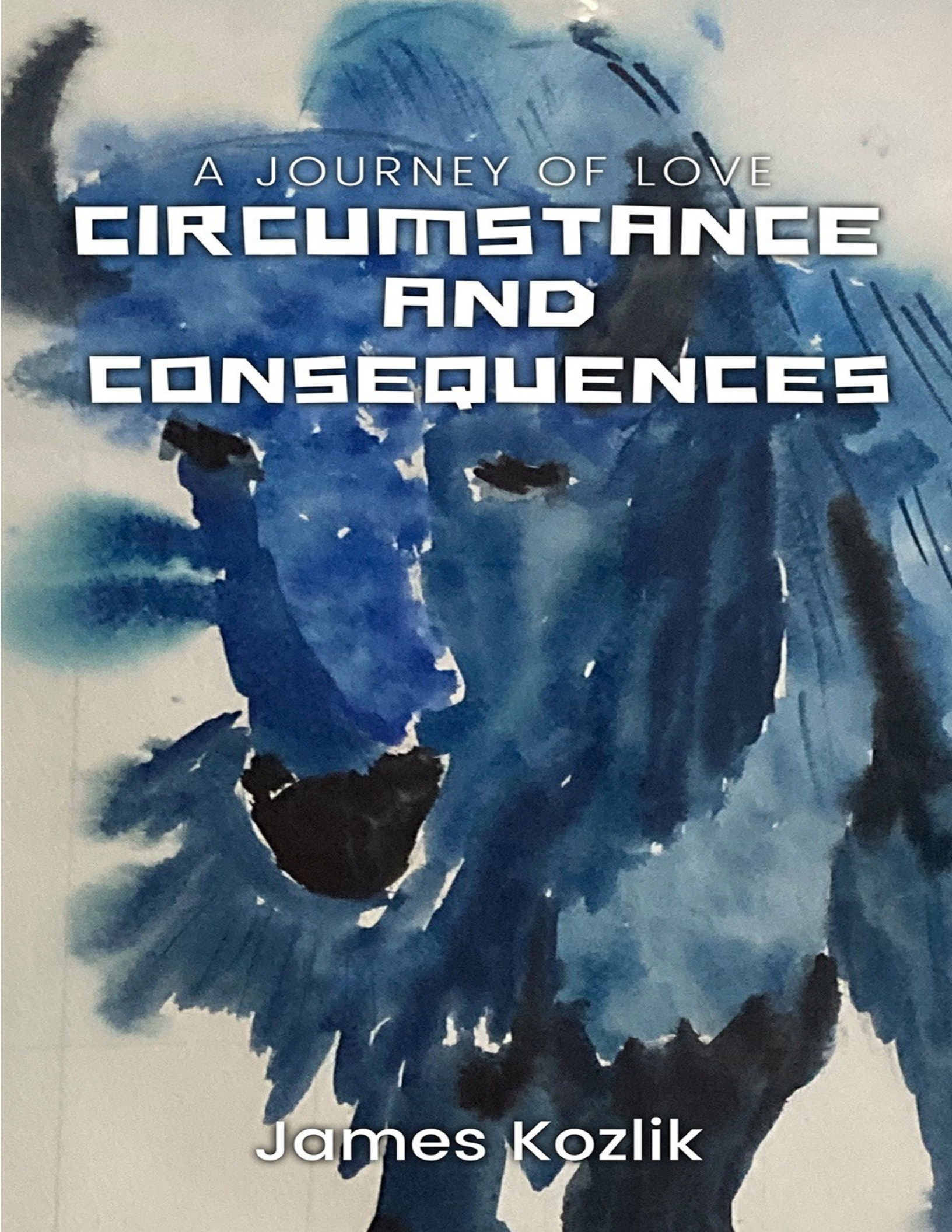
A JOURNEY OF LOVE
CIRCUMSTANCE AND CONSEQUENCES
James Kozlik

