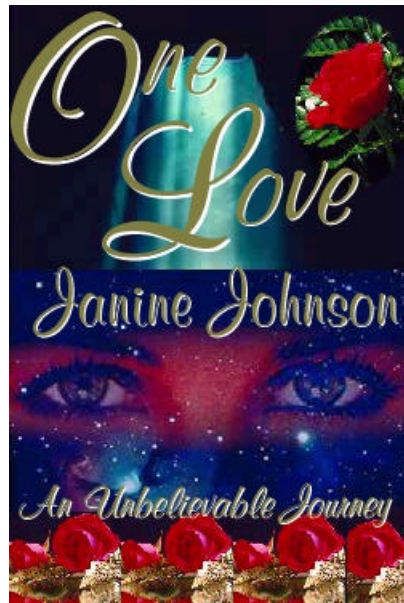


ONE LOVE



by

Janine Johnson

ISBN 1-892745-12-7 (Diskette)

ISBN 1-892745-11-9 (Trade Paperback)

Each event in your life, every experience you have, and each emotion you feel, are all just petals in the flower garden of life. In our publications at Petals of Life, we present ideas and thoughts to help you plant the seeds, water the growth, and enjoy the scents of life's strenuous journey.

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My family thanks you very much for any contribution you choose to make!

With Love & Blessings, The Johnson Family

Dedication

With love and appreciation, I dedicate this book to two very special people:

George E. Carr, my grandfather, the man who lost his earthly battle, leaving behind some valuable gifts for me - his entrepreneurial spirit, his joy in giving, his strong Irish temperament and the knowledge that all it takes to be a winner is to *try*, for the journey and the lessons learned is where true success is ultimately discovered.

Michael D. Johnson, my husband, the man who won his earthly battle, remaining here to be my soul mate, showing me the true meaning of unconditional love through his generous, giving heart, his patience and perseverance, and his tremendous strength and wisdom. Michael truly is a gift from God and I love him with every ounce of my being.

Prologue

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

I turned toward the voice which vibrated with awe and a delightful softness. "Yes," I said, staring at the woman standing in the aisle. Her silver hair shimmered under the fluorescent lighting and her eyes glittered like fine sapphires. I admired the lines of age crinkling over her cheeks when she smiled.

"Yours?" I asked.

"Oh, no." A pair of pearl teardrop earrings swayed as she shook her head. "I'm next door." She pointed to my left.

"Whose booth is this?" I gestured toward the collection of antique items housed between three flimsy walls in a back corner nook.

The woman shrugged. "I don't know the young lady who runs it," she said. "But I heard she brought that picture in late last Friday night. It's been quite the talk around here."

I glanced back at the photo on the far wall. Or at least I thought it was a photo. Could it be an actual oil painting? Cautiously, I stepped across two small boxes of old tin canisters and waded through a spilled stack of dusty books on the floor. Stretching a hand out, I brushed one finger over the rose picture.

"Is it oil, I wonder?" I muttered, more to myself than the neighboring vendor.

She entered the booth behind me and answered anyway. "Best we could determine, it's a photo and it looks like it's covered with some kind of gel, the kind used with oil paintings. I've never seen such a piece." She spoke in a gentle whisper, as if she possessed the secret ingredient to an old family recipe. I wondered if she knew more about the picture but wasn't sharing.

"It doesn't look like an antique," I said, scrutinizing the red and white roses which filled the interior of the ebony frame.

The woman laughed and the sound of her voice echoed like tiny bells in the small booth. "Honey, in case you haven't noticed, this place is hardly an antique mall any more. So many of the young ladies come in and set up just to sell crafts."

I shook my head slightly as I perused the picture. "This is no craft...it's more like art," I said softly.

She leaned over and whispered, "Expensive art. Check out the price." She left the booth then to attend to someone rustling around on the other side of the partition. I leaned closer, squinting as I tried to read the tiny white tag at the bottom of the frame.

One thousand dollars!

I blinked, sure I'd read it wrong. I looked again, but the same amount stood out as boldly as if it were printed on a highway billboard. One thousand dollars...

I shook my head and turned to leave.

Come back.

I stopped short and swiveled back. Who said that? I was the only one in the booth and it was against the back wall. There couldn't be anyone behind it.

Come here. Buy it...please.

The sound of the voice was musical, like a harp in the distance, floating like the tiniest of breezes, tickling my ear with the words. I brought my hands up and crossed them in front of me, rubbing my forearms to wipe away an uneasy chill.

I thought it odd that it suddenly seemed cool, for it was at least ninety degrees outside. The roar of the huge fan at the end of the aisle reminded me of the poor cooling system in the large metal building. I shouldn't be chilled -- it had been as warm as a preheated oven when I first entered!

Bringing a hand to my forehead, I wondered if I might be coming down with something; yet my skin felt normal, not hot, nor cold and clammy like a breaking fever. An image of a burning pot swiftly removed from a fire came to mind and I shivered again.

Lowering my hand to my cheek, I shifted my gaze back to the picture. That's when I saw it. I blinked at least four times, trying to convince myself it wasn't there, yet each time my eyelids fluttered open, I saw it again. At first I witnessed only a flicker of a figure in the background of the photo. But with each breath of denial I released, the vision sharpened, like a television working its way through subtle interference.

By the time the image became clear and the faint musical voice apparent, I convinced myself I'd lost my mind somewhere between the front door and the back. I wondered, as I hurriedly reached for the hook on the back of the artwork and dipped into my purse for my checkbook, if I'd ever find it again.

CHAPTER ONE

“Since when did you become interested in antiques?”

I eyeballed the ceiling when Mandy asked the question, just as I had when my husband asked about, or rather, chastised, my purchase. “It’s not an antique,” I said. “It’s just a picture I liked. It’s not even a painting...it’s more like a photo. Believe it or not, this looks like an exquisite piece of art. It’s so...um...unique, I just had to get it.”

“But you never buy stuff like that,” Mandy probed, her voice full of curiosity. “Come on, Em, tell me more. What on earth possessed you to spend a thousand dollars for a photo? God, I bet John was livid!”

Livid was an understatement. The memory of my husband’s face contorting into wrinkles of displeasure and disgust permeated my thoughts. The blast of his anger had been icy and I closed my eyes, attempting to force the image out of my mind.

“He was pretty mad. He told me we didn’t have discretionary funds to afford such luxuries.” I said, mocking his voice by lowering my own, speaking stiff and clipped, just as John had. I shifted the phone on my shoulder and sighed. “He’s hardly spoken to me since.”

“Well, I don’t blame him,” said Mandy. “You guys have been on the verge of bankruptcy for the past year and just when things start to look up, you blow a thousand bucks on a picture. I’m surprised John didn’t take your checkbook away right then and there!”

“He did.” I glanced at the picture nestled against the bedroom wall. Chewing on my bottom lip, I stared at the brilliant image of the red and white roses.

“What does the thing even look like?” Mandy asked.

I sighed. “Oh, Mandy, it’s gorgeous. It’s an enlarged photo of red and white roses. And it’s covered with...” I reached out and brushed the tip of my finger across the wet-looking substance. “...some kind of coating which makes it look like an original oil painting. The flowers are stunning, outlined in dark red matting and framed in black.”

“And what’s so special about it? Who’s the artist? Somebody famous or something?”

My gaze moved lower. “I don’t know the artist. It says ‘Jai’, but I don’t know who he or she is.”

Mandy laughed and I winced. I knew I’d done a really stupid thing, spending the last of our meager savings on this picture. Though John’s job situation had stabilized, I was well aware we still had back expenses to pay. The only reason I could come up with for my temporary insanity was the enticement I’d felt. It was more than the average money-burning-a-hole-in-your-pocket pull.

“It was really weird,” I said in a soft voice, still staring at the photo. “It was almost as if someone was standing beside me saying buy it, buy it.”

“Maybe it was the clerk. Maybe she stood behind something and

whispered out loud," Mandy said, chuckling.

"No." I shook my head and took a deep breath as I prepared to tell my friend what really occurred in the antique mall.

"Actually, I heard a voice. First it told me to come back when I started walking away. And when I did, that's when I saw the eyes in the corner. After that, I got my checkbook--"

"Eyes!" Mandy's giggling came to an abrupt halt. "You saw eyes in the picture? The picture of the roses?"

"Yes." I stared at the corner of the framed photo, looking for them, but there was only a black background. "I haven't seen them since and believe me, I've examined this picture totally. But they were there then, in the booth at the mall. It was very fast and quick, almost like a flicker, but I know I saw them."

"Emily...um...are you still taking that stuff?"

"What stuff?"

"That wort stuff...Saint something-or-other...for your depression," she clarified.

It suddenly dawned on me. My best friend was implying I was nuts or that the herbs I took were having an effect on my mental stability. "I saw it," I said, straightening my shoulders and crossing the room. "I didn't imagine it. I really saw it! And that's what made me buy it. To tell you the truth, I'm glad I did." I tightened my grip around the receiver. I was happy about the purchase. It was as if I'd found a treasure in a field of weeds...and a magical treasure at that, for I believed in what I'd seen.

"Even though your husband might divorce you over it?" Mandy's voice sliced into my thoughts.

"He won't," I replied. At least I didn't think he would go to such extreme measures. I wondered if it would make any difference to me if he did ask for a divorce. It'd be par for the course.

John and I had grown apart this past year. He seemed to think only of the financial issues in our marriage, and his concern with me, his wife of just over five years, was minimal at best. For the past two months in particular, he'd rarely made it home before dark and then all he wanted to do was work or sleep. Many mornings, he left before I awakened.

I was alone when I left for work in the morning and alone when I returned home. Dinner had become a solitary event and I spent many evenings reviewing manuscripts and editing them, simply because I had nothing else to do with my time.

"Anything improved in the marriage?" Mandy asked.

How did she always know my thoughts?

"No. Ever since the plant reinstated John to full-time, he's buried himself in that job. I hardly ever see him, except on weekends. Even then--" I paused, looking over at the stack of books I'd given John for his last birthday. Perched neatly, one on top of the other, they covered the top of the small chest by his side of the bed. Not a cover had been opened, nor a page turned, all summer long.

“Even then,” I continued, “he still spends a good bit of time at the office.” The bitterness lingered on my tongue, sharp as a butcher’s knife, and I wondered what made me angrier -- his absence, or the fact he didn’t appreciate the gifts.

Mandy’s sigh of friendly pity added to the ill feelings and caused me to cringe. “Since he’s gone so much, why don’t you come down here and see us sometime? It’s not too long of a drive,” she said, her voice warm with sympathy.

“It just doesn’t feel right,” I said in complete honesty. “You and Greg have a new life together and I’m sure you need time alone, especially with your family doubling in size.” Mandy and Greg, recently wed, both brought two children into their new family unit and I assumed they were busier than ever.

“But we still have time for our friends.” The protest in her tone rippled through the phone line. “Especially you, Emily.”

“I’ll come down soon.” I made the familiar, artificial promise before we ended the call.

After Mandy made her futile promise of coming to visit me, we parted ways once more. In truth, she never had time for anything except a few phone calls. Yet as a friendly gesture, I guessed, she always issued some kind of invitation before hanging up the phone.

I, on the other hand, lacked the desire to do anything except sit in silence, like a garden without water, praying for a rain which never came. Inside, I’d wilted. Outside, too, I admitted as I lifted a strand of lifeless hair from the side of my face and pushed it back behind my ears.

Falling backward on the bed, I focused on the cracks on the ceiling. It was time to brood again and I handled the task well, moving from the fading paint to the blades of the ceiling fan, counting the rounds they made. My marriage was on the rocks thanks to a sea of financial problems and my work as an editor bored me to tears these days. I lived the life of a hermit...so why shouldn’t I brood?

What was the meaning of excitement? I’d long forgotten, since every shred of it had vanished from my life, a pitiful existence taking its place. Halfway to forty, I had no children to brighten my days. Even if I were to have a child, what did I have to offer? I couldn’t possibly begin to give a child emotions I lacked inside myself!

I gnawed on the inside corner of my mouth as the negative, self-defeating thoughts barreled through my mind like rampant, trampling horses. Closing my eyes, I willed, then begged, for the accompanying ache in my heart to subside. But it throbbed on, reminding me that I was human and pains didn’t simply disappear because of the fleeting wish of a brooding woman.

Moments later, a warm July breeze drifted through the open window, brushed my arm, then tickled the underside of my chin, gently encouraging me to lift my head. My body unconsciously followed until I stood in front of the photo again.

The curtains next to me rustled and I heard a faint breath next to my right ear. I leaned toward the direction of the whisper, struggling to hear what I

thought must be voices outside the open window.

The voice sharpened, its depth unmistakably male and lightly graveled.
“Look at me...look at me.”

My gaze instinctively darted to the upper corner of the picture, searching each dip of oil coating for the image I'd seen before. I moved closer, so close my eyelashes brushed against the rugged texture, and I studied every detail, each brush stroke, every rose petal.

There!

Behind the petal at the top left, buried within the ebony background, I saw him.

CHAPTER TWO

I wasn't crazy! Someone was there, plain as the hair on my head. Stunned, I watched as the vision of a man appeared. He extended his arms toward me and a dusty white light erupted around him, caressing his physique in an angelic, ethereal manner.

My heart didn't miss a beat as it forced the air from my lungs in breathless, urgent gasps. I pulled in another gulp of air as the skin on my face tightened. My forehead seemed to burst into imaginary flames, prickling like a sizzling sunburn. My skin dampened and sweat poured forth from behind my ears and around my hairline. A tremor began in the pit of my stomach turning quickly into a violent shake and I felt as if I were on the edge of a cliff, and could fall at any moment.

With soul-shattering intensity, I mentally acknowledged what was happening and my breath came to an explosive halt.

This can't be happening. This only happens to other people, not to me!

A groan of denial escaped my throat and I stepped back, grasping the open neckline of my shirt. I blinked hard, but the image of the man waving remained intact.

Mandy was right -- I was losing my mind. All sense of reality vanished from my world and I froze, totally unsure of what to do about the image I witnessed. I glanced at the phone and entertained the idea of calling 911. A myriad of images followed, from counselors to men in white coats, to my husband shaking his head in disbelief as he presented my insurance card to office staff. A straitjacket certainly could be in order, I thought as I discarded the thought of calling anyone. I shifted my gaze back to the picture.

The image remained. The man had ceased his waving and now the figure, so very small in relation to my pupil, stood very still. If this were real...if he were real, I could see he'd be a tall man. But he's not real! He's not!

Yet if this were a product of my imagination, my clarity in creation had improved greatly. For I could see every angle of his facial bones, every line of his muscled flesh under what appeared to be loose and ragged clothing. Every lengthy wisp of his hair as it blew in an imaginary breeze. Even the long eyelashes outlining violet eyes -- the same eyes I'd seen at the antique shop, no doubt.

I continued to stare, my breath hovering in my throat, as the man tilted his head back and closed his eyes. A soft golden light descended over his forehead and cheeks, casting a glistening hue over his skin and dark hair. The light continued to brighten until he started to fade away.

"No!" I breathed my objection hoarsely across the beads of oil. Pressing my face even closer, I struggled to maintain the realistic illusion, only to watch it dissipate as fast as it had come.

I stepped back, hoping my closeness had blurred my vision. Yet he was gone and a sudden emptiness filled my heart. That was as odd to me as

anything else I'd just experienced. For how long had it been since my heart had felt anything?

Here, in just a matter of a few short moments, my body's most vital organ had pounded with a mixture of excitement and fear and dread, now replaced by an inexplicable longing. I reached out and touched the place on the photo where I'd seen the vision of the man.

Like a flame from a freshly-lit candle, the spot singed my finger with sudden heat. I jerked my hand away, then moved it slightly to the right, touching the rose petal. Like the coolness of snow, the spot numbed my finger. Slowly, I slid my finger back to where he'd appeared. Warm...still warm. Yet the image was definitely gone, faded, like the early morning dew which disappears under the bathing of the sun.

"Must you hang that thing by our bed?"

I whirled around at the sound of the irate voice and in the process, bumped the side of my face on the bedpost. "John!" I shuddered, guilt draping over my dampened skin. Wrapping my arms protectively across my chest, I looked into the my husband's eyes.

"Do you have to hang it in here?" he repeated, his angry glare shifting first to the source of his irritation, then back to me.

My breath came in short bursts. I felt trapped, like a bird in a cage, stuck between the picture on the wall and my husband's unfortunate anger. I swallowed past the lump in my throat and drew upon emotions of defense.

"Why not? You're hardly ever here before dark, so you won't have to see it much." The curt tone detonating from my voice surprised me.

John's eyes widened. "It's not dark now," he said, very matter-of-fact.

"It might as well be." I shifted my stare from his eyes to his hands, and noted the tight fists at his thighs.

An invisible sheath descended over him. The angry lines around his temple vanished and his shoulders lost their stiffness. "I'll fix dinner," he said, his voice suddenly indifferent. Without another word, he turned and walked out of the room.

I stood very still as I watched his retreating figure. For a large man, my husband looked incredibly small as he rounded the corner of the bedroom door.

When I heard the sound of pans being extracted from the cabinet, I finally released the breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. As my chest deflated like a punctured balloon, I stumbled backward and sank into the corner chair.

What was he doing home so early? Why hadn't I heard the rumbling of the garage door as it opened? I always heard noises from the garage when I was in our bedroom. However, it was usually after I was in bed for the night. Bringing a trembling hand to my forehead, I fingered my temples, then lowered my fingers, putting pressure on the crease between my nose and eyes.

What in the world had just happened?

It was as if I'd left myself for a short time, blocking out all other sights and sounds. A piece of time had been sucked from my life while I'd experienced the image in the photo. And as I looked up, past the picture on the wall, I squinted,

trying to read the numbers on the digital clock.

My heart seemed to cease its function when I realized more than an hour had passed, completely unbeknownst to me.

An hour? I stared into this picture for over an hour? Disbelief spun in my head like a circling merry-go-round. How could this be? It had felt like only a few short seconds, yet time had advanced more than an hour?

I entwined my fingers together. A cold, clammy feeling saturated the center of my palms. Glancing up at the picture, I struggled once again to see any sign of the image, but only perceived total darkness behind the brilliant tint of the flowers.

What was happening to me?

No answer came to mind.

Yet as I stared at the photo, the sole source of my husband's recent anger, I realized I'd had more excitement and experienced more emotions in the past hour than in the entire preceding year of my life. That, I decided, was worth every lousy dollar I'd spent on this strange, haunted picture by an unknown artist.

A smile spread like sweet, thick honey across my lips. For the first time in months, the numbness of a pitiful non-existence had dissipated from my body, like smoke fading into a clear sky, and I finally felt alive again.

Alive...and terrified as hell.

CHAPTER THREE

After supper, John retreated to his office upstairs. It had been unusual, having him home for a meal. We'd survived it, fortunately, with no harsh words; in fact, no conversation at all. The forks had scraped periodically against the plates, creating an irritating sound which echoed off the walls of the silent kitchen. I'd been counting the remaining bites of chicken on my plate when John stood, carried his plate to the sink and tossed it in. The utensils clattered against the silver basin.

My heart sank as he left the room. I felt rejected and unwanted after trying unsuccessfully to meet my husband's gaze for the past half-hour. What kind of marriage was this?

I took my plate to the sink and threw the remaining food down the garbage disposal. Turning it on, I stared out the small window above the ledge while the grinding made a loud, but welcome sound in the quiet room.

How long was this going to go on, I wondered as I rinsed the dishes and placed them in the dishwasher. How long could two people live together without communication? I had tried...I was tired of trying. It was like groping in the darkness with no light, as I attempted to figure out my husband's moods, his thoughts. He certainly wasn't sharing them, yet I waited patiently and found myself more and more frustrated.

I dried my hands and tossed the damp towel onto the counter. The dishes were done. Standing in the middle of the kitchen floor, I slowly turned around, observing the room through clouded eyes. I stopped and focused on the bare refrigerator door which had once boasted countless love notes from John. They were all gone now. I'd taken them down months ago, after the feelings portrayed in the notes had vanished.

I stood very still, unsure of what to do next or which direction to go. The floor creaked above my head and I looked up at the ceiling, wondering if perhaps John had second thoughts about working tonight. I listened for any sound of approaching footsteps, but only silence met my ears. He wasn't coming down.

The ache in my heart finally forced me to take flight to our bedroom, the one place I'd come to view as safe and secure, its walls keeping out the rest of the world and the husband I no longer knew.

Behind the closed door, I stripped off my jeans and socks, leaving on only my oversized cotton shirt. The material swirled around my thighs as I brushed my teeth. It tickled my skin and a memory of John coming up behind me, running his hands up my bare legs, kissing my neck, and snuggling against my back caused me to shiver with longing. I forced the image out of my mind, for there was no point in torturing myself. When I finished, I didn't even look up, caring nothing about what the mirror might say about my appearance.

I wasn't the least bit tired. Gathering up the pages of the past-due manuscript from my desk, I took the package to the bed. Tossing my decorative

pillows onto the floor, I crawled between the sheets and positioned my bed pillows to support my back. I tried to concentrate on the author's story, yet I couldn't stop peeking at the picture on the wall.

"This is crazy," I said, firmly gripping my red pen. I had to get this book edited - and soon. I was already two weeks behind schedule and Brenda would have my head if I didn't finish this book in the next couple of days.

It took every ounce of willpower I could foster to finish the final fifty pages. Only when I reached the end did I receive the message from the story.

Reality is an illusion.

The thought darted through my tired mind. What did that mean? That which I thought was real, was not?

Silently, I argued with myself. I know what's real. I'm conscious and completely aware of the happenings in my life. Everything's real -- I haven't lost my mind...I'm not crazy.

Like bullets, the words careened in my head, ricocheting off of the walls of my mind, repeating over and over. My eyelids became heavy with sleep and I stuffed the manuscript pages between the lamp and the edge of the night stand.

Exhaustion overtook me as I switched off the light and reached for the lavender-scented eye pillow beside me. My last thoughts before drifting off were of the pillow, another unnecessary purchase according to my husband, even though it enabled me to sleep as quietly as possible during nights in which I felt no peace and turmoil filled my body, my heart, and my head.

What seemed like an eternity later, I entered into a semi-conscious dream state. I could see clearly, yet I knew my body was technically asleep. A fog covered my mind, circling around me until I found myself walking, then stumbling in the darkness.

In the midst of the blackness, I suddenly came upon a tunnel filled with a bright, white light. It was blinding at first and I shielded my eyes. Then the light softened and warmed my skin. A voice, delicate, like one child calling to another, told me to step forward, and when I did, I found myself falling, spiraling downward like Alice in Wonderland must have journeyed.

I landed on my backside with a thump and after uttering a curse of pain, I reached back to rub my tender skin at the point of impact.

"Hello."

I froze, my hand on my buttocks, when I heard the already familiar voice. I wasn't surprised when I looked up to find the man from the photo on the wall looking down at me.

Of course.

What else would I dare to dream about tonight, but the vision from the haunted picture on my wall?

He towered above me like a marble statue, yet he was alive and breathing, his hand outstretched, his fingers curling open and closed. I looked past him, then around him, as I searched for a sign of where I was...where we were. I finally looked back at him and his extended fingers when I realized all around us was a darkness, a blackness.

Blackness, except for where he stood. There lay a pool of golden light from the tunnel. "Give me your hand," he said, rays flashing from his fingers like a hidden power. Looking into eyes as brilliant as amethysts, I had a feeling it was best to do as he suggested.

His fingers cupped my hand like warm silk and he pulled me effortlessly to my feet. Now I stood in the same golden light as he and for the first time, I obtained a clear picture of the stranger who'd entered my real world in such an unreal fashion.

Fearless when my mind told me I should be scared, I appraised him from head to toe. His hair was dark, pushed back from his angular face and extending well past his collar in the back. His clothes were dull brown and ripped in various places. His feet were callused, and devoid of shoes.

I shifted my gaze back to his solemn face and finally looked into his eyes. The dark purple erupted into a million particles of light, surrounding me with a cocoon of warmth and safeness. The corded muscles of his neck extended to a muscular chest, devoid of hair, smooth and brown.

And then I saw the blood.

CHAPTER FOUR

I gasped, pulled my hand away from his and covered my mouth, staring at the open wound over his left breast. Blood trickled slowly forth, dotting his tattered shirt and drying into auburn spots across the burlap material.

"It's okay." His voice, the childlike tone replaced by one of an adult male, was calm and soothing and my gaze instinctively darted back to his full lips. "It's okay," he said again as he reached out and took my trembling hand away from my mouth, bringing it slowly toward the wound on his chest.

I tensed, unwilling to touch the bloody spot, but he tugged my fingers gently to him and pressed my palm over the wound. Seconds later, he took a deep breath and smiled as he lowered my hand, still clutching my fingers.

