

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We are not alone. Yet when we tumble and fall over our own karma, all we have is ourselves. We are the ones to determine whether we are able to face our worst nightmares and still wake up every morning grateful to be alive.

We are challenged daily by our shadow and its maze, but always the divine impulse beckons us to remember our Soul's original mission. The only way to triumph is to embrace the light once more until we merge and become one with both sides of our duality—Our Yin and our Yang. At such a moment we can begin again, and create a wonderous new future.

Reese Julia

# PROLOGUE

Five years after the kidnapping of Julia's daughter, the telephone in her kitchen rang. As it was so perfectly proclaimed by Kierkegaard, *Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.*

Amelia, an investigator for the San Diego District Attorney's Office, introduced herself on the other end of the line.

Then she inquired cautiously, "Julia, are you sitting down? I have some news for you."

"Sure, why? What's up?" Julia questioned, presuming the call was a routine check-in. She sat down at the kitchen table.

"We've arrested your ex-husband Mario Dellucci. He's in custody, in the Orange County detention center. Today he'll be transferred to San Diego."

Julia stood up and began frantically walking with the phone. Its long cord allowed her to pace between the kitchen and dining room. "Wait a minute, let me see if I heard you correctly! Matthew Phillips, real name Mario Dellucci, is in jail?"

"Yes, he was detained the day before Thanksgiving and taken into custody by the FBI. Now, when Matthew was arrested, he was alone. From the limited information we've gathered, we speculate that your daughter is somewhere in Mexico."

"Mexico? Holy crap. I can't believe it." She leaned her lower back against the kitchen counter. Her body was trembling uncontrollably. Clutching her hands together, she felt their clamminess. The mixture of shock and fear besieged her. She labored for enough oxygen.

"Unless Mario talks, I can't make any assurances that we'll be able to extract Camille from Mexico. We heard from the FBI that he married a Mexican national, and we assume his wife has been caring for your daughter." Amelia paused.

Julia could not fight her emotions. The years of holding in the grief broke through the dam that had held her heart captive.

She collapsed on the floor, sobbing.

"Oh, my God!! Is this really happening?"

Amelia comforted, "I'm sorry I can't tell you more. Jason Brown from the FBI and I are going to interview Mario tomorrow morning. I'll call you once we have a better idea of whether he will cooperate with us. Our main objective is getting Camille home to you, but there's no guarantee of a successful extraction."

Julia sniffled and gathered herself. She managed to speak without an onslaught of emotions. "I never thought I'd actually see my daughter again. I've worked so hard to let her go. I just figured she'd either locate me as an adult, or maybe we'd meet up in the afterlife. Will you phone me immediately after the interview?"

"Of course."

Julia queried, "How did you find him?"

Amelia explained, "The FBI followed an anonymous tip that Mario was coming into the U.S. by train. His destination was Orange County. A team was assembled and sure enough, he was at the train station. We were extremely lucky. We haven't had any leads this entire time."

"What do I do? Just wait to hear from you? Can't I go to Mexico and get her?" Julia sputtered frantically.

"I'll call you in the morning. Please hang tight. I know everything seems to be dangling by a thread. Until I've spoken with Mario, I can't say much more." Amelia ended with conviction. "I will promise you one thing. Until I can return your child to your arms, I will not rest."

"Thank you for all your hard work. I'll be waiting. Good-bye."

Julia collapsed on a chair and quickly paged her beloved Cameron. She hung up the phone.

A swirl of feelings charged through her body: disbelief, trepidation, and joy. Holding her face in the palms of her hands, she grieved for all the years that she had missed with her daughter.

Then an upwelling of excitement pressed into her awareness. Camille was within her reach! The thought cracked her heart wide open and love flooded into its tender protected places.

## CHAPTER ONE

The phone rang again. It jolted Julia out of a daze. Still spinning, she hesitated. The strident ringing continued, so she picked it up.

"Hello," she squeaked, finding her voice a bit wobbly.

"Julia, this is Cameron. Are you ok? You just paged me and all it read was 911."

"Oh, Cameron." Relief weakened her knees. "Is it possible for you to come over to my house right now?"

"I'm really slammed. Right in the middle of a plumbing nightmare. What's the emergency?"

"I ... I just received a call from Amelia. She's one of the missing child investigators in San Diego. Cameron ... they've arrested Matthew," she choked. "Out of the blue. After the case was closed! There's only one problem. He's alone."

"What? But did they locate Camille? Is she coming home? Will she—"

Julia cut him short, "I don't know. They only arrested Matthew. I'm waiting to hear back from Amelia. They're questioning him right now."

"Ok, I'll find someone else to finish up this job. I'll be there in half an hour."

"Hurry, please. I'm totally freaking out."

The line went silent. Julia hung up the phone, then darted into the living room and flopped down hard on the bronze-colored leather sofa. Her newly dyed auburn hair flew as her head landed on the back of the cushion. Her body shivered with fine tremors. She spoke out loud to the room. "What if Matthew knows where Camille is? What if they really find her? Oh God! I assumed she was never going to come home."

Her first impulse was to cry. Crazy tears burst out and she soaked the sofa as waves of old energy released. Then her mind bounced around. *What if she's dead? What if Matthew doesn't tell them where she is and this is just another empty lead? What if they*

*do find her—my God, my daughter and I are strangers! If I get her back, will she even remember me? She was just a baby! What if she hates me?*

For a moment Julia became aware of a ripple of panic punch her belly. Fear ricocheted throughout her body, and her heart palpitated wildly. Her mind swam as she wrung her hands, *I don't know anything about seven-year-old girls. What kind of toys do they like? I have to buy her new clothes, but what's her size? How will Tristan relate to her?* Julia squeezed her eyes closed, attempting to quiet her mind. The November weather was frosty. Julia got up from the couch and opened the closet door. She yanked out a grey woolen sweater and pulled it over her head to warm up. The sweater did little to relax the cold butterflies in her gut. She huddled on the couch, her mind racing.

Twenty minutes later the entry door flung open. Julia immediately leapt up and wrapped her arms around Cameron's neck. The side of her cheek pushed into his firm chest. She breathed in his essence, salty with musk, attempting to steady her emotions.

Finally, with a shaky breath, she led him to the sofa. "I'll tell you what I know."

They gripped each other's hands, and Cameron looked calmly into her eyes.

"Amelia— she's the one who works for the San Diego Child Abduction Unit—she called and said the FBI arrested Matthew last week. The day before Thanksgiving. He was coming into the U.S. on a train from Mexico. They were following up on some tip they had received about another issue—not Camille. Undercover FBI agents were at the station, and when he got off the train, they arrested him. Because of the Thanksgiving holiday Amelia's team hasn't even had a chance to interview him! Hopefully, they will have more information later this afternoon. Amelia said to wait. But Cameron, I'm so close. I can almost feel her, but they have no idea where she is ..."

Cameron lowered his tone. "Breathe with me. Stay calm. They're going to find her. I feel it in my bones."

"I don't want to hold onto false hope. I can't bear the idea of her disappearing again!" Tears threatened to overwhelm her.

"Julia, I'm here with you no matter what happens. We'll get through this together." He reached up his hand and gently moved a piece of hair out of her eye, brushing along the top of her forehead.

She clutched his hand. "Thank you for being here for me. I've

got to call a bunch of people. Do you—would you mind picking up Tristan from school? I just don't want to miss the call-back from Amelia."

"Sure. I'll get Tristan for you. How 'bout I pick up some Chinese food for dinner?"

"That's a great idea. Please don't tell Tristan what's going on. It's better if he hears it from me."

"Understandable. I won't say a word."

"I thank God every day that we're back together." Julia bent forward and lightly kissed his full lips.

A recent haircut had removed most of Cameron's brown curls, which Julia missed as her hand slid through his hair.

He hugged her and then stood up. "When I return, maybe you will have more news." He waved good-bye and hurried out.

## CHAPTER TWO

One thousand, eight hundred and twenty-four days. That is how long it had been since Julia had seen her twenty-month-old daughter. The very last image in her memory was of her precious Camille resting peacefully in her baby bed. The next morning, all that had remained were shattered fragments of broken glass and an empty crib. Camille had been ruthlessly kidnapped by her Sicilian father, Julia's now-estranged former husband.

It had been extremely difficult living with the consequences of her folly and ignorance. Marrying into the Italian mafia in her early twenties had certainly been a fundamental misstep. It remained a mistake she regretted each and every day. You reap what you sow, she'd told herself repeatedly. After Camille was taken, Julia had languished month after month and prayed diligently for her to be miraculously found.

Through the years since the incident, Julia's life had been shrouded in a layer of regret. Her over-obsessive mind replayed that particular dawn of Camille's disappearance over and over again, searching fruitlessly for a way she could have changed the outcome. Yet, she always circled back to the realization that it simply was what it was. Painful as it felt to acknowledge, Camille had probably vanished for good.

As the years passed, hope of finding her daughter became less and less plausible, and Julia's thoughts had often turned dark. *I'll probably never see her again. Chances are slim that she'll ever be recovered after all this time. Camille is six now and will be seven in a few months. I wonder if she's even still alive.* Harsh self-judgment lingered, along with a nagging sadness.

Though the after effects of that trauma lived deep inside Julia, the other parts of her life were steady. After moving from San Diego, to Santa Fe, New Mexico, Julia had sustained herself by launching another cleaning company. Recently, she'd sold the business to attend massage school and become a licensed

therapist. Her new massage endeavor was a success.

Not long after moving to Santa Fe, Julia and Cameron, her beloved friend and lover, began dating again. They called it “round two,” and both felt it gave them a chance to rekindle the beauty of their first love. They were a couple, but loosely this time. Cameron had been transparent from the onset about his aversion to acting out the role of a step-parent. His relationship with his own father had tainted his view. He adamantly refused to be a dad for Tristan. Even though Tristan’s Soul-essence had floated above the love-birds back when Julia was sixteen, Cameron insisted that he wouldn’t budge on his “no fatherhood” rule. So, that was that. Julia understood that it was an experiment to discover if they could maintain a loving relationship and live apart.

Julia was still a practicing born-again Christian, who consciously chose to break the “no sex before matrimony rule” with Cameron, because she knew full well that they would never wed. Living on the edge of sin made their sex fierier, Julia felt. She appreciated his sweet love, despite his refusal to parent Tristan. *After all the crap I’ve been through, she often thought, I deserve some pleasure and companionship. Cameron knows me—he’s a safe and good person.*

Tristan was eleven years old, thriving in school and content living alone with his mom, which uplifted Julia’s nurturing heart and concurrently veiled the underground emotions of despair over the loss of her precious daughter.



*As for Darius, Julia-the-human’s Soul-guide, almost twelve years had passed since he’d tracked her unique light signature. Nevertheless, early on he had managed, with the assistance of other guides, to send Julia several essential messages of courage through the quantum field into her consciousness. In his desperate search for Jewels, he had also chosen to break some inherent directives that were given by the honored elders of the Council of Light during his instruction period. Darius remembered the rigorous training he had, eons before. It was drilled into each student that while assuming the role of Guide to a new baby Soul, one must be steadfast and only concentrate on one’s own charge. It was understood that an initiated Guide should never interfere in the affairs of another’s Soul. He had been true to his agreements—until his beloved Jewels had disappeared without a trace. Darius*

*knew he had risked losing his position when he snuck into the Soul of Julia-the-human's lover, Cameron, in order to gather vital information for his quest to find Jewels. It had helped, yet practically speaking ... Julia was still missing. Darius yearned to find his dear Jewels again.*

*For many of Jewels' missing years, he stayed with a consortium of Guides in the waiting assembly station, located near Earth's entry and exit portals. It was a large, pale blue sphere that hosted Guides in transit. Recently, Darius had made the decision to relocate to a more secluded location far away from fellow Guides—who kept probing him regarding his progress in locating Jewels. He chose a place near Jupiter on one of the deserted moon bases, a relic outpost belonging to Venus, Maldek and Mars. It had been active back when these planets were verdant, before the moon ship near Earth had arrived.*

*Unfortunately, his current abode was dismal—just an unlit grey-maroon cave in one of the ancient moons. His Soul-body did not need much, only a simple place to reside in peace. Darius had managed to transport his viewing screen to watch for Jewels/Julia's light code signature. He was confident that when he finally found it, he would gratefully return to his final mission as Jewels' guide.*

*From his grey cave of self-imposed exile, Darius floated back in memory to an extraordinary adventure he'd had on the edge of the Milky Way Galaxy. Due to the kindness of another sojourner like himself, he received a priceless gift. He'd been given a download of the full spectrum of human emotions, combined with a certain amount of neutrality. He knew it was unusual for a Soul devoid of a bio-humanoid form to experience human feelings. And now, on occasion he was bombarded by a never-ending array of emotions that he found hard to control, despite his neutrality. It drove him crazy, being yanked from one feeling to another. Anger, love, lust, and compassion joined in a symphony of sound and light frequency. It was a bit too much for his Soul's wiring system, though it definitely expanded his understanding of the human condition. Darius had also received a library of data regarding other galaxies, solar systems, planets, customs, languages, and a full visual list of bio-forms in those regions. What an incredible gift to be infused with such vast knowledge, and a first-hand experience of emotions; Darius sensed how it had changed him for eternity.*

*Periods were spent contemplating. Darius was curious whether or not his current gifts would modify his relationship with Jewels, when he found her at last. This new trait of riding the undulating waves of emotion could possibly change the way they would relate*

*in the other dimensional realities. Time would tell.*

## CHAPTER THREE

Julia paced into the kitchen, flipping open cupboards to look for a snack. She fretted under her breath, “What if something goes wrong and the FBI can’t find Camille in Mexico?” *Breathe, Julia... One step at time*, she coaxed, trying to hold her center together.

There was no way for Julia to predict what tests lay ahead. Or more honestly, she wondered how difficult it would be to integrate Camille back into her life. Inside, she worried, *what if I can’t handle the pressure of running a massage business and raising two kids at the same time? I wonder if they will even like each other?*

Far below her rational mind, an instinctual gut knowledge endured. The facts were clear. Julia had given birth to Camille, and Matthew had stolen her five years earlier. No matter how much time had passed, Camille remained Julia’s flesh and blood, a child of her womb. *Somehow, I will manage the next chapter of my life*, she affirmed with determination. Julia would openly admit that she possessed a super-human quality: an indefatigable will to survive against all odds. It was her forte.