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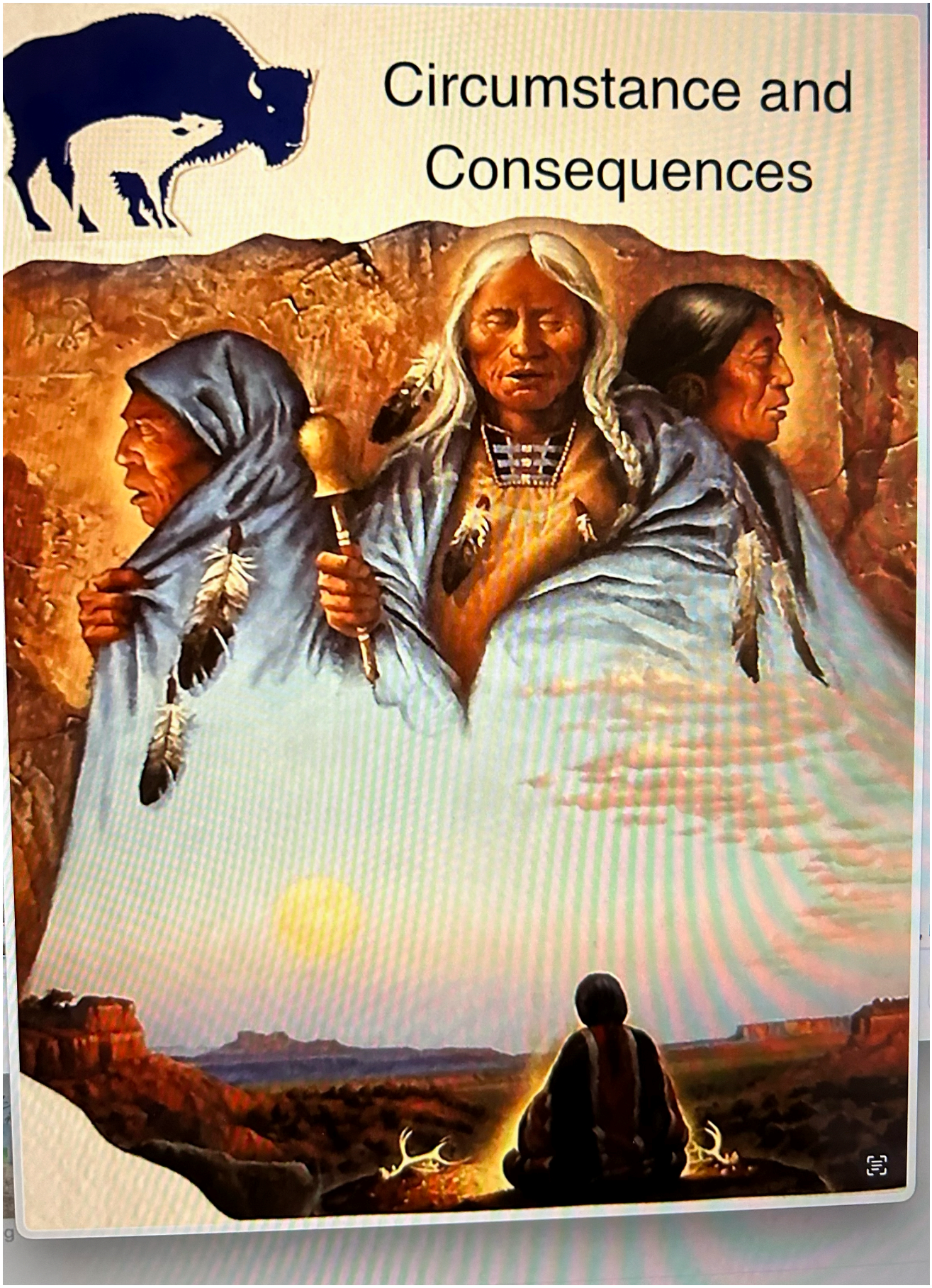
Circumstance and
Consequences

# Forward by author

This is a revision of the first copy of Circumstance And Consequences. There's a reason that I, as the author am writing this forward. Simply, that I am a first time author and this is the first book I have ever written. I spent more money than I should have going through a publishing company. That experience did not turn out as I was hoping. Let's just say that every service one needs to publish, the "best" copy, made that expensive sound "cha ching"! I could have had a ghost writer, better editing, custom cover, testimonials, and more. The editing process was taking so long that I finally said, "forget it, just publish the dang thing!"

As I revisited this story and read each chapter with a different eye than I had the first time, I became reluctant to lay claim to the book. So I pulled it off of Amazon, a little embarrassed but not diminished by any thought that I am not a writer. It is very enjoyable to create, so any sense of failure is not an option. I realize that maintaining quality relationships is a healthy social connection.

