieved and disappointed by his absence.

“Hey, Natalia,” said Tony. “How about a cup of coffee?”

“Sure. What are you guys doing?”

“We’re playing cards. For some reason Marc insists we get here at ten a.m. We don’t open until four, so we play for a little while. You won’t tell on us, will you?”

She winked at them. “Not if you let me play while I’m waiting for Mariella.”

“Sure.” They pulled a chair over for her.

“I know a fun game my brother taught me. What to try?” she asked. “We just need some quarters.”

“Why not?”

The men dug into their pockets and threw the coins on the table. Natalia looked in her purse and put her share in as well.

“Okay, everyone put in a quarter,” she explained. “I’m going to deal everyone a card. Put the card on your forehead facing out so everyone can see it but you. Then we all bet. Highest card wins, ace high.” The men looked at her with blank stares. “No, really, it’s fun. Of course it’s more fun if you’ve been drinking, but you’ll see.”

The three of them did what she asked while complaining about feeling silly having a card plastered to their forehead.

“Well, I must have a better card than you guys,” she said, throwing in two quarters.

She watched the men gaze at her forehead, smile, and toss money into the pile. Tony ultimately won the two dollars and twenty-five cents with his high-ranking five of spades. After a few more hands, they heard someone in the doorway

“So, this is what goes on when I’m not here?”

The four of them slowly turned toward the voice, each holding a card on their head, and saw Marc standing there. Natalia gave him a small shrug and smiled.

“Good thing I’m the responsible one,” Marc complained. “Natalia, I thought you were meeting my aunt, did you forget about that?”

“Marc, are you always this uptight?” she asked.

He gave her a foolish grin and opened his fist to show a handful of quarters. “Nah, I’m upset you didn’t wait for me to play. Although, it looks like the silliest game I’ve ever seen.”

“It is, but it’s still fun.”

They played a little longer until Marc’s phone went off. “Hi, Mariella. Yes, she’s here. Okay, I will. Bye.” He put his phone down. “Sorry to break up the party but I have to take Natalia to Mariella’s. Something came up, and she had forgotten to get your cell number. Apparently, someone never took the phone off night mode,” he said, looking at Tony, who shrugged.

“Sorry.”

“Come on, Natalia. We better get going.”

“Thanks for humoring me and playing my one card poker game,” Natalia said. “It was nice to see you all again.”

They stepped out onto a congested Fifty-Fourth Street. Even though it was cloudy and cold, Natalia was happy to be outside and stretch her legs.

“It’s this way,” said Marc. “So, what are you meeting my aunt for?”

“I haven’t been sleeping well, but I don’t think I have the time to come to the city for treatment.”

“They have great doctors there. I’m sure they’ll be able to get to the root of your problem.”

“We’ll see.”

“Maybe you could ask them how you knew about my birthmark,” Marc murmured under his breath.

“I’m sorry. What did you say?”

“Natalia, I need you to ask them how you knew about my birthmark.”

She stopped walking and glared at him. “No, I will not. If I talk to anyone, it will be about my sleep problems, not your obsession with a mark on your back. Anyway, how would a sleep therapist know anything about that?”

“They have doctors who can hypnotize you. Natalia, please,” he said with a pleading look on his face. “We must have met before. It’s the only explanation. Maybe we were drunk at a party and don’t remember.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you? I’m twelve years older than you are. You’re grasping at straws. If it’s that important to you, why don’t you get hypnotized?”

He looked down at the concrete sidewalk. “I’ve always been skeptical about the work Mariella does there. She believes that dreams have meaning, and she’s into the whole past life regression thing.” He raised his eyes to her. “I like everyone, and they’re great doctors, but they know how I feel. I can’t act like all of a sudden, I’m a believer and ask for their help.”

“So you want me to be the guinea pig? You’re out of your mind.”

“It’s important to me. It should be important to you, too.”

“Listen to me,” she said, pointing her finger in the direction they’d come from. “You need to go back to the restaurant and leave me alone. I’ll find Mariella’s place on my own.”

“It doesn’t bother you that you drew something as obscure as the birthmark of someone you never met?”

“No. I haven’t given it another thought.”

“I don’t believe you. You came back to the restaurant that night because you were curious. Now you say you haven’t given it another thought. You’re a terrible liar.”

“Marc, I’m trying not to get pissed off, but I’m warning you, you need to drop this right now and leave me alone.” She marched away down the street.

“Walk away if you want, but I’m not going to drop it,” he yelled after her.



Natalia arrived at the center, furious with Mark for putting pressure on her. His birthmark wasn't her problem. If he was so obsessed about it, let him be hypnotized. All that nonsense about why he didn't want to do it himself was probably just bullshit.

Mariella walked through the lobby to meet her. "There you are, dear," she said. "Where's Marcos?"

"I don't know where he is, and I don't care. This isn't going to work if he keeps bothering me about his birthmark. I want to forget everything that happened that night."

"I'm sorry, dear. It's been a problem for him since he was a child. Although, he's been more preoccupied than usual since he met you. You have to admit it's strange."

"Yes, it's strange. But so are a lot of other things. He needs to figure this out on his own. It has nothing to do with me."

"Natalia, it has everything to do with you."

"Not you, too?" she whined.

"You're right," Mariella admitted. "We're here to talk about wine and sleep, not Marcos. Let's go upstairs and I'll show you around."

To Natalia's surprise, the facility was beautiful. Each room was light and airy, not dark and dreary as she'd assumed.

"What were you expecting, dear? Dracula's castle?"

Natalia laughed. "Maybe a little. I didn't know what to expect."

"Just because we delve into non-traditional methods of treating people doesn't mean we've moved to the dark side." Mariella led her to the elevator. "Let me show you the rooms I would like to put the wine in."

Natalia didn't consider them rooms, but suites, and they were impressive. The kitchen was small, but the living room was large with a two-sided fireplace that faced into the bedroom.

“I would like to place a basket filled with wine, cheese, and crackers on the hearth. We could include a card showing your vineyard nestled in the beautiful hills of Litchfield County, Connecticut, as well as directions. Who knows? It may get you more visitors on the weekends. Can you picture your wine here?”

Natalia could easily envision her wine here and that worried her. Mariella was a savvy businesswoman and had done her homework. She was sure Mariella hadn’t heard of Litchfield County before last week.

“Yes, I can picture it. I’m not sure we’re a large enough vineyard. I promise to figure it out in the next couple of days and let you know.”

“I have an apartment here in the building. Let’s go up there where we can talk.” As the woman pushed the button for the twelfth floor, Natalia felt herself moving toward a disaster of monumental proportions. She was heading to the apartment of a woman she had just met, who was the aunt of a man she thought about constantly.

She was royally screwed.

Where was her earlier resolve to be through with this family? She was well aware she needed to stay away from Marc, but something deep in the recess of her soul told her she wouldn’t be able to.

As they walked into the apartment, Natalia was struck by the view of Columbus Circle through a large picture window. She gazed down at the statue of Columbus standing tall, as if he were directing the traffic as it looped around him.

Mariella showed her around the small but stylish, two-bedroom apartment. The décor was a little more modern than Natalia usually liked, but she found it warm and inviting. She sat down and gently rubbed her eyes.

“Are you all right, dear?”

“Yes, I’m just tired. It happens this time every day.”

“Would you like to talk about your sleep problems?” Mariella asked as they sat on the sofa. “I am a licensed

therapist. I do more in the administrative side these days but I think I remember a thing or two.”

“I saw online that you have quite a few degrees.”

“Yes, I was very career-oriented in my younger days. That’s why Marcos is so important to me. I never had any children of my own.”

“You never married?”

“No. I never had the time. Between taking care of Marcos, going to school, and opening this center, I had a lot on my plate.”

“You took care of Marc? Why, did his parents work?”

“No, dear. He didn’t tell you?”

Natalia shook her head.

“Marcos’ parents died in a train derailment accident in Italy when he was four years old. His father, Salvatore, was my brother. To celebrate their anniversary, they went to Sicily then on to the mainland. They boarded a train headed for Rome, but never made it.”

Mariella turned her head away. Natalia rested her hand on the woman’s back. “Mariella, I’m so sorry. I would have never asked if I thought—”

Mariella put her hand up. “It’s fine, dear. We still miss them, of course. Anyway, they named me as Marcos’ guardian, and I was happy to raise him as my own. It was hard at first. He didn’t understand where his parents were. But we are a big, extended family, and time does heal wounds, to a certain extent.”

“Does Marc remember them?”

“He has pictures and home videos of them together. We told him anything he wanted to know about them. He has a few memories, but he was only four.”

“You did a wonderful job raising him. He seems like a great guy.” Natalia put her head down and whispered, “I really like him.”

“I thought we weren’t going to talk about Marcos anymore today.”

“Yes.” Natalia took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders. “Please no more about Marc.”

“So, tell me about yourself. I seem to have done all the talking.”

Natalia didn’t like talking about herself. She walked back to the picture window and gazed down at the hustle and bustle surrounding Columbus.

“I grew up in Connecticut. My family has owned the vineyard for many years. I have a brother Robbie and some extended family. I went to UCONN and got my business degree then went to work at the vineyard. My brother and my parents had a falling out, and I took Robbie’s side. They weren’t happy with me, but they were more upset with him. They retired and moved to Florida and before I knew it, I was in charge. My relationship with my parents is civil, but strained.”

“What about the men in your life?”

Natalia let out a small groan. The one thing she hated more than talking about herself was discussing her terrible track record with men. She sat back down on the couch with Mariella. “I’ve had a few serious relationships. The last one didn’t end well.”

“Do you think all this is impacting your sleep?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is that when your sleep problems started, after the break-up?”

“No, it was a few weeks, even a month or so afterward. It was around Thanksgiving.”

“That’s when Marcos got his tattoo.”

“Mariella, you promised.”