In the kitchen, she viewed the white clock on the wall while munching on chips and hot red salsa. She waited impatiently for the phone to ring, anticipating the news that Camille had been located.

At exactly three in the afternoon the call came.

“Julia McNeil here.”

“Hi Julia, it’s Amelia ... Ok, I’ve got an update. The interview with Matthew, I mean Mario Dellucci, did in fact provide many answers. Your daughter is living in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. A Mexican national named Paola has been caring for her during his absence. He claims this woman is his wife. Camille has a half-brother who is a few years younger. I know this might be disturbing, but Matthew, sorry I keep forgetting his legal name, Mario never mentioned that you exist. Therefore, Paola is the one your daughter considers to be her mother. Also, Camille does not

speak English, only Spanish.”

Julia was having trouble searching for a response. “Uh ...That’s a lot to process. But you found her, after I’d almost given up hope.” She noticed acid burning an angry hole in her stomach at the thought that Matthew had effectively obliterated her from Camille’s life.

Inhaling a shallow breath, Julia continued, “Where do we go from here? How do we get Camille out of Mexico?”

Unconsciously twirling the telephone cord around her forefinger, Julia pressed the phone to her ear. Suddenly the cord became so tight that it started to cut off the circulation in her finger. Becoming aware of the numbness, she quickly unwound it. Her finger tingled as she told herself firmly, *calm down, you can do this!*

Amelia’s voice continued. “My colleagues have warned your ex-husband that if he does not make arrangements to have Camille transported to the Tijuana airport immediately, we will indict him on charges of stranger kidnapping instead of parental kidnapping. Stranger kidnapping would give him a minimum of ten years in prison if he does not comply. Apparently, that caught his attention. He said if he called Paola, she could book a flight out of Puerto Vallarta in two days.”

The next step was obvious to Julia. “Ok. Good. Then I’m going to book a flight to San Diego. I’ll be there tomorrow evening.”

“Julia, I have to warn you. There are no guarantees that we will recover Camille. This is an international exchange. I called your former FBI agent, and he’s agreed to make the transfer of custody at the border in Tijuana. Fortunately, he’s done this before, so he’s pretty sure there won’t be any complications. But these things can get weird. There are no guarantees.”

“Oh, Amelia. This is the only break we’ve had in all these years. Camille is so close. It’s got to work out! Plus, I want to see that man face to face and tell him a thing or two.”

“I’ll make sure you get that opportunity. Can you tell me if there are any ways to identify Camille? Scars, birthmarks?”

“She has pierced ears, a small scar on her right ankle, and a caramel colored birth mark on her left butt cheek. Maybe it’s still there.”

“It’s been a long time. Our reunification counselor reminded me to tell you to bring anything you have kept from the past. Like toys, photographs, mementos. Any items that might jog her memory. Do you have a place to stay in San Diego?”

“Yes, I have friends who can accommodate me. I’ll call you

once I've landed. Good-bye Amelia. And really, thank you for everything."

"Of course. I've wanted to solve this case for a long time, even after they officially closed it. What an amazing break to find Camille when we least expected it. I look forward to seeing you. It will be a welcome closure for all of us."

"Indeed!"

Immediately after hanging up with Amelia, Julia began phoning friends to tell them her extraordinary news. Within an hour, she had reached everyone on her list. One of Julia's old friends offered to raise money for her travel expenses; a woman from her church said she'd organize the entire congregation to collect donations of girls' clothing and toys. The outpouring of generosity from her community was totally unexpected. Julia hung up the phone in amazement and announced to the empty kitchen, "Without a doubt, this is the most activism and love I've ever experienced!"

By four o'clock Tristan and Cameron entered the house. The tangy smell of orange chicken and Mu Shu pork escaped the seams of the white paper to-go boxes swinging on their fingers.

"My favorite men!"

Eying Cameron, she winked, and then squeezed her lean, budding, blonde-haired son.

Spinning around in a circle for no apparent reason, Julia asked, "Should we eat now or later?"

"I'm starving, mom. Can we have dinner early?"

"Why not?" Julia laid three plates on the table. She removed handmade wooden chopsticks from the silverware drawer and pranced lightly about as she prepared the table, feeling especially happy.

"Mom, are you ok?"

"Well, I do have some surprising news." A big smile lit her face.

"What's the news, Mom?" Tristan narrowed his eyes. It was his way of indicating he was scrutinizing the validity of his mother's next words.

"I'll tell you while we eat. Together they sat down and Julia said a heartfelt grace. Then they dolloped portions of steamy food onto their plates.

She kept unbroken eye contact with Tristan and announced, "I had a call today from the people in San Diego who have been looking for your sister. They called to tell me that they have arrested Matthew, and your sister has been found at last." Julia

paused, not wanting to overwhelm him with too much information.

His face morphed between incredulous upset with furrowed brows, to a warm smile that spread across his face. Then a pensive stare took hold. He said nothing.

"I know this is a shock," Julia continued. "It is, for all of us. I'm going to fly tomorrow to San Diego, and God willing, pick up Camille."

Stressed at Tristan's silence, Julia rotated her body toward Cameron, who only shook his head, indicating that he had no idea what Tristan was feeling.

Slowly Tristan began to open his mouth. "Uh, so Camille is coming home?"

"Yes. There's a very good chance that your sister will be home by this weekend."

His face revealed more than his unspoken words. Tears dripped off his cheeks and then he asked, "Where is she going to sleep?"

"What do you mean, Tristan?"

"I'm not sharing my room with her!"

"Ok, ok. Don't worry, son, Camille will sleep in my room until I change the office into a bedroom for her. Tristan, your sister has been missing since you were six. It ... it's going to be a big adjustment for us all."

Tristan kept his head down, saying nothing.

Julia tried a new tack. "Imagine how traumatic this is for her. She is losing her father and step-mother at the same time. We're technically strangers to her. We'll have to get to know Camille all over again. Remember how close you used to be?"

Tristan shoved out of his chair, ran into his bedroom and slammed the door shut. The bang vibrated down the hallway.

"Oh crap!" Julia jumped up, about to race after him.

Cameron touched her hand, stopping her. His eyes held mercy and compassion.

"What am I going to do about Tristan? I thought he'd be excited."

He insisted, "Tristan is a very aware kid. Give him some time to cool off. This is one hell of a transition. Camille has been missing for so long. It will take time to create a sense of family. A lot has happened between then and now. It'll be ok, sweetie."

Julia clung to Cameron, literally choking on an ambush of suppressed emotions that could no longer be held back. The dam broke, and Julia's heart flooded with a mixture of joy, fear, worry,

and a hint of relief that perhaps the nightmare was almost over.

A sudden thought struck her. "What the hell am I going to do with Tristan when I'm gone? I can't leave him alone." Though she wished Cameron would volunteer to care for him, she didn't expect it.

He didn't offer, but he did come up with a solution. "Isn't your mom visiting your grandma for the holidays down in Albuquerque?"

"Oh right, Andie, my dear busy mom. We rarely talk. Yes, she may still be there. Maybe she'd agree to drive up and take care of Tristan while I'm in California. She will certainly be amazed at my news about Camille!"

Surprising her, Cameron said softly. "Julia if I wasn't working forty hours a week, you know I'd help you out. Right?"

"Thank you, my love. But don't worry. I will find someone. Truly, I know you have to make a living. I don't begrudge it in the least."

"Good. Because I never want you to feel like I'm abandoning you."

Mutely, she met her lover's pale sea-green eyes as she stroked his short brown hair. A precipitous tidal wave of love for him spread through her troubled heart. She bent close to his ear and whispered, "I want to make love to you. Will you spend the night with me?"

"It would be my honor and my pleasure." He rested his face in the palms of her outstretched hands. "I love you so deeply, Julia McNeil."

"Thank you, my love," she breathed.

In the next second, her brain raced around, scared again. "I just have to say, this is totally overwhelming. I know nothing about girls. What if I fail?"

Cameron sounded incredulous. "Fail at what?"

"How in the world will I be a parent for an irate eleven-year old boy and a distressed kidnapped child, who might as well have been adopted? We don't even speak the same language!" She stepped away and began to march the length of the narrow kitchen.

He scooted in behind Julia and held her firmly, nestling his face along the nape of her hairline. "That's why we're together, love. I speak fluent Spanish. Or have you forgotten? I will be your number one translator."

He delicately spun her around and they French-kissed near the washer and dryer, slightly hidden from the kitchen window

and the neighbors strolling the sidewalk out beyond the browning winter lawn.



Two days later, Julia and her “saint,” Amelia, paced the corridors of a very plain, utilitarian Federal building, located near the border of Mexico in the city of Chula Vista. It smelled strongly of antiseptic cleaner, like a hospital ward. The odor gave Julia a headache. She felt extremely grateful for Amelia—the one person who never gave up on recovering her daughter, even when Julia herself had abandoned some of her faith.

A series of delays that morning shook Julia’s confidence. First the plane from Puerto Vallarta was delayed by two hours. Then a message was sent to inform them that there were snags on the Mexico - U.S. border. Presumably, it was due to the mounds of bureaucratic paperwork and endless signatures required to transport a minor without a passport across international boundaries. Everything took so much longer than Julia had expected. Endlessly waiting, she felt as if she would go mad. Her mind swirled. *I’m so nervous. What if I never see her again? What if something goes wrong at the last minute?*

Ten minutes later a man finally poked his head out from behind a heavily secured door.

“Mrs. McNeil?”

“Yes, that’s me,” Julia replied, advancing toward him at a strong clip.

He held open the door just a crack and detailed, “Your daughter has just cleared customs. FBI Agent Russell is escorting her to our facility now. We will first assess her emotional, mental, and physical condition. After we determine her stability, we will send for you. We ask that you maintain your composure. It’s best to refrain from crying or becoming overly emotional. For this transition to flow smoothly, your daughter will need to feel your certainty. It’s important to develop trust between the two of you. We’ll see how she responds. Every child is different. Do you have any questions?”

“So, when you call me in, should I bring this bag of trinkets and toys from when she was a baby?”

“Yes. Agent Russell will further debrief you after he releases your child to us.”

The man scurried away, and the door slammed behind him.

Julia held back the pressure of a surge of predictable waterworks.

"Is this really it? Am I going to be with Camille again?" Julia puffed out a big breath and bent over, putting her hands on her knees. She felt faint.

Amelia stepped closer and placed a hand on Julia's upper back, "Julia, you've endured the loss of your baby. You have the strength to be her mom again. You have waited longer than most for this reunion."

Standing back up, Julia blurted out, "I never believed this day would come. I hoped and prayed—But Amelia, I'm scared to death."

Amelia countered, "Julia, I've never met anyone as brave as you. It will all work out. Now that Camille is in the building, I have to go back to my office. Tomorrow, I will need you to come back and sign some official documents. Good luck." She waved as she departed the building.

"Thanks."

Julia heard a click, and the door opened. A tall fit man entered the room. She recognized him from four years back.

He approached and said, "Sam Russell, Senior FBI officer at your service." He shook her hand. "I'm delighted to tell you that your daughter is safely in the building."

In natural relief and exuberance, Julia reached out and hugged him. "Thank you so much. I remember you from when you interviewed me over four years ago. What you can tell me?" She asked breathlessly.

"There are a couple of noteworthy items. First of all, when I picked up Camille from her stepmother and brother, she had the oddest response. I took her hand, we walked away, and she was perfectly stoic. It surprised me because Paola and her brother were bawling hysterically. Camille never looked back to acknowledge her family, not once. Your daughter was emotionless and calm. The other interesting detail was when I told your daughter through the interpreter that she had another name. Camille said, 'good, I'll take it.' I have to say, she's a very spirited young lady."

A smile stretched across Julia's entire face. "That sounds like Camille. She was tenacious even as a one-year-old. I was concerned that they might send the wrong child. But I trust you have the right one." Her face flashed with the light of the sun.

"You'll be able to meet her in about an hour. We have to prepare her for you. Once we're notified that you can go in, you will enter the room with your own interpreter. Follow the guidance of the reunification counselor, and it will unfold easily."

"Thank you for the report. It helps me. I'm going to sit and regroup for a moment."

"I'll be sitting over here" He pointed a nearby desk. "Let me know if I can do anything more for you."

Julia walked away from Agent Russell and sat in one of the few padded chairs in the institutional waiting room. Inside, Julia felt like the whole experience was a test, as well as a testament to her ability to handle whatever life threw her way. Stubbornly she insisted, *no matter how intense you make it, I can handle anything, God. Do you hear me? I can be like Job and endure.*

The sound of metal clanking jolted her out of her trance. The entry was unlocked, and a woman stood there, motioning for Julia and Agent Russell to enter. Gliding through the thin opening, she heard the thump as the door closed behind her. I'm up next, she thought. The stage lights are on, and I must deliver the performance of my life.

Quickly she followed the woman, who escorted her into a softly lit room with small chairs, tables, full body cushions, and blue beanbags on the floor. Julia saw the back of Camille's head. Her long, straight brown hair touched her waist. She rotated on her petite chair, but made no indication that she recognized Julia one iota. Only a blank stare emanated from her small face. Julia proceeded to sit down on a nearby beanbag.

A gray-bearded advisor welcomed her. "Hello, my name is George. We've been speaking with Camille. She told us that she is very fond of the color orange, and she likes small animals like dogs and cats. We've been talking about the fact that she is going to live in another home."

Two interpreters were in the room speaking in Spanish and English simultaneously.

"Julia, I hear you brought some presents for Camille." Those words instantly translated into Spanish.

Camille perked up and swung around, speaking for the first time. "*Amo presents!*"

The interpreter repeated in English, "I love gifts."

"Julia, you can give them to her now."

Julia drew out a stuffed rabbit dressed in a blue calico print jumpsuit, a pink baby blanket, and a photo of Camille as a baby resting on Julia's lap. She also had a photo of Camille sitting on the floor next to a cinnamon colored sofa.

