

Chapter 5

igh in the navy sky stars winked as I opened the bathroom window.

H October's autumn breeze pulled at my hair in passing.
To my left, shafts of brightness shot up from well-angled ground lights, catching the trunk of a lanky paper birch tree in a midnight pose. She swayed gently, rehearsing for winter's wild dance in a month or two. Then, exhausted, she will sleep and awake in April, rejuvenated.

Lucky paper birch.

My eyes settled on the image of curling paper where reams of thin white bark threatened to peel off her trunk.

Paper. Here. There. Everywhere.

How many letters had Roy and I written to each other? Two, sometimes three a day. Being apart after we'd found each other again was torturous. In the eighties, overseas phone calls cost as much as a week's stay at the Sheridan, so we perfected the art of letter writing. It's really a glorious way to get intellectually acquainted, or in our case, reacquainted. There was little time for philosophy and debate during our physical time together. Our bodies did all the communicating.

The essence of Roy filled my senses, and I inhaled him deep into my chest. I held him there until I felt my lungs burn. But I *felt*. Then, with a mammoth exhalation, I released him into the night, so he could go where the wind took him, then materialize and return to me.

It was late.

Those who'd become Very Special Agents had finally left.

Jim was sober as a judge, but not so much his passenger. They were really good guys. I'd known that for a long time but, during their impromptu visit, I realized how good it was to socialize with people I liked. I protected my privacy so carefully, had they not foisted their visit upon me, I would never, ever have invited them. I could not remember the last person—if any at all—who had paid me a visit since my move to America.

As much as I'd enjoyed them, I was glad to have my house back. And my quiet. I in no way wanted to make 'visiting' a regular thing.

I glanced at my watch. I had to be asleep before the witching hour when everything became as distorted as Dali's melting clock. It was my rule.

The Persistence of Memory.

Indeed.

I forced myself to close the window and allowed the air conditioner to do her cool thing as I got ready for bed.

With the pitter patter of determined paws behind me, I climbed onto the high Dream Cloud mattress, then curled up, hoping desperately for a dreamless sleep.



Suppressed memories, past-life regressions, dreams ... What they were called didn't matter. I was locked in their tenacious tentacles, experiencing them as real as the nose on my face.

I was no stranger to being helplessly sucked into—nay, consumed by—one of the many lives I'd lived centuries before.

FLASH!

My heart hammers against my chest, making it difficult to breathe. No matter how hard I try I can't escape the horrifying images surrounding me.

I gag as rosemary, sea spray, garlic, manure, rotten fruit, and acrid sweat invade my senses. Roughly hewn skirts in dull greens and lifeless grays swirl around me, hemming me in.

The fierce hatred of those surrounding me becomes tangible when congealed spittle lands on my cheek like a vicious slap.

I jerk up and swivel my head one way, then another, hoping to find a sympathetic expression in the circle. Alas, there is no empathy. These men and women wear only raging faces contorted with revulsion.

What have I done?

I strain to hear them over the thundering of my heart and the ringing in my ears. Every inch of my body hurts.

"Satan's daughter. You lured my husband!"

"Wicked witch! You told me my son would go blind, and he did. 'Tis the devil's work!"

"Making young girls act like imbeciles! Are you proud of your sins?"

My heart wishes it could thump louder to block out their monstrous accusations.

I stare down at myself, hoping for clues.

I am scantily clothed in blood-red silk scarves, a sharp contrast to the dull yarns encircling me. Splotches of dung, bruises and splatters of tomato pips mar my white, nigh-translucent thighs.

A rough-legged hawk circles and, for the oddest reason, I become infused with loyalty and love. I concentrate on its magnificent wingspan, its beak, its fearlessness. It swoops down and I don't duck. My conscious mind wonders why? Up, up, up he goes and then down again, dive-bombing the circle of haters around me. The dowdy ones cower and cover their eyes lest the hawk should pluck them out, but the rare bird swoops up again as if his aim was for them to witness, up close, the size of his talons.

"Tula?" I reach my arm up to the hawk, "Is that you?" And the bird circles slowly and dips his head in acquiescence. "I thought so. You've been many animals during my lifetimes, haven't you?" The tight circle again. The nod. "And you're always here to do your utmost to protect me. Thank you," I whisper.