Awe filled me as I stared at the affected area. The bleeding ceased and the dark spots on his garment began to disappear.

The stranger leaned forward and brought his other hand up, grazing my bare neck. He lifted my chin, forcing me to look into his eyes.

"Thank you," he said. I could feel his presence enter my soul as he leaned over, placed his lips gently against my cheek and held them there. My eyes closed as I experienced the softness of his kiss. And though his arms were nowhere near being around me, I felt as if I were wrapped in them.

He pulled back and I opened my eyes, sure I had awakened from this crazy dream. But I hadn't. The man stroked my cheek, my chin, and my neck with his long fingers.

"Who are you?" I choked out the question, my true voice lost somewhere between reality and the kiss of the stranger.

"I am Nicholas," he said. "And I've come to help you."

Help me? At this moment in time, or lapse of time, I felt I needed no help, for all I could feel was a loving warmth running through my veins like a warm, liquid substance.

The word fear had vanished from my vocabulary. I felt incredibly safe in the presence of this man, this being who had entered my life through what I knew was only a dream.

"Help me...how?" I asked.

He turned away from me and walked silently in the opposite direction. Was he leaving me? I followed him, not wanting him to disappear. "Nicholas?" His name rolled off my tongue with ease. I suddenly felt I had known him for a very long time, though I couldn't recall ever seeing him before.

He brought his right hand up and motioned for me to come and stand beside him. When I did, a wonderful scene opened up before my eyes.

A garden, filled with the brightest of flowers, neatly trimmed hedges and tall, lush green trees, appeared from nowhere as Nicholas reached down and took my hand. We walked together now, over a pathway of flat stones designed for strolling. Scents of blooming roses filled my nose and rays of brilliant sunlight trickled through the limbs of the trees, landing on an elaborate, carved

bench. Nicholas tugged my hand and we stepped over to the bench. He pointed, indicating I should sit down.

When I looked back up at him, he was smiling. "Thank you for coming, Emily."

He knew my name! But of course he would. After all, it was as if he'd come for me, to bring me to this beautiful place.

"What are you going to help me with?" I repeated, anxiety pervading my body. I tangled my fingers together in my lap and noticed my bare toes tingled, as if they'd been asleep and were just awakening.

"I should clarify myself," he said, glancing toward the treetops. "You are to help me as well. In fact," he said, looking into my eyes, "you already have."

I inspected his chest which only moments ago had been bleeding, yet now there was no sign. "Your wound is completely gone," I said, my voice tinged with amazement.

He nodded. "You have helped to heal me. For you see, Emily, I need your help just as you need mine."

"I don't understand," I said, tugging my shirt down over my bare knees.

Nicholas moved to my side and sat down on the bench. Once again he reached for my hand and this time, he entwined his fingers with mine. And once again, the loving warmth returned.

"Emily..." He whispered my name and it was musical, like the angelic sound of a harp. "I have a story to tell you. Before I can begin to help you, I have to explain who I am and why you've been chosen."

"Okay," I said, looking down as his fingers tightened around mine.

"I don't want you to be frightened, for you have nothing to fear from me. Though what I have to say might be somewhat difficult for you to comprehend, I want you to know I'm being truthful and honest and am here for the highest good. Can you accept that and promise to keep an open mind?"

Open mind?

My mind screamed questions.

Why were you in that picture I bought? Did you make me buy it? Are you some kind of spirit or ghost? And why do you think I need help?

"I will answer all of your questions," he said, as if reading every one of my sporadic thoughts.

I brought my chin up and met his intense, lavender gaze. Though his eyes were piercing as they delved into mine, I still felt safe, loved. The feeling was a far cry from what I'd experienced in previous dreams, nightmares in which I'd been alone, lost, and crying. So why not? Could it hurt to play along in this positive, loving atmosphere?

Slowly I nodded. "I promise." The words crept past my parched lips and Nicholas smiled again...a brilliant, kind smile filled with compassion and warmth.

With his free hand, he gently pushed a strand of hair away from my cheek. His thumb lingered near my lips. Time halted, the skin around my mouth burning like glowing embers. A surge of excitement dashed through my stomach and I quivered beneath his touch. His presence refreshed me and I found my

soul thirsting for him, for his story, his message.

His eyelids fluttered closed. "Thank you," he whispered. "Thank you Emily."

Silence fell between us for a few seconds and then Nicholas pulled his fingers away and leaned against the curved back of the stone bench.

"We shall begin," he said. "We shall begin our journey."

CHAPTER FIVE

Silently, I watched Nicholas lower his head. A gray haze circled around his neck and shoulders. Anticipation bubbled inside me like slow-boiling water as I waited with barely restrained curiosity to hear what he had to say. He looked up with glassy eyes and began to speak. His expression was distant, as if he'd drifted to another time, another place.

"It was 1803," he said, his tone a cross between a whisper and what I'd already come to accept as his normal voice. The distance in his eyes took a giant leap backwards.

"The land I lived on was in turmoil," he continued. "I was married to a lovely young woman -- named Emily -- just as you."

My heart lurched into my throat as shock reverberated through me. Was I once his wife? Did this explain why I felt I knew this man though I'd never seen him before? I shuddered, recalling the manuscript I'd recently read on reincarnation.

"She was different than you," he went on, as if reading my thoughts. I tried to meet his gaze, but to no avail. His eyes were covered in a thick glaze, seeing something or someone other than I.

"We'd married young and worked hard for our land. On it, we'd built a small cabin and it was there Emily became with child. We'd thought our world was perfect. It would be just the three of us, living off of the beautiful land, relishing in good health and good fortune."

Nicholas paused and swallowed hard. I slid to the edge of the bench, intent on learning more about this man in my dream.

"All we wanted was to be left alone. The villages were doused in strife about the Cherokees living nearby. The government refused to pass a law to protect the Indian people, to consider them equal. There were outbursts, violent anger and terrifying fights. We kept to ourselves and didn't bother anyone."

Nicholas brought his hands to his face and massaged the skin of his cheeks and forehead. I looked on with a feeling of dread, guessing that something terrible had happened.

"It was a humid summer night when they came across the valley through the mounds," he said, his voice hoarse and laced with anger. "Emily and I had just retired for the evening. That's when I heard the voices and the horses' thundering hooves."

I flinched, as if I could hear the pounding of the hooves myself. The atmosphere around us darkened and I heard the whistling of a violent wind, yet no breeze crossed my face. "Who was it?" I asked.

"White men from the village." Nicholas lowered his head now, cupping it in the palms of his hands. Tentatively, I reached out to touch his arm, to encourage him to continue. He spoke rapidly, his voice spitting through the fingers which clutched his long locks of hair.

"They heard I had allowed a Cherokee to help on our land in exchange for

food and shelter. They thought the man still lived with us, yet he'd done his work and been gone well over a week. They barged up the steps, broke open the door and rampaged through the house. I heard them as soon as their feet hit the wood outside, so I stood ready with my gun. But they were too fast!

"They disarmed me, cursing and striking me in the back with a horse's whip. Emily screamed and one of the men raised his gun, pointing it at her chest. I leapt free of the man who pinned me against the wall and I lunged for the bed...for Emily."

I covered my mouth with my hand, keeping back by own screams of terror, for I could see the room in the tiny cabin and feel the fear in Emily's heart as she stared down the barrel of a rifle.

Nicholas began to sob, his voice wracked with pain and sorrow. "I didn't make it!" he cried. "They shot her, right through her heart."

I inhaled a sharp breath and even as I seemed to know the woman died right then and there, I felt compelled to ask. "Did she...did she..." The words caught in an imaginary net at the back of my throat.

"She died instantly," he said.

I grabbed the front of my shirt and bunched my fingers around the material. I could feel his ache in my own heart. Closing my eyes, I sensed the dreadful moment of death. Visions of spattered blood were followed by an eerie silence. I trembled and quickly opened my eyes to avoid the images.

Nicholas lifted his head. His face was contorted like a withered prune, lined with a mixture of anger and sorrow. Squinting, I saw the two emotions doing battle around his eyes and mouth. I opened my mouth to speak, to console him, yet no words came.

Nicholas looked up at the heavens then, and I did as well. The air around us lightened and I felt an incredible sense of relief as I stared up at the clearing sky.

"Were you killed as well?" I asked after a few quiet moments had passed.

Slowly, he shook his head. "No. One man held me down on the floor by the bed while the others ransacked my house, looking for the Indian. When they didn't find him, they left in a hurry. It was then I crawled onto the bed where Emily had seen her last moment of life. I knew she'd passed on when I touched her limp body and found no signs of breath." He glanced away. "I felt her stomach, and the tiny bulge within, but there was no movement. I was numb, feeling totally insensate, as I lay my head on her swollen belly and cried. It had taken her nigh on five years to conceive. We'd waited so long..."

Looking back at me and clutching a balled fist to his chest, he said, "I was heartbroken. The only woman I'd ever loved had just died, right before my eyes! They'd taken my wife...my baby..." Tears streamed from his eyes as he glanced upward, sobs hurtling forth from his throat. "I went outside, alone. My heart was destroyed...my life was over."

He stopped then and I saw a knot bob in his throat when he swallowed. Gently, he reached for my hand.

"There was nothing I could do," he whispered, looking into my eyes. "As

much as I wanted to turn back time and erase the horrible deed, I couldn't! I was devastated...I had nothing to live for."

The expression in his eyes spoke volumes about what happened next.

My head began to spin. Was he saying what I thought he was?

"You...you...killed--" I brought my hands to my throat, unwilling to say the words which lingered like bitter medicine on my tongue.

"Yes, Emily," he said, taking my trembling hand and placing it where his open wound had been. "I took my own life."

CHAPTER SIX

Roaring filled my mind, like a jet flying closely overhead. My hearing was consumed by loud, volatile sensations and my body violently trembled in reaction to his admission. I closed my eyes tightly and as I did, I felt the vortex I'd come through re-open, sucking me backward. The pull on my body was as strong as a tornado, and tiny dots of brilliant light darted through my head, my mind, my closed eyes. I grabbed the sides of my face, clutching my ears, and I wondered if the screaming I heard was me or a powerful figment of my imagination.

Nicholas's admission had triggered my own! Thoughts I'd carried in my subconscious the past year - never spoken, yet always there - rushed to the surface of my being, virtually sucking the life and breath from my body.

Darkness enveloped me as the presence of Nicholas started to fade. Like a ballerina who couldn't stop turning, I spun backwards, toward my present life. I reached out in my mind, struggling to escape the thoughts of self-death which bubbled to the surface as a result of his words.

For I myself had contemplated suicide, though I'd never voiced the thought nor acted on the desire. Yet it had been there, boiling beneath the surface of my conscious mind, threatening my existence on more than one occasion over the past horrible year.

How many times had I said to myself, "You have nothing to live for!"? How often over the past months had I contemplated, if only briefly, ending my own life? How frequently I had wondered if anyone would care if I were alive or dead!

Was this what this man of my dream would help me with? If so, I wanted no part of it. I'd tried to bury the self-defeating thoughts...tried to ignore their existence. And now, betrayal shot through my body like a bullet expelling from a gun. My dream and the vision of the man inside the dream was tricking me, bringing back the hateful thoughts, bringing them to the surface, urging me to commit the ultimate sin!

While Nicholas had seemed ethereal and heavenly, I now wondered if I was dealing with the devil. And I didn't want to!

His fingers clamped around my wrists, tugging my hands away from my face. I jerked them back, up and over my head. "No!" I tried to scream, but my voice escaped in the form of a crude whisper.

I closed my eyes tighter and imagined, like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, I could click my heels and return to my life, no matter how unfulfilling it had become. And for a brief moment, I saw myself, back in my own bed, resting on the pillows.

When I first heard my name being called, I thought it might be John, perhaps awakened by what I'd decided were night terrors. And when I felt a cool cloth placed on my head, I experienced a sense of joy that my husband cared enough to comfort me...to take care of me.

But when my eyelids finally fluttered open, it wasn't John standing there. It was Nicholas, surrounded by golden light reflecting from his shoulders and down onto my face.

I tried to sit up, but couldn't muster the strength. My body was limp and weak, and as my gaze darted to the side, I realized I was lying on several soft, white pillows. The damp cloth, teetering on the edge of my brow, was iridescent, sparkling with the crispness of morning dew.

"Emily, it's all right," Nicholas whispered as he stroked my arm, then curled his fingers around my hand.

Once again, the feeling of safety returned, washing over my body with loving warmth. My breath slowed from short, choppy gasps to a more even level.

"You have nothing to fear. I am not the Angel of Death," said Nicholas.

My eyes widened. "Then what are you?" I choked out the question looking around in utter amazement at the change in my surroundings. Only moments ago, I thought I'd been awakening, escaping this dream. Yet I remained here, participating in it against my will.

Questions coursed through me. One in particular echoed in my mind. What if this wasn't a dream at all? Could this be reality? Were these events really happening to me?

I shuddered.

"Reality is an illusion," Nicholas said.

I examined his face and scowled, biting my bottom lip. "How do you know each thought I have?" I asked. "Who are you? Your admission of death brought back memories...terrifying thoughts...which I don't want to have," I said.

"I didn't intend for you to become fearful," Nicholas said with a sigh. "You must realize your reaction to my story is something I have no control over."

"You didn't orchestrate this?" I tried to sit up, but fell back onto the pillow before I'd risen an inch.

Nicholas stepped back and lifted his hand to his face. He massaged his chin as he looked on in deep contemplation. His violet gaze wandered, his focus no longer on me, but moving far, far away.

"I guess you could say I caused this to happen. I caused you to be here in my presence today. Yet you, as a human, a living person, have free will. If you hadn't wanted to stay in my presence or hadn't wanted to acknowledge my existence, you would not have done so. Consequently, we would never have connected." He paused and looked down at me, swallowing my stare with his own, the one filled with brilliant particles of light.

"Your reaction to my suicide of years past is not something I can control. Your reaction to anything I present to you is uncontrollable by me. Only you can control how you react to a situation. But in my opinion, Emily, your reaction is part of a whole...part of the entire reason you acknowledge my existence now. It is something which you've struggled with and perhaps need to learn, in addition to what I'm here to teach you."

"And what exactly is that? Who are you and why are you here?" I

struggled and finally managed to sit up. The cold cloth fell from my head onto my lap. Grabbing it and clenching it between my fingers, I met his gaze with incredible strength and passion. "Or better yet, why am I here? This is not my life or world...this is yours! I demand an explanation for why I'm conversing with a man almost two hundred years old. Why I should even acknowledge your false existence, as you are surely only a dream...or a figment of my overworked, troubled mind."

I crossed my arms and in doing so, I noticed my clothing had totally transformed from the night shirt I'd been wearing to a plush, white robe. I plucked at the material, feeling its softness, verifying its reality.

I brought my head up sharply and flinched when Nicholas brought a finger to my cheek and placed his other hand behind my neck, under my hair. I struggled to turn away from his compelling eyes, yet found I couldn't.

"Your demands are what causes your strife, fair lady," he said softly as he brought his face closer. His breath, sweet as wine, entwined with mine as I looked into his eyes. A surge of excitement danced through my veins. Or was it fear? My skin tingled and I began to tremble despite the warmth of the heavy robe.

"You desire to have answers revealed, exposing themselves to you, before you're ready. This causes fear and anxiety. You feel it now -- I can feel it here." He squeezed the back of my tightening neck.

I clamped my lips tightly closed as his mouth moved to my cheek, his breath warm against my skin, caressing the pores and drifting toward my ear.

"Let go of that desire...let go of your demands," his whispered. "Simply accept the fact there are things you don't know. Have confidence they will be revealed, slowly, like the center of a rose as its petals bloom outward, then fall off one by one. Only then will you know what lies within."

It was hard to resist his suggestion. His imagery combined with his soft, gentle touch encouraged my breathing to deepen. A willingness to be more patient seeped over my body and through my soul.

"See?" Nicholas said. "Once you let go of the demand and change your demand to a preference, the fear dissipates, does it not?"

I gave a slight nod. He was right. The fear and tension consuming my physical and emotional bodies had vanished. A loving warmth took their place...the same loving warmth I'd experienced earlier in this adventure.

"This is one of the first steps in our journey," he said, still holding me. "Replace demands with the option of accepting things as they are, adding no unfounded fears and illusions to the picture. Releasing the demand discharges the chains of attachment from your emotions, freeing you to accept any outcome, whatever answers cross your path. It is only then you will experience reality. It is only then you can experience true happiness."

My mouth parted slightly as he pulled away and a sensation of relief swept over me. It was okay to accept this moment as it was being presented.

"You're smiling," he said. "Why?"

I folded my hands on my lap. "It feels good to accept things as they are,

right at this moment in time. However, I want to know why you've come into my life. I won't demand you tell me, but I do wish you would," I said carefully, telling myself I would accept things if he chose to keep me wondering. After all, this was only a dream, and it would inevitably end.

Nicholas tilted back his head and laughed. It was a strong laugh, one which sounded like it had been buried for years and now echoed its escape off the surrounding particles of air.

"You shall have your wish, fair lady, for you are now willing to accept whatever the answers might be."

I offered him a slight smile, wondering if my face shone with guilt; for I was only playing along, enjoying the most creative dream I'd ever had. He'd gone from devastation to laughter, and this was the kind of dream I loved...one with a pleasant ending. Certainly I'd participate, now that the sense of danger had passed.

But little did I know, the curtain in this nighttime drama was far from closing.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"I am neither an angel of heaven, nor of hell," Nicholas said, handing me a silver cup filled with water. "I am a soul."

I sipped on the cool liquid as I watched Nicholas pace back and forth.

"Because I took my own life," he continued, gesturing to where his wound had been, "I am not allowed to continue on. We come from a soul to an earthly existence in order to learn certain lessons -- lessons we have chosen for ourselves. When our lessons are complete in this lifetime, we elect to go on and prepare for the next lifetime."

"We elect to go on? As in, we choose to die?" My mouth dropped open and he shook his head.

"No, it's not the way you think. We don't chose our death, but I did, and that's why it was wrong." He lowered his head and his voice dipped into a softer tone. "I committed the ultimate sin by taking my own life."

I stared reverently at this huge man, his head bowed like that of a reprimanded child. His demeanor sought forgiveness for his actions. "Are you sorry?" I asked.

He gave a wisp of a nod and then brought his head up. His face was drawn, the lines deepening across his forehead. "I regret my decision very much." He blinked, took a deep breath, then spoke again as the wrinkles in his skin dissipated. "Yet I am very thankful and blessed our heavenly creator gave me a second chance...a chance to learn the lessons I should have stayed on earth to learn."

I paused. "How do you know what your lessons are?" I finally asked, tilting my head upward. "I can't even begin know why I might be here on earth. I couldn't tell you what my lessons are, and I certainly can't begin to understand why I would have chosen the things I've experienced."

He offered a nod of understanding. "It's very difficult. Obviously, when you are in possession of a human body, you fall under the realm of human life. Your mind cannot recall your soul's memory of why you're here, or what might have occurred in prior lifetimes. Though the memories are there, stored in your soul's thoughts, they're very difficult for the human mind to tap into. We've all lived hundreds, some even thousands of lifetimes before, yet only our soul can recall them all."

"But I've read about people recalling past lives," I countered his logic.

He nodded again and tapped the side of his head with his finger. "A person must be willing to open their mind in order to view past life memories. Many aren't willing, because of fear, or even disbelief. The ones who are willing learn why they've been on earth before and about the lessons they've chosen in the past. This in turn helps them to recognize lessons of the present. Some even progress into the future, rather than regress into the past, which is quite fascinating."

I contemplated his comments. "So since you took your own life, you cut

off the opportunity to learn your lessons...even though you didn't know you were supposed to learn them?"

"Yes, and I've been stuck ever since."

"Stuck?"

"Yes, stuck. I cannot go forward. While there are many other lessons on my map of lifetimes, I cannot proceed. Taking one's life as a human is the gravest of sins. The punishment is where I've been -- in transition."

I placed my cup of water on a table which miraculously appeared next to the cushioned bed where I sat, perched like a tiny bird in the midst of the pillows. "What is transition?" I asked with great interest as I folded my empty hands in my lap.

A brief scowl appeared at the corners of his mouth and then disappeared as he sighed. "Transition is the stage between heaven and hell. This is where suicide victims go. I call us victims because we are blocked at the time of the event and so unsure of our own mind, that we become casualties of poor decision making. Poor, because of what the event does to our friends and families. Poor because our clouded human minds are unable to tap into the spiritual world or our own subconscious to find the necessary answers or assistance. Poor because we lack faith."

Everything he said made sense. I'd experienced the same foggy mind, usually accompanied by a dull, burning ache in the pit of my stomach. Only now, in this dream state, did my mind feel clear and crisp for the first time in ages.

"So what do you do in transition?" I asked, glancing around at the colorful surroundings and inhaling the fresh, natural scents. "How long do you stay here?"

"It depends--"

Not giving him a chance to finish his answer, I continued in a faded voice. "I don't understand. I thought you'd be punished severely, perhaps even sent straight to hell for such a horrible sin. Yet you're here, in an atmosphere much like the heaven I've imagined."

With a sweep of my hands, I gestured at the pillows, the sparkling silver goblet and the gardens in the distance, all depicting the purest beauty.

Nicholas shook his head. "My transition has only now reached this stage, for I am processing quickly and am closer to completion. I can soon absorb myself in my next lifetime."

"Quickly?" My bottom lip inched lower. "You've been dead almost two hundred years!"

"Yes, I have in your time - human time. But as a soul, it seems like only an instant."

I pondered his comment, realizing the past ten, maybe twenty, years of my life had moved by in a blur. I recalled my teenage years, when I couldn't wait to grow up and it seemed to take forever. Yet now, as an adult, the world spun around me, and before I knew it, another year would have passed. I wondered where it had gone, what I'd accomplished. The thought intensified, frustrating

me.

I glanced up at Nicholas, speculating on his abilities, for here and now my life seemed to be moving much slower. I frowned as I tried to recall the last time I'd had such a long conversation with someone. The muscles of my face loosened as I took a deep breath and admitted to myself I needed to slow down. This dream offered a good opportunity to begin.

"So, what happened when you first entered this stage? What was it like?" I shifted closer to the edge of the bed and dangled my legs over the side, moving them back and forth.

Nicholas brought his right hand up and I jumped as another cup of water appeared between his fingers. He sipped the drink before answering. "In the beginning," he said, "I couldn't do this." He raised the silver cup and turned it slowly in his hand. His eyes twinkled, reflecting in its brightness.

"I couldn't do anything except exist in a gray area," he said, his breath laced with a twinge of irritation. "I was in the center of a dark storm cloud. For quite some time, I sat behind a desk, learning as a student in your world would learn. First there were books, hundreds of them, constantly appearing before me. Then a computer screen appeared, enabling me to work faster, to learn more quickly. I had no instructor, only a voice absent of a physical body telling me to study the material."

"What was the material?" I asked when he paused to take another drink.

He swiped at a bead of water at the corner of his mouth. Then he gazed up toward the sky, his expression pensive. A muscle twitched in his jaw. "It was study material on negativity, self-destruction, having faith, believing. After reading about the uselessness of sour emotions such as negativity, bitterness, anger, selfishness and cruelty, I found myself exhausted. I hadn't known so much of the negative existed, much less that it had been growing inside of my body like a slow-moving fever."

His shoulders shivered as if he had tapped into the very feelings he mentioned. "Then I was given material on positive emotions...love, kindness, compassion, and understanding." He gestured toward the blue sky. "It was only then things began to lighten up around here. Once I rejected the destructive emotions and began to concentrate solely on the pleasant ones, my transition became more bearable."

"So you're here in this place called transition to learn about the positive, the good emotions," I mumbled, wondering if perhaps that's why I ended up here in my dream. I acknowledged my own need to experience some positive emotions.

"Not just the good, but the bad as well. One must have balance. If I had not become accepting of the good, I would have gone straight to hell."

I gnawed on my bottom lip, the same place I always chewed when in deep contemplation or experiencing something of grave concern. "So if you've accepted the good, then why are you still here?" I asked.

He smiled briefly. "Learning is only a part of the process. In order to effectively master the course, I must also become a teacher."

It was as if a light bulb brightened above. Nicholas was here to help me learn the good. It was a part of his criteria -- to help someone else, a person with the same tendencies as himself.

"That's right." He smiled and nodded, reading my thoughts yet again. "I am here to teach you, in order to better your life and in order to go on to my next lifetime."

Surprisingly, my heart grew heavy. Was I sad at the thought of him leaving... 'going on', as he put it? Though I'd only just met this soul, this man whose presence seemed to surround me with love, I ached at the thought of losing him. No one, not a single human being, had talked with me as much as Nicholas had. Nor had I experienced this loving warmth from another human - ever.

I closed my eyes and forced back threatening tears. What kind of teaching was this... to give someone something good, only to take it away?