Camille picked up each item and examined them at length. When she looked at the photos, she exclaimed in Spanish pointing her finger, "That's me when I was a baby. That's my couch in

Mexico.”

Julia looked at Agent Russell and then the counselor. “It’s her. How else would she know about the sofa? Her father must have taken it with him to Mexico.”

George pointed at the photo of Camille as a baby on Julia’s lap. “Do you recognize the woman in the picture as someone here in this room today?”

Reluctantly, Camille surveyed the room and shyly focused on Julia, tucking her chin to her chest to indicate yes.

“Very good. You were a baby, and the woman holding you in this picture is your mother.”

Julia gazed lovingly at Camille as a turmoil of thoughts filled her mind. *I would’ve never recognized her passing on the street. Her features mirror her Sicilian father, and the Italian side of her genetics. Yet I totally accept that she is indeed my daughter.*

The counselor asked Camille a series of questions rapidly in Spanish.

“Camille, what color skin does your mom in Mexico have?”

“Brown,” she said matter-of-factly.

“What color is your skin?”

She looked at her arm. “White.”

“What color is your mother’s skin here in this room?”

She focused on Julia’s arm and said, “White.”

“What color eyes are your mother’s in Mexico?”

“Brown.”

“What color eyes do you have?”

“Green.”

“Look at your mother’s eyes here. What color are they?”

She got up from her pint-sized yellow chair, walked over to Julia and stepped in closer. “Green.”

“Camille,” the counselor said momentarily, “This is a very special day. Most kids only have one mom, but you have two moms. This is your mom from America, and her name is Julia. She’s going to take you home to New Mexico where she lives. How do you feel about that?”

Camille looked around the room then asked in flawless Spanish, “Does she have a two-story house?”

The interpreter relayed the question, and low chuckles rippled through the room from all parties.

Julia interjected. “No, I’m sorry, I don’t have a two-story house.” She continued, eager to stimulate Camille’s curiosity. “We do have a cat named Samantha and a back yard with a jungle gym and swings. You also have an older brother named Tristan.”

After the translation, there was no response. Camille went back to coloring a two-story house with an orange crayon on a blank piece of copy paper.

The counselor whispered privately with Julia. "Camille is not resisting the idea of you taking her with you. This is about as far as we can go. You're free to take her home with you now. It's impossible to know if she'll have memories of you or her brother. She'll probably miss her life in Mexico and may become depressed about the loss of her family. I'd suggest you find a therapist right away in your area. It will take time to integrate her into your family. Be patient. Life will eventually normalize."

Julia sputtered in a frantic whisper, "Are you kidding me? Normalize? You mean I can literally just take her hand, carry her bag, walk out of here and fly home?"

"Yes, that's what I am saying."

Julia's eyes widened. Dubious, she asked, "How is this supposed to work? She doesn't speak English. We don't even know each other."

"Julia, it's important that you stay composed. I admit that these are unusual circumstances, but you both will adapt. Before long, you'll be laughing and playing together." The counselor paused. "There is one more thing. I've been informed that your ex-husband requested to see Camille before you return to New Mexico. It's your decision, but from what I have seen in other cases, if the abducting parent can say good-bye to their child, it helps with the transition and healing process. You can let Amelia know your answer when you see her tomorrow."

"I need some time to deliberate on that one. Okay, to be clear, you're going to release Camille right now into my custody?"

"Yes, that's the plan."

Dumbfounded and terrified, Julia got off the floor and scanned the team, "Okay, then." She replied with her hands on her hips. "The counselor has given his blessings, and I'm going to go now. Thank you all for helping me find my daughter."

She could barely believe it. Wildly she thought, *I know enough basic Spanish to get by with my employees. But they're mostly words related to cleaning houses, not talking to a child. Holy god. I can't believe there's not more support than this! Well, here goes nothing.*

Julia took Camille's wee hand, her petite suitcase filled with all her worldly possessions, and a bag of memorabilia. They were escorted by Sam Russell through the building and into the underground parking area. Julia spotted the car she had borrowed

from her friend. As she approached the car, she stopped abruptly and spun around to face Agent Russell.

"Thank you for taking Camille through the customs process and safely delivering my daughter to me. Words can't express my gratitude."

"Ms. McNeil, it was a gift for me to participate in a case with a positive ending for a change. Thanks to you, I'm having a great day."

She felt her hand being tugged.

"I have to get her into the car. Again, thank you."

Sam Russell smiled and headed back in the direction of the building entrance.

I'm alone. She briefly scanned her brain for a simple Spanish phrase. "*Este aqui. Es mi caro.*"

Camille then fired out a string of questions in rapid Spanish—none of which Julia could understand. She smiled at her daughter, thinking petulantly, *it would have been awesome if one of those translators could have come home with me. I have no idea how I will manage all this.*

Opening the car door, Julia pointed and Camille hopped up onto the seat. Julia began to strap her in and Camille pushed Julia's hands away from her lap. In English, Julia said unyieldingly, "You have to wear a seat belt. It's the law."

The verbal inference was effective. Even though Julia spoke in English, Camille grasped the tone and remained still. Julia handed her a magenta gift bag closed with a pink ribbon. A radiant smile widened across the girl's tiny face. Her little pale fingers extracted an unwrapped toy. Julia prayed it would keep her occupied until they returned to her friend's home.

"It's a 'Polly Pocket,'" Julia explained.

Camille's expression was buoyant. Her fern-colored eyes sparkled with rapture. Instantly, she began to play with the small doll and her house, swinging open the various doors and squealing her approval.

Ok, Julia thought, *one second down. Another hundred billion to go.*

Later that evening in the living room where Julia and Camille were to sleep, they shared a moment of stillness. For ten minutes they stared at each other as they lay on their sides on a large sectional couch. Suddenly, Camille bounded off her side of the sofa and positioned herself in front of Julia.

*What in the world now?* Then Julia motioned for her to be seated on the edge of the cushion. Instead Camille nuzzled closer.

Julia switched positions to lay on her back, making room for her daughter. Camille instantly flopped on her belly against Julia's abdomen and took in air, cautiously sniffing. Then exhaled fully, like the thawing of winter into spring. *Can she remember my smell? Is this her way of reconnecting with me?*

Julia held still, sending love from her heart to the little girl. In the next moment Camille fell asleep on her mom's chest. Julia didn't risk disturbing her. The newness of it all made her thoughts race. *I can't imagine what she must be feeling right now. I'm petrified—and I'm the adult here. This child has traveled all day, spent hours in therapy and was exposed to all sorts of unknown people. Now she has to integrate the fact that I'm her real mom.*

Not wanting to move, she lightly embraced her baby girl and listened to her breathe and dream. Absorbing the sacred moment, she tried to slow down and be present. For a few minutes it worked, then her emotions dashed about again, morphing from overwhelming love into worry. After an hour, Julia lifted up her babe and put her under the covers on the other part of the sofa. Gently she kissed her forehead, whispering, "Camille, you made it. You've finally been restored to me, your true birth-mother. Thank you, God."

As she slipped into her own dreams, Julia imagined the joyous prayers of celebration at church on Sunday, when she would bring Camille for the first time. Her dear congregation had kept hope all these years, and Jesus had protected her baby and brought her back, even when Julia herself had almost lost hope. A smile accompanied her into sleep as she contemplated this true miracle of God's grace.

The next morning the house was hectic and noisy. Julia heard the blasting horn of the school bus. Her girlfriend ran around marshalling four kids and herself out the door. From the sofa, Julia and Camille's heads turned side to side as they watched the brood run this way and that. Finally, they all scurried to exit the same front door.

Once the house was still, Julia smiled at Camille and waved her arm, signaling for her to follow her to the kitchen. Julia's heart soared as she grasped with amazement the reality that her baby girl sat right in front of her in the flesh. *I'm with her again! And she's hardly a baby anymore. She's almost seven years old.*

Despite the language barrier, Julia could tell right away that her daughter was clever. Julia pointed at a stool and Camille bounced up. *What kind of food does she like?* She picked up a cereal box and handed her a piece to taste. Camille puckered her lips and

shook her head in disgust. *Ok not cereal. What about eggs?* She went to the fridge and showed Camille the eggs. Her eyes revealed her disappointment. *Ok she's from Mexico. Beans, rice, salsa and tortillas. I know those ingredients must be in this house. We're in San Diego, for goodness sake.*

Ten minutes later a steamy plate of foods that Camille recognized sat on the kitchen counter in front of her. Julia watched as Camille picked up a spoon enthusiastically. Within minutes, she lapped up every morsel. Julia relished this simple exchange. *Mexican food it is, she mused. Fortunately for you, dear child, you're going to live in New Mexico. Perhaps it will be better than the old Mexico you've just left behind.*

After the meal, they dressed and Julia drove them to Amelia's office where she would meet with the San Diego District Attorney for an official deposition—and then perhaps a visit for Camille to say good-bye to her father.

Amelia greeted them both with hugs. She led Camille to a small table with crayons and a coloring book. The little girl happily began to color.

Julia reclined in a padded arm chair and took a big breath.

Amelia quickly asked, "How did your first night go?"

"Not speaking the same language is challenging. Camille may have some vague memories of me which is encouraging. We had a really sweet cuddle last night. And she liked the breakfast I made."

"I'm pleased for you. I sincerely hope it will continue to get easier as you bond even more. Now on a less pleasant subject, have you mulled over Matthew's request? By the way, you're not obligated to say yes."

Julia changed position in the chair, leaning forward intently. "What do you suggest?"

"It may help you—and her—with the transition," she said, looking down to scribble a note at her desk.

Julia took a minute to marshal her thoughts before answering. "First off I don't trust him. I'd like an interpreter to be present. Also, if I agree, he'd need to tell her that he took her away from me and that I'm her birth mother. Can I negotiate that?" She sat back, folding her arms resolutely.

"Let me make a call and see what I can do." Amelia reached for the phone and dialed.

While Amelia spoke, Julia swiveled around and placed her attention on Camille, who was still coloring industriously. She commended her daughter on her beautiful colors and neat job, but Julia knew Camille did not understand her words of praise.

Amelia hung up. "Well, it looks like we can accommodate everything you require. I will drive you and Camille to the detention center in a few minutes. Incidentally, I had a request from the San Diego Tribune to write a story about Camille's recovery. Would you be willing to be interviewed?"

"I guess that would be ok."

"It will actually be a positive boost and exposure for our department."

"Of course, in that case. Anything to support your heroic efforts in finding other kidnapped children. Scared as I am, I am so incredibly grateful, Amelia."



As they parked in front of the detention center, Julia's eyes were drawn to the grey cement exterior and the narrow windows near the top of the building. All morning, while signing papers with Amelia, she been jittery, wondering if she'd made the right decision to let Camille see Matthew. Now that they were here, her worries dashed chaotically. *Do I have to say a word to that man? I know that I must face him and regain my power. I just need to remember that I am no longer a battered woman or a victim! And seriously, he's in jail, not me.*

Julia supported Camille out of the car. Their eyes met for a moment.

"*Dónde estamos?*" Camille asked.

Julia took a moment to translate 'your dad is here' in her head, and replied, "*tu padre esta aqui.*"

Quizzically Camille lifted her head upward, gazing at the building as she clung to Julia's hand. They proceeded forward and walked in through the glass doors that opened up into a spacious lobby with massive windows and modern furniture. It gave Julia relief. I'm so glad that the detention center does not feel like a prison on the inside.

Amelia had arrived and was conversing with a receptionist. She waved the two over and said, "They will need your driver's license in order to process the paperwork regarding your visit."

In an instant Julia complied, and signed a document. Camille clung to her skirt and didn't utter a word. The woman at the desk pointed them toward a thick metal door and pushed a button to open the lock with a loud click. On the other side, all three relocated to another waiting room.

"We will meet the language interpreter here," Amelia explained. After that I will leave. Sometime later this week you will receive a call from our district attorney, who will brief you on the upcoming court case. Do you have any further questions, my dear?"

"Only one. After we are done here today will I need to testify or anything else?" Julia inquired.

"No. For now, you have completed the deposition, and you are good to fly home to New Mexico."

"Amelia, I have endless gratitude to you and the agency for finding my daughter. It really is a miracle." Julia reached out her arms and the two women embraced for the final time.

Minutes later, a man entered the area and introduced himself as Ted Johnson. He indicated that he would be the translator of the conversation between Camille and her father. Julia and Camille followed Ted into a large open room with a wall of glass windows and dividers. Phone receivers were positioned on both side of the glass. At the end of the room at the last divided partition Julia glanced and almost choked when she saw Matthew sitting in an orange jumpsuit on the other side.

Camille ran to the glass and pressed her face to see her father. She squealed, "Papa! Papa!" In frustration, she slapped her bitty hands against the glass. Julia stood to the side, next to Ted and listened intently as Spanish flew out of their mouths so fast that she could hardly track the whole interaction.

Ted detailed, "He's telling her that she will be ok. That you are a good person and will take care of her. Your daughter wants to know when she can be with him again. He says he doesn't know for certain how long it will be."

Julia suspended Ted for a moment, "Make sure he explains to Camille that he took her away from me when she was a baby. And the woman in Mexico is her step-mother and I'm her birth mother! Got it?"

"Ok I will." Ted leaned in and took the phone from Camille.

It was muffled and Julia could not quite make out what was being verbalized. Reluctantly, Julia decided to put her body in full view of Matthew-Mario. Her stance said don't mess with me buddy.

"Tell Camille the truth", she mouthed, knowing he could see her, but he could not hear her. Her body shuddered with rushes of fury to actually be in his presence again.

Ted continued, "Right now he is telling her about you. That she will be safe with you and to be brave no matter how long it takes to be reunited."

At that, Camille wailed, begging her dad to hold her and be with her. Julia could barely witness the interaction, and she backed out of view. Camille was desperate to understand the circumstances and kept asking why her papa was behind a glass wall. Then a guard came in and touched Matthew's shoulder. Time was up. Matthew stood up and kissed the glass. For a brief second Camille and her father pressed their palms together against the barrier.