“Yes, dear, I know. Then after you met Marcos, did you sleep better or worse?”

“Mariella! What the hell does that have to do with anything?”

“Answer the question, dear.”

“It’s been worse, but that doesn’t mean anything. My sleep problems have nothing to do with Marc. They started before I even met him.”

“You do know you’re the only one who gives him a shock. I assume you only get a shock from him as well.”

“What? How did you know?”

“Marcos told me.”

“You don’t really want to help me, do you? This is all for his benefit. How could I’ve been so stupid?” Natalia stood, angrily grabbed her coat, and walked to the door.

“Of course, I want to help you, but I think it’s all connected. I’ve been doing this for a long time. There’s more going on here than you think.”

“I don’t want to hear it. I’m going.”

“Wait.” Mariella took hold of Natalia’s arm. “I promise to run all the proper tests with no mention of Marcos.”

“I don’t know, Mariella. I’m so exhausted right now I can’t even think straight.”

“Come sit down, and I’ll make you a cup of tea.”



When Natalia woke up, it took her a few minutes to get her bearings.

Mariella sat, patiently waiting, in a chair.

“I’m sorry,” Natalia said. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

“Remember where you are dear. I have people falling asleep on me all the time.” Mariella smiled. “Here I made you a sandwich. You must be hungry.”

“Thanks.”

“If we are going to move forward with this, there are a few questions I have to ask you.” When Natalia gave her a warning glance, Mariella added, “Don’t worry, these are strictly professional questions.”

They went over Natalia’s diet, sleep patterns, and exercise routines. Mariella faxed Natalia’s doctor to get the results of a

physical she had in December. She left the room and when she returned, handed Natalia a bottle filled with pills. “Here, take these for ten days. If you don’t see any improvement by then, even a little one, we can talk about the next step. It will be entirely up to you. I won’t call you. You get in touch with me if you want to continue.”

“What are they?”

“It’s a mixture of different herbs that will help you relax and soothe any anxiety you may have. It’s chamomile and a small amount of synthetic melatonin. Melatonin is what your body produces to help you sleep.” She handed her a piece of paper. “Follow these directions and hopefully you’ll get some sleep.”

“Thank you, Mariella.”

“I want you to use these ten days to think about my business proposition as well.”

“I will.” The two women hugged and Natalia left.



When she was gone, Mariella picked up her plate and walked into the kitchen. This may be a little harder than she’d initially thought, but she wasn’t too worried. Her new friend had a strong and stubborn personality, but strong and stubborn had nothing on human nature. Human nature always won.

Natalia would be back. She wouldn’t be able to help herself. They would go through the motions of therapy, but Mariella knew what she really needed and would do whatever was necessary to get her to that point. Unfortunately, that included giving her placebos instead of herbal supplements. Mariella had a small pang of guilt but it was short-lived. She was becoming quite fond of Natalia. It was too bad she was already exhausted and wouldn’t be getting much sleep in the next ten days, either. In this particular case, the end would justify the means.

CHAPTER 5

“When soul mates meet, there is from the very beginning instant recognition of each other stemming from the very core of their being, and this recognition has an aura of certainty that defies logic. This is commonly called ‘love at first sight.’” – *Jaime T. Licauro, 1940- Parapsychologist and Author*

“Sam, what do you think? I have to call Mariella and tell her what we’ve decided. I promised.” Natalia looked affectionately at the man she had come to love as a father. Sam Belfry had been at Santagario Vineyards for twenty-five years, and she couldn’t have kept the vineyard running without him. He was an expert on grapes, from the vine to the bottle.

They sat in front of her computer, looking at Mariella’s website. Natalia explained to him everything she and Mariella discussed.

“I think we could do it,” he replied. “We may have to pull back a few cases from the local liquor stores, but I think the exposure in the city is well worth it.”

“I’m glad you think so. I’m so excited. I never thought we’d have the opportunity to have our wine in New York.” Despite her earlier reluctance, she was almost giddy with enthusiasm.

“Me neither.” He grinned. “It’s a chance we shouldn’t pass up.”

Natalia knew Sam’s simple smile was as animated as he got, even on happy occasions. “Make sure you get the price we talked about,” he said. “Tell Mariella if she can’t pay what we want, it won’t work for us.”

“Okay. I’ll call her.”

But she didn’t call. She waited another day. Another day, she hoped the pills would start to work and she would get some sleep. Then she could ship the wine to the city and not have any contact with Mariella or Marc. But nothing was helping. She had followed Mariella’s instructions perfectly and there was no change. The rational thing to do was to find a place in Connecticut to help her. Nevertheless, she knew deep in her heart that she wouldn’t. She would end up at Mariella’s center eventually, of that she was sure.

Sleep deprived and exhausted, Natalia had no choice but to pick up the phone.

“Mariella?”

“Yes.”

“Hi. It’s Natalia.”

“Hello, dear. Has it been ten days already?”

“You don’t fool me, Mariella. You know it’s been over two weeks.”

“I’m assuming the supplements must have helped, or you would have called sooner.”

“No, I’m sorry to say, they haven’t helped. I even gave it a few extra days.”

“Don’t get discouraged, dear,” Mariella reassured her. “There are other things we can try.”

“I’ll think about it, but I do have good news. I would like to have our wine at your center if you’re still interested. I know it took me longer to decide than agreed, so I won’t be upset if you went elsewhere.”

“Of course, I’m interested. I’m a very patient woman, Natalia. I wanted your wine and I waited until I heard from

you. I couldn't be happier. I think this arrangement will work out for both of us."

"I think so, too. This is a first for us, to go outside of our local area."

"When can you come down to go over the numbers and sign a contract? Have you thought of a price?"

Natalia explained everything to Mariella exactly the way Sam told her to.

"I think that's very reasonable. If you're coming down anyway, why don't you pack a bag and stay? We can go over some of the treatments that might help you sleep."

"I don't know. This is all so frustrating. I've always been a good sleeper."

"Eventually this will affect your health. Insomnia can cause many problems. If you don't want to come here I understand, but promise me you'll take care of yourself."

"I liked your facility very much." Natalia laughed. "At least I know I'll like the wine."

"There won't be any alcohol during therapy. Alcohol doesn't help you sleep. It actually makes it worse."

"Whatever," Natalia said. "When do you want me to come?"

"It will take my lawyers a couple days to draw something up. Today is Sunday. How is Tuesday? Does that give you enough time to take care of things up there?"

"Why? How long am I going to be there?"

"Pack for a few days. You never know."

"You never know what?"

"Good-bye dear. See you Tuesday."



Natalia told Sam where she was going and why.

"Don't worry about anything here, Nat. Do what they tell you and get better." He embraced her. "I need you well rested for the spring cleanup."

“Thanks, Sam. I’ll fax the contract to you when I get there.”

“I’ll be waiting for it. Now, go take care of yourself.”

Natalia was packing when she felt Giovanna cheerfully blow into her room. “Why are you so happy I’m leaving? Are you planning a weird party with your other unworldly friends?”

Feeling Giovanna stop cold in front of her, she said, “Oh, I’m sorry,” as Giovanna let her know it had been a very long time since she’d been to a party.

Natalia sat on the edge of the bed and looked around the seemingly empty room, not knowing exactly where her invisible friend was. “I wish you would tell me who you are and why you’re here. Maybe I could help you.”

At that moment, Natalia felt a whirlpool of cool air wrap around her tightly. Even though Giovanna’s temperature was chilly, the warmth of her love came through.

“I know you do,” said Natalia, closing her eyes. “And for some strange reason, I love you, too.”



When Natalia arrived, Mariella was in the lobby. “Hello, dear. Oh my, you look awful! You have terrible circles under your eyes.”

“Thanks. It’s nice to see you, too.”

“I’m sorry, I’m just surprised. You didn’t look this tired the last time I saw you.”

“I hardly slept last night. I was nervous about coming down here today.”

“There’s no need to be nervous. It’ll be very relaxing, I promise.”

“I hope so.”

“Shall we do the paperwork first?” asked Mariella. “Get that out of the way?”

“Sure. I want to fax the contract back up the vineyard and have Sam look at it.” Natalia paused. “It’s not that I don’t trust you.”

Mariella cut her off. “Natalia, I wouldn’t think you were a good business woman if you didn’t look after your own assets. I would do the same thing. Who’s Sam?” she asked as they walked into the elevator together.

“Sam and my father are best friends. He came to work at the vineyard many years ago and stayed even after my parents retired to Florida. I’ve known him all my life and love him very much.”

“Did you discuss our business arrangement with him?”

“Yes. He really encouraged me to do it. He thought having our wine in the city was a great idea.”

“I hope I get to thank him someday,” said Mariella.

She had multiple copies of the contract ready. Natalia read them over. Everything looked fine to her, but she still faxed the agreement to Sam.

“With that behind us,” said Mariella, “let’s talk about you. Tonight, we’ll do a routine polysomnogram. This test will help us figure out what your sleep disorder is.” Mariella briefly described how Natalia would be hooked up to electrodes and monitored all night. “The doctor will explain everything. You can ask him any questions that you have.”

She got up and walked to the door. “Let me show you to your room. I’m sorry we don’t have a suite available right now, but in the next day or two you should be able to move into a nicer room.”

“I only need a room with a bed and hopefully a good night’s sleep.” Natalia had to give Mariella credit for keeping her word. There had been no mention—or sight—of Marc since she arrived. That changed when she picked up her suitcase, opened the door, and found him standing there.

“Hi, Natalia.”

“Mariella, you promised.”

“What did you want me to do, dear? If I told him not to visit for a few days, he would have known something was wrong.”

“Natalia, are you sick?” he asked “You don’t look so good.”

“I’m starting not to feel so well.” She glared at both of them.

Mariella’s phone rang and she went in the other room.

Marc stood within inches of her. Would he touch her? She breathed a sigh of relief when he shoved his hands in his pockets and asked, “How have you been these last few weeks.”