I felt Nicholas's fingers close around my wrist. Their warmth filled me with positive energy and my spine tingled from top to bottom.

"Don't worry, Emily," he said, embracing me in a hug. "After this journey, you will always feel the warmth you've felt tonight. Though our time together will come to an end, once we are finished you will realize we are all one and are all connected. Thus we will always be a part of one another. Our energies will work together to bring you to the height of enlightenment you desire and need. And though I am combining my energy with yours in order to assist your learning process, we are truly all one energy, so you will be teaching yourself just as much as I will be teaching you the lesson."

"And what is the lesson?" I whispered.

"It is the only lesson necessary -- the overall lesson which branches into other, smaller lessons, just as we are one eternal energy, yet we branch into separate energies in order to live in the world our creator has designed for us. It is the lesson of unconditional love."

My eyelids fluttered open and I met his gaze. His face -- his beautiful, strong face -- glowed in a golden light. He looked angelic as the light increased in intensity.

"I feel love right now," I said in a soft, fragile voice. "But I feel it's only due to your presence. How could I possibly experience this in the real world?" A tear escaped and trickled down my cheek, for I never wanted to leave his embrace, to let go of the incredible feeling of belonging.

"I will begin by teaching you how to love yourself - unconditionally." His warm breath slipped under my hair, causing a mixture of shivers and heat to move through my body.

"Only when you love yourself unconditionally can you begin to love others the same way. Only then will your world be filled with the blissful sensations you are currently experiencing. And only then will you feel truly alive."

Like a falling star dissolving into a blackened sky, his arms suddenly disappeared and his presence vanished. My head fell backward as I was sucked through the tunnel of darkness I'd originally entered. My legs and arms flailed

about until they became limp in the shadows of the vortex.

“No!” I screamed as I tried to shove my arms outward, to reach for him, reach for the feeling again.

Hands cupped my shoulders, fingers dented, then dug into my skin, shaking me. I heard my name being called faintly in the distance. It echoed in my mind. I struggled to open my eyes, to see what had happened.

When my lids finally snapped apart like brittle twigs, I saw my husband's face looming over me, creased with lines of fear, of worry. My gaze darted past him and skimmed the bedroom walls, the picture, the furnishings.

An exasperated breath escaped my throat, followed by a moan of distress.

Nicholas was gone...totally gone.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“What are you doing, John?” My voice echoed in the quiet room. I rolled away from him, violently kicking off the covers.

He stepped back. “You were talking and thrashing around,” he said, folding his arms across his chest. “It sounded like you were having a terrible nightmare.”

“No.” The word was harsh and short. “I was having a good dream for a change.”

Bitterness pervaded my voice and then the familiar curtain of distance dropped down, creating an invisible barrier between us.

The lines of concern on John’s face slowly turned to lines of fury as he tilted his chin up and took a deep breath. Yet he held his tongue. His eyes flashed and I could see darts of angry light exploding in his pupils.

I expelled a huge breath as guilt and frustration entered my body, tying my stomach in a tight knot. John, still in his clothes from the night before, turned away and swiped a hand over the top of his unruly hair.

“I thought you were having a nightmare,” he mumbled as he turned and flung open the closet door, stepping inside with heavy steps. He stripped off his clothes in seconds and a moment later emerged, naked.

“Time for a shower,” he said, moving past the bed.

The slump of his shoulders was undeniable as I watched him from behind. His muscles were limp, his hair grayer than it had ever been.

A soft light filtered through the bathroom window, then disappeared as my husband yanked the door closed. Only when I heard the water begin to splatter against the tiled shower walls did I allow myself to breathe again.

“Damn.” The curse rushed across my tongue, invading the room with its underlying negativity. I rolled back to my side of the bed and punched my hand into the pillow.

Why couldn’t he just leave me alone?

I grabbed a second pillow to my chest. He’d spoiled my dream. I’d been so close to getting answers from Nicholas.

Yet I had received one answer. The message had been clear - I was to learn about unconditional love. And it was certainly something I had a lot to learn about, as I surely wasn’t feeling it now!

Tears gathered at the corners of my eyes when I thought of my angry reaction to John, then the way he looked as he entered the bathroom...as if the spirit had been sucked from his body. For a fleeting second, I wondered if I placed my hands on him, would they have the same healing affect as they’d had on Nicholas, the soul in my dream?

I quickly discarded the thought as the word ‘dream’ echoed in my mind. God, how I’d wanted the event to be real! But it wasn’t, and now I wondered if I’d ever feel that loving warmth again, for I rarely dreamed at all, much less the same scenario more than once.

My gaze darted to the picture and I shoved the pillows behind me, scrambling out of the bed to stand in front of the roses. I closed my eyes and prayed for Nicholas's presence to reappear, yet when I opened them and stared into the photo's background, all I saw was an inky, black darkness.

The sound of the shower ceased and I whirled around to face the white painted door. John would emerge from the room at any second, towel-drying his hair and making it stand on end. His body would be covered in droplets of water.

For a brief second, I recalled showering with him -- soaping each other's bodies -- and our fervent lovemaking afterwards.

But that was a long time ago. It never happened any more, for John had no interest, no desire for me. The thought rammed through my heart like a rod of steel and I cringed at the sudden blast of pain.

In thirty minutes, my husband would be gone, on his way to his beloved job, his sacred money. There would be no lovemaking. There probably wouldn't even be a spoken good-bye.

Hanging my head, I walked toward the closet to pick out my own clothes for the day. There was no reason to hang around. I might as well go to work instead of listen to the sorrow echo off the walls of the shell we called a home.

As I approached the closet, I glanced at the paperwork on the night stand. I thought of the manuscript I'd finished last night and decided to put it on the bed, so I wouldn't forget to take it to the office.

My eyes widened, horrified, as I reached for the former crisp, white pages. Former, because now they boasted a brown dampness. "Oh, no!" I cried as I saw the coffee cup on its side, one of my bed pillows teetering precariously over the edge of the night stand.

I grabbed the papers and the remaining dark liquid rolled off the pages, dripping onto the floor. In my haste to get to the picture, I must have shoved the pillow too hard, hitting John's cup of coffee and ruining the work I'd completed the night before.

"Why did he leave his coffee here?" I groaned. Anger began to boil inside my stomach, churning like bitter chemicals. I struggled to read the pages, but the ink was smeared and faded.

The bathroom door opened.

I swiveled and faced John, the pages of the edited manuscript dangling between my fingertips. I held them up so he could witness my ruined work.

His eyes lacked emotion as he stared first at me and then at the papers in my hand. "What?" he said, holding a hand out to his side.

"Look!" I shook the pages, splattering drops of coffee. I tried to lower my voice, yet my next words escaped with the force of a tiny, potent explosion. "You've ruined my work! I was already behind and now I'll have to start all over. I'll be amazed if I even have a job after today." I grimaced and tossed the pages to the floor as an unwanted ache filled my heart.

John tapped his bare chest. "I didn't do that. I didn't spill that coffee," he said with a glance of accusation.

I turned and pointed to the cup. "You left your coffee there, right beside my work. I didn't see it," I argued, aghast that he would deny his action which contributed to the event. Why couldn't he accept fault? Why couldn't he accept responsibility?

John clamped his mouth shut, then inhaled deeply, his nostrils flaring like an animal poised for attack. The hiss of ingoing air filled the room. I trembled, not from fear, but from anger over the way my day was beginning and the way our lives had been for the past year as we both became resistant to any form of positive communication.

Why couldn't he just say he was sorry? I knew I was the careless one who knocked the pillow into the cup...but why couldn't John apologize for placing his coffee there? We never drank coffee in the bedroom!

Seething, I clamped my lips closed as John spurred past me and grabbed a pair of pants and matching shirt from the closet. Quickly, he pulled on the pants and shoved his arms into the shirt. Not a word was spoken as he crossed the room and ripped a pair of socks out of the top dresser drawer. Angry silence continued to invade the air as he jerked his shoes up from the floor and tucked them under his arm. He moved to the chair in the corner of the room, sat down, and hurriedly put on his socks and shoes.

I began gnawing my bottom lip as John stood, grabbed up his damp towel, and tore open the bedroom door. He started through the opening, then spun around to face me, his face contorted like an angry bull's. His brows lowered and his chest puffed up defensively as he inhaled again.

"It wasn't my coffee," he said articulating the words impeccably and deliberately. "I brought it for you. I thought you might like it."

My head dropped down and I blinked through trickles of advancing tears as the impact of his words, his gesture, became clear to my troubled, tired mind. John left the room, slamming the door behind his retreating figure.

My hands shook, then my arms and legs. I tried to cry out his name after I heard the slam of the washer lid, but no words came out of my tightened throat.

By the time I heard the engine of his truck roar to life in the garage, I'd slumped to the floor, burying my head in the carpet, soaking it with my tears. There was no point in going after him. For I only had myself to blame.

Condemnation of myself slowly ruptured into my thoughts and heart, severing any sense of self-worth. I don't know how long it was before I finally pulled on the edge of the sheets, struggling to a standing position. The first thing my gaze landed on was the picture of the roses.

Agony reached into my throat, yanking at the sobs in my voice as I yelled at the photo on the wall. "Why can't you be real? I can't take any more of this! Please come back!" I held my breath, stifling my cries as I waited for some kind of sign. But it never came...and soon I dropped my head to the bed, not caring how long I lay there and cried, not caring if I lived another second of my threadbare life.

CHAPTER NINE

I jumped when the phone rang at half past six. Pushing the newly printed manuscript aside, I reached for the receiver.

“What are you still doing there?” Mandy’s voice was light and chipper, like a the song of a bird at the breaking of day.

I groaned, envying her enthusiasm. “Reworking a manuscript.”

“Why?”

I explained what happened, the bitterness still evident in my voice. The day had been filled with instances of my acrid, inner voice, chastising me for my reaction to my husband’s gesture.

“I bet you felt terrible after he told you it was for you,” Mandy said, referring to the spilled coffee.

“Yeah.” I sighed. “I still feel horrible. My reaction certainly didn’t help matters between us.”

“Were you having a nightmare?” she asked.

I debated with myself for several seconds, and finally decided to tell Mandy about my dream. She didn’t say a word as I hurriedly spewed out my story.

“He told me he’s here to teach me about unconditional love,” I said, staring blankly at the wall opposite my desk. “I don’t even know what that is, but I thought for sure I’d find out right then and there. The dream ended when John shook me and I never learned anything. And I’m irritated because I know I won’t have the same dream again.”

An audible sigh seeped through the receiver.

“What?” I asked. “You think I’m crazy, don’t you? I swear, it was so real!”

“Oh, I have no doubt you had a dream,” she said. “I don’t believe this guy, this person or soul or whatever he is, really came to you, though. I think it’s probably your subconscious talking.”

I shook my head. “Why would my subconscious talk to me about unconditional love?”

“Maybe because it’s something you need to learn about.”

I lifted the red pen from my desk and grasped it between my teeth, chewing on the end in a slow, circular motion. “Why would I need to learn about it?” I finally asked.

Mandy exhaled, then cleared her throat. “Okay, Em. I’m going to be blunt. I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but I do think you need to learn a little bit about love.”

My chest tightened as I bit down on the pen cap and it cracked, pinching my lower lip. I winced from the minor sting of pain.

“You’ve turned so bitter,” she continued. “I know you’ve had it rough this past year, but instead of just accepting things and dealing with them, you’ve acquired this attitude that everyone’s either out to get you, or you think they

don't want to be with you. And it shouldn't be that way...it's not that way."

"That's not true!" A knot lodged in my throat and I gripped the pen with whitening knuckles.

"It's true, Emily. You've even done it with me! When I haven't called you back, you automatically jump to the conclusion there's something wrong with you or that I'm angry with you. You can't seem to understand I'm just busier now with the kids and Greg and work. It's got nothing to do with you. I miss the days when we did things together all the time, and the nights we'd sit for hours, having coffee and talking about life. I miss it, I do! But it's just not possible any more. There comes a time to stop talking about living and just start doing it...just start living. Both of our lives switched directions when we started living. It's not your fault, nor is it mine. It's just part of the process."

Tears welled up in my eyes and I gathered my bottom lip under my teeth, biting it a bit harder than necessary as I tried not to cry.

"Things change, Emily. The world is constantly changing. It doesn't stay the same. It can't, or we'd all become stagnant like that pond behind our old place, you know, the one with no stream."

She paused as if giving me an opportunity to envision the pond. It was easy to see the image of the dull, murky water, covered with tiny pieces of nature's debris. And the smell...I wrinkled my nose as I recalled the scent the still water used to bless us with on humid summer days.

"You're doing the same thing with John," she continued. "You've gotten so used to the bad times, to his withdrawal from you during the crisis, that you can't even begin to see the light when he tries to do something nice for you."

"You've let ill emotions take over your life and your body. You used to be so happy-go-lucky and could handle anything which landed on your plate, then get over it and move on. It's like you're stuck in a cave of darkness and despair. You seem to have forgotten how to love...and I don't think you even give a damn about yourself anymore, which is really a turn-off to me because I used to love your confidence and excitement for life."

Her words stung like the bite of an angered bee. I cringed and lowered my head. It was like looking in the mirror at my reflection. I wanted so badly to turn away and shut off the light! And I did, in my mind. Darkness swiftly came as sorrow for myself reached across me, blackening my inner self.

"I guess you don't like being around me any more," I mumbled as I dropped the pen on my desk and leaned back in my chair. If I were in her shoes, I wouldn't care to be around the person she described so vividly.

"I always enjoy being with you, Emily," she replied. "But how often does that happen these days? I've asked you on numerous occasions to come and visit. You refuse, or simply do nothing. I can sense you've blamed me for that, but I really do believe you should look at yourself a bit, because I think it's you who's really holding you back."

Me? How could she blame me for this when she was the one who never had any time any more? A spark fired inside me and I lifted my shoulders. "Okay," I said, my tone haughty and challenging. I would prove to her it wasn't

me...she was the one who squelched the possible visits between us. "When do you want me to visit? I'll be there. Just tell me when."

"Saturday afternoon," she said without hesitation.

"Okay." I grabbed the pen from the desktop and twirled it between trembling fingers.

"See you then," she said, the chipper tone returning to her voice just before she hung up the phone.

After I replaced the receiver in its cradle, the challenging attitude I'd briefly acquired disappeared. Nervousness tugged at the muscles of my stomach and crept up the back of my spine. I hadn't expected her to reply the way she did. Instead, I'd mentally planned her rejection of the idea of a visit and it had taken me by surprise when she'd voiced her acceptance, even going so far as to set a date and time.

Chewing on the pen again, I wondered, could she be right? Had I let ugly emotions take over my life? I certainly missed the woman Mandy said she used to know, used to like being with. Where had that woman gone, the one who used to reside within me, the one who used to love my life and love living? Did I need to learn about love again? Was it the magic solution which could wipe out my misery?

I stood up and tossed the chewed pen into my desk drawer. I'd deal with the rest of the manuscript tomorrow. Tonight, I decided, I'm not taking work home. Instead, my heart fueled a burning desire to get back to my bedroom and see if I could resurrect Nicholas's presence from the rose picture.

No matter what Mandy believed, I felt sure Nicholas was in there and that he'd entered my dream - or my life - on purpose. And I needed this soul, real or not. I needed him to teach me about the love my life lacked, before I ended up just like him...before my life and the lives of those around me were completely destroyed.

CHAPTER TEN

The next two days passed uneventfully. I was unsuccessful at conjuring up the image of Nicholas and each time I tried, my frustration mounted. John avoided coming home until very late and when he did, he swiftly retreated to his office upstairs. He would mumble something about a project he had to finish by mid-August, only a month away.

Deep down, I knew he attempted to avoid me and I accommodated him by busying myself with other things. My time at home I spent doing chores, lying in bed, or combing the photo with my gaze, looking for any sign of Nicholas. Yet the photo remained still, with no odd activity. My nights were quiet aside from disappointing dreams of being dismissed from my job.

Now as I drove south to Mandy's part of the country, I thought of those dreams again. A second reprimand placed in my file had to be the underlying factor involved in the disturbing nightmares. Brenda indicated, in no uncertain terms, if one more project fell behind because of my lack of responsibility, I'd be out on my rear end.

The trees blurred as I sped past the wooded countryside and I wondered if losing my job would be such a bad thing. Sometimes I thought I'd like to write a book instead of always editing someone else's book. When I'd originally had the thought, I envisioned Apple Press as the publisher for my work. I assumed since I worked for them, I'd be given preferential treatment. After my recent reprimands, however, I doubted they'd look at one word of my manuscript because of my carelessness and sometimes blatant procrastination. Shivering at the thought of rejection from my own employer, I tried to push the image out of my mind and I started counting the road signs as I whipped by them at a higher rate of speed than necessary.

By the time the corner grocery loomed above me on the hill at Highway 100 West, my self-esteem had reached a daily low. If I weren't proving a point to my best friend, I would turn around and head back home. Instead, I turned right as planned and began the last three miles to Mandy's place.

The scent of refreshing rain and recently cut grass seeped in through my partially-open window. The road glistened with dampness from a summer shower I must have missed by only minutes. An upbeat song played faintly on the radio and I looked down, moving my hand to adjust the volume. Perhaps the music would lift my mood before I arrived, ensuring a more pleasant visit.

The steering wheel vibrated under my left hand as I turned the radio knob with my right. My gaze shifted back to the road, and I saw the car had eased onto the gravel edge of the shoulder. I jerked the wheel to the left to re-center the vehicle in the lane. The slight flip of my wrist moved the car quickly back onto the highway -- too quickly. The car suddenly spun around, turning wide, 360-degree circles on the wet pavement.

Clutching the wheel with both hands, I hit the brake with my right foot. The car began to skid and my throat closed tight around my windpipe, locking a

gasp of a terror behind the walls of my chest. Fearful heartbeats pounded in my ears as the car moved off the road, backwards, rumbling down the side of a graveled, rocky embankment. My white-knuckled fingers created an iron grip around the padded wheel.

I closed my eyes. Miraculously, I began to pray the car would stop.

My life isn't finished yet -- I don't want to die! Please, stop this car!

The words screamed through my mind but never made it past my lips as the car slammed, trunk first, into something solid. My neck flew back against the head rest, sparks filled my eyes, and a flush of heat crept over my cheeks. A few seconds passed before I realized it was not the fire of death licking my face with its flames, but instead my hot breath mixed with sudden bursts of perspiration.

The car didn't move.

The light shooting through my eyes brought on nausea and I swallowed hard, pushing back the tremors in my stomach.

I wiggled my fingers, then slowly brought my hands to my head. I could feel my hair.

With one hand, I frantically began to push at the seatbelt cutting into my chest. It was tight against me, and while it probably had just saved my life, it hurt like hell. I fumbled for the driver's side door handle with the other hand and was thrilled when it popped open easily. Finally, I managed to unclip the belt, and I dived past the confining strap and out of the car. My knees hit sharp protrusions of gravel mixed with dirt. Turning away from the sudden pain of tearing skin, I rolled to the right and landed on my backside.

I blinked.

I could see the car.

My head must be in one piece.

My vision cleared. Looking over my right shoulder, I saw the solid mass of hundred-year-old pine the car had slammed against. The wrinkled, red metal of my car's trunk encompassed the base of the tree like a shiny bow on a Christmas gift.

I inhaled, amazed at the energy which filled me from just a single breath. Slowly, I moved each leg, and then my arms, testing the feeling. Everything seemed to be in working order and the only visible marks on my body were the scratches on my knees where I'd hit the ground as I'd jumped from the car.

I grabbed the edge of the open door and pulled myself to a standing position. A trembling started at the top of my head and worked itself lower as I visually assessed the damage. I moved my fingers numbly along the roof as I walked toward the back and took note of the firmly-wedged car. A glance up the hill told me I'd never get it out without help - and even then, could the car be driven?

Gathering strength with a another deep breath, I reversed my steps and walked around the front of the car, over to the passenger door. This door was more resistant and I tugged at it until it popped open with a groan of agony and a squeak of objection. Slipping my hand inside my purse, I fumbled for my cellular

phone.

I turned the tiny black box over in my palm and stared down at the numbers. Then I looked up and reconsidered the depth of the hill. A sinking feeling filled me as I admitted to myself there was no way for me to get the car out. This wasn't like the events of the rest of my life, the ones I could handle with a bit of creative planning or just plain avoidance.

I couldn't help but compare the situation to my marriage to John. Though our relationship was as messy as the accident I'd just experienced, I'd failed to ask for help. I'd experienced the same feeling of entrapment, yet there always seemed to be a door to run through, a place to hide. Now, as I trained my gaze on the edge of the quiet highway, then turned and looked at the woods looming behind me, I knew I had no choice.

In order to escape, to salvage my car and possibly my own life, I had to call for help.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I poised my index finger over the nine on the phone pad, but paused before pushing the button.

I'm not hurt.

My gaze swept down, passing over my chest, stomach and legs. Calling 911 somehow seemed inappropriate. What I really needed was a tow truck to pull my car up the ravine.

I called Mandy instead. After explaining what happened, then listening to her ask about injuries for the fiftieth time, I finally convinced her all I needed was a wrecker.

And a good one, I thought, glancing up the hill.

"But Greg's got a towing package on his new truck," she suggested.

I shook my head as I walked to the front of the car and sat down on the hood. "No, I really think I need a wrecker. I'm mean, I'm way down this hill," I said, staring up the steep embankment.

"All right, okay. I'll call Four Way, I guess, since they're the closest. I guess...oh, Lord...are you sure you don't need an ambulance?"

I could picture her pacing and wringing her hands like a nervous mother. "No, I'm okay, really," I said with confidence. "I just need the car pulled out."

"Okay...okay. I'll call right now and then Greg and I will be right out."

I stifled a groan. I really didn't want to face her husband. She'd told me he had a softball game scheduled and according to my calculations, he should already be on the field. I hated to inconvenience him. And I didn't think I could handle his joking and teasing.

"No, it's not necessary for you to drag Greg out here," I said. "I'm fine. I'll either drive out there, or if the car can't be driven, I'll have the wrecker service bring me to your place." I looked over my shoulder at the back of the car, hoping it could be driven.

"Are you sure?" Mandy asked.

"Very. Now hang up so you can call."

"Okay, but you call me back if you want us to come."

"I will," I assured her, knowing I positively didn't want them to come and witness the fix I'd gotten myself into this time.

I lay the phone beside my leg and cradled my head in my shaky hands as I began the wait for the wrecker. I assumed it would be fifteen or twenty minutes and when I heard the sound of a diesel engine only a few short minutes later, I looked up in amazement. Bright orange lights flickered at the top of the hill and I wondered how they'd arrived so quickly.

The white truck with a hook dangling from the back edged in reverse down the rocky incline. Seconds later, the truck stopped directly in front of my disabled car. The hook swayed enticingly close to my bumper as a serviceman stepped out of the truck, his shoes crushing the gravel and dirt.

As he walked slowly toward me, my trembling eased. I stared at him,

wondering if I'd seen him before. There was something familiar about his slow, confident gait. His cap shaded his face and I struggled to see his eyes as a feeling of incredible calmness washed over me, soothing my churning stomach.

He lifted his head when he reached my side and I gasped when he took his cap off and shook loose his locks of shoulder-length dark hair. His eyes were the same, unmistakable violet and my gaze darted to the name on his shirt.

'Nick' was scrawled inside the white circle and my mouth dropped open as if I'd just taken a bite of something much too hot. I felt the warmth of his brilliant smile as I met his gaze again.

"Are you ready to continue your lessons, fair lady?" the mysterious, missing soul asked as he reached for my hand.

"You!" My breath crossed my lips in a dry whisper as I willingly extended my fingers into his palm. My feet landed soundlessly on the gravel. Hundreds of questions filled my mind as he tugged on my fingers and I followed him like a lost puppy might follow the master who recovered him from the dangers of a strange world.

Nicholas led me a short distance into the trees and this time I wasn't surprised when the concrete bench appeared, surrounded by brilliant, colorful flowers. The sun bore down on petals of roses, lilies, and strewn magnolia blooms, all dotted with drops of water. I inhaled deeply with wonderment and awe. My senses filled with the freshness of the environment. The palpitations of my heart slowed to a reasonable level as he dropped my hand and I anxiously sat down beside Nicholas.

"I didn't think I'd see you again," I said. Laced with relief, the words tumbled out of my mouth. "In fact, I thought I'd just invented you to start with, or maybe I'd just had some crazy dream. I gave up thinking you were real."

"Do you think I'm real now?" he asked with smiling eyes.

I nodded and he looked down. My gaze followed. "Touch my hand," he suggested.

I did. The warmth of his skin slid upward, into my fingertips. "Yes, you're real," I said, shifting my stare back to his face.

And then my fingers landed with a thump on the bench. I blinked and slid back an inch. Nicholas was gone! My gaze darted around the area as the beautiful flowers began to sink back into the ground, like melting snow on a sunny day.