It was the saddest moment of this difficult visit. Julia's heart sank. She knew that regardless of Matthew's mafia ways, he did genuinely love his daughter. *At this point, he has a better relationship than I do with Camille.* Julia felt like the bad guy, as she peeled Camille away from the window. The child wept and muttered unintelligibly in Spanish.

Julia briefly thanked Ted. As a threesome they all exited the visitation room. Once outside the building, Julia relished the heat of the sun on her skin. She'd felt cold with fury at seeing Matthew, and uncertain whether it had been a good idea for Camille to visit.

Julia did her best to console her daughter, who cried for forty-five minutes as they drove north to her friend's home. *I don't know enough Spanish to even comfort her! All I can do is hug her and wipe her tears. Damn it! This whole situation is such a mess! At least she doesn't seem to be blaming me. That's a relief.*

The next day they soared home in a plane to begin a life unimagined only three days before— when Camille lived in the warm tropics of Mexico and Julia had almost given up hope in the brown winter of Santa Fe.



## CHAPTER FOUR

Perhaps Julia was naïve because she underestimated the level of jealousy Tristan would display toward his sister. But he had been an only child for a while, and he was not accustomed to sharing his mom or his belongings with anyone.

Day one, the siblings were bashful and sweet with each other. But on day two, the fighting began. Julia tried her best with her limited Spanish to referee these skirmishes. Yet her interference did not reduce the squabbling over Tristan's treasure chest of hot wheel cars, Legos, Lincoln logs, plastic dinosaurs and stuffed animals.

Julia felt rattled emotionally. *I'm not sure I can endure two kids. Holy shit this is hard! I have to buy more toys for Camille. This fighting business is ridiculous. My god, I sound just like my mom when I was a child.*

Cameron stopped by every day after his work shift. Julia knew that without his ability to speak accurately with Camille in her native tongue, she truly would have lost her mind. On day four, as soon as Julia heard Cameron's knock on the front door, she swiftly popped outside onto the covered landing. It was a grey wintry December day. She exclaimed, "Damn it's cold! Hold me, my love. I am going crazy!"

Cameron unzipped his hunter green down jacket, and she snuggled her body close to his.

"Could you please spend the night? I can hardly breathe. So much is going on all at once."

"Whatever you need. I told you. I'm here for you."

Julia pressed up on her tippy toes to reach him. Their lips touched in a sensual kiss. Julia's body melted in ecstasy and a shiver bolted up her spine. "It's been a while. If you know what I mean." She lightly touched his crotch.

Cameron pressed in harder and whispered, "I aim to please, babe. Tonight, it's all about you, my love."

"Music to my ears." She glanced through the window in the door to be sure that Camille and Tristan were not running down the hallway about to tear one another apart. She sighed, unsure of how to help them bond again. Warmly nestled inside Cameron's jacket, it dawned on Julia that they had forgotten about a major trip planned for early January.

"Hey, I just realized something! We need to discuss what we're going to do about our trip to Central America with Tristan in January! We already have our plane tickets. And now I have Camille."

"That's right! God, I'd forgotten all about it with everything that's going on right now." He kissed her again, releasing her from the warmth of his body. "Sweetie, let's get inside. I'm freezing."

The front door squeaked open and both kids came racing into the living room shouting out Cameron's name.

"Como estes, mi hija?" Cameron enfolded Camille in a hug.

"Este bien," she giggled.

The siblings tackled him. He obligingly wilted down onto the ground and succumbed to their overthrow. A rush of laughter ensued for all four of them, but the tender surge of delight was fleeting. Soon the children began arguing again and Cameron backed away. Julia couldn't help thinking wistfully, *they love him and he's good with them. I wish he'd be willing to truly father them. Oh, well, it's a relief to have him here now, Julia comforted herself. Be grateful for that.*

Later, after the children were tucked in their beds, Julia walked into the bathroom and shut the door. She and the mirror had never been friends, so she averted her hazel green eyes from its reflection. She washed her face and brushed her teeth without glowering at her age lines.

As she entered her bedroom, Cameron was already in bed waiting for her. He opened up the covers, revealing his strong lean form. Hastily removing her heavy coral wool sweater and jeans, she slipped under the covers and shivered in the partially warmed sheets.

Cameron pressed his torso against her backside. Julia snuggled close, enjoying the warmth and his growing desire. But before she could relax fully into making love, she wanted to get Cameron's feedback on the January trip. She flipped onto her back. Taking his hand, she asked, "I just need to ask you what you think we should do about our trip? We've saved money and planned this for almost a year."

He squeezed her hand. "I've been exploring options in my

mind this evening. Why don't we apply for Camille's passport, buy another ticket to Honduras, and have her come with us? She knows better Spanish than I do. Plus, imagine— you'll have thirty days to be with me, your daughter and son virtually alone. Remember, we are staying for two weeks on the island of Roatan in the Caribbean. It could be a great place to relax with them and help them be friends."

A huge sigh came out of Julia as she considered this idea.

"I like it. Why not? That way, everyone gets what they need. We want to travel and expose Tristan to undeveloped countries. And Camille will have our undivided attention, so we can all adjust and integrate."

"Excellent. We can start making the arrangements in the morning." Cameron grabbed her waist and drew her close. "Now you're mine!"

They kissed passionately and quietly tangled in wild lovemaking until both reached a climax of soothing release. Then they drifted into a calm slumber.

True to his word, in the morning Cameron called the airlines and purchased another ticket to Tegucigalpa, Honduras, reserving the seat next to Julia and Tristan. That same day Julia went to the Post Office and applied for a US passport for Camille. With plans settled for the new year, Julia could now focus on preparations for a very special Christmas holiday.



January came at warp speed. Julia's expanded family started loading up their back-packs. Camille wanted to pack all of her new clothes, though Julia convinced her she wouldn't need the warm winter things. Nonetheless, it was plain for Julia to see that she would be hauling most of Camille's wardrobe along with her own belongings.

The traveler in Julia looked at Tristan's bag as he strained to lift it on his back. Quietly she suggested, "Why don't you take some items out? I'm afraid that's going to be too heavy to carry all the time. We'll be on buses and we'll often have to walk long distances to hotels."

"Mom, I can do it. I want to bring everything I packed!"

"Ok." Julia shrugged her shoulders. I won't convince him. He'll learn as we go that lighter is always better. She had Cameron explain in Spanish to Camille about what to bring in her own carry

on. Julia had bought her a tiny dark pink bag with straps. Camille joyfully filled it with two kinds of Polly Pockets, markers, coloring books, colored pencils, scholastic workbooks and a baby doll plus accessories. She pranced around the house giggling, sporting her mini back-pack.

Early in the new year, they arrived at the airport loaded down with their over-packed gear. Cameron and Julia decided to send the bags through to Tegucigalpa and hope for the best. It would make changing planes so much easier.

As they went through the security check-point Camille gripped her pink bag close. When told to give up her precious cargo she burst into tears.

Cameron soothed her in Spanish, "They will take it for a few minutes and then return it." His explanation quelled the upset.

The flight connections through Dallas were easy. Camille and Cameron sat next to each other on the flight, chatting non-stop in Spanish for over an hour.

Julia felt something unknot inside. *Whew. It's been so stressful getting ready to leave, keeping track of two kids and all their bits and pieces. But sitting here on the plane reading James Redfield's Celestine Prophecy is the most relaxed I've felt in months. Thank goodness Cameron loves my daughter and converses with her. My Spanish is terrible. She'll probably learn English before I ever master Spanish!*

On the longer haul to Honduras, Camille dozed with her head resting on her brother's shoulder.

Julia tapped Cameron's arm and said, "Turn around and look at them...it's so sweet when they are not fighting."

"We're going to have an amazing trip. It's wonderful that we can travel like this." He leaned in and kissed her lightly on her lips. Julia stroked the skin in his cheek and smooched him again.

"It's part of the promise we made to each other. Travel no matter what." Julia grinned.

Cameron seized her hand, "I love you."

"Me too you."

They landed in Tegucigalpa and walked onto the tarmac into the warm humidity and Camille let out an audible sigh. They all did. When they left Santa Fe, it had been snowing and the temperature had hovered around twenty degrees for a week.

At an elevation of 3,199 feet, the sky radiated crystal blue. The temperature was a pleasant seventy-seven degrees. Tegucigalpa was a city of a half million people who lived in relative harmony. There had been no wars or political strife in decades.

Julia instantly felt secure.

Camille spun around and in rapid succession spoke in Spanish, which Cameron quickly translated.

"This smells like my home where I used to live! It's warm. People speak my language here. I love it. Can we live here?"

Just as rapid-fire, Cameron said that they would travel in the area for thirty days and then go back to New Mexico. Camille's face contorted as she puckered her lips and furrowed her brow, "*Quiero vivir aquí!*" Then a flood of tears came.

Julia shook her head and said in an undertone to Cameron, "I can't win. I'm always going to be the other mother who took her away from her family and the country that she adored."

She scooped up Camille's teeny hand and half dragged her toward the airport's main building, walking faster than her daughter's mini legs could stride. Suddenly she felt sad and frustrated. *Why am I so mean to her? This is not her fault. It's mine for sure. It's preposterous how often I'm emotionally set off by her!* Julia slowed her pace so the little girl could keep up.

Tristan ran ahead and was already in baggage claim pulling the bags off the conveyer belt when the three stragglers approached. Julia was proud of her son. *He's showing his growing responsibility with his actions.*

"Wow Tristan look at you. Thank you for helping all of us. It's very thoughtful. I'm also glad all our bags made it!"

He smiled and his face beamed as he received her acknowledgment.

Cameron assisted Tristan to lift his pack onto his back. He lumbered forward and Cameron laughed, "Your pack weighs a ton. What do you have in there? The kitchen sink?"

"No. I just packed what I wanted."

"Ok. But, if it becomes too much you may have to give some things away."

Tristan bounded forward, laboring to stand upright. He led the way through customs. Outside the terminal, Cameron flagged down a taxi and all of them piled inside.

The hotel Cameron had pre-booked through a recommendation in the Lonely Planet travel book was decent in Julia's estimation. No cockroaches or obvious moldy smells. She inspected the bathroom and to her relief it was sparkling clean.

The four of them collapsed at 8 p.m. on three beds, all crowded in the same room. Cameron and Julia snuggled close on the double bed. They had discussed that this venture was not a romantic getaway. It was to serve a grander purpose to unite them

and foster a more tangible bond.

At dawn, the light streamed through the window onto Julia's face. Her morning prayer went out to the tropical sun. *Here goes our first day in paradise. I hope everyone gets along.* She gingerly scooted away from Cameron and tip-toed past her sleeping kids. In the restroom she brushed her teeth and soaked a washcloth in hot water for her face.

In the other room, the natives began to stir. A silly giggle erupted from Camille. As Julia entered, Cameron and Camille were nestled together. Julia joined the cuddle and squeezed her daughter lovingly. Next, Tristan leapt onto the bed and instantly started a wave of uncontrolled laughter.

Cameron wiggled out of the pile and announced, "*Vamos a desayunar!*"

"Great idea. Let's eat breakfast. I'm starving." Julia chimed.

Tristan dressed in a pair of tan cargo shorts and a blue t-shirt and he was quickly ready to go. Camille, on the other hand, was slow to rally, even for a meal. The three waited another fifteen minutes for Camille to dress, brush her hair and teeth, and then load up her pack with toys.

Julia whispered in Cameron's ear, "Camille is as slow as my aunt Sylvia in the morning!"

"At least you're glimpsing signs that she's truly related to your family."

"True, true."

The day was spent meandering around the main plaza and market in Tegucigalpa. Large macaw parrots squawked from their roosts in the tall tree tops surrounding the square. Vendors cried out, bidding for a sale.

"*El papagayo!*" Camille shouted pointing upward at the colorful birds.

Cameron left them briefly to purchase bus tickets to the Caribbean coast for the following day. Camille nattered in Spanish with the merchants along the way. Tristan tried out his newly learned Spanish phrases. He earnestly attempted to negotiate for a cheaper price, using a classic tourist line, 'I'm a poor student with little money.' Low and behold, to Julia's amazement it actually worked.

"Mom! Look at what I got!"

"A knife?"

"It's a wooden dagger carved with Mayan symbols."

"How much did you pay for it?" Julia asked just as Cameron approached to investigate.

"The man wanted twenty-five Lempira. I bargained and got it for ten."

"Well done Tristan. You followed my advice." Cameron held up his hand and Tristan proudly smacked it hard.

Lunch consisted of soft tacos with beans and rice from a street vendor located near a park. The kids played on a jungle gym and took turns on the one swing that was functional. Lounging with Cameron they held hands and watched Tristan and Camille play. Julia's heart hummed with contentment. She took pleasure in witnessing her daughter's ease with the Latino culture and Tristan's willingness to try out a new language.

The next morning at the bus station Julia nudged Cameron. "It reminds me a little bit of India, but not so overpopulated. And cleaner, thank goodness."

He nodded. "But now it isn't just the two of us."

Just then, the bus arrived in a cloud of smoke.

Cameron added with a chuckle, "That reminds me of India!"

Camille was lifted up to the top step of the rickety bus.

Julia instructed Tristan, "Please find an empty seat for you and your sister. We can trade places along the way."

"Ok mom, I will."

Julia watched as Tristan and Camille maneuvered around crates of vegetables and live chickens in the aisle.

Cameron and Julia found an open seat a few rows ahead of the kids. She felt safe enough to have them sit behind her. She managed to cram her pack under the seat in front of her, while Cameron struggled to jam his pack onto a narrow rack above their heads. He plopped down next to Julia, who had just wiped off the cushion with the edge of her shirt.

"You crack me up Julia. I swear your obsession with cleanliness is downright weird!"

"You have strange quirks too, you know."

"I'm not judging you. Only pointing out an observation."

"Hmm. I'm not so sure about that." Annoyed she slapped his thigh playfully. "I guess I will forgive you."

"Nothing to forgive, sassy girl."

"Ohhh, I see. We're in for a clash."

"I'm not going to have this become an argument. Let's enjoy the scenery and be happy we are not back home in the cold weather."