“Cranky.”

“Just your usual self, then?”

“Natalia,” said Mariella, coming out of the kitchen, “you’re going to have to give me a few minutes before I take you to your room. I’ll be right back. Marcos, come with me and leave her alone.”

“Sure.” He followed his aunt to the door. She walked into the hallway, and Marc shut the door behind her remaining in the room with Natalia.

“Marcos,” Mariella called through the door. “I don’t have time for this. I have to go.”

“Then go,” he yelled back.

“I don’t think this is a good idea. She’s tired and irritable.”

“It’ll be fine. Go do what you have to do.”

“Be careful, dear,” she said.

The smile Natalia heard in Mariella’s voice made her suspect the woman had planned the whole thing.



“What do you want, Marc?” Natalia asked.

“I want to talk to you about a couple of things.”

“A couple of things? In which order? Your birthmark and how I knew about it or what I’m going to do about it?”

“We’ll get to that, but first things first.” He put his hand out. “Shake my hand.”

“No. We’ve already met.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“Nothing.”

“Then shake it.”

“I don’t want to.” She crossed her arms defiantly over her chest.

“You really are the most stubborn person I’ve ever met.” Before she could stop him, Marc touched her forehead. She jumped from the shock.

“Stop it.”

He touched the tip of her nose.

“Stop it, I said.”

“No.”

Natalia uncrossed her arms and reached her hands out toward him. As they stood holding hands, Marc appeared not to want to let go. When she started to squirm uncomfortably, he let his hands drop to his side.

“It’s just me, right? You can touch other people and not get shocked?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Me, too.”

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I am. I don’t know if anyone has mentioned it to you, but you’re a little bit of a hot-head. At least you’re calmer today.”

“Maybe one or two people.” She gave him a smirk. “I’m too tired to fight today.”

“I guess we better get everything done today, then.”

“Great.”

“Do you still feel like you know me from somewhere?”

“Yes. Unfortunately.”

“Does—”

“Look, I can save you a lot of time. Let’s get it all out in the open. Yes, I feel drawn to you, and I don’t know why. You already know I like your birthmark and tattoo. I have an

overwhelming desire to look at them whenever I see you. I know I can't, though, because I'm afraid I'm going to want to kiss it again. I don't know why, and it bothers me. Yes, I think we have some weird connection I can't even begin to explain."

"Wow, I guess the key is to get you while you're sleep deprived. You told me things I wasn't even going to ask. You really want to see my birthmark?"

"Yes."

"Even right now?"

"Did you not understand what I just said?" she snapped.

"You really are cranky. I thought you were too tired to fight."

"Sorry." She sighed. "Yes, even right now." She walked over to the picture window. Marc stood beside her, and they watched the busy city below without saying anything.



As much as Marc wanted to have this conversation, now that they were having it, he found it disconcerting. How was this woman able to stir all these strange emotions in him? Natalia was honest. She'd told him everything he asked—and more. Should he be as open about what was going on in his head? If he said the words aloud, it would acknowledge he had feelings for her, and that brought up guilt and fear.

He stared straight out the window and didn't look at her when he spoke. "The first night we met and were in my office, I didn't want you to leave. I didn't understand it then, and I still don't. I called you to come to lunch because I wanted to see you again."

"I know. I felt it, too. I would've been content to stay and talk with you all night." She glanced in his direction. "Did Mariella tell you I was coming today?"

"If I say 'yes,' will you be mad? It wasn't her fault. I wouldn't leave her alone and kept asking if she heard from you."

“No, I’m not mad. It’s all so complicated.”

“I’m not used to anyone liking my birthmark. Most people recommend a plastic surgeon while telling me how sorry they are I have to live with something like that.”

“People really say that to you? I’m sorry. I hope you never take their advice. It really is a part of who you are.”

“You’re the only person who’s told me that. I know it’s ugly, but I want to keep it. And you appreciate that.”

“It’s not ugly,” Natalia whispered. “It’s quite beautiful.”

Every time she told him it was beautiful, he wanted to wrap his arms around her and thank her. He knew he couldn’t do that and tried to push the thought from his mind.

“Mariella will be back soon,” she said. “I should go upstairs and get ready for my treatment. You need to go home or to work, whichever it may be.”

“Work,” he said. “I have to go to work soon. Are they hooking you up to the polysomnogram tonight?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“I’ll come back tomorrow and see how you did.”

“No. Please don’t. Whatever this thing is between us, we have to let it go. You have a wife and a good life here in the city. I’m happy at the vineyard. We both need to move on. I’m sure we’ll see each other occasionally. I have to keep an eye on Mariella and my wine.” She smiled at him. “Let’s leave it at that. Agreed?”

“I’ll agree only if you promise to come to the restaurant whenever you’re in the city. Risotto Smeralda is on the house whenever you do.”

“My mouth is watering already.” She laughed. “Sure, I would like that.”

“Good. If I have time tomorrow, I’ll try to call you and see how the test went.”

Marc had plenty of time. Tomorrow was his day off. He also had no intention of keeping up his end of the deal. Things were set in motion, and there was nothing either one could do about it.

CHAPTER 6

“The worst thing in the world is to try to sleep and not to.” – *F. Scott Fitzgerald, 1896-1940, American author*

“Natalia Santagario?”

“Yes.”

“Good evening, I’m Dr. Alex Mikowski. Don’t you look comfortable?” he asked, chuckling.

It was ten o’clock at night. Natalia was snuggled in a luxuriously soft bed with wonderfully fluffy pillows. “Hi. It’s nice to meet you.”

A jolly man of smaller stature with a white beard and glasses, Dr. Mikowski reminded her of svelte Santa Claus.

“Did Mariella go over this procedure with you?”

“Yes, she did a little. She said you would explain everything as we went along.”

“Of course and please ask any questions. This test is a routine polysomnography. I’m going to put these electrodes on your chin, scalp, and the outside of your eyelids. They have to stay there the whole night. Are you okay with that?”

“Yes.”

“You haven’t had any medication, alcohol, or caffeine this evening, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Good. We’re going to observe your heart rate and breathing while you sleep. Even if you don’t sleep well, these must stay on all night. There’s a camera in the corner of the ceiling. While you’re sleeping, we’ll be recording you. Are you comfortable with that?”

She doubted anyone was comfortable with that. Who wants to be filmed while sleeping? It’s such a vulnerable state to be in. She thought it was nice he asked but didn’t think it mattered what she said. They were going to do it anyway. So she said what she was sure everyone in this position before her had. “Yes, that’s fine.”

“We’re going to monitor your REM sleep or rapid eye movement. In REM sleep, the voluntary muscle system in your body turns off. It’s almost a type of paralysis. The only voluntary muscles that move are your eyes. This is when you dream.” Dr. Mikowski attached the electrodes to her face. “We’ll also check your NREM sleep or your Non-Rapid Eye Movement sleep. Generally people go back and forth from REM to NREM sleep every ninety minutes or so. Typically there should be four to five cycles of sleep each night.”

He asked if she had any questions. “Try not to think about us watching you. Just relax and go to sleep.”

“Okay. I’ll try.”

She laid there in the dark, trying not to feel self-conscious. Taking a deep breath, she began to unwind. The bed was extremely comfortable, and she hoped to get some much needed sleep. Thinking about her day, her mind drifted to Marc. Even though she knew it was best not to see him, she was glad they talked. She went over their conversation in her head and was soon asleep.

At some point, like every night, her eyes popped open. She didn’t know what to do. She assumed they knew she was awake. *They* were the professionals. The last thing she wanted to do was roll over and face the camera. So she laid there and tried to will herself to sleep. But sleep wouldn’t come. There wasn’t a clock in her room, but she knew she had been awake for hours.

There was a knock on her door.

“Come in,” she said.

Dr. Mikowski burst into her room. He seemed in good spirits. “Good morning, Natalia.”

“Hi, Doctor. Aren’t you the cheerful one in the morning? What time is it?”

“It’s seven a.m. You didn’t get much sleep last night, huh?”

“It was the same as every other night.”

“How do you feel?”

“I’m tired.”

“I’m sorry about that, and we’re going to do everything we can to get you back to a normal sleep pattern. Let me take those electrodes off, and you can get up. They’ll be bringing you breakfast soon.”

“Thank you.”

He told her he would come see her as soon as he got the results from the test then left.

She got up and went into the bathroom. When she came out, Mariella was standing there. “Good Morning, Natalia. How did you sleep?”

“Not very well, I’m afraid.”

“After breakfast we’re going to start the maintenance wakefulness test.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a test that tells us how alert you are during the day and how well you are able to stay awake for long periods of time. There are usually four tests with two hours in between.”

“It’s all day?” Natalia didn’t want to complain but staying awake while you were tired didn’t appeal to her.

“Yes, dear. I’m sorry,” Mariella said. “And it can be tedious at times. I’ll be around most of the day. I’ll try to see you when I can.”

“Then, what?”

“Then we wait for the results. This test may take a little longer to get back, so we can look into some other options.

“Like what?”

“Have you ever been to a chiropractor?”

“Yes. About five years ago, I hurt my back, working in the vineyard.”

“Good, I’ll make you a couple of appointments over the next few days. Then how would you feel about a nice massage with aromatherapy?”

Natalia couldn’t remember the last time she pampered herself. “Mmmm. I may never leave”

“While you’re with the chiropractor, she may talk to you about acupuncture. If you’d like to try it, she would be the one who would do it. I can tell you from my own experience that it works.”

“I don’t mind looking into it.”

“That’s it, dear. We want you to relax. Here comes your breakfast. I’ll come get you when it’s time for your next test.



“Hi. Natalia?”

“Yes.”

“I’m Matt Davenport, the technician who’s going to administer your next test.”

“Hi.”

“First, how does the temperature in the room feel? Is it too hot or cold?”