No -- I didn't want this! I liked the flowers and Nicholas's presence. My heart deflated as the good feelings I'd experienced began to dissipate. Sadness surrounded me as I looked down and realized I sat on a decrepit old tree stump, not an ornate, concrete bench.

My cheeks puckered in reaction to his disappearance and my bottom lip slid over the top, pouting at the dismay running through my veins. A sigh of frustration escaped my throat. Losing my mind fast became an answer to my recent life events.

Finally, I swallowed hard, then stood and took a few steps toward my car. "Wait."

I froze and my heart thundered beats of joy. The sound of his low, husky voice brought unexpected sensations of excitement into my body, dowsing the fire of disappointment. Yet I hesitated to turn around, for what if it were only my imagination? What if, when I turned, he'd gone again? I closed my eyes. Was it worth taking the chance? Did I want his presence so badly I'd risk more feelings of defeat?

My head pounded, echoing like a raging thunderstorm as I stepped forward, away from the voice. I took two more steps, then paused, gripping my waist with folded arms. Through pursed lips, I managed a breath.

This game playing had to stop...for my own sanity, it had to come to an end.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I spun around. Nicholas stood beside a tree, looking very, very real. A hint of a smile tugged at the corners of my mouth as the flowers and bench returned. Nicholas carefully stepped over broken tree limbs and branches, then resumed his seat on the bench.

“Reality is what you make of a situation,” he said, his tone of voice changing to one of instruction and knowledge, as if he were beginning a lecture to eager students. “Your mind takes in what’s happening and churns it around. By the time it’s finished, the outcome might be nothing like you originally perceived, thanks to beliefs you’ve acquired and learned emotions. If you think you’re supposed to fear something, you fear it. If your acquired beliefs tell you to react defensively to something, you put your guard up and do as you’ve been taught. By understanding how your mind and acquired knowledge creates your own version of reality, you can empower yourself to lead a happier life.”

I sat down beside him and lowered my brows. “I don’t understand,” I told him, twisting my fingers together in my lap. “Are you saying I fear something because it’s what I’ve been taught by others? Or that I question something because I think I’m supposed to do so?”

“Yes.”

I squinted at him. “Does this have something to do with what you told me about demands? Do I demand things be a certain way because it’s the way I think it’s supposed to be? Is that what this is all about?”

He looked away, into the sky. Sunlight flickered through the tree tops and the words which followed made me wonder if he read from an invisible textbook. “Human minds constantly activate demanding thoughts which trigger negative reactions such as fear, frustration, anger, and even hatred. If your mind thinks you’re supposed to demand something because of what society, media, or other humans have taught you, then you do so, and in essence trigger some very nasty emotions.” He lowered his gaze, meeting mine.

“For instance,” he said with a look of deep contemplation, “let’s say a clerk at the market treats you disrespectfully. You’ve been taught this is not acceptable behavior in your society. After all, you’re shopping and spending your hard-earned money in this store and you deserve some thanks and appreciation. Inside here,” he paused and pointed to his forehead, “you demand that you not be treated in such a fashion. Those demands bring on the negative feelings of anger. Is this image accurate?”

I nodded in total agreement, for his example had happened and it always made me boil inside, sometimes ruining my entire day.

He leaned against the back of the bench and extended his arm behind my shoulders. “Now...envision this. What if you preferred the clerk not talk to you disrespectfully? Let’s say the clerk does it anyway...but since you’ve changed your demand to a preference, you are no longer attached to the outcome.

“When you prefer something, it suddenly becomes optional. The situation

can go either way. But because you aren't demanding it happen in a certain fashion, you are accepting, no matter which direction the situation turns.

"Because you have empowered yourself to be accepting, there is no blanket of ultimatum over your eyes. You can now assume the clerk had underlying reasons, reasons which have nothing to do with you at all, but instead have everything to do with the clerk's own demands which have not been fulfilled.

"In this scenario, acceptance on your part becomes a real possibility. After all, you didn't do anything personally to this clerk. You know that. There's no way of knowing if the clerk recently had a traumatic life event occur, or perhaps experienced an irate customer before you. These are things you couldn't possibly know, yet you would be understanding and compassionate if you were aware of them.

"By letting go of your demands, you automatically become more compassionate, even though you are totally unaware of the circumstances behind the clerk's behavior. This is a part of being unconditionally loving. It's the first step. Once you let go of your demands, just like you did a few moments ago, you will begin to feel peace and love in your heart."

"I did that a few minutes ago?" I raised my brows, sure I'd missed something.

"When I disappeared, you could have thrown yourself down on the ground and cried because something was given to you and then taken away. In your human state, you've been taught that it's rude or mean to give someone something, then take it away. You could have become angry, but you didn't.

"Instead, you unconsciously chose preference over demand. While you preferred these beautiful flowers, pleasant atmosphere, and my presence, you didn't allow yourself to become upset that they disappeared. You accepted the situation as it was and began to walk away. You didn't understand, yet you accepted. You didn't place demands on my return. When you prefer rather than demand something, the reality which your mind creates is pleasant and positive, rather than destructive and negative."

I swept my hand through the top of my hair, pushing the strands away from my face. "Are you telling me if I prefer something to return, it will return?"

"No. What I'm saying is if you prefer instead of demand, it doesn't matter if it returns. You're not attached to the outcome. Therefore, you are accepting of the situation, thankful you experienced it, and willing to learn what you can from it. You take that lesson into your next moment. You've created a reality which is pleasant and enjoyable."

I smiled. "Since I reacted that way when you disappeared, does this mean I'm progressing?"

He laughed and his voice filled the woods with its richness. "You're getting there," he said, placing a hand on my shoulder. "But you've only just begun."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Nicholas stretched his long legs out in front of the bench and nestled his feet against the base of a large rock. He lifted his arms, cradling the back of his head in his palms. Once again, I marveled at his 'realness'. It simply amazed me that he was able to appear and disappear at will, and in the guise of the a serviceman, no less.

"Have you ever heard the saying," he continued, his voice startling me out of my reverie, "If you love something, let it go. If it comes back to you it's yours--"

"And if it doesn't, it was never mine to begin with." I ended the sentence.

He nodded and smiled. "If you practice that thought, actually put the statement into play in your game of life and you combine it with preferences rather than demands, you'll be surprised at how often wonderful things come your way. The same event, person, or tangible objects may never return. But, something else which is capable of bringing those feelings of joy and happiness you crave most certainly will come your way."

"That makes sense."

"Good," he replied, moving his hands back to his knees.

I noticed a gold ring glitter as the sun crossed the tops of his fingers, and I wondered if it were a wedding ring, a symbol of his past with his Emily. And then I looked down at my own wedding band and the thin prongs centering a small diamond on its surface. A film covered the stone and surrounding gold. Unlike the glitter of Nicholas's ring, mine had no sparkle, no life. I closed my right hand over my left, vowing to clean the ring again soon, for no wedding ring deserved to be so neglected.

"Let's talk about the accident and the feelings you experienced at the time of the event," Nicholas said.

I brought my head up sharply. His gaze searched mine inquisitively. Ah, he spoke of my negative emotions. My stomach clenched into a tight ball at the realization and I squirmed on the bench, tucking one leg up under me. Swallowing hard, I said, "I feel stupid and careless. It was totally my fault. I shouldn't have been looking at the radio - I should have been watching the road."

My eyelids fluttered closed as I admitted the feelings, but flew open when I heard the snap of fingers. Nicholas held a small video screen in his hand. "Let's look at your expressions," he said, pressing a button on the bottom of the screen.

The skin around my eyes tightened as they widened. On the screen, a clear picture of my face appeared, just as the accident occurred.

"Oh." Nicholas sighed and pointed to my face on the screen. "There they are, the feelings you just mentioned...all over your face."

I struggled to see what he spoke of, yet the incident seemed to flash on the screen in fast-forward. He pushed yet another button and the picture slowed

to a near-stop. I winced and my facial muscles cramped as I watched the replay on the screen.

“There!” he cried, stopping the frame and tapping the screen with his finger. “Look...tell me what you see.”

I stared at the image of my bright eyes, lifted brows and partially-open mouth. It reminded me of a person experiencing the first dip in a roller coaster ride. “Excitement?” I whispered, my tone filled with stunned disbelief.

“Yes!” Nicholas tossed the screen into the air and it promptly disappeared. I looked on the ground, in the direction he’d thrown the contraption, only to see flowers and glossy white rocks.

“Excitement, that’s correct,” he continued. “In the midst of your dismay and fears, you still had a trickle of excitement in your being. This is what we need to tap into.”

“How?” I asked, unsure of the point he tried to make.

“In every challenge or tenuous situation, there is fear. It’s a built-in human emotion as you don’t and can’t know what’s coming next. Mixed with your fear is self-destructive thinking and doubts. Self-blame...thoughts like this.” He paused and when he spoke again, his voice had magically transformed - matching the tone and the sound of mine!

“If I hadn’t been so careless, I wouldn’t be in this mess. I am stupid, this is all my fault, I am unworthy of a good outcome, I am a failure and everyone else will see that if this situation turns bad.”

How did he do that? The question I asked myself lost intensity as I pondered the words he’d spoken. I sucked in my breath and it hovered delicately in my throat. Letting it pass, I said, “Yes...yes, that’s exactly how I felt, and how I feel in so many situations!”

This whole encounter had suddenly become one full of information, and I felt as if a light-bulb illuminated my darkened mind.

“You know now the excitement is there,” he said, his voice once again his own.

I nodded, for I thought I did know.

“If you allow it to come through and you admit its existence, this excitement can lead you to preference.”

I stared at him blankly.

He stared back and he must have seen the confusion in my eyes, for he stood and began to pace. His heavy boots crunched against the tiny white rocks surrounding the flower garden he’d brought with him. “Bear with me,” he said, waving at hand at the sky as if he searched for guidance.

A second later, he lowered his hand and it contained a white notebook. He flipped it open and scanned the pages with an intense, concentrated stare. His eyes shifted from left to right.

Pointing to a place on the page, he began to read aloud. “If you prefer a good outcome and are willing to accept and deal with whatever it may be, and you tap into the same spirit of excitement for the challenge as the original event - nothing can bring you down.” He looked up.

“You won’t be self-defeating. Mentally and emotionally, you’ll look at each event and life issue with two things: a preference for a good outcome and a journey of constant excitement. If you do this, you can’t go wrong. No matter what is happening around you, your reality will be filled with positive vibrations. Disappointment will be absent from your life, for each event, good or bad, will bring on a new challenge, one at which you can ultimately succeed.”

I stared into his violet eyes, utterly amazed at his knowledge, and his persistence in teaching it to me, someone who never had been the best listener in the class. But this concept I thought I understood.

“It’ll be a never-ending circle,” I said. “for if the outcome is good, I’ll be excited, and if the outcome is not, the new challenge will present another bit of excitement. Then I can prefer that challenge to have a good outcome.”

“And odds are, your outcomes will produce more and more excitement for you, even though they might not turn out as desired. If you recognize there is excitement behind your fears, and you accept the anticipation of facing a new challenge, you might even find yourself welcoming changes and personally inviting new challenges into your life.”

I nodded, seeing the sense in his words.

Holding up a finger, he continued. “Plus, you’ll lose the self-defeating thoughts. You must always remember, no situation is ever totally the fault of your own self. You are not in control. We are all one and numerous other forces -- of other humans, nature, of our creator -- all contribute to events certain humans perceive as crappy.”

I chuckled at the term he used, but had no doubt even though this soul was more than two hundred years old, he had much more of the world’s present-day slang tucked away in his mind.

“So what I perceive as horrible, someone else may see it differently.” I formed my words as a statement, for I had this part figured out.

“Correct.” He nodded, touched my hand gently and expelled a soft breath. The expression in his eyes faded as he stared at me. Though his gaze tangled with mine, I felt as if he’d suddenly gone a million miles away.

“I perceived something as horrible once,” he said, looking past me into the surrounding trees. “My cousin William had once been my very best friend. Since I didn’t have any brothers, it was just Will and I growing up together. And we did everything as a team. Until one day Will announced these big dreams to me...dreams which terrified me, ones which I wanted no part of.”

He swallowed hard and glanced down at his feet. I waited patiently for him to continue. “Will wanted to cross the country to find an extraordinary treasure. It became all he talked about. At first, I thought he was just spouting off, dreaming the impossible. But he became more and more serious, to the point of including me in his visions. I had no desire to accomplish the feat he talked about. It went totally against what we’d been taught, the way we’d been raised. One day, I’d had enough of listening to him and I told him he’d better stop his foolish dreaming if he was ever to have a life. I told him the idea of crossing the country to find some unknown treasure was crazy and it would

break his parents' hearts. They had deeded their ranch to him, just as mine had. I refused to talk to him anymore, to suffer his silly ideas and fantastical mind. In other words, I perceived what he talked of as a certain death. If he attempted to cross the country during tenuous times...well, I wanted no part of it."

He paused and moved his fingers away from my hand. A chill immediately took their place.

"So what happened?" I asked, prompting him to continue with his story.

He cleared his throat. "I thought I could control Will. By refusing to talk with him, I thought it might make him come around. But it didn't. His ideas were different than mine. He'd been around people who'd filled his head with what I perceived as crazy thoughts and visions. It took Will finally leaving for me to realize I wasn't in control of him, of his life, or of the situation. It was his dream and he chose to follow it. By placing demands on him and trying to control his decision, I lost a valuable relationship. After he left, we never saw each other again." Sadness crossed his face, drawing tiny lines beneath his expressive eyes.

"What happened to him?" I probed.

He gave a slight chuckle. "He found his treasure. It was twenty earth years after my passing, but I was shown a vision during the early part of my transition which confirmed that my cousin, my long-lost friend, had accomplished his feat and found the treasure I'd once ruled out as non-existent and foolish."

He lifted his chin and faced me squarely. "I lost him because of my demands. If I'd been accepting of him, even though I chose not to participate, I wouldn't have died with that relationship absent from my life. In other words, I should have been unconditionally loving and accepted Will for who he was and supported his dreams, even though they differed from mine."

"So the root of unconditional love is to be accepting of people and situations, even if the outcomes are not what you prefer or desire?"

"Yes," he said, flashing me a sudden smile. "And lose the demand. Stop requiring that yourself - and others - be a certain way. Accept that you have no control. Other forces, beyond a human's comprehension, exist. There is a plan for every human being, though as a human, one rarely knows that plan." He glanced up toward the sky and closed his eyes. "All it takes is faith. Faith that things are the way they are for a reason. Exerting control where it doesn't belong can be detrimental, and much harder on the emotions than having faith and looking for the excitement of life in every challenge."

"Make no demands," I said softly, shaking my head as I reinforced the instruction in my mind.

"No demands," repeated Nicholas, the teacher in him taking over again. "Humans react negatively to demands and positively to preference. So if you prefer to erase your negative thoughts about your accident, you'll be able to tap into that shred of buried excitement we saw on the tape. You'll become accepting of the fact a combination of several forces incurred. You have the ability to learn from this experience as well as look forward to the new challenges which will occur as a result of the incident."

“John,” I mumbled, squirming on the seat and releasing my ankle from under my leg. It tingled with remnants of a numbing sleep as I stretched it out and wiggled my toes. John certainly wouldn’t be thrilled with what had happened to my car. I could see it already, the anger in his face.

Nicholas lowered his head and peered at me from beneath a fallen lock of dark hair. “I have no doubt your husband’s reaction will present a challenge,” he said. “Just remember: let go of your demands, and I have faith you’ll succeed. If you can accept John’s reaction rather than demand a certain behavior from him, you won’t be playing the part of a victim any more. You’ll empower yourself to be the creative course of your experience and your life will work better. Trust me.”

I stared into his purple gaze. Flecks of gold sparkled outward and glittering light surrounded him as the mechanic’s uniform disappeared from his body, leaving a long white robe behind. With wings, Nicholas would truly be the vision of an angel.

Trust him? Not a problem, I decided. How could I not trust this being whose presence brought a sense of love and warmth into my life?

I nodded slowly, deciding it was about time I allowed myself to experience some of the excitement he talked about in dealing with my problems. The time had come for me to have faith...something which I’d failed to acknowledge, though like the sun in the sky, it had always been there, had I bothered to open my eyes and look.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

My legs trembled as I stood and accepted the hug Nicholas offered. His arms were warm and strong and his silk robe tickled my skin. Gently, he pressed his lips against the top of my head and whispered, "I'll be back."

When I opened my eyes, he'd gone. Once again, I stood alone in the woods. I looked down the path and the red metal of my car glittered through the trees, inviting me to return.

I rubbed my arms, feeling chilled despite the humidity. Slowly, I circled around, only to find the bench, the flowers, and Nicholas totally gone - vanished like a fleeting thought.

How I wished he didn't have to go! I wanted his constant presence, the feel of his soft, caring touch, and the voice which was meditative music to my heart and soul. I swallowed hard and reminded myself to accept his absence, knowing I must face my challenges without his help. And he said he'd return again.

His parting words eased my chill and I walked through the trees toward my car. I thought over our conversation as I took each tentative step back into the real world.

I'd asked Nicholas about his own feelings just before he'd ended his earthly life. He'd told me he'd felt like a failure as a protector for his wife and unborn child. He'd experienced worthlessness and in defense of the feelings, he demanded of God that his wife be given back her life.

Of course, that hadn't happened and because Nicholas had tried to force an outcome through demands, he felt he'd failed again when the event didn't materialize.

He told me for a long time after coming into transition he'd experienced incredible amounts of guilt, depression, anger, and other negative feelings. Only when he'd come to realize the true power of unconditional love did he begin to learn his lessons and become joyful enough to continue his existence as a soul. He was ready, he'd said, ready to go on and experience another lifetime - after he finished his teachings.

"Preference instead of demand is only the first of your lessons," he'd said before he departed. "It's the base lesson, perhaps the most important."

I wondered if that was why he'd spent so much time drilling it into my head. Sitting down on the hood of the car, I thought of his final words, just before he disappeared.

"Preferring is a tool to help you become more accepting of yourself, others, and situations. Acceptance takes the fight out of life's battles, hence giving you the power to treat each event and every living being with a form of appropriate loving."

I thought over his words as I rested my chin on my palm. What had he meant by appropriate loving? No answer came to mind, and a sense of peace washed over me as I decided I would learn the answer in time.

I smiled, suddenly feeling wonderful. I knew I didn't have control over when I'd learn the answer, but I did have control over my reaction to not knowing. Nicholas was right! By accepting that I'd figure out the answer at a later time, I experienced a sense of happiness and satisfaction, even though I didn't have immediate knowledge.

The sounds of a truck approaching interrupted my thoughts. Glancing up, I saw a wrecker at the top of the hill. A man waved from the passenger window, then turned to say something over his shoulder to the driver. A moment later, the truck backed halfway down the incline and lowered a winch to disengage my car from the base of the pine tree.

As I stood and watched the ascent of the two vehicles, I hoped my car could be driven. But I decided I could handle things if it couldn't. I turned away from the car and my prior worries about the damage. It will be what it will be. Whatever effect the wreck had on the vehicle, I'd face the challenge of what to do to correct things.

I plodded up the incline, surprised that I enjoyed each step, every pull on the muscles of my legs, and the feeling of the sun beating down on my back and shoulders. When I reached the road, I saw Mandy and Greg stepping out of their truck a few feet away. I cringed when I saw Greg and lowered my head in a brief moment of embarrassment.

As fast as the reaction came, it disappeared. I remembered the lesson and chose to apply it now, at a time of great need. While I hadn't wanted Mandy to bring Greg, the fact was she did, and I needed to be accepting of his presence. I brought my head up and waved.

Mandy ran over, arms extended. "Oh, thank God you weren't hurt!" she cried. She grabbed my wrists and pulled my arms out as she inspected me from head to toe.

"I'm okay," I said.

"Are you sure?" Greg asked as he stepped closer. "No broken bones?"

Mandy dropped my hands and I turned a circle on my toes. "None," I said, holding my arms away from my sides.

"Girl!" Mandy gasped as she glanced past me and looked at the huge dent in the trunk of my car. "You could have been killed! How in the world did you run off the road?"

I winced at her question, recalling my previous emotions and feelings of carelessness. I took a deep breath and said, "I think it was a combination of several forces: the wet road, looking down at the radio, and the way I pulled the wheel as I crossed the shoulder." I shrugged. "Or it could have been just a piece of loose rock on the road. Who knows? But it's a done deal now and I just hope it's driveable. If it's not, I'll have to come up with something else."

Mandy's mouth dropped open, then quickly reversed and snapped shut. Knowing my friend, I realized she was in shock about my newfound calmness. A grin tickled my lips as I met her amber gaze.

She frowned. "You're not up to something, are you?"

I shook my head. "No."

She leaned closer. "You haven't been drinking?"

I smiled again. "No, I haven't been drinking."

Greg stepped around us and proceeded to assess the damages to the car. I heard him speaking in a low voice to the servicemen and I glanced in their direction. At least all four wheels were still intact. But the trunk was crushed like a wrinkled soda can, right in the center.

Mandy tapped my shoulder. I turned to find her gaze intent on my face. She squinted and said, "You haven't been having those weird dreams again, have you?"

I laughed softly. "No, I haven't had any more dreams." I decided right then and there not to tell my friend any more about Nicholas. I could sense her disbelief during our prior discussion of my dream. Mandy didn't believe in spirits, ghosts, or angels and it didn't make sense for me to try to convince her of Nicholas's existence. I made a choice to keep my interactions with Nicholas to myself and share with her through my actions instead.

I lifted my hair off the back of my neck. The sun's rays mixed with the ground's dampness left a curtain of mugginess in the surrounding air and my long hair felt sticky and uncomfortable.

"Gosh, it's getting hot," I mumbled, turning to walk toward my car. "I'd better see if it can be driven so I can head home."

"A warm bath will make you feel better," Mandy said as she walked by my side.

"I feel okay," I said as Greg approached.

"She ought to start." He handed me the keys. "Nothing vital appears damaged. But I wouldn't put any groceries in that trunk for a while." I smiled, lifting the keys from between his fingers.

He was right - the car did start. I drove it a short distance down the road, then turned around and pulled up beside them. Pressing the button on the door, I lowered the driver's side window. "Even the power stuff works," I said, glancing back over the engine's gauges. "I guess it's all right to drive."

Mandy leaned in and I fumbled through my purse for some money to give the wrecker service. I handed her a twenty dollar bill.

"I hope that's enough."

She shrugged. "We'll make up the difference if it's not."

I pulled a sheet of paper off the dashboard. "What's this?"

Mandy cocked her head and looked at the yellow paper. "Oh, that's for your insurance company."

I nodded and stuffed the paper into my purse, doubting I'd turn it in for fear of an increase in rates.

"Guess I'll head out," I said, turning back to Mandy.

"You can still come to the house for a while," she said, folding the twenty in her palm.

I shook my head. "I think I'd rather go on home and take that bath you mentioned. I believe I've had enough excitement for one day."

She turned her gaze heavenward and offered a heavy sigh. "Bet there'll

be some excitement when John sees this.”

“Maybe.” I smiled as I put the car in drive. “Thanks,” I said before I drove off, starting my journey home. I glanced in the rear view mirror to find them waving, and I passed my arm through the open window and acknowledged their gestures with a slight wiggle of my fingers.

Relief flooded through me as I drove off, only to be replaced by gnawing anxiety seconds later. Though I’d managed to remain calm and accepting of any outcome back there, I couldn’t deny the fluttering of nervous tension which crept into my stomach at the thought of encountering my husband - a man who’d faced me for months with only anger and withdrawal.

How mad would John be?

I gripped the steering wheel tighter, knowing a turning point had just arrived, dropping into my life like an unwelcome visitor and leaving me completely unprepared for what was to come.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The hot bath did feel good. I languished in the water after dropping a few lavender-scented bath beads into the depths of the sunken tub. The steam from the water combined with the stress-relieving scent soon permeated my senses and eased the anxiety I experienced.

John hadn't been home when I'd arrived, but I knew he would be soon. He didn't work as long on Saturday. The thought of his impending arrival brought the tightness back into my stomach and I shifted uncomfortably, trying to rest my head against the rim of the tub.

It would be wonderful if John didn't berate me for the accident, yet deep inside, I knew he would. I tried not to think about it, but it was no use. Finally, I succumbed, admitting I feared his reaction. And then I began to wonder why.

It dawned on me I was afraid he'd point out my irresponsibility, and it wasn't something I wanted to hear. My head throbbed at even the thought of being told I was irresponsible. I'd heard it enough as a child, and I didn't want to hear it as an adult!

I lifted a sponge to my neck and squeezed. The warm water trickled over my chest as I contemplated my dislike for being considered irresponsible.