He flies down and through the ragged, now screeching circle and settles on my shoulder.

I am no longer facing this dreadful fate alone.

The circle of my condemners widens, giving way for this oddity that is wanton girl joined with a wild bird.

I enjoy the peace and space the shocked silence and distance affords me, but too soon, hysteria resumes a thousand-fold.

“Eeeee.” “She’s indeed a witch.” “No mere mortal would attract such a bird!” “And a vicious hawk we’ve never seen in these parts at that...”

“Take her!” A course voice instructs, and brawny arms grab my arms from behind. The hawk lunges at my captor, but the women band together to shoo away my protector.

Three men lift me up like I am but a tree branch.

“Noooooooooooo,” I cry. “Tula, stay with me, please.”

Between violent kicks aimed at my pallbearers I see Tula above me, still circling, letting me know he is always with me. I am still for a second, allowing gratitude for the agape love from the Tula the hawk, to infuse my soul.

The men push and prod me into their desired position until I feel a hard beam against my back and my buttocks. I look up at the looming wooden post to which I am now tied, hand and foot. I look down and see the women piling kindling around my ankles.

Above me, as close as he can, Tula circles.

Everyone steps far away from me and my head lolls back in relief, allowing me to admire Tula’s circles, but not ten seconds pass before a skinny man hurls a long, flaming torch into the firewood surrounding me.

“Go now, Tula, save yourself. I will see you in my next life and the life thereafter. Go. Live! Be safe.” And I watch as the hawk rises and disappears beyond the smoke.

I hear the pyre spitting and surging as the flames crawl demonically toward me.

Ferocious "re leaps and fans quickly. I cannot hear my scream through the roaring flames as my feet melt.

The torment is so intense I feel myself slipping into...

...Roy, as I know him in this twenty-century life, blocks the excruciating agony, the sounds of crackling "re, and smell of my own burning flesh.

All I see is unconditional love in his expression.

“Save me,” I cry, but his face disintegrates, becoming part of the smoke, and all that’s left are hungry flames.

My tears bubble and boil against my soft cheeks, as billowing smoke sears my lungs. I cough, and unbearable pain shrieks from my chest. I wonder briefly if the pain is because of loss of Roy in this life, or loss of air in the ancient one I’m enduring.

I must find breaths so I may force out words to beg forgiveness for that which I cannot remember, so I need not come back to this earth and do it again. But my tongue is on fire, and my throat has sealed itself off from the fumes and I can’t breathe.

Come back to me, Roy. If you won’t save me, then at least let me see your beloved face, let me hear your deep, comforting voice, let me taste your lips, let me feel your passion before I perish...

And then my face becomes wet and warm in slow, almost languid bursts. It's not Roy, but it is a great comfort, one into which I wish to disappear—but not too far, lest my soulmate cannot find me.

The pain of missing Roy is ever-present. And it is that ache for my soul to touch his again that makes me struggle for a last living breath until...

BACK!

And as I inhaled, my eyes opened to a blue-eyed stare.

My hand wiped away his doggy kisses. "I'm okay now, Tula. I'm okay." I smoothed my dog's worried brow with my thumb and tugged gently at his fluffy ears. "And I am so happy you're a dog this time. Though you surely were a handsome hawk."

He kept looking at me until he saw me inhale and exhale enough to make my racing pulse slow. Only then did he lie down. I shrugged and said, "I suppose this means I can add 'witch' to my list of past identities."

Figuring any danger to me had passed, Tula lay with eyes closed. A not-so-subtle hint for me to keep schtum so he could finally sleep, but the need to share exceeded my consideration.

"Whether I was a true sorcerer in the seventeenth century or a Cambodian Buddhist monk in the 5th century, you and Roy were there to share my joys and sorrows, lives, and deaths. Sucks that our souls grow mostly from hardships. What say you, Tula?"

My faithful but exhausted companion yawned. He was there to console, protect and advise, but not to listen to idle chatter when sleep called.

While attempting to find Roy in my past lives—an excuse to regress at will so I could experience all the emotions of being with him—I had to face my own baggage that was dredged up from each of those ancient lives. Sure, I'd been able to acknowledge the dark leftovers, thank them for their lessons, exorcize them and move on, but my dalliances—as cleansing as they were—brought me no closer to Roy in *this* life.