“No, it’s very comfortable.

“Good. Now I’m going to shut the blinds and put a dim light behind you. You’ll be sitting in this recliner, and I have to place sensors on your face and chin. They are connected to our computer. Okay so far?”

“It sounds very exciting.” She sat in the recliner and tried to relax.

“Yeah, I know.” He smiled. “Then we wait and see if you can stay awake. It’ll be quiet and calm. You can’t fail the test. If you feel the need to sleep, then please do so. Don’t make yourself stay awake. Do what your body needs to do. Ready?”

“Let the party begin.”

Matt put the sensors on her and went into another room where he spoke to her through an intercom. “Okay, Natalia. I need you to look straight ahead and try to stay awake.”

Natalia sat there, feeling ridiculous. Were they all looking at her? This had to be the most absurd thing she had ever done. She was exhausted and thought she would fall asleep from pure boredom. Her mind kept wandering to Marc. In order to make herself stop thinking of him, she counted the diamonds on the wall. The next thing she knew, Matt was shaking her.

“Natalia, you can wake up now. You did well and stayed awake for almost fifteen minutes.”

“How long did I sleep for?”

“We only let you sleep ninety seconds,” he explained. “This way it won’t affect the next test. You can get up now and occupy yourself for two hours, then come back here.”

“Okay, thanks.”

The next test she did about the same. The third test she fell asleep sooner, after about nine minutes. There was only one more test to go, and she was glad.

She decided to go outside and walk around. The building had what she assumed was a beautiful garden in the summer, but since it was February, there were only bare bushes and trees.

There was no place to sit. All the benches were covered for the winter. The fountains stood still, a little water frozen in the bottom of each one. The sun was trying to win its battle with the clouds, but it couldn’t break through. It was cold and bleak. Natalia thought it might snow, but it felt good to be outside and get some fresh air.

It had been an extremely boring day. It was five o’clock and her last test wasn’t until six. She thought about Marc. He hadn’t come to see her, but she’d told him not to. He was only doing what she asked. Although, he did say he would call.

She looked at her cell, no messages. What would she do if he did call? It would be better not to talk to him. It was too

damn confusing when he was around. She looked at her watch and realized she'd been outside longer than she thought. She went back inside and headed off for her last date with Matt.

"Natalia, that's it," he said after the test. "You're all done for today."

"I didn't fall asleep that time. Is that okay?"

"Yes. It's fine. Don't worry, there is no right or wrong."

"Thank you. Is Mariella around?"

"No. She went out, but she'll be back later."

"I guess I'm on my own then."

CHAPTER 7

“Anyone can be passionate, but it takes real lovers to be silly.” – *Rose Franken, 1895-1988 Playwright and Novelist*

As Natalia walked back to her room, her stomach growled. The first thing she needed to do was get something to eat. She opened the door to her room and was startled when she saw Tony, Giuseppe, and Marc sitting there. There was a delicious smelling pizza on the table as well as a deck of cards and poker chips.

She couldn't help but laugh. “What are you doing here?”

“Wednesday and Thursday are our days off,” said Giuseppe. “Marcos told us how boring the tests are and said we should visit you.”

“That was very thoughtful of you.”

“You said that silly card game was more fun if we were drinking but we can't find any wine. Mariella is out, and her apartment is locked,” said Tony. “Marc doesn't have a key.”

Natalia gave the three men a sly smile. “I know I wasn't supposed to, but I brought some wine with me. Promise not to tell Mariella?”

“Ah.” Tony grinned. “Marc knew you'd have wine. It seems he knows you too well.”

Marc shrugged. When she went to get the bottle of wine out of her bag, he followed her. “How did the tests go?”

“Okay. I didn’t sleep well but it’s what I expected. You’re right, today was very monotonous. This is just what I need, a little company. How did you know I had wine with me?”

“I don’t know. I get the feeling you’re not someone who always follows the rules.”

“If it’s your night off, shouldn’t you be home?”

“Simone, that’s my wife, is working late.”

“Oh, well thanks for this. Let’s eat, I’m starving.”

After they ate, they played Natalia’s one card poker game until Tony spoke up. “Do you know how to play real poker?”

“I’ve played once or twice. I guess I could try.” She listened intently as Tony explained the game and wrote down what beat what on a piece of paper.

“Let’s try five card stud,” he said, dealing the cards.

“Oh! Is this the one where I can pick new cards if I want?” she asked innocently.

“You don’t pick them. I give them to you. Don’t forget to ante up.”

“Sorry.” She threw a blue chip into the middle of the table.

“No, Natalia,” Tony snapped as if losing his patience with her. “Not a blue one. Everyone threw in a red one. Please pay attention.”

“I didn’t think it mattered.”

“Yes, it matters. They’re all worth different amounts.”

“Okay, I have it now.” She looked over her cards at the men. “Let’s play.”

She carefully watched the men’s mannerisms as they were dealt their cards. Giuseppe sat up a little straighter with a good hand but slouched a bit with a bad one. Marc tended to lean back and relax when dealt good cards. Tony was the easiest to read. He had no poker face at all. Natalia lost the first few hands and folded a couple of times.

She looked at Tony. “I’ll take three cards, please.”

Giuseppe folded, Marc had two pairs, and Tony had three of kind. He went to reach for the pot, ignoring Natalia.

“Excuse me, I have a full house,” she said, showing them her cards. “I’m sure it was beginner’s luck.”

Her beginner’s luck continued until she had a pile of chips in front of her. The paper Tony had written for her was on the floor.

“So, who taught you the game?” Marc asked. “You seemed so innocent in the beginning, you played us well.”

“My brother and his friends taught me at least twenty years ago.”

“How do you know we weren’t taking it easy on you because you didn’t know the game?” asked Tony.

“What do you have in mind?” asked Natalia.

“Strip poker.”

She laughed. “How old are you? I don’t want to get arrested for having a buck-naked, under-age kid in my room.”

“Very funny. I’m twenty three.”

“You’re on.”

“Here are the rules. Jewelry doesn’t count.”

“I don’t have any jewelry on.”

“Neither do belts or shoes. Socks do—if you want them to. So everyone can leave their socks on. Or use them to stall.”

“I don’t think this is the proper thing to be doing,” said Giuseppe.

“Oh, have another glass of wine and relax,” said Natalia. “We’ll go easy on you.”

Marc asked her to come to the side of the room. “What are you doing?”

“Are you going to get all proper on me, too?”

“No. Who doesn’t love strip poker? But we both know what’s underneath my shirt.”

“I know, and I would love to see it, but I can’t.”

“Then why are doing this?”

“I’m expecting you not to lose.”

A half-hour later Tony had lost his shirt, as well as his socks. Everyone else had managed to stop at no more than being barefoot. The next hand found Natalia and Giuseppe betting. When she put down a straight and saw his face drop,

she assumed he didn't want to take his shirt off. "I'm sorry, Natalia," he said laying down a full house. "No one expects you to take off your sweater." His face turned slightly red as he spoke.

"Yes, we do," said Tony.

"You need a girlfriend," she said, raising an eyebrow to him. "It's fine Giuseppe. I play fair and square."

"Natalia, you don't have to prove anything," Marc chided. She crossed her arms grabbing each side of her sweater and started to pull. "Natalia, stop it!"

She yanked her sweater off and sat there with a burgundy Santagario Vineyard t-shirt on. "Gentlemen, it is winter. Didn't you mother teach you to layer your clothing?"

"Is there another shirt under that one?" Tony quipped.

Natalia turned to him. "You *really* need to get laid."

"That's enough, you two." Marc's grimace suggested he was biting his cheeks, trying not to laugh. "Natalia, considering you're a forty year old woman, why do I have to be the mature one here? Come on, I have time for one more hand, then I have to go."

Giuseppe dealt the cards, announcing deuces were wild. Again, it was between Natalia and him. This time he put down a straight.

"Giuseppe, you shouldn't have made deuces wild." She placed her cards on the table and showed three fives and one deuce. "You're a dear sweet man, and no one is going to make you do something you're not comfortable with."

"No, I shouldn't have agreed to play if I wasn't going to play by the rules." He started to unbutton his shirt.

"What's going on here?"

They all twisted their heads to the door and saw Mariella standing there. Giuseppe groaned a sigh of relief, and Natalia started giggling.

"I'm sorry Mariella, but I don't think Giuseppe has ever been happier to see you."

"Is that wine? Where did you get that from?"

"I brought it," the three men all said in somewhat unison.

“Where did you get wine with a Santagario label on it? We haven’t signed the paper work.”

Natalia was touched they were willing to take the blame for her. “Thanks guys, but it’s mine, Mariella.”

“I thought I told you alcohol makes sleeping worse.”

“I haven’t had a glass of wine in over two weeks, and I still can’t sleep.”

“The party’s over. You three get out now!”

The three men did what they were told and got up to leave.

“Thank you for visiting me. I feel much better.” Natalia hugged Tony. “No hard feelings?”

“Nah, it was fun.”

“Buena sera, Natalia,” said Giuseppe, kissing her on the cheek. “Good luck with Mariella.”

“I can handle her.” Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Marc walk toward her. “You better get going.” She made sure she didn’t touch him.

“I have a few minutes. Do you want me to explain to Mariella? She’s tough. I grew up with her.” He stepped closer and Natalia backed up.

“No. I have the advantage. I won’t sign the contract if she gives me a hard time.”

“I heard that,” said Mariella.

“Mariella, I’m kidding.” Natalia faced Marc but lowered her head, not wanting to look at him. “Good night, Marc. Thanks, again.”

“Natalia, come with me.” Mariella said as she walked out the door.

“Mariella, it’s late and I’m tired.”

“You yourself said you won’t be getting any sleep.”

Natalia followed her into the elevator. As the doors shut, she saw Marc standing there watching her leave.

“Natalia, I’m disappointed with you. You knew the rules.”