"I guess I can let it go. It's great to be traveling in a foreign country with you again." She winked playfully, even as she noticed her feisty mood. Then she realized the cause. It's weird how

irrational I become a day before my period starts. I want to fight and cry all at the same time. I wish it didn't throw me off track emotionally every month. I know it makes me erratic and hard to deal with, and Cameron gets uptight with that.

Apologetically, Julia scooted in close to kiss Cameron. Bus riders gawked at them, so they instantly pulled away like nothing had happened.



The Island of Roatan was an hour's flight in a tiny puddle jumper from the coast of Honduras. The idyllic natural beauty swept them off their feet. They had rented a spacious room near the end of a secluded beach facing east. Pure white, untouched sand flowed for a mile in either direction until massive rock outcroppings poked out of the earth and jutted into the sea. Caribbean turquoise water sparkled, and the temperature was a mild 85 degrees with a consistent sweet-mannered breeze that kept the mosquitos at bay and the nights refreshing.

At one end of the beach stood a bamboo shack restaurant owned by a man from Belgium. It had delicious and affordable meals, so the clan walked there some days for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Other times they ventured to a larger village nearby, where they could purchase snacks and buy quirky handmade souvenirs.

On day ten Cameron snuggled in close to Julia, who murmured, "I love you. What shall we do today?"

"Well sleepy head... This is my idea. What if I take the kids to another part of the island and let you have a day to yourself?"

Julia perked up, "Really?"

"Sure. I can do it for a day. You manage them day and night. I also arranged for you to get a massage today at noon in our room." Cameron smiled, please to surprise her.

"Wow! I'm not sure what inspired such pampering, but I'll happily accept. Thank you so much..."

Sex could have been the next phase of gratitude, but Julia knew that any minute those two children of hers would be awake and ready to swim in the ocean. That had become a morning ritual that she definitely could get used to as a way of life.

After a leisurely breakfast, Julia waved goodbye to Cameron and her offspring. Julia felt light as feather skipping along the beach. She hummed, "Happy days are here again. Happy Days!

Happy Days!"

Their room was decorated in pale blue hues with white coverlets on the beds. The tile floors were smooth beneath her bare feet. She flopped on the couch and let out a moan of relief. I love being alone for a change. After her massage, she lay on the bed and slept uninterrupted for over two hours.



Cameron, on the other hand, felt apprehensive about being alone with Tristan and Camille. Walking along a dirt path, Tristan ran ahead and disappeared into the shadows of green jungle foliage.

Seconds later, a tiny, soft hand reached up to grab his and he felt a warm tender place open in his heart. His growing attachment to Camille surprised him. Yet, it did not change his sentiments about parenting. His dad had manipulated and disparaged the name of his mother for decades after his parents' divorce. He discovered the truth of her innocence when he finally met her at the age of sixteen. Almost immediately he had decided to change his residence and get to know his mother away from his dad's psychological tyranny. Cameron shook off his mental process and suddenly noticed that Tristan was nowhere in sight.

He yelled, "Tristan! Where are you?" Silence answered, and a sinking fear arose. He wanted to run, but knew Camille's short legs could only go so fast.

"Camille, jump up on my back! We have to find your brother."

He squatted down and she eagerly climbed up. He jogged ahead with Camille giggling as she bounced on his back, her fingers gripped tightly around his neck. Despite his quickened pace, he did not see Tristan in the distance and it began to totally freak him out. Stopping, he loosened Camille's fingers from his throat and said, "I'm going to put you down now."

She leapt off backwards, landing on her feet. A puff of dust rose up under her sandals.

Kneeling down, Cameron explained carefully, "We must find your brother, so we are going to go as fast as we can. Like a race. See if you can catch me."

Camille immediately took off on a path through the dense tropical forest, squealing the whole time. It was much slower than Cameron had hoped for, but easier than hauling a child on his back. They popped out into an open courtyard with vendors selling vegetables, housewares, and tourist trinkets made in

China.

He was out of breath, panting heavily. He scanned rapidly around the circular plaza in search of a blond white boy. He thought it should be easy. Again nothing. Now panic surged. He had heard of kidnappings of foreigners in Central America from news reports in the States. He tried to calm himself, but his worry and frustration intervened. I've got to find him—and keep track of Camille. It's so hard dealing with kids! I don't know how Julia does it every day.

Striding toward the nearest booth with Camille in tow, he inquired in Spanish, "Have you seen a blond child pass by here?"

"Ah, yes my friend. He asked me about five minutes ago where the bus stop was located."

A moment of relief came over Cameron. "Where is the bus stop?"

The market vendor pointed left. Quickly Cameron swooped Camille into his arms and sprinted. As he rounded the corner, he saw Tristan under a covered bus stop, calmly sitting on a bench.

Cameron was furious inside. He exploded. "Tristan what the hell were you doing? I thought you were lost— or worse, kidnapped like your sister! Don't run off like that again! If you can't see me then you are too far away!"

Stammering, Tristan's voice quivered, "I didn't mean to make you mad. I just wanted to run."

"It's not an excuse. I want to keep you safe. We're in a foreign county. Plus, your mom would kill me if you were lost. Don't do it again!"

"I won't. Geez, you don't have to yell at me! You're not my dad!"

Cameron ignored the barb and attempted to calm his voice. "When we get back later today we will discuss it with your mom. I'm sure she'll agree with me. Here's the bus. Sit next to me ok?"

"Whatever," Tristan mumbled. With his eyes averted, he stomped onto the bus.

Biting his lip, Cameron decided to hold off on the lashing he wanted to impart. All of a sudden it struck him that he sounded just like his dad. Holy shit! He thought in alarm. This is insane. I can't do this disciplinarian act ever again. I have to talk to Julia about this. I refuse to become my father. It's definitely why I'm having serious doubts about the future of my relationship with Julia. I just don't want to raise kids.

For the rest of the outing, Tristan and Cameron had little verbal exchange. Nonetheless, they continued with the day's plan.

The three explored a botanical garden, a museum and another food market. At the end of the day they purchased snacks, bottled water, and splurged for one trinket each.

Finally, riding back on the bus, Cameron's heart softened. He ached inside because he knew how Tristan felt; Cameron had experienced the scorn of anger and belittlement time and again from his own father. He looked at Tristan's withdrawn face and resolved not to tell Julia about the incident. He'd tell the boy that they could simply keep today's episode between themselves.

Yet, as the bus rattled down the road, Cameron worried about his ability to maintain healthy boundaries and not get sucked into managing Julia's ever-changing family dynamics. Despite his growing care for Camille, the impact of her return had shifted a lot, unbalancing both Tristan and Julia. For the last three years with Julia, her ups and downs and the resulting drama was often more than he had wanted to deal with, despite his love for her. And now, upfront and center he'd seen his personal reactions and anger toward Tristan—the primary issue in his own therapy sessions as of late. Tristan perfectly reflected himself as a pre-teen, and dealing with him brought to the surface Cameron's inner unhealed child. It was almost too much.

Cameron knew that he would always be connected to Julia, but now that two challenging children were a reality... he felt like if he gave in to Julia's desire to be married, he would suffocate and lose himself in being a financial provider for children which he swore he never wanted. Cameron sighed and looked out the window. Lately, he often struggled to walk the middle path: to neither retreat nor advance. At this point, Julia still needed him. For now, he determined to take it one day at a time and enjoy the rest of their trip together.

Later in the evening, once the kids were tucked into bed, Julia and Cameron strolled out to the beach in the moonlight and plunked down on the shore. They listened to the lapping sound of the ocean caressing the silken sand and beheld the twinkling stars against the black sky.

"Cameron, thank you for my day alone and for the massage."

"You deserve it," he said, gently kissing her hand. "You've gone through a lot lately, and I knew a massage would help you to regroup."

"Well it really did help enhance my attitude immensely. By the way how was your day with the kids?"

"Challenging ... and ... good, all at the same time."

"Anything you need to discuss?"

"I'm learning about my own shadows right now. You already know how Tristan activates my childhood wounds. Nothing really more to be said."

"You sound defeated."

"I'll be better when my naked body is pressed against yours."

"You're deflecting."

"Yes, and I'm on vacation from myself tonight."

"Okay. I understand completely. Today is my vacation as well."

They stayed a while longer in silent introspection appreciating one another's silent company and nature's gentle embrace.

## CHAPTER FIVE

In the whirlwind of life, despite inevitable adjustments, everything seemed to advance in a positive direction after the trip to Honduras. Yet the five-year gap of Camille's absence had filled the child's formative years with unknown experiences. It was such a long time for Julia to have been estranged from her daughter. She could only speculate about what might have happened while Camille lived with her dad and stepmother in Puerto Vallarta. Julia had no idea if she had been vaccinated, or worse yet, if she'd been exposed to any kind of abuse. It never came up in any sessions with Camille's initial therapist, so Julia continued to be in the dark about her daughter's life in Mexico.

However, in the Spring, Julia began to have serious concerns about her second born child. Camille was now eight and she began demonstrating signs of intense trauma. At school, the second-grade teacher suggested Camille might be served by repeating the grade level because, despite her quick grasp of English, she was having trouble reading, writing, and spelling. She still had intense emotional breakdowns and fits of anger.

The next indication that something was definitely wrong came a few months later, in early summer. Julia drove by an old Mexican Catholic cemetery on the way to the grocery store. At the sight, Camille went mad, shaking uncontrollably, diving to the floor of the car, and howling in Spanish. Julia missed most of what she was bellowing and wished for the millionth time that she could become fluent in Spanish. All of Julia's worries came to the forefront later that same day.

After lunch Camille declared in an angry fit of rage, "I'm evil and going to hell. I'm going to find a gun and kill myself!"

Stunned Julia didn't know what to expect next. "Why are you talking this way Camille?"

She hissed in Spanish, "*Muerte al mundo!*" Then she flopped

onto the carpet and began rocking back and forth clutching her knees like an autistic child. Julia had no idea what had caused the torrent of emotions. She tried to hold her daughter, who wildly fought her off, knocking the glasses off her face. After minutes of thrashing while Julia persistently held her, Camille finally relaxed. Julia's thoughts spun. *Why did she want to kill herself? Why did she scream 'death to the world'—or did it mean death to everyone?* Either way it disturbed Julia, and at that moment she knew without a doubt that more help was required. Shaken, Julia called a close friend, who suggested that she contact the Santa Fe Crisis Center. Julia immediately reached out to them and scheduled an appointment. *There's no time to waste. I can't have her spinning out like this. There is a much deeper issue here, and it's beyond my scope of expertise. I know the body in terms of massage, but not the workings of the subconscious. My little girl needs serious help.*

At the first meeting, three women therapists assembled to meet with Julia. They had all taken part in the initial psychological assessments with Camille a week before. The women sat with Julia at a large round table as Camille played in another room behind a closed door with another staff member. The tribe of women explained gravely to Julia what their tests had uncovered about Camille's true emotional state.

The youngest woman, Emma, spoke gently. "I want to let you know that when we evaluated Camille's levels of post-traumatic stress, her results were off the charts. Frankly, we're amazed that she hasn't exhibited more symptoms before now."

Shock and dismay flooded Julia's body. "Camille's only been with me for ten months. And her original therapist told me she thought Camille was coping quite well under the circumstances. Apparently not. What do we do?" Julia leaned in and listened intently, mentally capturing each therapist's feedback.

A mature, grey-haired counselor named Meg explained, "Julia, your daughter was kidnapped when she was twenty months old. She was preverbal at the time. The memories of you faded. It's the memories from Mexico that are triggering the outbursts. As we interviewed Camille, she revealed some disturbing episodes that occurred while she was with her father."

"What happened to her? Damn it! I knew that something happened in Mexico. If he abused her—I swear—"

Meg continued, "For now our confidentiality—even with you—is imperative for her to trust us. Therefore, we cannot divulge any details. At some point she may naturally disclose to you what happened."

Emma said, "For us to work together, we will need your full cooperation with our plan. As a team, we agreed that for the most productive outcome, Camille needs a minimum of three types of therapy per week."

"Wow, that's a lot. I never realized that it could be this intense. It was my greatest fear that she might have endured some kind of abuse. My ex-husband was no prize, and he was often violent."

Regina Dente, the director of the center, spoke up. "Julia, I can only imagine what you've been through as her mother. We are at the beginning. I'll disclose one aspect in order for you to understand the depth of it. We suspect some kind of ritualistic abuse."

"What do you mean ritualistic abuse?" Julia asked, as her eyebrows drew together.

The younger therapist answered, "This kind of abuse can be found within a church setting. It includes strange ceremonies that could involve animal blood sacrifices ... and other things. We highly recommend that you find a therapist for yourself as well. It will assist you in navigating your reactions as we learn more."

Meg described the protocol. "Camille will meet once a week with other children her age to talk about their feelings. Another day per week will be a private session with Regina."

She paused, glancing at a paper on the table in front of them. "The final session each week will be with you, your partner, Cameron, and your son Tristan. We're sure there has been an increase of tension in the family unit, and this needs to be addressed, for all your sakes."

"I don't actually live with Cameron. He has his own place. Is it necessary for him to come?"

Regina answered, "Yes, Cameron is a part of her life. It's necessary for the plan to work and to heal her psyche. Her emotional stability is wavering. This situation will require all of our expertise."

"Of course, you might guess my next question. How much is all this going to cost?"

Regina relayed, "As a team we've talked it over. Given the nature and severity of her abuse, and its catastrophic potential if not treated. Well, Julia, we decided to tap into specific grant money. All the sessions will be free of charge."

Julia sensed a lump forming in her throat and tears rising. "Thank you so much. Wow. I would've never been able to pay out of pocket the true cost of what you are offering. I'm so grateful."

At the end of the meeting, she took each woman's hand one

by one, squeezing them tightly, thanking them again for their generosity.