Okay, perhaps I did possess the trait. I had committed many irresponsible acts in my life, in my marriage. I refused to believe the accident was one of them, yet deep down, I sensed John would think it was.

Irresponsibility is not an attractive trait. Yet I hadn't set out to possess it - somehow the illusion of it just cursed my life. I caught a fingernail in the sponge and worked with the other hand to free the nail before it ripped.

Surely a person couldn't be cursed with a trait! Perhaps my worrying about being accused of it was bringing it to the surface in my life...maybe even causing me to act in ways which promoted the very accusations that angered me.

I frowned as I held the sponge tight against my chest. The term 'irresponsible' had negative connotations, yet I couldn't deny I sometimes liked being irresponsible. I didn't think of my behavior as negative when I acted; it felt fun-loving, made me feel alive.

I thought again of how irresponsibility had touched my life and I realized the things I'd done weren't prompted by bad intentions. My actions, which John and others viewed as irresponsible, were simply my way of creating a fun-loving, exciting life. This trait hurt no one, but others' reactions hurt me.

I brought the sponge to my cheek and inhaled the lavender scent. When I lived at home as a child, a young adult, I had the impression my parents lived a dull, boring life. They did the same things every day, creating a haven of safeness and met expectations. They were careful with their money, so much that they didn't enjoy it. I recalled thinking, my life isn't going to be that way. I intend to enjoy life and have excitement each day.

I had done so before I married John. I stayed up as late as I wanted,

attended parties which I would have never been able to attend had I still been living at home with my parents. I blew my paycheck as soon as it was placed in my hands, figuring I'd worked hard all week and I deserved something enjoyable, something exciting. The pace was too hectic, too edgy for a person to keep up on a regular basis, and I soon tired of it. Yet I didn't wish to eliminate the behavior entirely and end up living my parents' boring life.

When John and I married, I slowed down tremendously, always trying to do the right things, make the correct decisions, and create a comfortable, safe environment for my husband and our marriage. Yet every once in a while, I craved excitement and pursued it in order to fulfill my heart's desire. I believed my behavior was seen by others as irresponsible, yet to me, I was keeping myself alive and vital.

If I told this to John, would he understand? My stomach clenched and I closed my eyes. Oh, it would be nice to have his support! For him to accept my desire to have occasional excitement would be the ultimate goal. I should tell him, I should explain my feelings and then he'll understand. He won't berate me any more for my behavior--

Stop! I brought my hands to my head and squeezed my temples. There I go again...assuming John will accept this part of me, when in actuality, I have no idea if he will or not. I cannot control his reaction! I cannot control his feelings!

I balled my hand into a tight fist and thumped it against the edge of the tub. Was I ever going to learn?

Slowly, I relaxed my hand until it slid down the wall of the tub into the water. I closed my eyes and inhaled, willing the sweet floral scent to work its soothing magic on my emotions. As I took another deep breath, a second thought came.

Could I still love John if he didn't support my need for occasional excitement, something which was an important part of my life?

The question sounded over and over in my mind as my eyelids grew heavier. Maybe I just needed some rest...some silent time...

A door slammed, jarring me from the impending nap. Pushing my palms against the bottom of the tub, I moved upward, listening. It was the door from the garage into the house. John was home.

Hastily, I hit the valve for the drain with my toe and quickly stood, then stepped out of the tub. I'd just finished wrapping a towel around me when I heard the familiar click of the bedroom door opening.

"Emily!"

I winced at the tone of my husband's voice. Gathering what little strength I possessed, I slowly pushed open the bathroom door.

John paced across the floor, raking his hands through his hair. Lines of anger streaked across his forehead, his cheeks and down into the muscles of his neck. I didn't say anything. Finally he stopped and pointed at the wall, the one dividing our bedroom from the garage.

"What happened?" His lips contorted, curling over clenched teeth.

"I had an accident," I said softly. I proceeded to explain the way the

wreck had unfolded.

“You took your eyes off the road?” His voice rose in pitch.

I held my head high. “Yes,” I said, being completely honest, offering no excuses.

The pacing started again and I squirmed under the confinement of my towel. Beads of sweat broke out on my forehead. I tried to remain calm and allow John his reaction, yet it was difficult.

“God, Emily! Think of how much it’s going to cost to fix that car!”

I paused. “Well, I assumed we could avoid filing a claim. But if it’s that much, I guess we can turn it in on the insurance,” I said.

“But the insurance will go up!” He stopped and stared up toward the ceiling. “We can’t afford any more expenses right now. Can’t you see that? I’ve been working my butt off to fix the financial situation, yet you constantly undermine my efforts. Buying that picture was completely irresponsible, but taking your eyes from the road is even worse. To think what could have happened if you’d have hit another car! God, Emily!” He curled a set of taut fingers over his face.

I opened my mouth to speak, to defend myself against the very accusation I’d expected him to make. Yet no words emerged from my suddenly dry throat.

“Are you trying to drive me crazy?” He dropped his hand as he yelled the question. The silence which followed his burst of anger was deafening. His stony gaze met mine and I tried to look away, but found I couldn’t.

A boiling, slow and ominous, began in the pit of my stomach. John was clearly distorting the situation, blowing it out of proportion. I took a deep, ragged breath and swallowed hard, trying to drown the angry, defensive feelings which threatened. I had to tell him how I felt, but doing so in the way my body was suggesting would only make matters worse.

I closed my eyes and searched for any shred of calmness I could muster. “I wish you wouldn’t yell,” I finally said, deliberately keeping my tone slow and even. “It’d be nice if you’d at least ask about me, instead of being so concerned with the vehicle or how much it’s going to cost. I want to feel I’m the most important thing in your life, and right now, I don’t feel that way and it really, really hurts.” A tear dotted the corner of my right eye and I swiped at it angrily.

I hadn’t yelled. I didn’t accuse him of making me unhappy.

John hadn’t always been this way. I tried to remember, John is not the behavior he acts out...he’s simply replaying mental tapes based on what he’s learned in his past, what he’s used to and been accustomed to doing.

For some reason, he now dwelled on the subject of money. Something must have happened to make him this way. We had nothing when we first married and he didn’t worry about it at all. Was it because he had obtained money and a secure future, only to almost lose it during tenuous employment times? Or did it go farther back, into a past I realized I knew very little about? He didn’t like to talk about his pre-college days. Perhaps therein lay the answer.

I felt a calm descend over my body, washing away the tightness in the pit

of my stomach. I loved John, despite his behavior, his beliefs. I wanted to get to the bottom of his feelings, and discover why he was so terrified of the loss of money. I felt sure this reaction wasn't due to my carelessness while driving. This reaction stemmed from some sort of fear, something deeper than I could see from where I stood in his life.

I opened my eyes. John stood very still in front of me, his gaze turned downward. When I tried to look into his eyes, he averted them and didn't say a word. The expression on his face had changed to one of bemusement, of confusion. Of course -- he'd expected to be attacked and he was surprised when I didn't fire back with both barrels like I normally would have. I was surprised, too. And I figured I'd better act quickly, while I was still in control of my emotions.

I reached out and touched his arm hesitantly. "I want to figure out why you worry so much about the money, John. I love you and I believe our love for each other is much more important than money, or a wrecked car. The way you've been the past year...well, you're not the John I used to know. And I want to help, if you'll let me."

John looked up at the ceiling and his eyes glittered under the bedroom lights. They filled with tears and he swallowed hard. "I'm glad you didn't get hurt, okay?" His words were barely a whisper as he looked down, pointedly, at me. "Okay?" he repeated and I slowly nodded.

With his arms folded tightly across his chest, he stepped past me and through the open door of the bedroom.

"John?" I ran to the door as I heard his retreating footsteps, heavy on the kitchen floor. Holding my towel tightly around my damp body, I jogged into the kitchen only to see the door to the garage swinging shut. By the time I reached the door, John had started his truck and I heard the squeal of tires as he backed out of the driveway. I flung open the door, yet he sped away before I could wave for him to stop.

"Great." I turned and stepped back into the kitchen, shoving the door closed behind me. I leaned against the wood frame, hanging my head and staring down at my toes.

For a brief moment in the bedroom, I'd experienced warmth as my palm had rested on my husband's arm. Yet now I felt numb and I shivered under the breeze from the kitchen fan.

This wasn't the outcome I desired, and I was surprised my emotions didn't wrench my stomach into knots as I leaned against the door and studied a few tiny specks of dirt on the linoleum floor. Amazingly, I didn't feel anger, or even frustration. Instead, a feeling of sadness swept through my body and I sank to the floor.

How could I love someone unconditionally who ran away from me when I tried? What if my husband no longer wanted my love? How would I survive if he didn't?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

By nightfall, John still wasn't home. Maybe he'd given up on me - on us. I didn't know, but the thought lingered in my mind and the corresponding emotions tore at the walls of my stomach and chest like a raging heartburn.

About nine-thirty, I closed the garage door and prepared to sleep another night alone. My legs ached. I'd spent the balance of the afternoon pacing the floor and watching out the window for John's truck, hoping I'd see the familiar glint of silver against red as he rounded the corner of the driveway. But it hadn't happened.

As I brushed my teeth, the sound of the running water echoed against the silence of the empty house, aggravating my loneliness. Swiping at my mouth with a towel, I shook my head as I saw my reflection in the mirror. My cheeks seemed rounder, heavier.

It's no wonder, I thought, recalling the sandwich bun I'd piled full of turkey and cheese several hours earlier. As if that wasn't enough, I'd added a large helping of potato chips to the plate. The food was gone in less than ten minutes and now I chastised myself for the cookies I'd devoured afterward, knowing I'd failed once again to watch my weight. For so many, being depressed and upset caused a lack of appetite. For me, it had the opposite affect.

As I studied my face, my jaw and even my neckline in the reflective glass, I wondered if my slight weight gain over the past few months had anything to do with John's physical withdrawal. I shivered, thinking it must have had some effect on my husband's desire. I reached for the herbal mouthwash on the counter after angrily tossing the hand towel aside.

"No, Emily."

Fumbling with the plastic bottle between my fingers, my gaze darted back to the mirror. Nicholas! At first, I thought he'd appeared in the glass, but a second glance proved me wrong.

I dropped the bottle of mouthwash into the sink and whirled around, gathering the neckline of my shirt in the palm of my hand. I drank in the sight of him. He stood in the center of my bedroom, dressed in modern-day jeans and a white shirt, smiling.

"Your appearance has nothing to do with John's withdrawal. It's what's happening in here," he said, tapping his chest. "He has an empty heart right now, but you have the power to fix it...to fill it up again."

I bit my bottom lip, still shaking from surprise at his sudden appearance in my bedroom. "Really? Then why is he gone, and I'm here alone again? I tried what you said and it didn't work." Tears welled up in my eyes as I remembered my sadness when John hurriedly left the house.

Nicholas held out a hand, reaching for mine, and I reluctantly lowered my arm and extended my fingers. He pulled me close to him, then shepherded me through the bedroom door and into the darkened living room. It didn't surprise me he knew his way around my home - for he seemed to be everywhere, even to

the point of knowing my deepest thoughts.

He escorted me to the sofa and I gratefully sank onto the overstuffed cushions. Curling my bare legs up under my gown, I watched intently as his silhouette moved across the room toward the television. Once there, he pushed a button to turn it on.

A golden globe appeared in the center of the screen, filling the room with a light as bright as a setting sun. Squinting, I noticed patterns underneath the light. "What is that?" I asked, straightening my back.

Nicholas sat beside me and wrapped one arm around the back of my shoulders while pointing at the television with his other hand. "That's the earth, Emily. It's where you are right now. The light is the surrounding energy."

"Energy? Like the ozone layer?"

Nicholas chuckled. "Your scientists do create interesting names for the simple and basic," he replied.

For a few moments, nothing more was said. I could feel the energy from Nicholas's arm, creeping up the back of my neck, prickling under my hair. My body filled with tenderness, and a softening warmth, like a stick of melting butter. Blood rushed into my heart and the feeling of love and safeness from Nicholas's presence returned with renewed strength.

Why couldn't I feel this way with John? I blinked, trying to avoid the next thought, afraid of how Nicholas might react. Yet the thought came anyway, bringing with it a pool of unshed tears.

Why couldn't Nicholas and I be together? No one had ever brought out these feelings in me and I found myself leaning into the curve of his arm, relishing in the desirable sensations.

If Nicholas read the thoughts rampaging through my mind and body, he tactfully ignored them. "The energy you see on the screen is part of human difficulties and needs to be understood," he explained.

"I'm listening," I said softly, staring into his eyes. His deep lavender irises sparkled like fine amethysts in the light from the golden globe. He shifted his gaze away from me, back toward the screen. All of my senses heightened as he began to speak in a soothing, instructive voice.

"What you see there is the joint energy of all living things. Every living thing on earth is a part of this energy. Every human, animal and plant exudes energy from its physical body, and this energy rises up through the skies, joining together as one energy field. This, in essence, is what makes us all one." He paused and gave a slight sigh of awe and admiration.

"When our creator decided to do His earthly experiment, he took his energy and broke it into particles, creating the earth. He formed the broken energy particles into plants, animals and humans. Each has its own purpose. While all living beings have a physical body or existence, they are really just a particle of one total energy - an energy with free will and thoughts and actions, yet still a part of one. We are all one."

I stared at him, fascinated by his rendition of creation. I'd never heard this approach, and while I hesitated to believe in the theory, I could see where it

could have credence.

“Because we are all one,” he continued, “and because many humans continuously experience negative emotions, parts of the whole become unbalanced. This upsets the overall unconditional love and energy we exist in. See those vibrations on the screen...there...and there?” He pointed to the far right side of the globe.

“Yes.”

“Those are parts of the whole, or individuals who are vibrating with negativity due to circumstances in their life they are unwilling to accept. This vibration enters the energy field of that particular human being, the one experiencing the negative emotions.

“Then those energy fields enter the aura of the natural surroundings, shaking and vibrating directly into the atmosphere.”

“Like an earthquake, but in the energy instead,” I said. I felt confident making a statement rather than asking a question, for this time I knew I had the right answer.

“Yes.” He nodded and looked pleased. “This is what causes the forces of nature to occur...the weather you humans are subjected to, the shifting of the moon and sun, and others moods.”

I placed my hand on his arm, stopping him. “But I thought when the moon shifted, *it* altered peoples’ moods?”

“Then who shifts the moon?” He answered my question with one of his own.

“Nature? The atmosphere?”

He cocked his head to the right and held up a finger. “Energies shift nature,” he said. “Nature shifts the moon as the vibrations of the one, singular energy are reflected back to the earth and its inhabitants.”

“Then how could people predict full moons and half moons and quarter moons if it’s caused by shifting of the energy?” I asked.

“Because the shifting of today is based on the energies from the past. Astronomers have learned this and they can predict based on the past, for the same events, while different in appearance, keep happening as earth time moves on.”

“So this is a never-ending circle - or rather, cycle,” I said, my breath almost a whisper as I suddenly understood. “In effect, we humans, create our own moods, and our very environment, even down to the weather.” My mind tumbled over memories of more violent weather in my city over the past few years...ice storms in the winter, unbearable heat waves in the summer, and tornadoes which had ripped apart entire subdivisions in a matter of minutes.

“More violent weather in a more violent world...the concept is stunning!” I said in a choked voice, still not sure it was possible, but I entertained the idea nevertheless.

“Correct. Harsh, destructive weather has sometimes been referred to as our creator’s anger. Yet, it is our own anger, entering from one human’s energy field into others, and eventually into the outer aura. It is unlike the gentle

cleansing rains the earth experiences, which are meant to replenish and refresh, like the tears of a human. It is when humans hold in their tears, stifling their feelings, that those gentle rains turn to heavy storms, corresponding with the churning emotions looking for escape.” He leaned back and sighed. “If only one day, the whole world would meditate at the same exact moment, as one.”

“What would that accomplish?” I asked.

“The energies would calm, like a settling sea, and every living being would finally feel the peace they crave.”

“That would be nice.” I leaned over and rested my head on Nicholas’s shoulder, entering into a minute of silence. For a long moment, I felt the peace he spoke of.

The feeling itself is unexplainable. It caused a loss of words in my mind. But it felt so good and so right, and I knew right then and there, it was a feeling I never wanted to lose.

“Tell me more,” I finally said, sitting up and meeting his gaze. My heart beat so loudly I heard the thump, like the sound of a distant drum, echoing off the walls in the quiet room. “I want to know how to always have this feeling. Please, tell me what I need to know or do to have this peace forever.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Be gentle with yourself,” said Nicholas. He snapped his fingers and a silver goblet appeared in his hand. Carefully, he handed it to me.

“What is it?” I asked, peering into the clear liquid.

“Just water,” he answered with a smile. “It’s good for you. Water helps to clear your mind and bring renewed energy to your system.”

I lifted the cup to my lips and took a drink. “It’s good. Is this like the water you gave me in my dream? It tastes...” I sipped on it again. “Different, somehow, than my water.”

He nodded. “It is different. It hasn’t gone through your underground piping and has no chemicals.”

I leaned back on the sofa and eagerly drank more, wetting my dry lips. It was then I noticed Nicholas didn’t have any shoes on, and I giggled.

“What is it?” he asked with all sincerity.

I pointed to his feet. “You’ve done a good job of dressing in the modern clothes,” I said. “But you forgot shoes.”

He reached down and pulled the ottoman toward him, then sat, legs slightly spread, in front of me. “It’s more comfortable without them,” he said, shrugging and looking down at his toes. A look of recollection crossed his face. “In my previous life, I rarely entertained the idea of garments on my feet. In fact, I used to travel through the woods barefoot.”

I winced, thinking of my own tender feet. “I can barely walk on the driveway without shoes,” I told him. “Sometimes I try, but I tread very lightly.”

“Because you’re afraid?”

“Because I don’t want to get hurt.”

“Just as you do with your husband.” His gaze, now serious and compelling, met mine.

Though I almost laughed at his analogy, I had to admit he was right.

“You must be gentle with yourself,” he repeated his earlier statement.

“Don’t berate yourself, tearing up your soul like the rocks outside tear your feet. If you’re gentle with your body, you owe it to your inner self, and to your heart and soul, to be just as gentle.”

I clutched the goblet between my fingers and ran my thumb over the knotted rope design embedded around the silver rim.

“It’s fine to have goals,” he continued. “But if you expect immediate results and fall short of your striving for perfection, you needn’t condemn yourself. You cannot sow and reap the same day.”

I lifted my chin. “But what if I keep trying and I constantly fail? I will have wasted my time...it will have all been for nothing,” I insisted.

“Failure is an opportunity for growth,” he said, stretching his arms out, then bringing them back, clasping his hands between his knees. “Most successes are built on multitudes of failures - because you learn from them. Wisdom is learned more from failure than success.”

I lowered my shoulders. "But it's so hard...life is so hard...relationships are so difficult. It's physically draining, especially in here." I brought my palm to my chest and placed it over my heart as I stared at Nicholas.

"But is there a better way to invest your energy than to put it into your own growth? What you'll receive is the foundation for greater happiness for the rest of your human life."

"I'll believe it when I see it," I mumbled, glancing away, then back to his face.

"Okay." Nicholas looked up at the ceiling. "Think back to your childhood. Think of something negative others might have said to you, or about you."

A memory came rushing back and landed in the pit of my conscious mind as if it had never been gone. "They said I was ugly," I whispered, grimacing as I recalled the old, familiar pain.

"Who said this?"

"The girls at school. I had two upper teeth which wouldn't come in completely because my mouth was too small. They teased me, saying the teeth looked like fangs. They said I was ugly and I'd never have a boyfriend."

"And did you?" Nicholas asked, his voice filled with gentle compassion.

I blinked, then nodded. "Yes, I had many boyfriends. But I can recall feeling unwanted and unaccepted when they teased me. It was a horrible feeling I wouldn't wish on anyone."

"Yet you ended up having many boyfriends; therefore, you must have been beautiful. You didn't have to be different or better to obtain what they said you'd never have."

I shook my head. "No, I didn't have to be different. However, I think I changed after the incident. Not just because I got braces to fix my teeth, but different in here." I pressed my palm against my chest.

"How? What was different?"

"I didn't tease others. And if my friends began talking about someone, whether for physical reasons or not, I always tried to find something good to say about the party in question."

"For in everyone, there is good," said Nicholas.

"Yes."

"So while you felt like a failure when you experienced rejection from your peers, you managed to not only live through it, but to experience personal growth which made you a better person."

I shrugged. "Perhaps. I still feel self-conscious about my appearance and I constantly wonder if I'm a good enough person."

"Emily!" he snapped.

My shoulders stiffened in response to his urgent tone and my eyes widened as I looked at him. Tiny lines of frustration decorated his face as he lowered his brows. He gave a sigh of exasperation which filled the quiet room like the wind of an impending storm.

"No dog would do to itself what you do to yourself! A tiny dog doesn't go around thinking it's inferior because it doesn't have the long legs of a big dog."

Larger dogs don't put themselves down or think of themselves as failures because they can't cuddle on someone's lap like the smaller dog. They're okay the way they are, and so are you.

"In your essence as a human being, you are always beautiful, capable, and lovable. You can replace some of your negative mental tapes to get along better with other people and enjoy your life more. You can give your life a great boost by continuing to strive, even though you may face failure, for you will experience personal growth every step of the way.

"To say that you wonder about your person being good enough is the tearing up of your inner self, something you certainly don't deserve. Every person is special. Buried inside every person is an inherent good. Different people have different lessons to learn, and this is a part of your personal growth process. These lessons, these experiences, make you no better, nor any worse, than any other being. They serve to make you wiser."

He stood up, crossed his arms in front of his chest and looked down upon me. "If you're afraid to face potential failure, you'll never experience the growth you deserve. Trying is the key. It's like giving a gift to yourself. One which you are very worthy of."

I chewed on the inside of my lip. He had a point. I'd just sat there and admitted I'd experienced personal growth in a negative situation, one in which I perceived I'd failed. Now that I considered the event more closely and had talked about it, I saw that I had become a better person because of my experience. Why couldn't I become a better person from new experiences...even if I failed?

Questions raged through my mind.

Why not continue on? Why not try to master this thing called unconditional love? Even if I fail, I'll succeed, because I will grow inside. Perhaps it was time for me to cease walking so tenderly. As my grandpa used to say, "Only the rocks can toughen your feet, child."

"Okay," I said, nodding. "How can I become happy again in my relationship with John? We obviously have tremendous differences...how can I get past those?"

I stood up and rubbed the back of my neck with one hand. It had stiffened as I'd thought about the painful past, and the challenge of the present. Sighing wearily, I asked the most important question. "Most of all, how can John and I fix our life together, especially if he isn't willing?"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Nicholas stood and paced across the floor. Once again, I watched him, marveling at his realness and questioning it simultaneously. I sensed his presence, physically saw him, and witnessed his touch, but I knew with the blink of an eye, this seemingly 'real' being walking in front of me could disappear.

The next thought almost caused me to laugh aloud and I had to clamp my lips closed and hold my breath in order to force the emotion to stay silent and invisible. I thought of the fact that this man, this soul, was over two hundred years old, yet didn't appear a day over thirty.

"Don't do that!" He suddenly stopped in front of me. His eyes possessed an all-knowing look and I realized he'd read my thoughts again. "Don't suppress your laughter."

I smiled, but still didn't laugh.

"Hiding feelings and thoughts perpetuates what I call your separate-self," he said, resuming his pacing. "Pretending to be something you're not will not move you toward intimacy in a relationship."

I did laugh then, but more at his metamorphosis to a studious, intelligent tone of voice than my original thought.

"That's better," he said. "You must communicate your own living truth. This is a lesson you must remember, Emily. If you feel laughter, allow it to come forth. If you want to cry, then do so. If you don't like something, say so. Although humans usually wish to act gently, if you develop the habit of walking on eggs so as not to trigger certain reactions from others, or activate others' mental tapes, you are failing to be true to yourself. After all, you can only change those thoughts if you acknowledge their existence and face them."

"I'll try," I said, watching his face intently.

"You need to practice this with John," he said.

"Okay." I placed the now empty goblet aside and it disappeared as soon as the base connected with the wood table next to my sofa. Somehow, I wasn't surprised that it vanished.

"You must also give John the freedom to feel whatever he's feeling. That's part of it. You deserve the freedom to express your thoughts, feelings and emotions - and so does he."

"But how do I get him to open up? He's been so cold!"

Nicholas reached behind his back and a moment later extended his hand. A pad of paper and a quill feather pen rested on his palm. "You might wish to take notes," he said and I took the supplies.

Boy, this is really turning into the true aura of learning! I lifted the cardboard cover and turned to the first blank page.

"You must give the following freedoms to yourself and John. These will encourage him to 'open up', as you call it."