“They surprised me, and we needed something to drink with our pizza. I wouldn’t have opened it if I was alone.”

“Whose idea was this little party?”

“I have no idea.”

“Only Marcos knew you were here. He’s not going to be able to keep away. Neither are you, dear, just so you know.”

“We reached an agreement yesterday. We’re going our separate ways.” She neglected to mention that within twenty-four hours, Marc had broken their agreement, and she was glad.

“We’ll see who’s right and who’s wrong. Here’s your paperwork from Sam.”

Natalia looked everything over, happy to change the subject. “Sam says everything’s in order. Where do I sign?”

“Right here, dear.”

Natalia signed the papers and handed the pen to Mariella.

“Here’s to a long and prosperous business relationship?” Mariella said. “Should I open champagne?”

“I thought alcohol made sleeping worse,” Natalia teased. “No, thanks, I’m tired. Thank you again for giving the vineyard some extra exposure. I’m going back to try and get some sleep.”

Mariella handed her a paper with her appointments for tomorrow. She had the chiropractor at ten and maybe acupuncture at eleven. Then she had time to exercise and sit in the steam room, then a massage after lunch.

“Well, that’s a full day. I won’t be bored tomorrow.”



Natalia’s morning went well and after lunch, she went back to her room for a quick shower before her massage. She was surprised to see Marc sitting there watching TV.

“I could’ve sworn I locked the door.”

“I know the owner.”

“Why are you here?”

“I’m off today, too. I’m bored.”

“What do you usually do on Thursdays?”

“Follow women around. Today is your lucky day.”

“I won’t be too much fun to follow around today. Maybe you should bother someone else.”

“No. I’m good.”

“I have a massage at three.”

“I’ll be here when you get back.”

“What for? It’ll be after four when I get back. You’ll need to be getting home.”

“We’re going to hang out for a while.”

“No. We aren’t.”

“Look, it’s almost three. You’d better get going. They don’t like it when the clients are late. It messes up the schedule for the rest of the day. Go on.” He sat there smugly. “Oh, and can you try and be in a better mood when you get back? Thanks.”

She mumbled some obscenities and called him a not so nice name in Italian under her breath.

“Now, now, Natalia. That won’t work with me. I understand everything you’re saying. For the record, I’m not above calling you a few names as well, in English or Italian. I might even remember a little French from college—”

Infuriated, she slammed the door on him while he was talking. She tried to reap the benefits of her massage, but all she could think of was Marc and his damn birthmark. True to his word, he was there when she got back.

“Marc, please, I thought we had an agreement.”

“We do, and that’s why I’m here. I’m busy this weekend with work and some function with Simone. Then I work until Wednesday. I think you’ll be gone by then.”

“Yes, I’m going home tomorrow, after I get my results. I’ve decided to find a facility closer to home to help me.”

“Oh,” Marc said somberly. “So after tonight, we each go our own way.”

“Yes.”

“Then I think we should order Chinese food, rent a movie, and wish each other well.”

She knew the worse thing she could do was agree to his proposal, but like every other time he was near, her will power

had run off somewhere. “That’s it? Dinner, movie, and we’re done?”

“Cross my heart. I have to be home at ten.”

“You sound like a teenage with a curfew.”

“Yes or no?”

“Yes,” she said and told him what she wanted to eat.

“Jesus, you eat a lot.”

“Life is to be enjoyed. Food is a great thing.”

Marc laughingly agreed with her. “What kind of movie? Please not a chick flick.”

“Yuck. For me the scarier the better.”

“A girl after my own heart.”

“Surprise me—but I loved *The Grudge*.”



Natalia was through showering before he got back. She combed out her wet hair, put on a pair of sweats, a t-shirt, and applied a smidgen of make-up. She refused to get all dressed up and act like it was a date. The problem was where to eat. She was still in a small room, her suite not ready until tomorrow. There was a little table in her room but only one chair. She certainly wasn’t going to sit on the bed with him and eat. The floor would do. She pushed the bed to one side to make room. She was getting paper cups out of the bathroom when Marc walked in.

“Excuse me. Have you heard of knocking?”

“Sorry, I’m too comfortable around you, I guess.”

She quickly changed the subject. “What movie did you get?”

“*The Grudge* was gone. They did have *The Ring*.”

“Oh, perfect. I love that one, too. Can you put it in? I’m bad at the DVD stuff.”

She opened all the cartons of food and put them and some paper plates on the floor in front of the TV. Then she went to the closet and dug out the last bottle of wine, which she hid

after last night. Marc opened the wine and poured them each a little while she fixed him a plate from the buffet spread out before them.

He put the movie in and sat down next to her. "You look nice tonight."

"These sweats are hand-me-downs, and this is my brother's old Navy t-shirt."

"It doesn't matter. I think you look good. It's nice to meet a woman confident enough not to cover herself up in a lot of make-up."

"Let's watch the movie," she said, inching away from him.

Since Marc had never seen *The Ring*, Natalia had fun trying to scare him. She was impressed. He didn't scare easily. Maybe he was a horror fan. When the movie was over, she started to clean up. "I'm sure Mariella won't appreciate the mess in here."

He poured them each a little more wine. "Wait. You forgot your fortune cookie." He handed her a cookie and her wine. She took it, being careful not to touch him.

"Do you know the old joke about adding 'in bed' to the sayings to make them risqué?" she asked.

"Of course, I'm related to Tony remember?"

"Who told Tony?"

"I may have mentioned it to him while I was in college." Marc grabbed a fortune cookie for himself.

"That's what I thought. What's your fortune say?"

He opened his cookie and read it aloud. "You use your creative talents to transform a business environment."

"In bed," they said together and laughed.

Natalia read hers, "You will meet hundreds of people."

"In bed," they announced together. "Sounds fun but exhausting." She giggled.

He picked up a different bag.

"You have more?"

"These are the *other* fortune cookies you can buy at any participating Chinese restaurant. I knew if anyone would enjoy a dirty fortune cookie it would be you."

“You do know me too well. I’m going to need more wine for this.”

He poured wine in her little cup and held the bag open for her. “Ladies first.”

She picked a cookie and started giggling before she even opened it. “Sex is like snowfall. You never know how many inches you’ll get.”

“In bed.” They were almost crying from laughing so hard.

Marc opened his. “Sex drive begins with puberty and ends with marriage.”

The minute she heard him utter the word, Natalia stood, picked up all the fortunes on the floor and threw them in the garbage. She was angry with herself. Marc shouldn’t be here, and she shouldn’t have allowed this evening to go on, much less, let her guard down and have fun with him.

“It’s almost nine. You better get going.” She fidgeted a bit, putting her hands in and out of her pockets. “I feel like I’m always thanking you. I do appreciate you visiting me since all my friends are over an hour away.” She lowered her eyes to the floor.

He got up and went to her. “Natalia, I was happy to keep you company. I like spending time with you.” He gently lifted her chin and ran his fingers down the side of her face. “I don’t want to go. I want to stay with you, but I can’t.”

She felt a stream of shocks follow his fingers down her face like a teardrop. “I know,” she said softly.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s just the way it is. I’m glad we had a chance to meet and have some fun.”

She went to open the door. He put his arms around her. She didn’t resist and hugged him back, feeling the shocks sporadically striking where their skin touched, holding on to each other longer than they should have until Natalia pulled away.

“I’ll never understand the shocks,” Marc said.

“Me either, but it is cool, don’t you think?”

“Yes, it’s very cool and I like it.”

“You really need to go,” she said, trying to be firm.

“Nat, I—”

“Please don’t. I’m going home tomorrow.

“This is really good-bye then?” he asked solemnly.

“Yes, it is. Take care of yourself.”

“You, too.” He put his coat on and left.

CHAPTER 8

“Put your ear down close to your soul and listen hard.” –
Anne Sexton 1928-1974 American poet and writer

Natalia had told Marc she was going home, but she wasn't. She had weekend plans with Mariella. On Friday, they shopped and had dinner. It was a good day and the subject of Marc never came up.

That all changed on Saturday afternoon. After her appointments on Saturday morning, Natalia knocked on Mariella's door.

“Hello, dear, come in.”

“Are you ready? The movie starts at two p.m.”

“Yes. How have you been sleeping?”

“There hasn't been any change. I feel good though, very relaxed. I hoped the treatments would help, but they haven't.”

“After the movie, will you come back so we can have a talk?”

“I'm not going to talk about Marc. We've gone our separate ways.”

“I wanted to talk about your sleep issue, but I see he's the first thing on your mind.”

“No, he's all *you* ever want to talk about.”

Mariella only smiled. “Let's go. I don't want to be late.”

After the movie, Natalia and Mariella were sitting in her living room. Natalia made some tea.

“You shouldn’t have that tea this late. It won’t help you sleep,” Mariella said.

“I don’t think it matters much and it tastes good.”

“Marcos calls every day asking if I’ve heard from you.”

“Mariella. Stop trying to connect my sleep problems with Marc. One has nothing to do with the other.”

“Did he come to your room the other night with dinner and a movie?”

“Yes. Do you have some sort of tracking device on him? Doesn’t he have any privacy?”

“He walked around the city then came here for a few minutes before going home.”

“What does that have to do with my sleep problems?”

“Natalia, if you would be honest about your feelings, things might go a little better for you.”

“I can’t.” Natalia regretted her decision to come back to Mariella’s apartment.

“Well, I can, so you’ll have to listen to me. I’ve been a big believer in reincarnation for over thirty years. I think it explains many things in our lives—our fears and phobias, our likes and dislikes. Do you know anything about it?”

“Yes. I’ve read about it. I don’t know that I believe it, but I’m open-minded about most things.”

“Good. I also think most of the people in our lives are souls we have known before. We know some better than others, and some we have a very strong connection to. I think you know where I’m going with this.”