Since this story I have written eleven more stories and continue to write more. I have developed a style that tends to rely on less content and more context. A more efficient way of writing. I decided to shorten this first writing and eliminate a lot of elements that I felt slowed down the flow of the story. I encourage you to visit inspiredbookwriters.com. There you will find the six stories that make up the Journey of Love series, and more!

James Kozlik - August 2025

# Circumstance and Consequences

Everything that happens, when it has significance, is in the nature of a contradiction. Until the one for whom this is written came along I imagined that somewhere outside, in life, as they say, lay the solutions to all things. I thought, when I came upon her, that I was seizing hold of life, seizing hold of something which I could bite into. Instead I lost hold of life completely. I reached out for something to attach myself to—and I found nothing. But in reaching out, in the effort to grasp, to attach myself, left high and dry as I was, I nevertheless found something I had not looked for—*myself*.

Henry Miller "*Tropic of Capricorn*"

## Prologue

Both of us were on two separate paths. Not quite honoring each other's pursuits. There was something missing in our relationship. We both knew it, felt it. The honest communication was lacking. Our love connection was weak. We needed a way to find the depth of ourselves. Julian felt it more than me. I was mired in a streak of self centric thinking. My pursuits didn't necessarily include Julian.

"There's a distance between us. I don't feel your soul connection. I don't feel us. All we've been through in the past, all of the reconciliation and resolve we managed to work through, I feel is taken for granted. I love you. I just can't live like this. I need some spirituality in our lives, some meaning deeper than what's on the surface. Can you understand that? Do you hear me?" I love you. I want to love you more. I need more heart-to-heart contact."

I resented what Julian had to say. I reacted, in a negative way. We had a blow out and never came to a resolve. When I came back home after a day of work, she was gone. Two days passed and no Julian, no note, no phone call, just gone!

It's happened before, after a disagreement while camping with her sister, she became lost in the woods. There was Richard from her dream class. She pursued a male spiritual channel another time. Julian once walked out of a business deal, threatening to leave. Always coming back, we seemed to honor the commitment of our marriage. With forgiveness we managed to have a love that was a true commitment. We always found a way back. What we needed was grace in our relationship. We needed to find our own individual self, a higher meaning in relationship. This I lamented about, what could I have done to improve our relationship? I grieved the loss, blaming myself, and worried for Julian's life. I filed a disappearance with the local authorities. And finally about five years later I decided it was time to transform my life. I wanted to be part of community, to know people again and experience my life different from what transpired in my past.

# Chapter 1

Frank seemed stoic. That's what I surmised from his body language. He had a muscular build right out of a muscle-building magazine. His body was like a chiseled sculpture. It's a good look. He has a well-proportioned body. Blonde hair with a little curl over his forehead. Glasses, no smile, and he's focusing maybe at a spot on the wall? Hands clasped in front of him, perhaps a Mr. Universe pose for the judges. That was his pose.

Stephanie has shoulder length hair. Dark blonde with some long strands cascading over her shoulders. She is pretty, not glamorous, but intriguing. I wondered what inspires someone to model, in public. Same as Frank, she is staring at something. Stephanie has one leg propped up on a stool, half sitting. Like Frank, she is well proportioned. As I look at both of them I am observing body posture and imagining how courageous it is to bare oneself.

All the materials we needed to sketch was waiting for us when we entered the room. There were big sketch pads of paper on easels, a bottle of various pencils. There's about seven of us. We each pick an easel and wait.

"Good evening, I am glad to see that you all made it tonight. This will be a small, intimate class. My name is Eduardo."

He has thick, black-rimmed glasses to match his eyebrows. A military cut for a hairdo. I wonder if he used some grease to make the bristly, thick black hair stand upright? He's Spanish, but has very little accent. Strong features and yet a gentle demeanor and a rather soft voice.

"Tonight I want you to just sketch what you see. I'll be walking around looking over shoulders, but don't mind me, just sketch," remarks Eduardo.

I wonder what are the expectations of Eduardo? How am I supposed to draw? Classic lines? Details? Just sketch what? What I see and how I want it on paper are two different results. My mind begins to wander. Julian's

face and supple body keep appearing. She is so vivid in my thoughts right now! God, I see her in her bathing suit at the beach, or when she's dressed for a night out in one of those long, sheer dresses she fashioned many times, shimmering as she walks. And I recall her wearing a short robe, legs a sight to behold, as she finishes her day in the kitchen getting Sleep Ease tea.