I poised the pen over the page, ready to begin writing. The feathers of the pen tickled my nose and I raised my head up, tilting the pen to the right. A

drop of ink spread across the paper where I pressed the tip and I watched as the drop formed into a figure resembling the golden globe on the television set.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, glancing up at Nicholas, then back to the unlined paper.

"First, the freedom to see and hear what is happening now. Don't be concerned with what was, what will be or how something should be. Be able to share what is happening now."

I scribbled quickly, trying to get down each and every word. By the time I'd finished writing, he'd began the second point and I found myself wishing I'd paid more attention in the shorthand class I'd taken in college.

"Second, the freedom to think what one thinks, rather than what one should think. The freedom to feel what one feels, rather than what one should feel. The freedom to want and to choose what one wants, rather than what one should want."

I wrote furiously, trying to maneuver the pen and still keep the feather out of my face.

"And..." he paused and sighed. "The freedom to imagine one's own self-actualization, rather than play a rigid role or always play it safe. In other words, the freedom to be yourself and share that self free of demands and judgments."

"Got it!" I said joyfully as I wrote down the final words and looked up at him. Once again, his eyes possessed a far-away look. I saw the glint of a tear in the corner of one.

"Nicholas? Are you all right?"

He swallowed hard, tilted his head up, then looked over at me with an almost imperceptible nod. "Yes." His voice was barely a whisper and I strained to hear his next words.

"I just wondered how nice it would have been if I'd had the chance to give my Emily those same freedoms."

I watched his eyelid lower. Clearing my throat, I said, "Perhaps you need some of your own advice." I flipped a page back. "You should give yourself the freedom to see and hear what is happening now. Don't be concerned with what was, will be, or should be." I looked up at him after reciting his own words.

A trace of a smile crossed his lips and he raised his head and brushed a long lock of hair back behind his ears. "You're a quick study," he said, crossing his bare arms over his chest as he chuckled. "And you're absolutely correct."

"What's funny?" I asked.

He laughed again. "Suddenly I feel as if our roles are reversed. It's obvious a teacher can also learn from his student - if he takes the time to listen."

I grinned. A rush of adrenaline surged through my body. After all, if I could help Nicholas in any way, a magical soul who seemed to be the epitome of perfection and knowledge, surely I could help John...and maybe even myself!

"As you gradually increase your ability to offer yourself, John, and others these freedoms, you will enable the power of unconditional love to carry your life to new heights. You'll no longer feel hopeless, a victim of circumstances beyond your control. Your life will be miraculously transformed - all because of

unconditional love.”

“So how do I begin with John?” I asked, placing the paper and pen on the end table. I held out my hands, palms up. “Do I start with his mental tapes? Do I delve into his childhood? Do I need to find answers before I can start the process of loving unconditionally? Or should I wait and see if he still loves me?” The questions rolled off my tongue.

Nicholas walked over to me and sat on the sofa. He placed his hand on my bare knee and extended the index finger of his other hand, lifting my chin. Slowly, he caressed my bottom lip with the pad of his thumb. Shivers slid through me at his gentle touch. He moved his mouth close to mine and I could feel his warm breath mixing with the short bursts of air coming from my throat.

“The best way to help John experience greater love for you is to create in yourself an experience of love for him. Do it first. And continuously. Don’t expect anything in return from him. Eventually he will begin to feel the love as well and give it back to you...but with good feelings.”

I closed my eyes, drunk from his loving advice and his breath against my cheek. His words continued, his voice subtly echoing in my ear.

“Once you can give the love with no expectations of getting something back, you will feel exactly as you do at this moment.”

I leaned into his warm, safe embrace as contentment and peace surrounded me. I had not a care in the world as I listened to Nicholas.

“It’s very simple,” he continued. “You love a person because they’re there. If you want to experience more happiness, loving is how you do it. It’s the best way you, yourself, can feel good. Every human wants to feel happy and fulfilled. Learning to radiate your love is the best way to be good to yourself and this pure love will automatically produce the best relationship for those involved.”

“But what about others, not just John? How do I love others?” I whispered the questions as I thought of my family, friends and co-workers. “And how can I make sure I don’t lose myself while I’m showing everyone love?”

“There are appropriate forms of loving for every human you come in contact with. Obviously, you won’t demonstrate your love to a friend or acquaintance in the same manner as you would your husband. But you can offer other living beings these freedoms. This will show your love.

“As for making sure you don’t lose yourself in the process, this can be handled by setting limits. From time to time, someone, be it John or another person, may want things which you don’t want to spend time, energy, or money on. It’s okay to have these boundaries, but you should make others aware of them and be honest in expressing your feelings.”

Nicholas brushed my hair back from my face with his fingers. “There’s nothing wrong with having limits...boundaries,” he repeated. “Everyone has them, and they expand farther and farther as you grow in unconditional love. And it’s always helpful to recall this familiar phrase: It is in giving that we receive.”

I sighed, for Nicholas made everything sound so easy, so perfect.

“I must go now,” Nicholas said, kissing the top of my head. “Your

husband will return home soon and I challenge you to try the teachings I've left with you. While you may not see immediate results, I do believe you'll witness a noticeable difference...if not with John, perhaps within yourself."

I nodded and blinked back the tears pushing at the corners of my eyes. I didn't want him to go. But I knew deep in my heart, for my sake and the sake of my marriage, I must have time on my own to try...to feel...and to experience as only a human could, the struggle of letting go and the miracle of love on earth.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Sunday morning dawned clear and crisp. I awakened on the sofa to the sun streaming through the mini-blinds and a dew-kissed breeze drifting through the cracked living room window. For a moment, I lay very still, inhaling and exhaling, filling my chest with the fresh incoming air. I listened to the silence until it began to alter from its gentle pleasing sound to a throbbing sense of aloneness, and then I scrambled to life.

A trip through the empty house reminded me of my husband's missing presence and my hands shook while I made my morning coffee. As soon as one cup was ready, I opened the back door and sank into a patio chair on the deck, gratefully inhaling the light floral scents as I drank the hot liquid.

I was thankful for the break in the humidity, for it had been stifling the past few weeks, like my life had seemed for months. Today, however, I experienced an incredible feeling of lightness. It was as if the weights had been lifted from my shoulders and the blindfold removed from my eyes.

Now as I sat sipping my coffee, it suddenly dawned on me that I was not responsible for my husband's happiness. All I could do was love John...*for love is all there is*. It was up to him whether he wanted to return home and accept that love.

I continued to sit quietly, occasionally glancing around the yard. Birds sang delightful hymns from the tree tops and the sun gently warmed my face. In the distance, I heard a neighbor's car engine roar to life.

I breathed deeply once again, basking in the beauty of the morning, living completely in the present, as Nicholas had instructed. It was a wonderful feeling - a safe feeling. I thought of last night, of Nicholas, and I wondered if he was around me now.

The thought shattered like breaking glass as the back door burst open and I sat up straight. My body immediately became rigid and tense, despite the relaxation I'd been experiencing. Turning swiftly in my chair, I found my husband standing just outside on the stoop.

John looked haggard, his graying hair, unruly, curling in tiny circles behind his ears and around his forehead. His face was unshaven; his clothes, mussed and wrinkled.

He averted his gaze as I attempted to make eye contact. For a long moment, he looked down at the ground. Finally, he glanced back up, offering me a stare filled with agony and confusion.

My tongue was glued to the top of my mouth as I sat very still and contemplated the emotions dancing in his eyes. I wanted to know where he'd been, yet I didn't want to ask. And was it really important? He was here now...where he'd spent the night made no difference. I swallowed hard, offering myself the freedom of staying in the now, of not worrying about the past, which I certainly couldn't change.

John took slow and deliberate steps. I counted them. One. Two. Three.

Three long, almost crippling strides brought him to the deck railing. It would have taken me at least six.

He leaned back against the railing and cautiously folded his arms in front of his chest. Though he seemed stiff and angry, a look at his eyes when he allowed me a glance showed me he was really afraid.

I could relate. My body tingled with a tense, edgy sensation ever since his arrival and I felt if I moved, I would break in two. Inside, my stomach muscles twitched and fluttered, like wings of a butterfly. The situation fostered the nervous habit I'd developed over the past couple of years of chewing the inside of my cheek.

Should I speak first, or should I wait for him to speak? The question lingered in my mind for many seconds before I allowed myself the luxury of a short breath.

The sun no longer heated my face, for John's silhouette blocked the rays of light. I shivered as his mouth finally opened and he began to talk.

"We've got some real problems, Emily." He finally spoke, his voice low and cold and calculated.

I wanted to retort, but stopped myself and lowered my head, scrutinizing every wrinkle of my gown across my lap. It was hard, but I let go of a demand which threatened to surface...one which called for him to walk over and throw his arms around me, professing his love. There was no way I could even begin to expect such behavior and the best thing would be not to expect anything.

Whatever behavior he chose to demonstrate was okay. After all, I'd rather have him do loving things when he really felt like doing so, and that obviously wasn't this point in time, this strained moment in our lives.

I closed my eyes. My husband was entitled to his experience. While his guardedness, fear and anger weren't on the top of my wish list for the day, I refused to deny him the right to feel the way he wanted.

Thinking those thoughts, I suddenly felt lighter and the tension slowly seeped from my body, dissipating into the thin air and leaving me limp and exhausted. The heavy pounding of my heart subsided as a feeling of peacefulness encased my entire body. I felt as if I were giving John a silent, unspoken gift, and it felt good.

"We do, Emily," he spoke again, his tone less cutting.

I opened my eyes and lifted my chin. It took all I had to meet his gaze, but I finally did. I nodded as I looked past his protective wall and saw the scared man, almost childlike, behind his facade.

"Yes, we do," I said softly.

He looked away and I watched as the sun danced across his cheekbones. I could see the familiar muscle filled with anger, twitching alongside of his jaw.

Placing my hands on the damp arms of the chair, I pushed, forcing myself to a standing position despite my weak, trembling knees. I walked across the decking and stood in front of him.

He kept his arms firmly enfolded around his chest, his large hands cupping his elbows. Taking another deep breath, I slowly extended my arms,

wrapping them around his tight body, squeezing hard. I lowered my head and rested it against his taut chest.

A moment later, I felt his chin nestle against the top of my head. His breath tickled the back of my hair, coming in short, uneven spurts and I continued to hug him, clasping my hands together behind his broad back. God, how long had it been since we hugged each other? The emotion accompanying the embrace overwhelmed me and I fought back the urge to break into sobs of relief.

"I love you," I whispered, closing my eyelids tight over my tear-filled pupils.

"I'm sorry I hurt your feelings," he finally said, his voice breaking at the end of the sentence.

Lowering my arms, I stepped back, intending to reply to his statement.

But he averted his gaze once again and quickly stepped past me toward the house. I could feel the magic of the fleeting embrace fizzle away into the air which devoured the distance between us. I watched, dumbfounded, as the door slammed behind him when he entered our home. Then I leaned back against the railing where John had stood and I turned my face toward the heavens, blinking away the bright sunlight.

God, this was hard!

I waited, expecting the familiar knots of frustration to clench my stomach, yet they never came. Instead, a feeling of satisfaction mixed with breaths of hope swept through my inner self. Despite John's volatile emotions, I had just taken the first step in showing my husband the unconditional love he deserved.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Almost an hour passed before John returned to the deck. This time, his hair was neatly brushed back from a clean-shaven face and the clothes he wore were fresh from the closet. He looked so handsome, I almost asked him if he was going somewhere, but held my tongue while he took the seat across from me, pulled it out, and sat down.

"I had to get cleaned up," he said.

"You look wonderful." The words were spoken with total honesty and it hit me that my husband, even at forty-five, was still the most appealing man I'd ever seen.

"You said something yesterday about my motivations, why I worry about money and finances," he said, looking at me intently, his lips turned downward into a frown.

"Yes, I did." A breeze swept at my bangs and I reached up and pushed them back, behind my ears. "I think something must have happened in your past...something regarding money, and I'd like to see if we can figure it out. You're awfully frustrated about the issue of finances, but I don't understand why it's bothering you to the extent it has been."

John glanced away and sighed deeply. I recognized the breath - it's one he usually offered before lashing out at me. I cringed, waiting for the impact with unwelcome anticipation.

He finally looked at me again, his gaze spitting with sparks of anger. Had I been able to see inside him, I imagined there'd be a boiling pot of lava, ready to erupt.

His tone was low and clipped. "Rather than talk about my money worries, why don't we talk about your irresponsibility with the green stuff? Perhaps your flippant spending is the cause of my feelings. Have you considered that?"

Ouch.

I winced at the harshness of his words and the sound of the raspy, grating breath which followed. Glancing away from his penetrating gaze, I took a couple of deep breaths, gathering my composure. Once again, I felt an urge to retort, to dispute his comments. Yet John had a right to experience his feelings, I told myself.

I clamped my lips closed. Oh, I wanted to lash back! I wanted to remind him of all of the times he'd blown money on vehicles, on electronic gadgets we didn't need. I wanted to remind him of how his perfectionist attitude had cost us more than a few pennies...how he'd take his shirts and pay a cleaner before he'd let me launder them, because they pressed his collars perfectly. I ground my back teeth as I recalled his expensive meals away from home, how he used to splurge at the fanciest restaurants, eating the best cuisine. He'd certainly done his share of frivolous spending, totally separate from my influence and actions. But that was then and this was now.

By thinking of them and tossing them out of my mind, I slowly washed the

negative, non-productive thoughts away. When the tightening in my back and shoulders began to subside, I turned back to him, facing him with a calmness and composure I wasn't aware I possessed.

"I agree I've appeared irresponsible. In fact, I've been thinking about this a lot and I think I know where my behavior originated. May I explain?" I held out my right hand, palm up, while I waited for his answer.

Tentatively, John reached out and pressed his palm down, onto mine. We entwined our fingers and I immediately gained strength from the gesture.

"I'm listening," he said, his tone losing some of its razor sharp edge from moments ago.

"When I was young, Mom and Dad stayed close to home. And of course, Sam and I did, too. We were never allowed to do much with our friends and as a family, we had a 'routine', I guess you could say. We didn't detour from it often. When we did do anything for entertainment, it involved spending money.

"We went to steak restaurants or to shopping malls. Occasionally, we saw a movie. Vacations, when taken, were extravagant and expensive. But between times...between these isolated events, we stayed home and I believe the entire family was secretly bored. I entertained myself by writing and living in a fantasy world through my words."

John leaned back in the chair and extended his legs. Our palms, still clasped together, began to perspire as the sun loomed above, its rays beating onto the deck. I waited to see if he wanted to say something and when he didn't speak, I continued.

"Dad slept a lot. After work, he'd settle into the chair with a martini and he'd sip on that one drink for what seemed like hours. Usually, he'd fall asleep in that same chair about ten minutes after supper. Mom complained about not having any money, though I figured out she'd been hoarding it away in her purse...saving it for when we all finally went stir-crazy. Sam...well," I paused and chuckled.

"He was just plain lazy. He'd lie around like a bear in hibernation, watching television and listening to the radio. When we all turned into makeshift tigers, growling and snarling at one another, that's when we'd stop staring at the four walls and go out. Then the spending would begin."

John released my hand and swiped at the beads of perspiration on his forehead. "So you're telling me that you associate money with entertainment because of how you were raised?"

I tilted my head to the right. "Sort of. More than that, I associate it with boredom. I have this mental tape which says if I get bored or stir-crazy, I should spend money. It created a form of excitement for me then."

"Does it still?"

I shrugged. "Yeah, I guess it does. Because that's when I do it...when I'm here alone and I get bored. And it's exciting, at least temporarily."

John crossed his arms. "I suppose you blame me for that, the fact that you're bored." The inflection of impending anger was as clear in his tone as it was in his words.

I blinked and opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out. I'd started to say no, that I didn't blame him. But that wouldn't be totally honest and I would deprive myself of the freedom to be me. Instead, I'd be playing a role.

"Yes, John, I have blamed you."

He jumped up from the chair and began pacing the length of the deck.

I stood up, too. "I know I shouldn't have. It's not your fault. It's my hang-up and something I have to get past. And I'm going to reprogram these thoughts or even erase them...whatever it takes." I stopped in front of him and grabbed his forearms between my fingers, forcing him to stop walking.

"I'm done blaming, John. I'm finished criticizing. But I'd prefer while I work on this that you try to be understanding. This behavior...these thoughts, well, they didn't come overnight and they won't go away overnight." I paused. My words were coming so fast; I was pleading, begging. I forced my rising voice to quiet by taking a deep breath and swallowing before I finished my thoughts. "If I slip up, I'd like to know it's okay. That's why I wish we could work on your attachment to money, too. It might help us both."

I brought a hand up and caressed the side of his face with the back of my fingers. Surprise darted through me like a bolt of unexpected lightning as he jerked his head away, his body quickly following.

"John!" I cried when he turned his back to me.

He swung around and pointed a shaking finger at me. "You might understand the reason to my attachment to money if you'd ever thought to ask me about my childhood!" he yelled, his voice echoing through the neighboring trees.

What? What in the world was he talking about?

We'd talked about his childhood numerous times, but he always glossed over the events. With his mother and father both deceased, his brothers and sisters had drifted apart and John hardly mentioned them or days gone by.

"Trust me," he said as he turned and began walking down the steps. "You don't want to know. Just be glad you don't!"

"John, wait!" I yelled, running to the top of the stairs. I took them two at a time as I tried to catch up to him, but his long legs carried him to the back of our lot and into the woods before I made it halfway.

I stopped and bent over, struggling with my labored breathing. A few seconds later I straightened and looked back at the house on the hill. Then I glanced over my shoulder at the tall trees and the dark green underbrush which had swallowed my husband.

I debated for a moment, wondering what to do next. A quiet voice whispered "*Go after him.*" I looked around, then looked up at the clear sky. Turning, I started toward the woods.

The voice was right. Finding my husband and facing his hurt was much more appealing than spending one more lonely hour in that empty, silent house.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I found John at the pond. At first, I didn't think he was there, but then I caught a glimpse of beige material behind the bush. I knew exactly where he was then -- on the rock we used to call Nature's Bed because of its long, rectangular shape. A thin, vertical slab supported the ground under the bush, creating a makeshift headboard.

"Hi," I said as I eased around the bush and stepped down onto the rock.

John rested his chin in his hands. "Hi," he mumbled against clenched fingers.

"I've wondered if this was still here or if the hill would have washed it away by now." I sat beside him and leaned up against the granite slab.

He didn't speak.

Great, I thought. He's not talking.

The negative thoughts entered my mind with increasing urgency. If he didn't talk, how were we supposed to work anything out? Lord, I didn't want to force him into conversation. I'd done it so much in the beginning of the problem period, and it had been mentally and emotionally exhausting.

I cranked up my old, comfortable habit and began gnawing on the inside of my lip. Maybe he likes it when I drag stuff out of him...maybe it makes him feel important, validated in some way. But why should I have to go to such an extreme, practically begging? His reluctance to speak made me feel I was unworthy of his thoughts.

I crossed my arms in front of me, gripping my forearms and squeezing hard. No more. I refused to beg. I refuse to allow him to make me feel this way!

"Psst..."

What?

"Psst..." The sound in my left ear became insistent and I finally turned in that direction. My mouth dropped open when I saw Nicholas squatting beside me. I opened my mouth to speak, then abruptly snapped it closed as I remembered John sulking on the other side.

"He can't see or hear me," Nicholas said.

I opened my mouth again.

"But he can hear you." Nicholas pointed at me to emphasize his point.

"Don't worry. I can read your thoughts," he said, tapping a finger on the side of my forehead.

Oh, yes, how could I forget? I lowered my brows. *What are you doing here?* I questioned him with my mind, my inner voice.

"Let's put that negative thinking to bed," he said, resting his hands on his knees. "You're demanding again."

Well, I could prefer he talk to me, but this has been a long-standing problem between us. My mind lingered on the word 'prefer', which I was suddenly sick of hearing.

"So what if he doesn't talk right now?" Nicholas said, lifting a brow. "He

will when he's ready. What are you afraid of?"

I'm not afraid of anything! I shifted uncomfortably as I pursed my lips together and directed my thoughts toward Nicholas. *I just don't see how we can work anything out when he refuses to talk.* I glanced over at John, who now had his forehead cradled in his hands.

"And is forcing him to talk if he's not ready going to make for a healthy exchange?" he asked.

I expelled a frustrated breath.

"Why don't you try a different approach," he continued. "You have a right to your wants and desires. But instead of blaming by using a statement such as 'why won't you talk to me', why don't you simply state what you want? Tell your husband you'd like to know what he's thinking and leave it at that. Either he'll tell you or he won't. If you sit there long enough, I'm betting he'll tell you. Just try it. And for goodness' sake, close the gap between you."

I looked to my right again. There was about a foot of space between John and I.

"That small amount of space can seem like a mile to someone who's hurting," Nicholas said. "You did well back at the house, holding his hand. Touch him now, while you express what it is you want. Go ahead, try it."

I balled my hands into fists, clenching the fingers tight inside my palm. *But I touched his face back there and he jerked away from me!*

"Ah." Nicholas rocked back and forth on his toes. "So you fear his rejection. Emily, Emily, Emily," he clucked. "Don't you see? Your demand is creating this fear. If you accept the fact he might not open up to you, then you won't have anything to fear."

I looked over at John. His arms were tense. The corded muscles in his neck and back looked like tight rubber bands, as if they could snap at any given moment.

I inhaled deeply and turned back to Nicholas, only to find he'd gone again. I thought about his words of advice. Maybe he was right. After all, I couldn't control John's feelings or actions. But I could control my reaction. John might have another mental tape, one which told him to keep things to himself. I couldn't change that tape. Yet I could show him by example, by my own actions, that it feels better to get the inner feelings out, especially if they are tearing him up inside. For only then could the problems be addressed.

I wetted my parched lips with my tongue and began to speak. "I feel better now," I said in a soft voice. "It feels good to finally acknowledge my problem with spending money. I never realized where it was coming from. And talking to you about it really helped."

I paused.

John didn't move. He didn't speak.

I flexed the fingers of my right hand, then tentatively reached out and placed my palm on his shoulder. Leaning up, I whispered, "I'd like to know what you're thinking."

I waited, expecting no answer, resolving myself to be accepting of

whatever he gave me, even if it was only silence.

A few seconds passed as I gently rubbed his stiff shoulder. A bird cried out in the distance. A breeze rustled John's hair and I moved my hand higher, entwining my fingers in the curly locks at the back of his neck. They were still damp and when I closed my eyes and breathed in, I could smell the sweet scent of his strawberry shampoo.

The aroma filled my head as I sat quietly, patiently waiting. Soon the scent of fresh pine added a crispness, enabling me to breath more clearly. I became so involved in feeling the silkiness of John's hair and smelling the mixture of aromas that I almost missed the faint words he spoke.

His voice sounded very far away, almost childlike. "Money was always an issue when I was growing up," he said, his head still lowered. "Lack of it caused nothing but pain and sorrow. My childhood was filled with a devastation you can't even begin to imagine."

I opened my eyes as he brought his head upward and turned to face me. "Try me," I whispered, moving my hand to his cheek.

He blinked and a tear glittered at the corner of his eye. It hung on his lashes, threatening to fall. I reached up with finger and brushed it away.

Then I met his gaze, wondering what he would say. Peace washed over me as I prepared to listen...to really listen to my husband for perhaps the first time in our entire married life - without expectations and devoid of judgment.

And no matter what tale he told me, no matter how ugly the exposed truths, I knew I'd love him with all of my heart and help him to survive. Not because of what he'd do for me in return, but simply because as a human being, he deserved my love.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

John swatted at another tear as one would swing at an aggravating bug. Then he cleared his throat and spoke, his voice low and husky.

"In my family, there were no luxuries," he said. "Sometimes we were lucky just to have food on the table. Having the farm...well, let's just say there were no guarantees. Weather destroyed crops. Bugs, too. Dad and Mom were always working...from sunup 'till sundown. They'd make us work, too...after school. On Saturdays, Dad would go to town to play cards -- or so he said."

John stopped and leaned back against the slab of rock. He folded his hands across his stomach and I waited eagerly for his next words.

"We never went to town. There wasn't enough money. Come to find out, Dad gambled away many weeks' worth of grocery money. There were other women, too. Women he spent money entertaining while Mom took care of us. When Mom found out - and she always did - they'd have a hell of a fight. And it all boiled down to money. There was never enough. By the time they managed to sell a crop, Dad had bet half of it away - on credit.

"He bought furniture. Once he bought a television and we kids were thrilled. Now we had something to do other than school work and chores. But just when we'd get ahead a bit, the rug was pulled out from under us." He paused and rubbed his cheeks with his hands.

"How? What happened?" I placed my hand on his arm. His skin felt hot, as if he burned inside with a stifling rage.

"The sheriff would come sometimes. He'd take Dad to jail. Apparently, he'd written bad checks and couldn't cover them. Then the store would come and repossess the items Dad had brought home." He cleared his throat.