“Yes, I do. Have you had this talk with Marc, or am I the only one lucky enough to hear your ideas?”

“Only you, dear. Even you said you were open-minded to most things. Marcos is not. He’s very touchy about his birthmark, and that’s a big part of this. I believe birthmarks are reminders of things that happened to us in previous lives. Through the years, I’ve often wondered what Marcos had to go through to get those scars, but I could never tell him that.

Then out of nowhere, you show up and seem to understand his birthmark.”

“I don’t understand it. I have no idea what those marks mean.”

“But you could find out.” Mariella looked Natalia straight in the eye. “You could go back into—”

“Oh, no, Mariella. I came here to get some sleep, not be an experiment.”

“You wouldn’t be an experiment. The two doctors on my staff have been doing past-life regressions for years. It’s a new practice *here*, that’s all.”

Natalia looked out at the statue of Columbus. It was getting dark. The city was aglow with lights and so alive. Yet, she felt stuck in some sort of limbo she didn’t understand.

“Natalia, why did you come to me for help? I could have referred you to plenty of places in Hartford or Stamford.”

“I like you and I like it here. It’s easier to get help from people you know and trust.”

“You knew Marc would be here. You could have declined on the wine and therapy, but you didn’t.”

“No.”

“You could have told Marc and his cohorts to leave your room Wednesday night and told him it wasn’t appropriate for him to be there on Thursday night. But you didn’t.”

“No,” Natalia said, feeling ashamed.

“Well, dear, it’s just going to get worse. You’re both drawn to each other. Ignoring it won’t make it go away.”

Natalia continued to look out the window with her back to Mariella.

“Will you please take these few books on the subject of regression back to your room? Look through them and think about what I said. That’s all I’m asking you to do.” Mariella said.

This being a rare occasion when she was at a loss for words, Natalia took the books and started to leave.

“I know it’s a lot to think about, Natalia, but I know you’ll make the right decision. You need answers as much as he does.”



Sunday morning Natalia’s eyes popped open at six a.m. She had stayed up reading until two-thirty in the morning, only getting a few hours of sleep. She wasn’t sure how much longer she could go with such little sleep.

The past life regression subject made her uneasy. But after reading the books, she had a better understanding of it. Still, she needed time to think—away from everything Tremonti. She dressed and headed outside for a brisk walk.

She found the streets of New York empty, quiet, and cold. All the wonderful sounds and smells were hidden away somewhere. New York City may never sleep, but it does rest on Sunday mornings between six and eight o’clock.

After exploring the streets for forty-five minutes, she walked up to the statue of Columbus. Pigeons were taking off and landing on him. Natalia smiled. She was sure Columbus would be thrilled with the admiration the city gave him, but not about being a pigeon perch.

She looked up at him half expecting him to say something. However, he was the strong, silent type and didn’t offer her any advice. No, she was on her own, the only one who could make the decision that had to be made.



Sunday night Natalia knocked on Mariella’s door to return the books.

“Natalia, have you eaten? I have a nice antipasto.”

“No. That’d be great.”

“Did you get a chance to look over the books?”

“Yes. We can talk about it while we eat.”

Half way through their meal, the doorbell rang. Mariella answered the door, and Natalia could hear Marc's voice in the other room. "Mariella, do you have my tux? Simone thinks it's here."

"Yes, dear. It's in the closet in the second bedroom."

"Thanks."

Mariella glanced at Natalia. She shook her head. Marc didn't know she was there and Natalia wanted to keep it that way.

"Where are you going tonight?" Mariella asked Marc.

"I don't know. I haven't seen or heard from Simone for weeks, then out of the blue, she needs me to attend some function tonight. I hate this tux." Marc sighed. "Have you heard from Natalia?"

"I'm sure she's fine, dear. Why not have Simone pick you up here?"

"Yeah, let me call her."

Mariella went back to Natalia. "Please think about what we talked about. Every day he asks about you."

"Why can't he be regressed?"

"He's afraid. He doesn't want to go back and remember his parent's accident."

"I understand that, but this is different. This is past life regression."

"He doesn't believe it. He thinks you're born, you live, and you die. He assumes you can't go further back than childhood, and that's when the accident occurred."

"Why did he say Simone was away for weeks? He told me she was at a dinner the other night?"

"He hasn't said anything about Simone to you?"

"No."

"They haven't lived together since July. She's a little *confused* right now and wanted some time to figure things out. When she's not traveling, which isn't often, she stays in the apartment above the restaurant. Unfortunately, sometimes they go weeks without talking."

“Oh.” Natalia was surprised at Mariella’s words. “Where is he?”

“In the second bedroom.”



Natalia knocked on the door.

“Hold on, Mariella,” Marc answered. “Is Simone here already?”

“No. Not yet,” Natalia said, standing in the doorway.

He turned around. “I thought you went home.”

“I lied. I can’t keep seeing you. It’s too hard.”

She walked toward him and looked into his eyes. “Can I see it?”

“Why? No—I don’t think so. Not tonight.”

“It’s important. Please.”

He hesitated but eventually turned his back to her. While he took off his shirt, Natalia stared at the floor. When she slowly looked up at his shoulder, she was again amazed at how his birthmark affected her. This was only the second time she had come face to face with it. She had seen it plenty of times in her mind. Lately it was all she thought about.

She walked up behind him and asked him to sit on the bed. As if something else was instructing her on what to do, she took off her sweater. She kept her bra on, for which she was grateful, as it seemed she had no control over her actions.

She sat behind him and traced his birthmark with the tip of her finger, feeling the expected shocks. Tenderly kissing his shoulder, she felt a surge of jolts hit her as her stomach brushed against his lower back. Slowly and deliberately, she continued to press herself against him. She thought she heard him say her name, but all she could do was her put arms around him and lean her head on his back. She welcomed the small parade of shocks flowing between them. It was warm and soothing and just what she needed.



Marc had been taken by surprise when he heard her voice and turned to face her. He was happy to see her, but when she asked to see his birthmark, he didn't think it was a good idea for either one of them. He also knew he couldn't refuse her. Taking off his shirt, he was aware of her behind him. He sat on the bed, expecting the shock as she touched and kissed his shoulder. But when she embraced him and her body met his, it was a sensation he could have never imagined. He heard himself utter her name.

Instead of answering him, she rested her head on his back. Like a gentle massage, shocks ran up and down his spine. He held her arms around him tightly and put his head down. It was the most peaceful and serene feeling he'd ever had.

It wasn't sexual. Although if someone saw them and didn't understand what was happening, they would certainly think it was. In reality it was much deeper, and something he was sure neither one of them had ever experienced. It was the coming together of something. Something that had been separated for a time, but found its way back together. Within a minute or two, their breathing was in sync, and she seemed as content to sit there as he was.

Mariella opened the door and saw them sitting there, turned away and left them alone. Natalia tried to get up.

"No," Marc said. "Not yet." He held on to her arms even harder.

"Marc, if I don't get up now, I might not ever."

"I said not yet."

She didn't say anything and let her head relax against his back. After a few more minutes she said, "Marc, I need to go, please."

He slowly and unwillingly let go of her. She stood behind him and pulled her sweater over her head before he turned around. "Thank you for letting me spend this time with you. I

know it was intense, but it's helped me make a necessary decision.”

He continued to sit there with his head down, not responding to her. She knelt down in front of him and asked him if he was all right. He gazed into her eyes and saw they were full of tears. He took her hand, kissed the inside of her palm, let the shock come, and put her hand down. “Yes,” he said.

She got up and walked out the door. He let her go and said nothing.



Marc walked out of the bedroom without his tux on.

“Are you all right, Marcos?” asked Mariella.

“No, I’m not. Did Natalia go back to her room?”

“Yes, dear. I have good news, though. She agreed to undergo hypnosis to get the answers you both need.”

“She did?”

“I thought you’d be happy.”

“She shouldn’t have to do it alone.”

“I have two doctors here tomorrow. Sometimes you have to find your own answers and not let others do all the work for you.”

“Or maybe we shouldn’t find out at all.”

“Marcos! You don’t mean that. You’ve been obsessing about her since you met.”

“I have to get dressed. Simone will be here soon.” He turned away from his aunt, went in the other room, and slammed the door. Sitting there with Natalia helped him make a decision as well. He needed to get his head on straight. Straight toward Simone, where it belonged, not in the opposite direction toward Natalia, the direction in which he’d been happily heading in the last few weeks. That ended tonight.

CHAPTER 9

“Relationships are like glass. Sometimes it’s better to leave them broken then try to hurt yourself putting it back together.” – *Author Unknown*

Marc came down the stairs the next morning and saw Simone’s luggage at the door. “We got home late last night. You didn’t have to get up. I have a car coming to take me to the airport,” she said. “Thank you again for coming with me. You were your charming self, like always.” She smiled.

“You’re welcome.” As Marc took her hands in his, he was blatantly reminded that at Simone’s touch he felt no shocks. For the hundredth time he had to force Natalia out of his head. “Would you consider not going on this trip? I was hoping you and I could go away for a few days instead.”

“Marc, I have to go. I’ve worked hard on this account, and I’m the only one who can present it.”

“How about you work on our marriage?” he snapped.

She walked away from him toward the door. “I thought maybe we could go more than one day without fighting.”

“You’d have to be here more than one day at a time for that to happen.”

“I’ll wait outside. The car should be here any minute.”

“Simone, wait. I’m sorry. I don’t want to fight with you. It’s just...I’ve had a lot on my mind lately, and I’m confused right now. I need you. I need my wife back. Please.”

“Marc, I’m sorry, too. I know you’re confused. So am I. I appreciate how patient you’ve been with me, letting me have my time alone these last few months. I don’t know how many other men would’ve been as supportive.”

“My patience is running low. I don’t want to live like this anymore. Do you?”

“No,” she said.

“I want you to be honest with me. Tell me how you feel.”