Later, Julia suggested Camille play in the backyard. Julia sat on a lawn chair watching her, trying to find peace in the moment, enjoying the heat of the sun on her skin. She contemplated, *Well, I guess it's back to therapy for me. It pains me to know Camille was ritualistically abused. I thought everything was going smoothly and then the damn rug was yanked out from under me again.*

Julia had been traipsing in and out of counselors' offices for over fifteen years, so a new round of therapy was nothing out of the ordinary. She'd been to a variety of healers who used different techniques to help undo a lot of underlying belief systems. The shadow of her childhood rape had haunted her for as long as she could remember. It still pricked her emotions. Even now, her body was presenting symptoms of her unexpressed anger which worried her. Like her liver, for instance, it felt achy and sore. She had read once in a Louise Hay book that anger was commonly stored in the liver. *Oh God, she prayed, for my daughter's and son's sake, I've got to heal myself. I know I'm damaged, and I've sinned plenty, but please forgive me. Help me give both my kids a fighting chance.*

Tristan had just come home from playing with a neighbor. Julia heard him yelling in the house, "Mom, where are you?"

"In the backyard with your sister," she answered.

The whole situation with Camille turned her stomach. It made her feel ill. Julia detected that the rollercoaster she was experiencing with Camille was driving to the surface her own lingering wounds, yet again. Wearily she protested, *I'm tired of peeling the layers of the onion ... but my faith will help me. With God's help I can do this.*

Camille seemed happy in the sandbox, so she walked into the house scanning through her memory bank. *Who could I turn to for help?* The name Isabelle Foster popped into her head. *Hmm, she might be the perfect person! Isabelle had taught a class at the massage school about supporting people in transition.* Julia had been enthralled with how Isabelle could captivate a room with her mere presence. The therapist's insight and compassion had also impressed Julia.

Inside her purse, she wrestled out her phone and looked up Isabelle's number. *I'll leave her a message and see if she's taking any new clients.*



A week later Julia entered Isabelle's office. The walls glowed in soft yellow. The room was inviting, full of sunlight and tropical plants. Within the configuration of the large space, there were several seating arrangements. One area had antique tables set with brightly colored mugs for tea, across the room sat comfy overstuffed chairs, and another corner held an amber love seat.

Julia hugged Isabelle, "Thank you for seeing me on such short notice." She looked into Isabelle's calm grey-blue eyes. Isabelle returned her gaze warmly. Even her clothing radiated peace—wide flowing pants and a soft blouse in shades of blue and green. Her long, wavy dark hair was loosely bound. She radiated a strong presence, though she stood barely five feet high.

"Please sit wherever you feel most comfortable." Isabelle smiled. "Or said differently, find a place to nest each session."

Julia scrutinized the room and chose a cream leather recliner bathed in a ray of sun. "I like this spot."

Isabelle joined her, sitting in the chair across from Julia.

The therapist spoke gently. "The quick debrief you gave me on the phone tells me that this would be a challenging ordeal for anyone. I also know from when I was teaching classes at Santa Fe Academy of the Healing Arts, that there are many layers of emotions that you experienced while your daughter was missing. And now—to have her home and integrated into your life again, how difficult it is to discover she has severe emotional issues. Julia, I'm sure that can't be easy. However, as long as you need to see me, I'll be here for you. That's how I work. You choose how often, and for what duration."

Julia did not know if it was the clarity and tone of Isabelle's voice, or the love emanating from her heart that set Julia's whole body at ease. All of her inner turmoil leading up to this session now seemed ridiculous. "That's a huge relief. I'm already sensing how comfortable I feel in your presence."

"We are simply being in the present moment together. You can express anything you want. Please." Isabelle sat audibly breathing and radiating an aura of tranquil openness.

Julia took a few deeper breaths and then took time to consider. Inwardly she asked, what is the most important aspect of my life that's coming up right now? Nothing specific surfaced, so she decided to just start talking and let it all pour out.

She looked directly into Isabelle's eyes and began, letting her

stream of consciousness ramble. “I have a lot on my plate right now. I’m operating my own massage business, struggling to raise two kids who fight all the time. I have to referee in Spanish and English—and then endure the scrutiny of my daughter correcting my Spanish. Camille is fierce. She kicked my diaphragm through most of labor. The midwife said it was unusual. She came out fighting. Plain and simple, I’m exhausted. I mean on all fronts, on all levels.”

“I’m here to listen and encourage. Please continue.”

“I’ve also had a lot of rage toward my daughter’s father who kidnapped her. It’s painful to admit it, but I’m annoyed at Camille most of the time. Is that normal?”

Isabelle took her cue. “It’s perfectly understandable that you are agitated and finding it hard to connect with her.”

“Thanks. I’m filled with guilt because I feel more anger than love. It’s not very Christian of me.”

“Would you like to explore the anger?”

Julia thought for a second, “Sure. Why not.”

Isabelle spoke in a gentle melodic tone, “Where do you feel the anger in your body. Pinpoint it.”

Julia closed her eyes, “I feel it in my heart.” A surge of rage quickened her heart beat.

“Ok. Now I want you to give the anger more room. More spaciousness.”

A minute later Julia noticed a shift. “Hmm—I feel lighter in my heart.”

“Good. What other feelings are rising in your heart now?”

“Hmm—sadness.”

“Now give the sadness more space. Take as much time as you need. Anything else?”

“Fear. Oh! I’m afraid to love Camille. Terrified she will be taken away again.”

“Allow the fear to be there. Don’t push it away. Be with your internal experience. Imagine that the fear is at the center of the universe. See how big it looks? Now widen your view and see the fear as a speck in the center. And now, see how the whole universe spreads out around it.”

In Julia’s mind’s eye, she could envision the whole picture just as Isabelle had described. Wow that’s amazing. It really has adjusted my physiology.

“What is your experience now?”

“Amazing. I feel peaceful inside.”

“Good. You can do this for yourself anytime. I want you to

know you set the boundaries here. When you're comfortable, you can share with me about your wholeness."

Julia let those words sink in. *Her mind scrambled. I'm whole? Just as I am? Maybe it's not all about sin and separation from God—Hmmmm. Can Jesus forgive me for all this anger? Or, can I forgive myself? That's a radical thought!"*

Aloud, she said, "I have never considered myself as whole. I see myself as mostly broken, a bad judge of character, and a dismal mother—basically still a sinner, despite years of church!"

"Under the circumstances I understand why you feel this way about yourself. Although, I'd like to advocate that you begin to see yourself through a different filter. One of compassion toward yourself."

"Hmm. Compassion. That sounds really nice. My internal self-talk can be pretty harsh at times. I've made so many mistakes."

"Loving yourself and calming your nervous system is critical right now. Do you ever go to A Thousand Waves, the Japanese spa?"

"Yes! As often as possible. I love it. My boyfriend has been working there for years. When he's with me, I get to soak for free."

"Go there as often as you can. The more you can give yourself rest and nurturing, the easier it will be to let go of your negative self-talk. Also, I'd like for you to notice what arises in your memories. Do you remember your dreams?"

"Sometimes."

"When a dream is clear, write it down as soon as you wake up. If it's significant, please share it with me."

"Isabelle, thank you. You're a breath of fresh air for me. This is a lot to take in. But maybe I've been suffocating in my life and judging myself harshly. God hasn't been very happy with all I've done either. But I like this new perspective you've given me. Thank you for helping me."

"It is my honor to listen and guide you."

"I'm feeling so much better. Like the pressure inside is starting to dissipate a bit."

"Wonderful. Does this time and day work for you?"

"Yes. I have so many other therapies right now, so how about every two weeks?"

"Ok. Shall we will set it up as a regular bi-monthly appointment?"

"Perfect. Thank you."

Julia rose from her comfy recliner and hugged Isabelle.

Walking out the door to her car, she felt uplifted. The summer

heat was a relief from the cold of winter and spring. As Julia drove home, she thought about how much she valued Isabelle's relaxed spiritual approach and how it had soothed her inner world. Surely, she could benefit from Isabelle's guidance and still be a good Christian.



Over the next month, Julia recorded the dreams she remembered and paid attention to flashes of memory. Overall, she was mellower with both kids and less irritated. Ever since she became a mother, her flame of desire had been to alter the family patterns of victimhood within herself, so they did not pass on to her children. She took hope in the new sessions with Isabelle, as well as those scheduled with the Crisis Center, though she couldn't help thinking that the whole family including Cameron were now in weekly therapy mostly to manage the fallout of her choices. Sometimes, she felt ashamed, but she knew now—that wouldn't help anyone truly heal. *I guess everyone's families are dysfunctional*, Julia thought after a particularly uncomfortable session. *I've heard it said that "normal" is just a setting on a washing machine.* She smiled briefly and straightened her shoulders. *At least I'm attempting to make a change within myself.*

Every Thursday at four in the afternoon Julia and her kids met Cameron for their family therapy. Regina facilitated the hour-long session. Julia could often tell that Cameron was distressed as the timing interfered with his schedule at work. Tristan rarely spoke about his feelings. Camille observed astutely, but silently. Most often only Julia spoke, sharing her frustration with the argumentative bantering between Tristan and his sister. Occasionally, Cameron would add clarifying details to various upsets that had risen during the week.

Yet this week Julia brought up a more serious situation that was upending the balance they were trying to achieve.

She began, "The mother of one of Tristan's friend's called me last night to let me know that she suspected Tristan of stealing items from her home." Julia frowned at Tristan, feeling her disappointment.

Regina asked, "Tristan, is this true?"

Tristan shifted around. He didn't look at anyone, and he muttered, "Maybe."

"Well, you tell me. It's either true or not."

Julia jumped in. "They said you took a laser pen. I saw you playing with one last night with our cat, Samantha. I never bought that for you."

"Yeah I took it, so what."

Regina asked, "Why did you steal it?"

"Because my mom never buys me anything I want. And I am so embarrassed when my friends come over and my mom brings out apple slices and walnuts. They all laugh at me and tell me how weird it is that we don't have chips and candy. It sucks."

Regina glanced over at Julia who just rolled her eyes. "Julia, I know it may seem trivial to you, but would you be willing to have some junk food around for Tristan and his buddies?"

"He's stealing and I don't think now is a time for him to be rewarded. Do you?"

"Tristan, why do you think you took someone else's property without asking permission?"

Despite her anger, Julia was curious to hear his answer and she leaned forward.

"It's a phase," he stated nonchalantly. "All kids steal from time to time. I'll grow out of it eventually."

Shocked by his cavalier avoidance, Julia commented, "Tristan this is not a good phase. And it's one that needs to end today!"

His retort shot back. "I bet you stole at one point when you were young."

"Julia," Regina requested, "let's call a truce. If Tristan apologizes and returns the laser pen, would you consider buying him the snacks he wants for his friends? There is a point when compromise can be a useful way to subvert the need to act out like this."

Julia was initially taken aback. She glanced at Cameron, who looked at her with encouragement. This was certainly not the kind of negotiation she would have done on her own. Julia didn't always agree with Regina's methods, but she trusted her, so she was willing to give it a try.

"Okay, I agree to follow your guidance. But, I want Tristan to promise he's not going to steal again."

Regina looked over at Tristan.

"All right, I promise I won't steal anymore," he conceded.

The entire session had been spent tackling that one issue. Cameron and Camille were silent bystanders that day, their heads moving back and forth from Julia to Tristan as if watching a tennis match from the sidelines.

Later that evening, alone in the privacy of the bedroom, Julia

and Cameron whispered back and forth.

"I'm glad you acquiesced about the junk food."

"Really?"

"Ever since Camille returned last year you've been hard on Tristan. I'm not sure you're sensitive to how difficult it is to be accepted and popular with guy friends. Especially in the sixth grade. I can tell you, from my experience, it was brutal."

Julia felt her core soften as she thought about the predicament. "You're absolutely right. It makes sense that he's rebelling to get my attention. It's been a wild ride for all of us. I have to remember that."

"And on the lighter side. When Tristan called his theft a phase. I literally bit my tongue so I wouldn't laugh out loud."

"Oh my God, me too! Where did he learn all that?"

They flopped onto Julia's mattress, hooting with subdued laughter.

"Thank God we can bring a bit of levity into the mix." Julia rolled onto Cameron and kissed his entire face. "And thank you for being with me through this and reminding me to laugh."



It had been a month since Camille had begun solo therapy with Regina. Julia wished that the privacy clause would be annulled soon. Not knowing what was happening in her daughter's inner landscape was maddening.

Each time Julia inquired with Regina, she would respond in a similar non-committal way, saying with a gentle smile, "We are slowly progressing."

Julia would counter, "What does that actually mean?"

"In each session she tells me a little bit more about her story in Mexico."

"And what of the concerns you all had about the ritualistic abuse? It's weird how that old Mexican graveyard set her off. But at our church, she seems fine. It is a Christian church—no Catholic ritual and no creepy graveyard, so maybe it feels sufficiently different to her."

Regina nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, that could be so. But until Camille reveals it, I will not ask her directly about it. Julia, I know that as the parent you want very much to understand what occurred during her absence from you. But as a therapist I have to wait for the topic to naturally come out. And if she never brings it

up—which is a possibility—well, that’s how it goes.”

“Doesn’t remembering the situation help to reduce the impact?”

“Yes and no. If the subconscious mind decides to keep it hidden, then it is wise not to kick the hornets’ nest on purpose. I can promise this; one day you will drive past that cemetery, and she will not have any reaction. Healing takes time, Julia.”

“I know, but it kills me knowing I couldn’t protect her. I’m overwhelmed by guilt.”

“And that’s why it’s important that you continue with your own therapist and resolve the guilt. What happened to Camille is not your fault.”

Julia pressed her lips together and felt a knot harden in her chest. “I find it challenging not to blame myself. I did marry the bastard. At any rate, thank you for being my daughter’s therapist.”

Regina held Julia’s hand briefly and then headed back into her office. Slowly, Julia walked out to her car, where Camille entertained herself in the front seat with the Polly-Pocket toy Julia had given her the day she arrived in San Diego. She sighed and prayed, *God, I hope one day I will receive an answer that brings some closure to this whole wretched mess.*



On the appointed day weeks later, Julia sat down in Isabelle’s office, this time on the comfy love-seat. Julia appreciated the amber velvet fabric as she swiped her hand along the cushion.

Isabelle sat across from her in an armchair, again dressed in softly colored, flowing garments. Quietly she asked, “How did the last two weeks unfold?”

“Well, I didn’t scream at my kids. So that’s an improvement.”

“I’m happy to hear that. What else?”