"I can remember standing in a corner and watching as they hauled things out the door. Mom would run into her room, crying. One night, they came and took my bed...a bed Dad had made for me from lumber bought on credit. I cried that night." He stopped as tears filled his eyes. I squeezed his arm gently.

Swallowing hard, he continued. "It was the only thing my Daddy ever gave me...that bed. It was the only thing that was ever just for me." The tears drained from the corners of his eyes, streaking his cheeks, yet he continued his rendition of his childhood.

"And the night I was finally going to get to go to town with Dad, for the first time ever, when the sheriff came again. We were going to see a live baseball game. It was something special we were going to do, because I'd done well in school.

"But Dad had stolen the gas for the car. A few days before, he'd filled it up in preparation for our trip into St. Louis. He'd driven off without paying and the owner of the station turned him in. I found out, he didn't even have tickets to the game - he was planning to sneak in."

John wiped his eyes. "That was the most horrible, humiliating experience I'd ever been through. To think my Dad had to steal to take me to the game! it

made me feel like I wasn't important enough for him to save up the money for the event."

My heart felt as if a hand had reached inside my chest and yanked it out. "Oh, honey, I'm so sorry!" I stretched out beside him and wrapped an arm around his waist, resting my head on his chest.

"Oh, that wasn't the worst of it." He shook his head, his breath catching in his throat. "When Dad got home from jail, he and Mom had a terrible fight. Though they argued behind the closed bedroom door, Tommy, Jan, Carol and I heard every word. Mom asked how he could be such a fool, to drive away without paying for the gas. Then she started in on him about never having anything, and accused him of wasting the family's money on trashy whores. She told him she'd have left him a long time ago if she didn't have all of us kids. She said they needed their Daddy, and she called him a failure because he was never there...he was always working or gallivanting."

John sighed, as if he were relieved to have made it through the story. But to my surprise, he wasn't through yet.

"Dad let her have her say and then he started throwing things. We could hear the sound of splitting wood and we heard Mom cry out. Tommy started toward the door, but I stopped him when I heard Dad's voice. And I've wished ever since I'd of let him go."

I sat up and my eyes widened. "Why?" Horrible visions of abuse and violence entered my mind.

John ground his teeth. "Dad said--" His voice left him and he coughed. "Dad said they'd have been better off if Mom hadn't gotten pregnant again."

"She was pregnant during all of this?"

John shook his head. "No, Emily. He was talking about me." He sat up suddenly and stabbed his finger into his chest. His face was wracked with pain and anger, the skin wrinkling at his temples and mouth.

"He said I was the last straw. 'We'd have been fine it hadn't been for John...the hospital bill nearly did us in...' Those were his words! He said he wished I'd never been born, that he'd been working his ass off for years for another damn kid, another damn mouth to feed!"

I covered my mouth with my hands. I wanted to throw up! How could my husband have been subjected to such cruelty? After so many years of marriage, how could I not know about this? Why hadn't I seen the signs?

My God! John equated lack of money with all of this. It all became clear as I sat there, frozen from the impact of his heart-wrenching story.

John thought money would bring him acceptance. If only he had enough money, he'd be wanted! This wasn't simply a negative mental tape...it was a destructive one, waiting, like a buried time bomb, ready to explode.

The anger fueled up inside of me and I clenched my hands into tight, trembling fists. I closed my eyes, trying to ward off the thoughts which entered my mind. Nicholas had implied I was to unconditionally love everyone. Yet how could I feel unconditional love for a man I would have wanted to kill if he wasn't already dead? How could I stay loving toward the man who'd wounded my

husband for life?

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Emily?” John wrapped his arms around me. “Are you okay?”

I nodded as he pulled me closer. Nestling my head under his chin and squeezing him hard, I said, “How horrible, John...what a horrible thing for him to say! I can’t believe I didn’t know--”

“Shhh.” John tilted my head upward and pressed his forefinger over my lips. “You couldn’t know. I didn’t want to talk about it.”

The tears had disappeared from his eyes but unwillingly filled mine. John’s face was bare of pain now. The lines around his eyes and mouth had smoothed considerably and he looked at me calmly, quietly.

“You know,” he finally said. “You might be right. I’ve had fears of going to jail when I wrote a check too close to the balance in our account. I’ve worried they’d kick us out of the house, or worse yet, come in and haul everything out, leaving us with nothing.”

“That’s understandable,” I said in a choked voice. “But would it really matter?”

He lowered his brows. “What do you mean?”

I shifted on the rock, pulling back from John as I gathered my thoughts. Crossing my legs and folding my hands in my lap, I said, “You’re working so hard to keep paying for what tangible things we have, and as a result, you’re not here to enjoy them.”

John sat very still and appeared to be pondering my words.

“Just because those things happened with your father doesn’t mean they’ll occur with you, in your life.”

John looked away. Gazing into the distance, he said, “I guess I’m following the same pattern as Dad, trying to obtain it all. I’ve often wondered why that is...and the only thing I could come up with is because I loved him and wanted to make him proud.”

My eyes widened. “How could you love someone who said such horrible things?”

He shrugged. “I guess I knew deep down he really didn’t mean them. After all, it was during the heat of an argument those harsh words were spoken. Outside of that, he was quiet and calm. He never treated me badly. He just wasn’t the kind of Dad I dreamed of. But that wasn’t his fault. His thinking came from generations before him, and he acted the only way he knew how.

“After that incident, I learned to expect nothing. And so when I got nothing, I wasn’t disappointed.”

I sat there, stunned. Shock fizzled through my body. Had I just heard what I thought I heard? If that wasn’t unconditional love at its deepest, I didn’t know what was!

I jumped to my feet and moved to the end of the slab, grabbing onto the trunk of a nearby tree. I stared across the pond which was somewhat murky from the lack of rain and recent humidity.

Like the rising of the morning sun, realization dawned. It was I who was to learn about unconditional love. It was me, not my husband, who neglected to hold such love in my heart! Somewhere along the way during this discussion, I'd assumed my husband was incapable of this trait. Yet it wasn't John at all...it was me who needed the lesson.

I closed my eyes as I hugged the tree. I envisioned Nicholas winking at me, telling me I was right.

"Emily?" John touched my shoulder and I spun around.

"You're capable of it!" I said excitedly.

"Capable of what?"

I moved past him and paced back and forth along the length of the flat rock. "Unconditional love...you've got it! You've shown it. You've demonstrated it for your father."

He expelled a quick breath. "Hardly."

I stopped in front of him. "Yes! You did -- you are! This is amazing! Here I thought I was going to have to teach you about it, but it's me who needs the lesson, not you. A few minutes ago, I felt incredible hatred toward your father for his harsh words about you. But you...you turned around and said you loved him still, despite his words."

John shook his head. "Then what about myself? What about others? For God's sake, Emily, you know I've been unable to do that with anyone else."

I grabbed his hands, clasping them tightly. "But you can. Don't you see? You are capable of it!"

His lips parted slightly, and he tossed his head back and gave a tiny laugh. "I don't feel capable," he said. "I don't know how."

"I do," I said, emphatically shaking his hands. "I mean, I know what I'm supposed to do, the way I'm supposed to be, but I'm not there yet. I want to be there. I want to experience the love, for then I'll have true peace."

I turned and stared into the woods. "We are all one," I said softly. "But if we cannot experience unconditional love, it breaks our oneness with the universe. It causes strife in our hearts and allows negative emotions to rule our minds. We are filled with unhealthy emotions, destructive mental tapes, and the only way to change it is by experiencing unconditional love." My voice and my thoughts drifted off.

"Emily." John tugged on my hands. I turned and looked up at him, staring deep into his eyes. His brows were lowered, his gaze, concerned.

"Emily," he repeated. "What in God's name are you talking about? What's this stuff about oneness with the universe? Where are you getting this?"

I froze and pulled my bottom lip under my top teeth, biting it firmly. Dare I tell my husband about Nicholas? Dare I tell him what I'd garnered from the purchase of the picture which had caused his recent anger?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I didn't spend many moments debating what to say, as John stared at me inquisitively, eager for my answer.

"It's the picture," I finally blurted out, watching his expression.

"The one with the roses?" he asked. "The one--"

"Yes, the one you got so mad about." I finished his sentence.

"I don't understand." He dropped my hands and I immediately took hold of his fingers again, closing the gap between us.

"I felt a need to buy that picture. And I'm glad now that I did, because we're talking - really communicating - for the first time in a long while."

He leaned back against the trunk of the tree. "Okay. But what's the picture have to do with this other stuff about unconditional love and oneness with the universe?"

I paused and swallowed, gathering my thoughts. "I've been doing a lot of thinking since I bought the picture," I confessed. "And I've been receiving messages."

"From whom?" Lines of confusion crossed his face.

I shrugged, doubting Nicholas's 'realness' for the purpose of the current discussion. I let go of one of John's hands and pointed to my head. "In here." I pointed to my chest. "And in here."

John's gaze followed my finger, then returned to my face. He stared at me, intent and curious. "Let me get this straight. Because you bought a picture, you suddenly feel unconditional love - or lack of it - is our problem?"

"It's everyone's problem, John," I said. "Not just ours. If a person doesn't feel unconditional love for himself, then he can't feel it for others. I'm guilty of it. You're guilty of it. Our neighbors and friends and co-workers are guilty of it. In essence, I have come to believe we are all one. But we're destroying that oneness by not allowing love in our hearts. Not just love for a few, but love for everyone we meet."

A trace of a grin crossed his face. "Okay," he said slowly, his tone pacifying. "But since this is everyone's problem -- worldwide I assume is what you mean -- well, what can we do about it?"

He squinted at me, brows lowered in perplexity, as if I were crazy. And I had to admit, I was crazy with excitement. "Okay," I began in a matter-of-fact tone, holding out my hand, palm up and fingers outstretched. "You've shown it with your feelings toward your father. You said you just accepted things, you expected nothing. It works the same way with others. Change your demands of others to preferences. By doing so, you'll become detached from the outcome. By demanding, you set yourself up to be disappointed...or hurt...or angry." I closed my fingers one by one as I went over the points Nicholas had taught me.

"This is supposed to enable me to be unconditionally loving?" His statement carried a humorous inflection and he gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head.

“Yes,” I said, staring pointedly into his eyes. “It’s the first step. Just try it. Please, John...just try it, will you?”

He sighed, then shrugged. “Why not?”

I smiled.

“So where do I begin?” he asked. “How do I do it?”

My mind whirred like a propeller, spinning over several choices. I picked one which I felt would be right for John.

“All right,” I said. “How about your job? You were hurt and angry when they put you on part-time earlier this year. You’ve been demanding extra hours ever since full-time work was reinstated, as if you’re trying to make up for the lost hours.”

“Because we need the money,” he said.

“Yes. But imagine this...imagine if you wanted the extra hours, but weren’t so demanding about it. Just make it clear you would like the extra work, but don’t order that it be given to you. Once you do this, you will have changed your demand to a preference and you’ll be accepting of the outcome, whatever it might be. Even if you don’t get the hours assigned to you, you’ll feel okay about it. Maybe you’ll choose to do something else with that time -- come here and fish, get back to nature, something you’ve always enjoyed.” I gestured toward the pond.

“Maybe.”

“If you’re more accepting of the outcome, and don’t stomp out of your office with your shoulders drooping, perhaps your boss will take notice of the attitude change. And he might like it.”

“I don’t stomp out.”

I tilted my head to the left and placed my hand on my hip. “John.”

He tilted his head backward and looked up at the tree tops. “Okay. Sometimes I stomp.”

“Just try it,” I said, taking his hand. “Please.”

He looked down at me again, grinning. “Are you demanding I try?”

I smiled. “Absolutely not. It’s up to you.” I placed my hands on his chest and toyed with the open collar of his shirt. “That’s another lesson.”

“What?”

“You must give others freedom.”

“Freedom?”

“The freedom to be in the now. The freedom to think, feel and want, whatever and however the person wishes, rather than the way one should, according to others’ expectations. In other words, give a person the freedom to be himself, rather than a role-player.”

He touched my chin. “Right now, I have to admit I’ve been thinking about doing something. I feel like doing it. I know if I do it, I’ll be true to myself and not acting like someone else, because I can feel it deep inside of me.”

“What is it?” My eyes widened and a slight tremor shook my body.

He leaned closer, his eyes as dark as melting chocolate. “I want to kiss my wife. I want to hold you, Emily. Will you grant me that freedom?”

I didn't have a chance to answer for as soon as my lips parted, his mouth was on mine. His tongue, coated with the delightful flavor of fresh mint, circled mine as his arms tightened around my trembling body. My heart swelled as an erratic beat took over and my husband kissed me for the first time in a very, very long time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The next morning was the first time in weeks - no, months - I awakened next to my husband. It was a nice feeling, cuddling close to his warm body. I snuggled closer, lying in the spoon position as he mumbled something incoherent.

I lay quietly next to him for several minutes, thinking over our night together. We'd talked well into the evening, going over the same issues again. I was giving him examples of demands versus preferences when I heard him snoring softly, his mouth pressed against my ear. I'd smiled and reached to turn off the light when he awakened briefly.

"Emily?" he said.

"Yes?"

"I'm glad you weren't hurt in the accident. We'll get the car fixed soon." Then he'd patted my arm and fell back to sleep.

I glanced over my shoulder at the rose picture. A tiny bit of sunlight danced around the edges of the blinds, its rays trickling across the red rose, illuminating the center of the open flower. I thought of Nicholas and wondered where he was, if he waited inside the framed photo. He hadn't come to me in my dreams last night. In fact, it was the first peaceful night's sleep I'd had in a while.

Turning, I nuzzled John's neck. He stirred under my touch and I gently kissed his lips. A shiver sped down my spine as I felt the sorely-missed swell of his arousal against my leg.

He groaned in response to his body's reaction and stretched his arms high above his head. Then he wrapped them around me and planted a kiss on my cheek.

"Good morning," he said, his voice still husky with sleep.

"Morning."

"Are you trying to torture me?" He lowered his eyes and I laughed.

"Not in the least."

"Right," he said, shifting his gaze toward the clock. "Uh, oh."

"What?" My gaze followed his and I noticed it was almost eight.

He moaned and rolled away from me, off the edge of the bed. "I've got an eight-thirty meeting," he said, pointing to the clock.

"Oh." I heard the inflection of disappointment in my voice and I knew John did, too.

"Maybe I won't have to work late tonight," he said as he headed into the bathroom. He started to pull the door closed behind him, then quickly pushed it back open. "Emily..." He looked down at the floor, then glanced up at me. "Thanks for yesterday. I feel better after unloading. I'll try to do what you suggested...prefer instead of demand."

"Okay." I smiled. "I'll try, too. I want to work things out, John. I think somehow, along the way, our priorities got messed up. I want to fix things. I

want to fix myself and us, too.”

“Me, too, Em.” He offered me a quick smile before he closed the door.

I crawled out of bed as well. As much as I'd love to stay there and relish my husband's scent on the pillows, the warm indentation in the bed, and the memories of the night before, I knew I couldn't, for I had to go to work, too.

Thirty minutes later, John was gone. As I got into my mangled car to drive the fifteen minutes to my office, I realized my step was a bit lighter and my load less heavy than normal. I sat in the car for a silent moment before I reached to turn the key. Today, this morning, right now...I felt surrounded in total peace.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“Hi there.”

“Hi!” Hearing Mandy’s voice on the other end of the phone was a pleasant surprise.

“You busy?” she asked.

I tossed my pen onto the desk and reclined in my chair. “Not too bad. I just finished editing another manuscript. In fact, I took it in to Brenda a few minutes ago. She was thrilled.”

“She didn’t chew you out over this one?”

I smiled, feeling very proud. “Nope. I started it this morning and already finished, so she was quite pleased. You should’ve seen the look on her face!”

“Well, my goodness. That’s great! I guess you’re feeling okay, then?”

“I feel wonderful,” I said, flexing my neck and shoulders as I cradled the phone in the palm of my hand.

“I was worried when I didn’t hear from you. I tried calling all afternoon yesterday to check on you, and I didn’t get an answer.” Her tone reeked of curiosity.

I smiled again and glanced at the picture resting on the corner of my desk. It was of John, in the tuxedo he wore on our wedding day. “John and I were down by the pond most of the afternoon,” I said, staring at his handsome face.

“Oh?”

“We were having a long talk.”

“Was he mad about the car?”

“At first,” I said. “He walked out Saturday night and didn’t come back until Sunday.”

“Oh, Emily!”

“Yeah, I was stunned. But I think it did us both some good, the time apart. We had a great talk and I actually feel hopeful now. If you’d have asked me Saturday night, though, I would have told you it was over for good.”

“Wow!” Mandy said. “What a turn of events! That’s wonderful, Emily. Hey, do you want to have lunch? You can tell me all about it over a cheese enchilada. What do you think?”

I sighed. “I don’t think so. I’d love to, but I have other plans today. I’m going to bring lunch to John, but he doesn’t know it. He always skips lunch and I think he’ll enjoy it.”

“Okay. Well, call me if you need me, all right?”

“I will.”

“And congratulations, Em. I hope you guys work everything out.”

“Thanks. See you.” I hung up the phone and a wave of appreciation swept through my mind and my heart. Mandy had stuck by me through it all. Whenever I needed her, she was always there, even if it was mainly by phone. But that’s better than not at all, I decided.

A knock sounded on my office door. "Come in," I called.

Geri popped her head around the corner. "There's a guy out here at the front desk with a delicious-smelling box. Did you order pizza?"

"Yes." I stood up and grabbed my purse from the floor. "I'm going to eat lunch with my husband. He loves pizza," I told her as I pulled out my wallet.

"Oh, darn," she said, following me to the front of the building. "I thought it was for us."

Laughing, I looked over my shoulder. "Not this time."

I paid the delivery boy, gathered up the box and left the office chuckling at the mock pout on Geri's face.

After making the short drive to John's office, I wondered why we didn't have lunch together more often. I asked him many times. John usually said he was too busy to eat and when he did take time out for lunch, he stayed in the office and ate a sandwich he brought from home.

We need to save the money, he usually added as an afterthought.

As I locked my car door, I determined there was no reason we couldn't eat in his office together. So I splurged by buying the pizza, but in my mind, it was a special occasion which deserved a special treat.

The department secretary wasn't at her desk. Balancing the box in my hands, I wound down the hallway until I reached John's office. I was surprised to find it empty.

I heard some activity in the next room and I stepped to the door, knocking softly before I entered his co-worker's space.

"Hi, Tim," I said. "Where's John?"

The young man looked up from the papers spread across the table in front of him. "Oh, hi, Emily." He pointed toward the front of the building. "He left with some of the guys for lunch about thirty minutes ago. I think they went across the street to Nellie's Cafe."

My shoulders sagged. "Oh," I said, looking down at the pizza box. "Well, I guess since he's already eating, I won't need this. Do you want it?" I asked, glancing at Tim.

His eyes widened and I swore I could see his mouth water.

"Well...uh....sure...if you don't," he mumbled as he stood and reached for the box.

I handed it over, disappointed that my surprise lunch didn't work out. I reprimanded myself as I left the building. I should have called first.

As I inserted my key in the door of the car, another idea blossomed. I should at least let John know I came by. Quickly, I pulled the key out of the lock and walked across the street to Nellie's Cafe. I wouldn't stay and interfere with my husband's luncheon, but I wanted him to know I'd been here in case Tim neglected to say anything.

Excitement welled up inside me as I crossed the parking lot. I found myself hoping John would be pleased to see me, and that he'd find me attractive. I'd managed to fit into a pink and white jumper which was an old favorite of his, and I looked forward to seeing the look on his face.

As I passed the windows lining the front of the restaurant, I peered inside and I saw John getting up from a table with four other men. I smiled as my anticipation bloomed.

Then I stopped dead in my tracks as I saw John reach for the ticket, and motion to the others to put their wallets away. What was he doing? Was he telling them he'd pay the bill? I wondered if I was in the right place and if that was my husband picking up the tab for a table of five.

The smile vanished from my face and I felt tension take its place. My husband, the one who consistently told me we didn't have money to eat out, was paying for the meals of four other people! The realization that this could be some kind of business lunch he was *expected* to pay for didn't diminish the shaking in my legs. I reached out and grabbed the edge of the brick wall beside the window.

I watched as John tossed his head back and laughed at something one of the men said. Then he stepped aside to allow the others to pass in front of him while he made his way to the cash register.

I tried to turn and leave, knowing the look on my face couldn't be remotely pleasant, yet my feet seemed frozen and my legs locked into an unwilling stillness.

My eyes widened as I saw John open his wallet and extend a bill to the cashier. The cashier handed him some change and my husband returned to the table to leave a tip.

Shocked was an understatement as to how I felt seeing my husband treat others to lunch when he'd deprived me of that luxury. And when he'd laughed with them, he seemed more alive than he'd been with me, even yesterday! Disbelief washed over me as I watched him count out several bills for the tip.

At that moment, when the hurt and anger at what I viewed as hypocrisy hit me, John turned toward the window and our gazes met like the collision of two trains.

Oh, Lord! He's seen me!

I felt a warm blush creep into my cheeks and a splitting sensation in my chest. John brought his hand up, perhaps as in a wave, but my feet suddenly gained their freedom and I turned and ran across the lot, back to Kemmons Engineering.

Hurriedly, I hopped into my car, started the engine, and shoved the gearshift into drive. I had to get out of there! I had to escape! I couldn't face John with these feelings of anger and bitter jealousy after the progress we'd made last night. It would destroy everything.

But as I drove out of the lot, I couldn't escape the feelings of anguish and betrayal from seeing my husband do something with others which he'd insisted we not do for months -- in order to save money.

I sped down the highway, not caring how fast I drove the car and not knowing where I was going. For suddenly, it didn't matter. Nothing mattered except the hurt wracking my body and the sorrow in my soul. I'd failed. Unconditional love was the farthest thing from my mind. I couldn't do it -- I

couldn't be the way I was supposed to be. As I shoved the accelerator to the floor, I thought I'd never be capable of learning such an emotion when bitterness, anger and jealousy were still so evident in my heart.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

My stomach clenched into tight knots, forcing me to pull over a few miles north. Following instinct, I turned onto a path I'd seen during previous travels. The gravel road was new, the rocks still glittering from their fresh pouring. The road led to a tiny chapel in a peaceful setting, hidden from view by tall pines and lavish bushes.

I came to a stop too quickly, spinning the car into the grass at the back of the empty parking lot. Dust flew over my windshield and through my open window, settling like a bag of spilled flour inside the car. I coughed and waved the substance away.

I sat there, dumbfounded, wondering why I'd done what I'd just done, and wondering what to do next. John must think me a complete idiot, standing outside the restaurant then running away as soon as he spotted me. I lowered my head into my hands, thinking it had to be one of the stupidest things I'd ever done. My mind whirled over memories of other foolish actions, replaying the old tapes as if they'd just happened.

Live in the now.

Nicholas's words came to mind, echoing in the midst of my chastising and painful memories.

"I lived in the now yesterday," I said, bitterness stinging my tongue like juice from a ripe lemon. "I thought we were working things out. Live in the now - - yeah, right. What about the now that comes after this one?" My voice rattled like the tail of a snake poised for attack as I spewed my anger and frustration into the humid air.

Then I laughed as I recognized my own sarcasm. "All this stuff is a bunch of baloney! There is no Nicholas, there are no lessons and right now, I don't see any future for John and I. I see double standards on his part, buried anger on mine, and there's no way it'll be washed away by some sea of unconditional love. If it were possible, those other feelings wouldn't have erupted back there and I wouldn't feel this way now." I slapped my hands on the steering wheel and winced at the stinging in my palms.

I glanced up when I heard a tapping sound at the front of the car. Nicholas! Okay, so maybe I was wrong about him, as my mind certainly wouldn't dream him up at a time like this, when he was the last person I wanted to see.

He knocked gently on the hood, then waved, motioning for me to get out of the vehicle. When I didn't, he stepped around to the driver's door and pulled on the handle. The door opened with an irritable creak.

"Emily," he said, reaching for my hand.

I ignored his gesture and stepped out, pushing past him. "Let me guess," I said through clenched teeth. "There's some kind of lesson in this. I supposed you witnessed what happened back there."

He nodded slightly and a slight smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

"Oh!" I seethed inside and stamped my foot. This all-knowing soul,

dressed in overalls and a short-sleeved shirt, crossed his arms, an 'I told you so' look on his face.

I paced around the car, knocking my fists against my thighs as I walked. I stopped on the opposite side and placed my hands across the roof of the vehicle.