“Marc, do we have to do this right now?”

“Yes, I want to know.”

She sighed. “I have a restlessness inside me. I feel like there’s a whole world out there to see and experience. My job is exciting. It allows me to travel and come in contact with so much. We got engaged straight out of college and then married. We didn’t travel or do anything but work. I feel like I already did the conventional marriage thing for all those years. Now things are different, and I have several opportunities.”

“And I’m holding you back from all that?”

“Not you.” However, when she looked at him, Marc saw tears rolling down her face. “Maybe being married is, though. Both my marriage and my job are huge commitments. They’re important to me, and I love them both. But I’m not sure I can do two important things at the same time and do them well.”

Can’t or won’t? Marc thought but kept it to himself. “I can take time off from the restaurant and travel with you. I’d be willing to do that.”

“I know you would.” She took his face in her hands and kissed him softly. “You are the kindest, sweetest man I know. It would work for a while, but you’d soon be unhappy. You’re a homebody. You want a more traditional life and marriage. Then we’d have the argument about kids again and end up right back here.”

Marc knew she was right. He never enjoyed a vacation lasting longer than a week, always anxious to get home to his

bed and home cooked meals. His favorite thing to do in the winter was curl up by the fire and watch football or a good movie.

She was also right about the subject of having children. She had been clear from the beginning she didn't want children. He was twenty-three when they'd had the conversation. At the time, kids were the last thing on his mind, so he agreed. As Simone became more adamant about not having kids, his longing to have them became stronger, especially these last few months.

"It seems we want different things at this point in our lives," he said.

"Yes, it does."

"Should we talk to someone? A counselor?" He'd asked her this many times and always got the same answer.

She hesitated a moment. "We could, but I don't know when I can arrange an appointment. My schedule is full the next few weeks."

"You have to make a decision then."

"I need more time."

"No. I'm sorry. This arrangement only works well for you. When you need a husband, you show up here and crawl into my bed or dress me up in a tuxedo, and we pretend we're a happy couple. Then you're gone again for weeks. As your escort last night, I didn't even get the benefit of you in my bed. I was an ornament on your arm. When I did everything you wanted me to do, I wasn't needed anymore."

"Marc, that's not true. I'm sorry. It was very late. I was tired and had to get up early."

"Don't apologize. I wasn't in the mood anyway." He saw her glare at him and knew he'd gone too far. "Nothing had to happen if you were tired. It would have been nice to have you next to me. We could have talked and maybe gotten a little of our connection back," he said softly.

"Marc, I do love you."

"Then please stay here and don't go on this trip."

“I have to go. Please don’t do this to me right now. It’s not fair.” They both heard the car horn beep. She put her coat on and grabbed her suitcase.

“Simone, please. You have to make a decision. Will you at least come home after your trip?”

“I—can’t. I love you and want you to be happy.” She kissed him again, this time on his cheek. “I’ll call you when I get back from D.C.” They heard another beep, longer and louder. “Good-bye, Marc.”

Marc stood alone in the foyer looking at the back of the door. He turned and walked into the kitchen and stared at the phone. What the hell was he supposed to do now? She can’t do what? Make a decision? Does she want him to make it for her? It was apparent she wasn’t coming home after her trip. Who the hell knew when he’d see her again? It could be weeks. Did she expect him to be here whenever she needed him? What about when he needed her?

“Good bye, Simone.” He picked up the phone and punched in the number of his lawyer.

CHAPTER 10

“I have fallen in love many times...always with you.” –
Author Unknown

Marc arrived at nine-thirty a.m. and found Mariella in her office.

“I’m sorry, Marcos,” she said. “Natalia’s already gone in with Dr. Ellis. I did talk to Dr. Collier and she has time this morning if you’d like to...find the answers you need.”

Marc had made his decision on his ride to the Center.

“I’ll do it on one condition. I don’t want to go back to the accident. I won’t go back any farther than when I’m five or six. I must have met Natalia as a child, and that’s why she has such an impact on me.”

“All you have to do is explain this to Dr. Collier,” Mariella said.

“One other thing. No hocus pocus regarding past lives. You know how I feel about that. I mean it, Mariella.”

“Yes, Marcos, I know.”

There was a knock on the door and Dr. Marcia Collier stuck her head in. “Good Morning, everyone.” She was a pleasant looking woman in her fifties and was Marc’s favorite doctor here. He was glad that Mariella had arranged for him to see her. “Hello Marc.”

“Hi, Doc.”

“Are you ready?”

“No, not really.”

“You’ll be fine. Most people don’t realize how relaxing this is. You’ll be in control the whole time, don’t worry.”

“Okay. Let’s go before I change my mind.”

They walked into her office, and he sat down. She went over the procedure and asked him if he understood what would be happening. She also asked him permission to record his session.

“So what would you like to accomplish today? Mariella told me you’re here because of your birthmark.”

“Yes. I met a woman for the first time in December. Yet, I felt like I knew her right away. Out of nowhere, she drew my birthmark without ever seeing it. We must have met before. She’s twelve years older than me, so it must have been when I was a child.”

“If you’ve met her before and want access to that information, it should be fairly easy to retrieve. What’s her name?”

“Natalia.”

“Let’s begin,” Dr. Collier said gently. “I would like you to close your eyes and take a deep breath. When you exhale, try to release any stress or tension you feel. When you inhale draw in energy from a source that is comfortable to you. Focus on your breathing, finding a place within that is peaceful, and allow yourself to go into a deep relaxation. You will only go as deep as you’re comfortable with.” She sat patiently while Marc relaxed—as much as he could.

“Marc, I want you to go back to when you were a child. Tell me when you get there.”

Marc assumed he would have to concentrate on going back to his childhood. Instead, he found it came easily to him. In his mind, he saw his life rewinding like a movie and was able to stop it where he wanted.

“I’m five years old.”

“Do you remember seeing Natalia during this period?”

“No.”

“That’s okay. We’ll go through the years and you tell me when you see her.”

Marc allowed his younger years to move forward slowly, looking hard for Natalia. He went through his teens and into his early twenties. There was no sign of Natalia. He was becoming anxious.

“Marc, just keep breathing. There’s no reason to get upset. We’ll find her. Just rest and let your stress go.” When Marc had calmed down, she told him she’d be right back.



Dr. Collier went looking for Mariella. When she found her, she explained that Marc was becoming extremely agitated. “He didn’t meet her before last December.”

“Of course, he didn’t,” Mariella said. “Take him back farther. He won’t go if he doesn’t want to.”

“I know,” Dr. Collier concurred. “But I thought he was clear, it wasn’t what he wanted.”

“I know, but he needs the answers to his questions. I’ll take full responsibility if he’s angry.”

Dr. Collier went back to Marc’s room and quietly sat down next to him.

“Marc, are you still feeling relaxed?”

“Yes.”

“Do you still want to find Natalia?”

“Yes.”

“In order to do that, we have to go back further in your memory. Are you comfortable with that? You can only go there if you want to.”

“Yes.”

“Are you positive?”

“Yes.”

“We’re going to have to go deeper into relaxation.” Within a few minutes, she had gotten Marc where he needed to be. “Marc, I want you to visualize a long hallway. Down this

hallway, there are many doors. Each door represents a past life. Can you find the one that shows us the first time you met Natalia?"

"Yes."

"Can you tell me about the door?"

"It's very old."

"Ancient?"

"Older. Prehistoric."

"Would you like to open this door?"

"Yes."



"Natalia, are you comfortable?"

Natalia was in a reclining chair in a dimly lit room with soft music playing in the background. She had met Dr. Elizabeth Ellis for the first time this morning and liked her immediately. "Yes, thank you."

"Have you ever been hypnotized?"

"No."

"Most people don't know this, but you'll actually be awake. Just in a very deep state of relaxation. You'll be in full control of what you say and do. I have no mind control over you. Do you have any questions?"

"No. I'm ready."

"Okay, Natalia," Dr. Ellis said soothingly. "As you go deeper into your relaxation, I want you to think of a safe place where you enjoy going. While there, you feel like you want to sit down and relax. You're comfortable there and realize this place has special energy. This energy will permit you to connect to infinite knowledge. Only you can allow yourself to go there and to do that you must be in a very deep state of meditation. I'm going to count backwards beginning with five. I want you to sink deeper after I speak each number. By the time I get to the number one, you should be at the deepest point at which you're comfortable. Five. Four. Three. Two. One."

Dr. Ellis gave Natalia a few minutes then asked, “How you are feeling?”

“Good. I’m very relaxed.”

“Now, I want you to envision a long hallway. There are many doors down this hallway. Each door represents a past life you’ve had. We won’t open every door, just the ones you want to, the ones that will be helpful to you at this time.”

“Okay.”

“I want you to find the door that will show us the first time you met Marc. Do you see it?”

“Yes.”

“Can you describe it to me?”

“It’s...old.”

“Hundreds of years old?”

“Much, much older.”

“How old?”

“Prehistoric.”

“When you open the door, what do you see?”

Natalia sat quietly for a few minutes before she spoke.

“My mate and I are wandering in the snow. I am with child. The rest of our tribe has died off from a sickness. We come across another tribe and watch them from the hills above. My mate will hunt for an offering, and maybe they’ll let us stay with them. He finds me shelter underneath some rocks, covers me with animal skins and gently touches my face. I smile and nod. I know this is how it has to be. He’s gone a long time. I don’t know what I’ll do if he doesn’t come back. I’m happy and relieved when I see him with a large animal tied to a stick. I shouldn’t have worried. He was the best hunter in our tribe. We look at each other and start down the slippery embankment.

“Some one sees us walking down the hill and tells the elders of the tribe. They are waiting when we arrive at the bottom. They are cautious at first, but impressed with the kill. They could use another hunter, and this is much needed food. They realize I will need the help of the women of the tribe very soon.