“More than anything I’m filled with anxiety that I have ruined Camille’s and Tristan’s life. The entire time she was missing I tortured myself for not being able to keep her safe. And I was right. Something terrible did happen to her in Mexico.” Julia had contemplated multiple scenarios. “It haunts me to think about Camille being sexually abused in a cemetery or the crypt of some old Catholic church.”

Isabelle’s eyes widened as she jotted a few notes, “Is this something Camille’s therapist told you?”

Julia continued as she wrung her hands together and felt their

clamminess. “Regina, Camille’s therapist, indicated from our first meeting that there was some kind of suspected ritual abuse in Puerto Vallarta. No details yet.”

“I know that you feel responsible for what happened to Camille in Mexico. You are taking action to provide her the best possible treatment through the Crisis Center.”

“True. But, it can’t make up for whatever occurred when she was there. Now all I can do is pray that she grows up emotionally intact and able to function as an adult.”

“As I have said before, loving and forgiving yourself is the example you can give your children. I promise, your healing process allows your kids to heal as well.”

“I appreciate the reminder. I’ve put both of them through a lot of distress.” Julia reached for the glass of water and took a sip.

“And their Souls chose you and the events before their conception. There’s no blame here.”

“Hmm. Hard to imagine that I’m not responsible for what happened. I married the idiot that kidnapped her. Maybe one day, I’ll perceive it differently.”

“Remember, it’s one day at a time. Listening, being kind to yourself, breathing, and grounding into the earth are ways to manage the overwhelm.”

“I love being outside in nature. It has always been a steady companion in appeasing my spirit.” Julia noticed a bright sunny patch on the other end of the love seat and moved to enjoy the warmth.

Isabelle’s eyes followed Julia. When she resettled, Isabelle asked, “And what about your partner, Cameron? How are you two dealing with all the changes in your relationship?”

“I think we are both pensive. Reluctant to bring up the elephant in the room.”

“And the elephant is what, exactly?”

“He doesn’t want to marry me and live in the same house because he never wanted children. It’s a big dilemma and one I can never resolve. I will be a mother until I die.”

“What keeps you two together?”

“Love and a whimsical fantasy. Perhaps a dream that we are destined to be together because we are soulmates.”

“Hmm. I find that soulmates can play many roles with each other even in one lifetime—lovers during one season and friends for another period. I’m sorry for the impasse. I can hear your endless devotion and love for him.”

Out of nowhere, a wailing sob emitted from Julia, which

surprised and dumbfounded her. Then anguish engulfed her like a wave crashing on the shore. Her head leaned down and her body jerked as she grieved the inevitable ending with Cameron. It was the thought of splitting up that collapsed her emotional body. It was no longer a concept to be pondered, but a certainty in her heart.

Isabelle handed her a tissue box, and Julia yanked a few out, blew her nose and wiped her tears.

"How are you feeling?"

"Like someone just punched me in the gut. But—strangely, I'm equally relieved."

"You allowed yourself to admit the truth of the situation. That's an important step. Later, when it's time, you will express your thoughts with Cameron. I hope that it will be a mutual understanding."

"Me too. There's no escaping it. It's sobering. I—I can't imagine a future without Cameron in it."

"And there's a good chance the two of you will remain connected throughout your lives. Allies of each other's Souls, ongoingly."

"Wow—What you just said rings true to me."

"Well done, Julia. You really opened up and let yourself be vulnerable today. It takes real courage to heal."

Julia took a moment to gaze into the serene, grey-blue eyes of Isabelle, and soak in her unconditional acceptance one more time before leaving. Julia stood up and felt taller, lighter, more in her essence. She opened the door and stepped into the hall with a confidence she had not felt since she was fifteen.

Julia knew that she would eventually need to share with Cameron what she experienced in her session. When that happened, she knew that everything would change; neither of them could deny the elephant in the middle of the room. And then it would be over. But, before Julia could ever speak to Cameron, she would have to confer with her dear old friend, Nancy Jo.

Julia had relied on NJ's unwavering friendship for over a decade. As her primary confidant, this dear old friend was privy to most of Julia's deepest secrets. Long ago, it was Nancy Jo who had wisely pointed out, "There's no time like the present. Once you face your shadow, the faster you will heal."

At home, Julia threw her purse on the couch and dashed to her phone, which was attached to the wall.

She dialed Nancy Jo's number robotically. *I hope she's home.*

The phone rang four times, making Julia nervous.

"Hello."

"Hi Nancy Jo! Whew, I'm so glad you answered. It's Julia. I have news."

"Don't keep me hanging. What is it?"

"Okay, this is today's big revelation. It's time for me to split up with Cameron. It's not right for either of us to keep pretending this arrangement is working."

"What? What happened?"

"Today let's just say I faced the elephant in the room, via the gift of therapy and self-reflection. It hurts, because Cameron and I love each other—but I want a family and a commitment. He wants his independence and zero children. I don't think he's ever going to be different."

"I'm sorry Julia. You two are really soul mates—I can only imagine how disappointing this is for you."

"It's intense to realize, but shit, Nancy Jo! I don't want to raise my kids by myself."

"And you are alone right now because Cameron will not be there for you in the way you want. Hmm. The right guy can't come forward if there's another man in his way."

"What you're saying is the truth. I'm glad I called, just to have your understanding. Hard as it is, I think it is the right thing for me. Please pray for us—and my kids. I hope they can handle it."

"I will. Hey, maybe he can be 'Uncle Cameron'."

"Haha. Maybe."

"So, how much longer are you going to keep this to yourself?"

"Not sure. Saying goodbye is never easy. I will still need to pray about it. But it felt like the right thing in my therapy session today. I just wanted to be sure you didn't think it was totally insane. Thanks for the support, Nancy Jo."

"It's why we have girlfriends. Our bond outlasts the boyfriends, husbands, and lovers. When our men depart or we leave them, we always have each other in the end."

Julia smiled at her friend's philosophizing. "I love you."

"Me too. You've got this, Julia. Bye."

Julia placed the phone on its cradle. A pile of dishes lay unwashed in the sink. The elation she had experienced after her session was gone. A dreary haze overshadowed her thoughts, plans, and future. *I'm going to pick up the kids from school and then we will go to a restaurant for dinner. I have to shift my depression. I wonder if Cameron has the same misgivings about us being together?*

What rose up in her in the days and weeks after that session

alarmed Julia. As improbable as it may have seemed just a month before, her physical passion for Cameron started to fade. Perhaps, it was the knowledge that they would never be able to re-create those initial years of first teenage love. She felt hopeless to try anymore, because they had both changed and lost their youthful innocence. Now they wanted different things. On one level Julia wished she could deny her intuition, push it away, and keep up the charade that everything was copacetic. Yet, she knew they couldn't continue.

And an inkling in her gut told her that another woman was close at hand for Cameron. Her fire to keep the partnership intact was dying. Maybe they had another couple of months, but even that was doubtful. Nevertheless, it was an issue that had to be discussed sooner than later.

Julia procrastinated for over two months before having the "talk" with Cameron. *You have to discuss this with him now*, she urged herself one autumn afternoon. Find a babysitter and go to his house for privacy. Gathering her bravery, she dialed Cameron's number around five-o'clock.

"Hey there, can I come over tonight? I've had some insights from therapy for a while now—I'd like to discuss them with you."

"Of course. What a nice surprise. Shall I cook a meal for you? I'm curious to find out what you uncovered."

He sounded so upbeat. Julia's heart sank, but she said, "I would love that. See you around seven?"

"Yes. Can't wait to have you to myself."

"Me too," she lied.



Cameron hung up the phone. He wondered what Julia had on her mind. For months, he'd noticed how distracted she was. These days, she was not very open to sharing about her inner world. He'd told himself not to take it personally. But, at the same time, his doubts about the relationship had grown. The pressure for him to be in weekly family counseling was a burden, and he was unsure how to graciously disengage.

His aversion to Tristan and his sexual apathy toward Julia had all intensified over the past months. Despite his love for little Camille, he did not ever want to be her father. So—whatever Julia had to say, he was prepared. Part of him was simply jaded after these up and down years with his teen love and soulmate. The

temptation that they could prevail as a couple with the obvious barriers of her troubled kids seemed suddenly ludicrous to him.

Thank god for his own personal therapy, because without it he would not have been able to maintain his equilibrium.



Because Julia seldom rested and hardly ever took time to play with her children, she managed to wash the dishes, run a load of laundry and vacuum the entire house before it was time to go. Her nervous energy had to be funneled into an activity, and cleaning was one way she eased her tension. It was actually meditative for her, and it soothed her anxiety.

Julia quickly pulled out two frozen Stouffer's mac and cheese and one spinach soufflé and placed them in the preheated oven. The babysitter knocked on the door at six-thirty. Julia thanked the young woman for being there. On a piece of paper Julia gave her Cameron's home phone in case of an emergency.

"I'll back around ten thirty. Is that too late for you?"

"No. Go have fun. If you come home at eleven that's okay too."

Julia turned to her offspring and begged, "Please be on good behavior tonight for Carla. Bedtime is eight-thirty. I want to hear a shining report from her when I return."

The three hugged and Julia smooched Tristan and Camille on their foreheads, whispering, "I love you both so much."

Tristan said, "Why are you paying for a sitter? I'm twelve years old. I can take care of Camille."

"I know you are old enough. But I don't think it's fair to put that burden on you. My mom had me babysit my brother when I was ten. It put a lot of pressure on me to be responsible. I don't want you to feel like I did when I was a kid."

He left the living room shaking his head.

During the ten-minute drive, Julia's stomach was riddled with nauseous surges. Her mind raced, practicing one made-up verbal scenario after another. Nothing seemed right. Finally, she told herself sternly, *you have to stop Julia. You're going to make yourself sick if you keep this up! Remember Isabelle and her tranquil countenance. You've known Cameron for sixteen years, and he will not just call you a bitch and cast you away!* Encouraged by her own pep talk, Julia took several deep breaths into her tummy and calmed down a little bit.

Cameron owned a tiny house near the plaza in the center of

town. Julia parked behind Cameron's blue Volvo station-wagon in the dirt driveway.

When she entered, he took her hand and said, "Bridget Julia McNeil— welcome to my humble abode." Cameron pecked her cheek lightly.

"You're super corny."

"I made us curry with vegetables; well actually the Thai Basil restaurant made it."

"It sounds great." Julia strolled into the living room and sat on his ragged navy sofa.

Cameron put the red Penang curry in bowls and served Julia. He pulled up a chair near the coffee table.

"You're too kind. Thank you for dinner."

"No problem. Now enough of the small talk. What's up?"

"Uh—I'm starving!" At the smell of curry, her gut had suddenly righted itself. "Let's eat first." Julia picked up her chop sticks and began hastily consuming her meal.

Cameron shrugged and followed suit.

At last, Julia mustered the courage to begin. She wiped her mouth with the thin paper napkin from the restaurant.

"Okay. As you know I've been seeing Isabelle every couple of weeks ..." She hesitated, then dove back in. "Oh Cameron, after months of hashing through my feelings—I can't keep pretending that we are going to have a future together."

"Oh. Do you—do you want to break-up as a couple?"

She nodded.

Tears welled in both of their eyes as the finality entered their mutual awareness.

Cameron responded, "Julia dear, my therapist and I have been discussing the same issue. It's hard when you love someone so much. But—I can't see how to solve the obvious impasse."

"The fear of losing you as my best friend—and fear of being on my own has blinded me. It's why it's taken me so long to accept this truth."

Cameron's eyes shifted upwards. He closed them tightly. Considering the reality of finally breaking up, he sighed.

"I'm serious Cameron. This is intense for me. I love you so much, and I despise being the one to do this to us."

He repositioned himself onto the sofa and clasped Julia's hand. With a piercing gaze he said, "I promise we'll always be friends."

"Thank you. That means a lot. And—we both know in our hearts that you never planned to be a father. But I want a

husband—someone who will care for me and my children. You can't fulfill this for me."

"You're right."

Julia's eyes overflowed, tears gushing. She felt the excruciating burn of separation in her heart. Yet as much as they both sought the dream of being lovers forever, she knew it couldn't be.

"Have you said anything to Camille and Tristan?" Cameron asked, equally filled with sorrowful emotion.

"Not yet. I thought you could come to our next family therapy, and we can tell them together."

"Of course. Then I think it's best for me to bow out of those sessions."

"This is so complicated, because I don't want to let you go!" Julia sobbed letting her body collapse into him. They cuddled, feeling the mutual grief of the inevitable dissolution.

"I'm going to miss us."

She blubbered, "Me too." Her heart skipped a beat. She pulled away and hopped onto his lap, straddling him. Julia insisted, "Look into my eyes and promise me that you will always be my friend."

With conviction he assured her, "Girl, you are my Soul sister for life. You can't get rid of me that easily."

Marriage and partnership were not in the cards for Julia and Cameron. Sadly, their lives could not meld until the end because of different soul lesson agendas and time lines. Twin-flame Souls do not always have longevity within the third dimensional realm. Their attraction is quick to ignite, and it will often extinguish before either is scorched beyond recognition. In this case, however, one blessing endured. The union of friendship between Cameron and Julia remained unscathed.



As Julia's intuition had predicted, soon after their parting, Cameron met a woman ten years his junior, at the Japanese spa where he was employed. True to his nature, he immediately started dating her and within two months, Jade Mathison had moved into his house. When Julia found out, she inwardly thought, *Good for him. I'm thankful he's found a lovely young woman. He told me Jade doesn't want any children. But she's only twenty-six. By the time she's thirty her baby clock will start ticking.*

*Who knows what Cameron has gotten himself into this time.* Julia was humored inside, but kept her speculation to herself.

Julia began dating again and briefly went out with a Tai Chi master in his late twenties, but that ended when the young consort realized that Julia had two children. She felt slightly guilty about having sex without marriage again, this time without even the deep love she had for Cameron. Nevertheless, it was a fun fling, and it bolstered her self-confidence. So, when the young fellow called to inform her that he couldn't see her anymore because she was a distraction to his spiritual progress, Julia responded by saying she valued his dedication to his path and left it at that. She decided to keep dating, and stay open to finding a man who would love and accept her and her children.