I patted Tula's fluffy head then nuzzled his neck. "But no matter where I go next, Tula, you better believe you're coming with me."

He looked at me as if I'd just wasted my breath. *Of course I'll be there. Just like always.*

I still smelled hints of garlic and rosemary from my imminent-death-of-a-witch turn. The aromas reminded me I was not responsible for what I did in a past life. But the tactile immersion into the horror was hard to brush off. It would remain an open wound until I intentionally sewed it up.

Rising from the bed I opened the window, took a deep breath of sea air, and then said, "Thank you for reminding me of that life, those feelings and that fate. I acknowledge those experiences served my higher purpose, but now I let that guilt, that fear and that shame go. That life and those lessons no longer serve me and they *must* leave me. *Now!*"

I exhaled every ounce of air. Then I perceived those destructive emotions I'd carried with me for centuries being sucked out of the room by a passing breeze.

Relief was instant as I watched them tumble away from me, twisting and turning in a gust of wind. Those past life lessons swirled from me, overpowered at last by nature's substantial force. They sailed further and further away, lessening my load with every knot, until a vicious gale-force wind swept them up and out toward the vast, forgiving ocean.

I closed the window and, feeling a life lighter, I lay down to resume a more peaceful slumber.

I melded my body around Tula's powerful, seventy-pound one.

"What a good boy," I whispered and considered that my witch 'extermination' was a little close to home. Here we lay on my comfy king bed on a quaint peninsula across the bay from Boston, not too far from Salem. Nearly a full circle.

The smell of rosemary was suddenly overbearing, and my heart sank.

Had I left one of the witch wounds open?

Tensely I lifted my head up and spied a little brown bottle of the concentrated herb on my nightstand. "That's the culprit!" I blurted.

Tula's head shot up, eyes darting, head cocked.

"That blooming lash serum with rosemary I slathered on my eyelashes last night. It's meant to make them grow up a storm. That pong caused the hullabaloo from three and a half centuries ago to come back and haunt me."

I, of all people, should know better than to mess with smells before bed.

Tula gave me a dirty look for creating such a big fuss about such a little bottle.

"Ha! In spite of that horrid dream, if my lashes grow in a couple of days, I'll try it again, just not at night. Then I will utter them at Andy and divert his eyes from my wrinkles when we delve into Janice's disappearance. But alas, I think it might be too little, too late. I should have started with self-improvement the moment I saw Andy had potential."

I laid my head back down on the pillow but guilt pelted my mind like a vicious summer hail. *What the hell am I doing thinking about Andy?*

Since Roy and my other losses, I'd deliberately lived my life without depth. Without vulnerability. I kept everyone on the surface, except those involved in my job. And then I only let the dead ones in.

Until now.

Spending a delightful afternoon and evening with two people I've known for years was an eye opener. Not only had I shared my very private home with them, I'd shared parts of myself I hadn't shared with anyone for decades. My mild flirtation with Andy, pointless but oh-so-pleasant, made me see what I was missing while I waited and waited and waited for Roy.

Suddenly, molten passionate anger began in my gut and moved north until my head throbbed, promising to erupt in fury.

Where the bloody hell are you, Roy?

You're always with me in spirit, but now I need to feel your physical presence. It's no longer possible to be satisfied with you showing up in my head then disappearing. I need your actual presence to whisk me away from the horrors that this life sometimes pulls me into. I need your soothing hand, the one whose every single line and crevice I can trace by heart. I need you to touch my face after past-life adventures regurgitate and scare the living daylights out of me.

And you didn't save me from the fire I just endured. You could have tossed all those tiny May Flower-ites aside with one hand and ripped the ties that bound my hands and feet with another. But no. You just became smoke and wafted away, becoming part of my demise. And you're not preventing me from giving in to the temptation of a fling with Andy, even though it's a really bad idea. Do you even care anymore, Roy?

I damn well can't go on loving your memory, your ghost. I just can't. But how the hell do I get over you? How? What must I do to NOT ache for you every day of my life? That bloody universe has made me so many promises. I've believed

her. I've always "known" she would deliver you. But enough's enough! You hear me Miss Freakin' Universe?
ENOUGH!