“We are allowed to stay, but we don’t know for how long. We build a dwelling from animal skins we’ve carried with us and from wood we find. We keep to ourselves, except when there are jobs to be done. Since the child will come soon, my job is to soak bark, strip it into thin pieces, and make rope for the hunters.

“My mate makes sure I have enough food. He was a highly respected member of our tribe, and wears strings of large animal bones and teeth around his neck as a sign of leadership. One younger male keeps touching it. My mate offers one to him in return for extra meat, which he gives to me. I have chosen well.”



MARC...

“I see the male and female walk down the hill towards us. I am curious about them but keep my distance. The elders will decide if they can stay or not. To show he is a skilled hunter, the male hands the elders a large animal he has killed. The female is with child. One of the elders tells me to take the male and help clean the animal. The female goes to the dwelling with the other females.”



NATALIA...

“My mate comes to tell me he is going hunting with the other males of the tribe. He touches my stomach and smiles. The next day, I’m not feeling well. I go to one of the older women and tell her I think the child is coming.”

“Natalia,” Dr. Ellis interrupted briefly. “Do you want to relive the whole birth?”

“No! It was so cold and long and hard.”

“Continue after the baby is born.”



MARC...

“I take the new male and the other males out for a hunt. I know he’s a good hunter, but I’m the leader of the hunt in this tribe. We walk for a long time. The sky is dark. We find shelter and try to get some rest before early morning when the animals start to stir. We wake up to animal noises in the woods and come upon a pack of wild boars. The new hunter knows he must contribute to this kill if he and his mate are to be fully accepted into the tribe.

“Everyone is quiet, waiting, and watching the beasts’ movements. The new hunter charges one of the animals, spear in hand. We scream for him to stop, but he doesn’t. The male boars have their tusks up and are ready to attack. We try to surround one or two of the animals when the new hunter hurls his spear at one of the large boars. It grazes the beast but doesn’t wound it enough for us to catch him. There is much confusion and spears are thrown in every direction.

“When it’s all over, the new hunter and another male are dead—gored and trampled. I have a spear in my left shoulder, and I’m bleeding. Someone pulls the spear out. I scream. They pack snow around my wound and cover it. They lay me on an animal skin and pull me back to the tribe. I am unconscious for most of the journey. The two dead hunters and one dead animal are brought back as well.

“When we get back, the elders come to see us. They are happy about the kill but not that two more are dead. I don’t tell them it’s the new hunter’s fault. I don’t want them to cast the female out with her child. The other hunters look at me but won’t go against what I say.

“The women look at my wound and give me dried fruit that’s been stored for the winter. They tell me the child has

been born. I go into the dwelling and see her wrapped in animal skins, feeding her child in front of the fire. She looks at me and is terrified. I give her the string of bones and teeth her mate wore and look at her sadly.

“She starts to cry. A woman comes in to cut some of her and the child’s hair to put with her dead mate. We wrap our dead. Far away from our dwelling, a fire is going. We put each body on top of the fire. They will now go the way of our ancestors.”



NATALIA...

“I stay in the dwelling with the older women. I look at the hunter’s wound each day. I know a little about healing. The wounded hunter is kind to me, and I know it’s because of him I’m allowed to stay.

“One day he shows me his dwelling and looks at me. I take the string of bones and teeth and put them around his neck. He smiles and tells me he will take good care of me and the child.

“Slowly, the weather changes, and the days of the sun are longer. I am with child again. As we lay on our animal skins, he turns on his side. I look at his wound. It has healed, but it’s left a mark.”

“Natalia, you had another child?” asked Dr. Ellis.

“Yes, two more. We had six winters together and were as happy as life would let you be at the time. With the longer days, we moved around and foraged for fruit, herbs, and plants. The males hunted. We would settle somewhere for the darker, shorter days. One winter a sickness went through the tribe.”



MARC...

“Many in the tribe were sick and dying. We needed food. I took two males and left to go hunting. When we returned the children were dead, and she was dying. The women came to take care of the children’s bodies, but I told them I would do it. I was heartbroken as I wrapped each of them, a piece of our hair in their hands.

“She was lying there coughing, burning hot as any fire. I stayed with her. She smiled at me but cried for our children. Soon she closed her eyes and her breath stopped. Tears ran down my face as I got her body ready. I carried each body out and laid them atop of the fire. That night I started coughing and by the time of the sun, I was burning hot. Those left tried to help me, but I told them to leave. I went into my pouch and put the children’s hair in my hands and her hair on my chest. I lay down. That’s how they found me.”

“Marc,” Dr. Collier asked. “Are you okay?”

“No...I don’t think so,” he said, wiping his eyes.

“Marc, that life is over. It’s two thousand-ten and you and Natalia are fine. Take a deep breath and relax.”

After a few deep breaths, Marc’s anxiety subsided. Dr. Collier asked him if he was feeling better.

“Yes.”

“Do you want to continue?”

“Yes.”

“Is there another door you would like to open? Do you know Natalia again?”

“Yes. We have many lives together before I get the second mark.”

“Do you see the door to the life when the second mark appears?”

“Yes. It’s made of stone and very old. We don’t have much time together.”



MARC...

“We are in ancient Britain. It’s approximately two thousand BCE. I’m making the long journey to what you now call Stonehenge. We gather there for the longest day of the year to remember our dead and those who came before us. Then we walk up the river to a similar structure made of wood. Here we have a fertility ceremony. It’s a two-day celebration and feast. Each year, hundreds of people come from all over. It’s an important ceremony for all of us.

“It’s early in the morning and we gather to watch the sun come up through the two main stones. It’s a beautiful sight and we’re happy. The festival can begin. I’d seen her on our journey here, but she had to stay with her clan. As we walk up the river, I look for her again. We take the long walk together.

“When we get there, we have to separate. We all have jobs to do. I tell her I will find her later. The feast begins. The fires are burning, and the drums are beating a festive rhythm. This is a fertility ceremony so we have sacrificed animals and brought gifts to the gods. We hope in the spring, the Gods will share their fertility with the people, the crops, and the animals.

“I see her in the crowd, and we dance around together. We make our way away from the feast and into the woods. Under the stars, we lie together. I roll on my side, and she curls up behind me. She sees the mark on my back. I tell her it came with me from birth. The elders think the God’s have given me special gifts. She tells me if it’s from the Gods it must be good, and she kisses it. She has her arms around me and pulls me towards her again. I am the happiest I have ever been.”



NATALIA...

“After the morning sunrise, we start on the path up the river to the wooden structure. We have to be there and be

ready for sunset. He finds me, and I am happy to make the journey with him. When we get there, we have things to tend to and must leave each other. We gather at dusk. The structure is in alignment with the sunset on the longest day. He comes up behind me. We watch the sun go down together.

“He is kind to me, and I’m happy to lie with him. He tells me the mark on his shoulder is from the Gods. I kiss it because the Gods think he’s special, and so do I. The next morning he leaves to go hunting for the next feast.”



MARC...

“I have to hunt for the evening festival. When the celebration begins, we search until we find each other. We eat and dance. Soon she pulls me into the woods. I have lain with other women but this so different. I think the Gods have sent her just for me.”



NATALIA...

“He’s lying on his back and I’m curled into his side. I’m almost asleep when he screams. He bolts up and there is a snake on the ground underneath him. It bit him. I pick up a rock and hit the snake until it’s dead. He’s struggling to get his breath. I look and see the bite on his shoulder near the mark of the Gods. I grab his water pouch and try to get him to drink, but he can’t. I run and get the members of his clan. They come, and I show them the snake.

“They take my mate and lay him down near the main fire of the festival. He looks at me and reaches for my hand. I pull him up on my lap, his back to me. I put my arms around his waist. The elders are asking the Gods to help them. I’m crying

and yelling at the Gods as well. The difference is they are begging, but I'm angry.

"His breathing is getting worse. He grabs my arms around his waist and holds them tightly."

Dr. Ellis saw Natalia trembling in her seat. "Natalia are you all right? Do you want to stop?"

"I'm scared for him."

"I understand, why don't you go to a time when all this has passed?"



MARC...

"There's a lot of confusion. I don't feel good. It's hard to breathe. Everyone is yelling and screaming. I want it all to stop. She's behind me with her arms around me, and I'm glad she's there. I hold her arms close to me. The elders ask her to let go of me so the Gods can see my mark, but she refuses. She tells them if the Gods put the mark there, they would know it. She doesn't let go of me. Again, I'm glad. She kisses my mark, and I feel her tears. I'm really grasping for breath now. I don't want to leave her."

"Do you?" asked Dr. Collier softly.

"Yes," he said in between labored breathes.

"Marc, I want you to leave that life behind. You're back here in your present life, and you can breathe normally. Please take some deep breaths."

When he was calmer, Dr. Collier asked him a few questions.

"How many lives have you had?"

"I don't know, hundreds."

"All of them with Natalia?"

"No, we can't always be together."

"How many lives have you had with Natalia?"

"We've been together for most of our past lives. I don't like to come back without her, but sometimes we have to."

“Are you still feeling all right?”

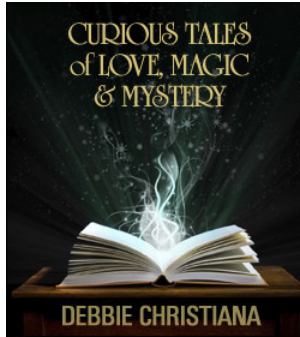
“Yes.”

“Do you want to open another door?”

“Yes.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Debbie Christiana remembers sitting in her room at eleven or twelve years of age pecking away at an old Smith-Corona typewriter, a gift from her parents. Even back then, the stories that appeared on paper were full of ghosts, skeletons and unexplained events.

An avid reader, she enjoys many different genres, but her true love is anything paranormal.

When not reading or writing, Christiana enjoys yoga, boating, and gardening. She lives in Connecticut with her husband and three children.