*While Darius patiently waited for Jewels' light code signature to appear again on his screen, a litany of memories entered his awareness. He experienced a cascade of recollections concerning the history between Jewels and Eridani, aka Cameron-the-human. An abundance of sadness, pride, and satisfaction overwhelmed his senses.*

*Right from the start Darius had been briefed by the Light Council about the Soul he was to guide. A unison of voices sung the chronicle for Darius.*

*"A Soul determined to split off from the whole-unified field of One Self and become two parts. The two particles went in opposite directions, delving into their individuality. One appeared as a male and the other as a female. It was a re-definition of themselves, separate from Source. Thus, it was when Eridani and Jewels were created."*

*Darius chose Jewels just as she birthed her individuated particle from the womb at the center of all creation.*

*As Darius educated Jewels on her Soul's options she instantly wanted to become a human. That lasted one brief lifetime.*

*Once she translated, Jewels, begged Darius for her other options. She chose to embody into the stellar region of the Nation of Pegasus. All beings in that galactic territory were tasked to deliver messages in the form of light-packages to other regions of the Milky Way Galaxy. As a Pegasus essence, Jewels' form was like a merwoman merged with a human. She resided on a planet orbiting the star of Mirach. As Jewels matured, she eventually*

*coupled with a merman whom she loved. Often, she and her partner were given common assignments to transport light packages to the same areas. Not every twosome had this option so they were endlessly grateful to work side by side.*

*Jewels had solitary operations as well. Homecomings were always pleasing and sensual—swimming in the galactic sea with dolphin and whale friends, while being embraced tightly by her mate in nonstop love. Never a hint of dissatisfaction entered her consciousness.*

*Until, in one of her long missions, she was directed to the star system of the Pleiades. She landed on a planet circling the star of Taygeta within the Seven Sisters constellation. This consisted of a biosphere where priests and priestess were extensively trained in manifold therapeutic techniques. Beings throughout the galaxy sojourned to this place to assist themselves with its diversity of adept healers.*

*On this reputed planet, Jewels was suddenly reunited with her twin flame. It had been eons since their divided parts had dispersed. Darius was instantly alerted to the meeting, and went to offer his astute counsel.*

*“Jewels, if you stay with Eridani you will jeopardize your Soul’s evolutionary progress. The re-connection with your twin is often chaotic and energetically challenging. I would not advise that you take this route.”*

*“And yet, I have free will, correct?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“I will return home now, but I greatly wish to return to Eridani.”*

*Darius knew exactly what his wayward Jewels would decide. His job was to point her in a direction that would best serve her Soul, but her choice would be final. He could not intervene.*

*Jewels returned to her home. She swam with her lover, and tried to forget her mission to the Pleiades. However, that fateful moment when her heart and Soul skipped a beat upon reuniting with Eridani forced her to cut all ties with her merman and her life as a Pegasus. The instant Jewels had reconnected with her twin male counter-part, her consciousness had been set. The immensity of her personal fulfillment with Eridani-the-Soul, aka Cameron-the-human bewildered her—and completely beguiled her. She vowed to stay with him throughout eternity. The very thought of leaving him was unbearable.*

*As a Pegasus, the rules of engagement with another species and morphing into that planet’s terrestrial forms could only be sustained for a short period. To withdraw permanently would*

*constitute a great unknown. Jewels dared to risk the unknown.*

*As her Soul continued to pine fiercely for Eridani, her other half in the star system of the Pleiadeans, Jewels' focus honed. She began colluding with other Pegasus beings about their common plight. Eventually an alliance of discontented Pegasus Souls decided that on the next assignment they would collectively never return home. This rebel group unintentionally severed themselves from their clan. The Light Council knew these Souls must be given the option of free will. Therefore, the Council, in an act of mercy, permanently cut the link with their home planet. Once it dawned on them that they could not find their way home again, they gradually integrated into other stellar nations and chose alternate mission codes for their Souls' development. Jewels cast off any regrets and left her life as a Pegasus, free to follow her will where it led her—this time to her beloved Eridani.*

*As for Eridani's Soul, he had incarnated in the Pleiades to study the healing arts. But when an opportunity arose to descend and embody as a Lemurian on the pristine planet called Earth, located in the Soleus planetary system, he gladly chose it. Maldek was a legendary giant that had always intrigued him, but nearby Earth was dear to all living beings, filled with a literal library of natural creations from the entire Milky Way and beyond. Earth's beauty shone like a cosmic botanical garden. Jewels pursued Eridani to Lemuria so they could feel the oneness again and serve the celestial's wishes for the blue green planet.*

*Many times over the eons, they went their separate ways, only to unite again in another configuration. Yet, the karmic arc of twin flames reconnecting over and over prompted Jewels and Eridani to swear each other that during their last human lifecycle they would come together once more in the third dimensional Earth plane. True to their pledge, in this lifetime, they had reentered Earth's realm seven years apart in order to carry each other through the best and worst of parts of being human.*



*In the middle of his reverie, Darius reacted to an electrical jolt.*

*"What was that? My intuition says it was definitely some kind of signal from Julia-the-human."*

*Although he did not know the details of her existence, and he could not see her light-code signature on his screen, he nonetheless sensed a crack in the walls that had separated them. This gave him*

*encouragement.*

*Darius had recently entertained a daring idea. The impulse was not without risk. It could place him in a precarious situation and he well understood that his action could jeopardize his position as Guide to his cherished Jewels. Yet it might assist him in locating her. He felt so close to success that the inclination to action beckoned. As he stared, hypnotized by the translucent screen hovering in front of him, Darius knew he was about to betray a long-held convention—once again. But he felt compelled to find Jewels by tracking the light signal of Elektra-the-Soul aka, Raya-the-human.*

*As for Elektra, she was another Soul and ally who had shared a few pivotal lifetimes with Jewels in human form.*

*Recently, she had sent word that she was in proximity of Julia-the-human. Darius held tightly to the memory of Elektra vowing to him, just before she entered the portal into the Earth realms, that she would find Jewels and complete their karmic obligation. Elektra had declared, “Darius, a promise is a promise. I will find Jewels and reawaken her consciousness.”*

*Soon, soon, he would find Jewels again. The understanding sunk into his energetic cells. If he could have wept, he would have. In his Soul form he had no tears. Instead a tidal wave of feeling inundated him. As a Soul he had no dense structure, only a visual frequency-wave of blue turquoise and harmonic sounds unique to himself. In his center he took solace that together Jewels and Elektra would assist each other in ways neither could imagine now, inside their human vessels.*

*Using his keen attentiveness, Darius carefully zoomed in to follow Raya’s light signal. He calculated that soon enough, she and Julia would cross paths. At that point he would simply tag Julia’s location and the years of waiting would be over. His current strategy seemed flawless.*

*Darius felt deep assurance that his reunion with Jewels was drawing near. He held that optimism within his Soul’s heart-womb as he faithfully studied Elektra’s movements.*

*Darius remained absolute in his dedication to serve Jewels this one last time.*

*Then, at last, a moment would come for him to investigate his next iteration of existence.*



## CHAPTER SIX

Early on a Sunday afternoon, the light was muted as snowflakes fluttered to the ground. Julia made a cup of earl grey tea with a dab of milk and sugar. Safe from the cold outside, snuggled in a peacock blue sweater, she took the tea to her comfy wing chair in the living room. As the fragrant steam rose to her nostrils, Julia let her body relax for a moment, choosing to ignore the dust bunnies she glimpsed under the couch.

Camille was in her room taking a nap, which was very unusual. Tristan had gone down the block to play with a buddy from school for a couple of hours. The relative tranquility in the house suddenly inspired Julia to call Nancy Jo, after sipping her tea in peace for a while.

"Hi Nancy Jo. It's Julia. How are you and Maddie?"

"We're fair to middlin'. And you and the kids?"

"I guess we are as good as could be expected. Camille's therapist has suggested some new protocols for school when she spaces out and disassociates. Believe it or not—rubber bands on her wrists. The idea is that when she has a PTSD flashback her teacher can snap the bands to bring Camille back into the present moment."

"It actually sounds like an effective method. Is it helping?"

"We'll see."

"I'm sorry for all the challenges."

"Thanks."

"It's cold here in the Midwest, and I've been fantasizing about sun tanning on an island in the Caribbean."

"Remember, we swore to each other that we'd move to Hawaii if neither of us got married?"

"Ha! That dream is still way down the road unfortunately. I'm talking about finding a rich boyfriend and have him pay for a seven-day sex adventure in the tropics. Haha!"

Julia laughed, though inwardly she swooned as images of a bronzed surfer kissing her body swept through her mind. "Now you're talking sister! Me too! I want a rich boyfriend."

"How's the separation with Cameron going?"

"I'm recovering little by little. Had a fun little fling, but my sadness keeps surfacing. I am trying to keep dating, but it's challenging. Lots of odd men out there!"

"Yup, I hear ya."

"You know, one of the qualities I miss the most about Cameron is the fluid communication and honesty we shared."

"Believe me I've been single for years. I understand your loneliness."

"Even though it was unspoken, Cameron and I knew from the beginning that it might not work out. But ..." Julia sighed. "It was a gamble we were willing to take."

"Four years is a chunk of time. I get it. Even though I discerned the relationship did have a fatal flaw." Nancy Jo stopped for dramatic effect. "You're a mother with children. He was crystal clear about not being a father. Regardless, I was rooting for the two of you. I prayed you'd end up with your high school sweetheart. It was a romantic notion. I'm mushy that way."

"Me too. But thanks for backing me up. I'm just trying to figure out what to do next."

There was a pause in the conversation. Julia questioned, Did I lose her? She reached for her cooling tea and drank, inhaling the smell of bergamot.

Nancy Jo spoke again. "Uh, Julia, do you remember my experience with Transcend Seminars?"

"Sure. You said it was one the best things you ever did for yourself."

"Well, you know what, I think it's your time. That course will kick-start the next phase of your life."

"Wow! You're right. I'm tired of this road of repeating the negative patterns!"

"Good for you! Okay, so when will you call and register?"

"Tomorrow! I'm not going to waste any more of my time regretting my past!"

"Bravo girlfriend!"

"Thank you. Talk soon. Love you Nancy Jo. I always will."

"Me too. Good bye."

Julia set the new portable phone on its charging station in the living room. Then she ambled to her computer on the kitchen table.

The bulky Dell desktop took up a lot of space and hummed loudly as it booted up. Julia was still amazed by all the information that could be found on the world-wide web. Transcend Seminars website popped right up and Julia read the description of their four-day program. *This sounds perfect.* Julia found the number and called to reserve her place in an upcoming workshop in Albuquerque.

The woman helping her asked, "What do you want to achieve by taking this program?"

"You mean— anything?"

"Yes. What would have you feel empowered?"

"Well, I want to end the pattern of marrying abusive men. I'd like a closer relationship with my children. I desire to be motivated by my goals."

The registrant on the other end of the line said, "It's all possible. I guarantee you will not be disappointed. We'll see you in two weeks."

"Thank you very much."

*This is a big step, she cheered. I'm thrilled and proud of myself for not procrastinating. I don't know what to expect. I hope it really works. A transformation to reclaim the truth of who I really am is what I need. I hope everyone at church will approve. I need a new approach, and I trust Nancy Jo!*

What Julia knew for sure was that her life had been a wreck long enough. It didn't take much coercion for Cameron to acquiesce and agree to stay three days with the kids while she attended the program. He was proving to be a true friend.

In early February, the training commenced in the Albuquerque convention center. In total, ninety-seven people had registered for the training. Julia was super grateful that the program organizers proposed the idea of sharing a hotel room with three other women from her area. Money was tight and the course was expensive, so splitting the room cost four ways was a gift.

When she arrived the first day and observed the sea of diverse people, her curiosity was piqued. *What in the world has Nancy Jo gotten me into?* The convention center had a stately entry and much of the room consisted of massive glass windows rising to the vaulted ceilings, allowing rays of light to enter the space. Julia noted the southwest colors: muted tones of orange, purple, sage, pale blue, and some hints of red. They combined harmoniously in the carpet, wall color, and the artwork.

After signing in and receiving her official name badge, she entered the spacious ballroom. At the front of the room was a low

stage, a single black director's chair and three massive white boards. Facing the stage sat endless row of chairs that Julia assessed might actually be comfortable, with thick padding on back and bottom. Julia wasn't sure why she hesitated to sit in the front row, but she decided to be in the middle, surrounded by strangers. People who might become friends, or perhaps—a potential husband. Her clothing was business casual: simple black slacks, a soft cream sweater and a plum shawl. She'd recently added more blonde highlights to her curly hair.

The breakthroughs promised by taking part in the workshop were beyond Julia's wildest imagination. It stunned her how the whole model was so immediate and practical. Throughout every minute she bounced from one opinion to another. *Huh, this course is telling us that all humans operate the same way at a fundamental level. Could this be really true? This lady at the microphone is rambling. Damn, I'm so judgmental.*

As the discourse continued, Julia shifted from one perception to another. *If this is accurate—if it's really true that I make up all the stories about my life, then I'm the only one who has the wherewithal to invent a new story for myself! Whoa—did I really invent all this crazy stuff I've experienced so far? I thought I was just being punished for my bad decisions.*

The internal rollercoaster of insights began to shake her entire belief system, turning it upside down and inside out. *Holy crap! There's no good or bad, right or wrong! What? Did I hear that right? No good or bad—only areas of life that work and don't work. Wow. That's worth remembering.*

Julia scribbled notes feverishly.

On her original list of goals, she did not even think to include having a rapport with her absentee father, whom she had not spoken to in nineteen years. Internally, Julia fiercely justified, *I'm not sure about being accountable for everything in my life. Yet, the leader said, "Responsibility is not about blame or shame. It's about crafting an empowering context where I have the power to own my part and then make another choice." This is so radical. But, my dad is to blame for a lot of my self-esteem issues and the bad choices I've made with men. Oh yeah—there's no bad or good. Reframe! It's a choice I made that didn't work and one I can amend. Whew.*

Lost in her mental self-talk, Julia lost track of events in the front of the room between a participant and the workshop leader. Deeply entrenched in her own inner macerations, missed a fair amount until the neighbor to her right shifted on her chair and accidentally bumped into to her.