Staring at him, I said, "I suppose I was being demanding, that I was too attached to the outcome." I continued my circling after he shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, come on, Nicholas, I know that's what you were going to say. I should've called first. Obviously I can't expect John to assume I might show up with lunch and wait for me. But I can expect him to keep the same standards for himself which he imposes on me! He's told me numerous times his concerns about saving money. He's told me we can't afford to eat out until things are better. He even went so far as to determine it costs one-fourth as much to eat from home as it does to eat in a restaurant! And then to see him today, taking not one, not two, but FOUR others to lunch - well, it just got to me."

I stopped walking and rubbed my temples with my fingertips. "I wonder how long he's been doing this -- telling me he was eating in, or not eating lunch at all. I wonder how often he's taken others out to eat with money he told me to save."

I began to laugh. The sound turned hysterical as I realized how minor this situation actually was. I gripped my stomach, laughing so hard that tears filled my eyes. How in the world could I tackle such a huge task, becoming a loving person when irritating emotions surfaced at such a small action as my husband paying for a lunch?

Nicholas moved to the front of the car and sat on the hood. "Come here, Emily," he said, patting the spot next to him.

I wrapped my arms tightly around my waist as I smothered my chuckles. Reluctantly, I walked to the front of the car. He patted the spot again and I sighed, sliding up onto the metal beside him.

"There are two things we must discuss," he said, holding up two fingers. "First of all, you must realize that everyone, behind whatever actions they take, has positive intentions. And second, I believe you need to understand more about the law of attraction."

I faced him and my mouth dropped open. "Are you saying John is right in what he's done? Are you saying it's okay he has one standard for me, but doesn't apply it to himself? I don't see fairness or unconditional love in that!"

Turning my head away from him, I focused through blurred vision on the trees outlining the church parking lot.

Nicholas placed a warm hand on my arm. "It matters not who is right or wrong, for humans view each happening in light of their own emotions and feelings," he said in a low, controlled voice. "What is right for one might not be right for another, simply because the two beings have different earthly histories, which form a basis for their beliefs and a root for their emotions about a given situation.

"The concept and act of unconditional love is applied when you, as a

human being, can recognize the good intentions another being has behind his or her actions, whether you agree with the actions or not.”

Still staring at the trees, I pondered his words, soaking them up like a sponge eager for water. Oh, how I wanted to believe him! I'd had such a sense of understanding and peace since he entered my life. John and I had begun to communicate again, because of Nicholas's intervention. My anger began to weaken as my curiosity about his theory of good intentions mounted.

Had I been too eager for things to be fixed between John and I? Or was I secretly searching for something to sabotage my relationship with my husband because deep down, I wasn't sure if our existence together was feasible?

I shivered as I acknowledged the possibility that my own self-defeating thoughts had once again returned, the ones which told me I didn't deserve to be loved and cherished.

My shoulders sagged and tears filled my eyes as I lowered my head. Could I ever get past these negative feelings? Was this the kind of fight I was destined to suffer through forever? I hoped against hope I was wrong, as I couldn't imagine winning the long, arduous battle.

“You can do it, Emily!”

I looked up as Nicholas whispered the encouraging words.

“I know you and John both want true happiness, peace, and love in your hearts. No, it's not easy, but I have faith in you...you can survive!”

I stared into his violet eyes which were filled with sparks of excitement. Maybe I didn't want to be happy. Maybe misery and petty frustrations had become such a way of life for me that I'd feel lost without those emotions. God, could it possibly be true that I wanted to sabotage my own life? The questions darted through my mind like flying arrows cutting through the air.

“What do you say, Emily?” he asked, placing a hand over mine. “Do you want to continue the lessons?”

I looked down at his fingers, curled over mine. The strength he possessed was obvious in his strong, muscular hold. Could I tap into his strength to learn the rest of the lessons he was here to teach me? He squeezed my hand again, as if offering unspoken words of encouragement. And at that moment, I knew he would share his strength with me, enabling me to carry on, though my load was heavy.

“Emily?”

Finally, I glanced up at Nicholas and wiped the tears from my face. “Tell me about good intentions,” I said in a voice laced with desperation.

I nodded after I said the words. My decision had been made. I was not going to allow myself to destroy my own life. I would fight for my happiness, no matter how hard the battle. “Tell me,” I said, more insistently.

I had to get past this pain, and if Nicholas was willing to help, I was willing to listen. Deep inside my soul, I knew that only by facing this pain and learning my lessons would I be able to truly love my husband, our marriage, my life, and most of all, love myself again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Nicholas waved his hand to the right, his fingers gliding through the air like silk as he opened and closed them. I blinked twice when I saw a scene appear.

Red velvet carpeting magically spread across the ground. Atop the covering, a long sofa appeared. It was upholstered in cream satin material, stretching over the base which was adorned with four curved, wooden feet. Throw pillows on either end sparkled with fine gold threads. To the right of this furnishing was a high-backed chair, covered in soft, mahogany suede.

Nature's light dimmed and a golden hue encompassed the makeshift room Nicholas had created in the instant of one breath.

Nicholas took my hand and helped me down, leading me toward the elegant sofa. "Go ahead." He motioned for me to lie down, while he positioned himself in the high-backed chair.

As soon as I placed my head against the golden pillows, the loving, safe feeling which I'd continuously felt in his presence, returned.

I'd never been to a counselor before, but I truly felt as if I were with one now. Nicholas instructed me to close my eyes and when I did as he suggested, he spoke, his voice low, soothing, and filled with wisdom.

"Behind it all, humans always have beneficial, good intentions," he said. "This is vital for you to remember on your journey through life. Once you apply this enlightening realization to your life, miraculous things will happen in your relationships. Understanding is deepened. Compassion increases. Every human being is basically good, even if he does unpleasant things. You are basically good, for beneath every action lies a good intention. Becoming aware of this helps avoid the destruction of self-esteem, just like you've experienced lately. Do you follow me?"

"Sort of," I said, wondering if he meant in regards to every person, behind even the most horrible actions, there were good intentions. I couldn't imagine a criminal having good intentions behind his actions. I opened my eyes.

"Okay, let's look at this principle carefully," he said. He stood up and walked slowly across the red ground cover. I followed him with my gaze.

"This guideline says John has beneficial, good intentions, behind actions which you may despise. His past addictive programming might have led him to bad behavior. Yet every addictive demand is motivated by a positive intention. Always."

"I don't see how John controlling my spending while ignoring his own rules could be considered positive," I spoke up.

Nicholas knelt down in front of the sofa. "Let's define this a bit," he said, staring intently into my eyes. "A good intention is a desired internal experience, something a person really wants behind what appears as a surface goal. It is an image, thought or feeling which is conducive to your well-being as a human. Whatever you do or say is ultimately motivated by your intention to bring about

the internal experience you desire.”

“This can’t be true for everyone,” I argued. “What about criminals?”

“It is true for everyone.” He wrapped his fingers around my wrist and squeezed the skin gently to enforce his point. “Sometimes people try to achieve their intentions using ineffective or harmful efforts to get what they want.

“For instance, a man who assaults another man at the prodding of his friends may have the internal desire to feel strong, accepted and dependable. His actions are hurtful and destructive. While recognizing the positive intentions behind these actions is not to be used to justify or defend them, it can help others who have to deal with this person in the future to achieve insight. Once others receive this insight, they can help this man achieve his good intentions without resorting to the destructive actions of his past. For example, this man might obtain a job which helps him to realize achieve internal feelings of strength, acceptance and dependability.”

“Can he do this on his own, or must he have the help of others?”

“He can do it on his own if he is ready, and if he’s willing to let go of his demands. Unfortunately, this doesn’t always happen. But if he is exposed to other unconditionally loving people, they can help point him in the right direction. By recognizing his internal desires, they can guide him to a positive situation which will give him the feelings he wishes to have.

“He should be punished, however, for his hurtful actions. That is part of the learning process which will help him become open and receptive to better solutions.”

“It’s starting to make sense,” I mumbled as I chewed on one of my fingernails. “So how does this good intention strategy apply to John and I?”

Nicholas resumed his seat. “You said John tries to control your spending, yet doesn’t follow his own instructions, correct?”

I sighed. “Yes. I didn’t realize that was an issue before today. I always thought he was living by the standards he imposed on me. Seeing an instance where he didn’t really made me angry.”

Nicholas leaned forward. “Why don’t you try to figure it out, Emily?” he asked. “What good, internal intentions could cause your husband to control your spending, yet be free with his own?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

I sat up on the sofa and turned to face Nicholas. Pointing a finger at my chest, I said, "You want me to figure this out? How could I possibly know what John's underlying desires are without asking him?"

Nicholas clapped his hands together like a child. "Exactly!"

He moved his hands to a praying position and leaned forward. "Without communication, you cannot truly know the answers, Emily. Yet, you automatically assume the worst -- that he is imposing double-standards, demanding you live one way while he lives another. If I were a betting soul, I'd bet you thought of confronting your husband on his spending today, just as he confronted you about the picture you purchased - with anger and condemnation. Am I correct?"

I hung my head and peered at him through fallen bangs, knowing the answer was written all over my face. Of course he was correct.

"I thought so," he said, leaning back in the chair and crossing one leg over the other while he folded his arms across his chest.

"Perhaps we should identify your positive intention first," he said, swaying his foot back and forth. "Your intentions when you bought the picture were good, were they not?"

My eyes widened as I recalled my own previous thoughts about what I'd done and how I'd analyzed my own feelings. While John had viewed my actions as irresponsible and careless, I'd figured out through exploring my inner feelings and beliefs why I had purchased the picture. Amazement swept through me. Studies of my inner-self and my own internal desires returned now to teach me about my husband.

"Emily?"

I blinked. "Yes...yes...my intentions behind my actions were good."

"Could John's intentions be just as good?" he asked pointedly.

I nodded. "Yes, I suppose so." I glanced down, then back to Nicholas. "But how do I guess at his intentions? Wouldn't it be better to simply ask?"

"Of course," said Nicholas. "But he's not here at the moment. Therefore, you need to explore his possible intentions in his absence. It will give you peace of mind to do this before you see him."

"Okay," I replied, looking at him expectantly.

"Ask yourself what John might be experiencing inside. Go beyond what he has actually said. He is most likely trying to see himself as something, to hear inside he is a certain way, or to feel a certain feeling."

I thought about my own feelings. "Perhaps John wanted to feel excitement. Maybe he wanted to feel alive and in control. I suppose he could have wanted to see himself as capable, or helpful, or even prosperous by paying for the lunch."

Nicholas smiled. "Very good. Now keep in mind, you won't know the real reason unless you ask him. But how does this make you feel, to examine these

possible good intentions behind your husband's actions?"

I paused and tried to look inside myself, to put into words what I felt. "You know," I whispered, bringing a hand to my chest. "It almost feels as if my hurt has been wrapped in a warm bandage. And at this moment, I feel compassion and understanding...and even love." I brought my gaze up and met Nicholas's.

Briefly, I saw a flicker of my reflection mirrored in his deep purple eyes. The lines disappeared from my cheeks. The tension in my neck and shoulders subsided.

"Wonderful!" Nicholas said, his voice full of praise. "You see, Emily, you can use this skill, this principle, to analyze any situation or action. It'll help you slice through the negative emotions the universe throws your way, and get to the sweet butter in the middle of the bread, so to speak. This will soften the turmoil you face in your travels. Paying attention and looking for the good intentions accelerates your growth by bringing you understanding, compassion, and love, all working together to embed the power of unconditional love in your life. Bring this power into your marriage and it will become more loving and satisfying each moment you and John are together."

"Yes," I said, glancing up at the sky, which had lightened once more.

Nicholas stood and removed a small piece of paper from his pants pocket. Looking at it briefly, he smiled. He stuffed it back in his pocket and said, "We have explored the benefits of changing your demands to preferences. We have gone over the freedoms which you must offer yourself and others. And now we have gone over the lesson on learning how to find goodness in yourself and others through examination of good intentions. These are all powerful tools for releasing the magic of unconditional love. But there's one item we have yet to cover."

"The law of attraction," I said, recalling his earlier words.

He smiled broadly and his face lit up with excitement. "Yes!" he exclaimed. "You're a very good student, Emily. Your memory is excellent and your recollections on the things I've taught you, combined with the lessons you've learned on your own, will be of great use to you in your future."

I smiled, too, for not only did I feel like a high-scoring scholar, but I was beginning to feel I could become a teacher myself someday, and share my lessons with everyone who crossed my path in life.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Reverently, Nicholas folded his hands in his lap and lowered his gaze. “I have another addition to the law of attraction,” he said softly. “It’s called the essence of giving.”

Looking up, he continued. “You probably already understand the concept of the law of attraction. It’s rather basic and common sense - what you give, either physically, mentally or emotionally will come back to you eventually. This goes for the negative things as well as positive. In order to encourage the law of attraction to work in the most positive and valuable way possible, you need to understand the essence of giving.”

“So, the more you give, the more you get, right?” I lowered my brows, not sure of the point he tried to make.

“Correct,” he said. He held up one finger. “However, by the essence of giving, I mean you should give all the gifts you can emotionally afford to give. Associate *giving* with *gift*. A gift always creates a positive experience for the receiver. You don’t intend to go out and give someone a negative emotion as a *gift*. Yet you do this, unconsciously inflicting it on others and yourself. It’s not like saying ‘Here is a gift from me to you’, as you would for a special occasion.

“Look at every day, each breath you take, as a special occasion. Associate giving with gift, the word which implies a positive experience. Don’t give others or yourself demands. Don’t give anything negative. Don’t give anything cruel and harmful. These things are not true gifts, as you know a gift to be.

“Any emotion or feelings or words which come from within you are being *given* to others. Keep that in mind every step of the way, and think to yourself beforehand...is this a *gift* for this person? Asking that question will remind you of the positive experience of a gift. If what you’re getting ready to share or do is negativity masquerading as a gift, withhold the gesture and consider giving an authentic gift instead.”

I pondered on what he said, still amazed at the depth of his wisdom. I thought I understood his concept, but I decided to make sure. “So what you’re saying is, in order to make sure the law of attraction only brings goodness to me, then I have to be sure what I am giving others or myself is of a good nature rather than a bad one?”

He nodded and reached over, taking my hands in his, clasping them tightly. “Yes, Emily. And the more good you give away, the more which will come back to you. You’ll know in your heart if you can emotionally afford to give the gift. You’ll know if you cannot emotionally afford it if you feel the slightest bit of resentment in your heart. Don’t give in this case, for the ill effects are not conducive to the oneness and unconditional love you are trying to create.

“And only give generously when you can do so without expecting anything in return. Then you will experience an instant reward of internal satisfaction. Sooner or later, you will even get back more than you’ve given. This is the

magic of unconditional love!" He gripped my hands tighter.

"Are you talking strictly about emotions and love?" I asked, staring into his compelling gaze. As he shook his head slightly, I noticed the brightness in his eyes. The sorrowful, intense look which had been present when I first met Nicholas had totally vanished. A sinking feeling entered my stomach as he continued talking, for I had an undeniable feeling our time together was coming to an end.

"Growth through giving of yourself can happen in many ways, fair lady. It can occur through a smile, a hug, a question which shows you care, an unexpected note and even anonymous, helpful acts. You will find a balance the more you give. You will discover the inventory of gifts you possess is endless. Generosity becomes a habit as you pull time, energy, and even money and tangible items from your physical and emotional store. The more you give, the richer you will become, especially in here."

Tentatively, he brought his hand up and placed it over my heart. He lowered his palm gently and the warmth from his fingers seeped through the material of my blouse, over me, inside me, and all around me. I closed my eyes as he leaned forward and kissed me softly, like a feather brushing my forehead.

"You will no longer feel as if there's not enough in your life," he said, his words forceful and determined. "Instead, you will experience abundant inner richness. Your love and generosity will affect your fellow humans, setting ripples of peace and joy in motion, flowing like a river to wash away the bumps in the universe.

"The power of unconditional love will give you the wisdom you've admired within me, and an open heart which will lead to a lifelong joy in being alive. You will feel the excitement you've desired to feel, even when the world is quiet and still around you."

He paused, still holding me, his breath warm against the side of my face. "If you follow these lessons, Emily, you'll be contributing to the oneness of the universe and you'll find the peace you've been searching for." He ended his commentary in a matter-of-fact tone.

I opened my eyes when Nicholas pulled away. He stood up and stretched his arms high above his head.

"You can do it, Emily," he said, bringing his arms back to his sides. I stood up as well and he took both of my hands in his. Shaking them, he said, "I have faith in you. Don't be fooled into thinking it's easy. Don't fall prey to the idea you won't have bad days or lose your temper, or face despair from time to time...because you will.

"But the more you orchestrate the lessons I've taught you, the more beautiful the music of your life will become. It takes practice..." His voice dropped to a whisper and he averted his gaze. "...constant practice."

The sinking feeling in my stomach deepened. An ethereal silence draped around us and my fingers trembled against his palms. In the distance, a bird began to sing a sweet lullaby.

"Will you be here to help me?" I asked the question in a choked voice,

already knowing the answer in my heart. "Will you ever come back?"

He brought his gaze back to mine and flickers of sadness mixed with embers of loving satisfaction burned brightly behind his partially closed lids. His lashes dropped a fraction, weighted down by the drop of a single tear.

"No, Emily. I must go on. I've completed my course and I'm now free to incarnate once again. I can only pray these lessons will remain in my heart in the event I might touch another human life, yet in a different way. I pray they will remain in your heart as well, that you'll keep trying, though the going might get rough from time to time."

I nodded as the tears filled my eyes, and then I dropped his hands in order to let him go. It would serve no purpose to try to keep him here. He'd earned his freedom and I wanted him to be able to go forward, absent of a heavy heart and a guilt-filled past.

"I don't know how to thank you," I said as tears trickled down my cheeks.

"You already have," he said, stepping back. The golden light which had surrounded us during what I now knew to be our final time together increased, encompassing him in a tunnel, much like the one I thought I'd fallen through at the time of our first meeting. I fought the urge to ask him where he was going, who he'd become in the next lifetime and if I'd see him again as a human.

He waved and as he did, his clothes miraculously transformed from comfortable, country attire to a white flowing robe, sparkling with iridescent light. Bringing his fingers to his mouth, he blew me a kiss and I held out a hand, pretending to catch it in my palm.

I curled my fingers closed and smiled as he started to fade away, and then I thought of a question I must have answered.

"Wait!" I shouted, stepping forward. "Why the picture? Why did you come to me through the roses?"

He smiled and his voice was deep and rich, filling me with a sense of renewed energy and vitality. "Emily," he said, placing a hand over his heart. "Remember, we are all one. I will always be a part of you...I always have been. When we met, you were a rose waiting to bloom, only the strength wasn't there. Your petals remained tightly closed. The picture of the open roses is the woman you've now become, and will continue to become. But Emily, I am simply part of the oneness, the stage the human race will one day reach when the curtain of unconditional love comes down and encompasses all, uniting every human being in the way our creator intends."

He looked up then and raised his hands toward the heavens. The light became so brilliant I shielded my eyes for fear I'd be blinded. "Wait!" I cried, still not wanting him to go. Was he saying I'd dreamed him up...that he wasn't really in the picture?

A whisper of a breeze brushed my damp face as the light faded and I opened my eyes to find Nicholas and all of his props gone. My question hadn't been answered...but then, I thought, did it really matter how he came to me?

For the messages are the same, no matter what you believe...

I spun around at the sound of the words which I knew came from

Nicholas. But once again, I was alone in the gravel parking lot. I scanned the lush green grass as I walked over to where Nicholas had been. Nothing. I looked around, turning in a circle. Everything was gone...Nicholas was gone.

Then I saw the tiny scrap of paper, its brightness dazzling against the green hue beneath my feet. I reached down, picked it up and smoothed the crumpled ball.

The words were scribbled, the writing crude, yet the message was very clear to me:

"The becoming of one shall bring eternal peace."

I smiled as I carefully folded the paper and placed it in my pocket. I felt that peace as I walked back to my car and began my journey home. It was time to start applying the lessons from Nicholas, and not just halfheartedly. I made a silent promise as I drove.

I would work on these lessons daily, during each waking moment. I wanted Nicholas to be proud, for somehow I knew, even though he'd go on to another lifetime, he'd never forget me, and I felt sure he'd find me again someday. And I wanted to be ready...I wanted to become the woman God intended me to be.

But most of all, I wanted to bloom, to smell the sweet scents of my life on the day of my death and to know that I'd brought love to the lives of others, and to myself. In essence, I wanted to contribute in the best way possible to the oneness of our universe.

EPILOGUE

Two months passed. I shared the new knowledge I'd acquired with my husband, and was constantly amazed at how applying Nicholas's lessons brought new happiness and joy to my life.

That's not to say it was easy. We had rough days. Yet in the scope of the oneness we tried to achieve, our squabbles became minor irritations.

John and I practiced learning to give. Money issues became almost non-existent. John's gift of taking the four men to lunch on that warm summer day had brought him a new job with a satisfied client. Today was his last day with Kemmons and it will be a special evening for us. Tonight also marks the beginning of a new stage in our lives; John and I have learned I am pregnant.

I folded the pink paper announcing my positive test result and I smiled as I recalled John's reaction in the doctor's office earlier today. I'd never seen a man so excited. He ran around the room, hugging me, the doctor and a nurse at least a dozen times before they threatened to sedate him if he didn't calm down.

"Steak's almost ready," John called through the open kitchen window.

"Okay." I walked into the bedroom, opened my music box and placed the pink paper inside, next to the note I feel certain Nicholas left on the church lawn that last day of July.

My gaze moved lower and centered on the blue notebook on the shelf beneath the rose picture. The notebook contained it all, my entire adventure, from the time I met Nicholas until the time he went on, journeying into his new life.

I'd been worried I might forget the lessons, so I began scribbling the words down, slowly at first, but as I practiced, they came more quickly. I finally broke down and admitted to my boss why I carried the notebook with me daily, diligently writing during every free moment. Brenda told me if it became long enough for a book, she'd publish it through under our company imprint.

"Maybe," I'd said, shrugging my shoulders.

I placed my hand on my stomach and looked up at the picture. "Maybe I should publish the story," I said softly, staring into the photo. I squinted, striving to see any sign of Nicholas. I didn't, and my shoulders sagged.

As I rubbed my waist, I entertained the idea this baby inside me could be him...coming into his new life—

No. It isn't Nicholas...he's gone.

"Hey, don't you want to eat?" John walked up behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist, placing his hands over mine. He leaned down and kissed my neck.

"John?" I said, still staring at the picture.

"Yes?"

"I'm returning the picture."

He straightened. "Why? It's okay. I don't mind if you keep it -- really, I don't."

I snuggled closer, pressing back against his chest. "I want to return it. It's a beautiful scene...but...well..." I struggled to find the right words. "There was a reason I bought it, other than for its beauty. It called to me, and since purchasing it, I've learned some very valuable lessons."

I turned around and looked into the depth of his warm, brown eyes. "But I've learned all I can from it now. The lessons have been taught and now it's time for me to carry them into my life...into our life."

I swallowed hard and fought back tears of longing for the soul who'd come into my life as a result of this mere photo, a tangible, earthly creation. And then I managed a smile, for I knew a part of Nicholas would always be with me through his words of wisdom.

"I guess you could say," I continued in a wavering voice, "the message remains, and will forever. But the messenger is gone. Therefore, I think I should return the picture."

A long pause ensued while John gently stroked my hair. Finally he whispered in my ear, his voice deep and sensuous. "Why don't you give someone the picture, honey?"

"What?"

"Give the picture to someone else."

I pulled back. "Are you serious? Who?"

He shrugged and pulled me close again. "Give it to someone like us...someone who needs something special to come into their lives. Perhaps they could benefit from the messages as well."

A tear escaped and trickled down the side of my face. I hugged him tightly, nodding my agreement.

"Emily?"

"Yes."

"I love you."

"I love you, too, John." A sob escaped my throat, burying itself in the folds of his shirt, as I realized I honestly meant the words.

At that moment, after hearing my husband's suggestion, I knew we'd finally become one, and were capable of the ultimate -

Unconditional love...one love.

THE END

Janine Johnson



Janine Johnson wrote ***One Love*** in three weeks. "It came from my heart," she says, "And that's why it was so easy to write. True life experiences are mixed into this tale, providing a strong emotional pull for the book. Never before have I felt such a connection to a character as I did with Emily. She's a normal person, like me, like you, like many people out there today, suffering deep down yet living as if there's nothing wrong - at least on the outside. This book gives help for the dark times, hope for the despair many of us face, whether only occasionally or even daily."

Janine lives in Jackson, Tennessee with her husband and two lovely children. She has been writing throughout her life, and had her first book published at age eleven. After graduating from college, she entered the working world and put her writing aside. Her husband Michael encouraged her to pick up writing again, telling her she had a talent.

Wisely, she listened to him, and has had several stories, poems, and articles published in both small and large publications over the past decade. She is the owner of Petals of Life. She is also the owner of Critique Partner Connections, a matching service for writers of all genres.

One Love is her first published novel.

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