I am startled as I can feel Eduardo pause over my shoulder, then move on since I haven't even applied pencil to paper yet. And so I start, with Frank. But the lines seem so abrupt on my paper. I get bold with thick, black chalk lines. He has swimming trunks on. What am I going to do about that? They become a focal point and I start sketching the rest of Frank's upper torso as if he were a Grecian sculpture with no arms. The sketch is taking on a Cubistic form. I flip the paper and take a look at Stephanie. Hmmmm, her body has a nice, soft flow to it. The curves and posture have a relaxed manor. Yet, my sketch is of form, not of what I actually see, but of what I feel. Flowing curvy lines intersect with each other and I sketch a figure. Not the exact features of the model, Stephanie. Rather I sketch an abstract form, much like the sketch of Frank. The lines aren't as sharp for Stephanie. Nonetheless, it is somewhat abstract.

The session has timed out. Eduardo has made various comments to the other sketchers before they leave. The models are dressing. Finally he makes his way over to me.

"What do you think, James?" asks Eduardo as he peers over my shoulder.

"Gee, I kind of took a different path than classic line drawing of a figure. I'm not sure about it yet."

"Oh. Um, that's alright, I like it. You did something different."

Here comes Stephanie, dressed and on her way out.

"What do you think, Stephanie?" asks Eduardo.

"Uh, I like it. That's different. I don't think anybody has ever drawn me like that. You have some nice flowing lines. Sensuous curves. That's how you viewed me tonight. Next time might be different. " She smiles and leaves.

# Chapter 2

A few days later, as I am walking through the school hallway, my eyes catch a small sign on the door of another art classroom. I walk up to the door. *Nude models needed $35/hr.* I peer through the glass. Lights out, nobody there. I get this sensation starting in my belly working up to my throat. A nervous feeling. Am I witnessing the desire to be a model? That seems way out of my comfort zone. I am peeking through the door window, into the classroom, wondering what it might be like, when all of a sudden I hear a voice.

"Hi, are you looking at the help wanted sign?"

"Oh, yeah, I was just thinking . . ."

"We really need nude males. We just don't get many."

"Oh. So thirty-five an hour?"

She has this amused smile. The look in her eyes is disarming. "You can wear swim trunks if you want, but not baggy ones."

"Oh, I think I can handle being naked. That's what the sign says, naked models wanted." I don't believe I said that. I seem so cavilar. "Actually I am a little nervous, not about being naked in front of a class, a group of strangers. They'll be sketching me? I guess I can do it."

She says, "Yeah, you'll do it? Can you come back in an hour? It's hard to find a male to pose nude."

And here I am, an hour later with the artist shuffling into the room. I enter and she looks up, with that amused smile that will haunt me forever!

"Oh, great, so you're going to do it? Sorry, I didn't get your name."

"James."

She grabs my hand, and with a shake, she introduces herself as Molly. Just Molly.

The other night, sketching Frank and Stephanie, I was intrigued as to what it might feel like to be a model for an artist, let alone a room full! What are the boundaries between model and, in this case, a room full of artists? That is what I am about to find out as Molly leads me to a corner for me to "get ready." I take off my clothes, wondering how many eyes are already on me.

"Are you ready, James? I think I'll have you stand here, in the middle of the room. Can everybody see our model? Let's have you turn around, slowly so everyone can take in what they are about to draw."

As I do this, I take in the eyes of those in the room. It's a mixed class, age-wise. There are peers, then some older and some younger females and males. A nice mix. I feel comfortable since the eyes don't reveal much emotion. I am just a model, or am I? What do they see? Just a body or a personality? I am not quite sure where this nude modeling venture will lead too.

"Let's have you take a simple pose, Maybe your legs shoulder width apart, arms, let's see, one hand on your hip the other just relaxed along your side." instructs Molly.

I stand as she says. "Yeah, yeah, good. Listen everyone, we are fortunate to have James as a nude model. So let's be respectful. We don't want to scare him this first night."

Molly circles me with that disarming smile and her searching eyes. "Can I touch you?"

"Yes"

A giggle . . . "Look how the body hairs pronounce the muscular arrangement on James's skeleton. I need you to hold this pose. Okay, let's start sketching."

So here I am and all I can think of was how Frank and Stephanie, in my sketching class, were focused on something other than us students. However, my eyes look up and there's Frank! Frank the model in my night class, the guy with the swim trunks! Wow, what's he doing here? Next to him are two older women. They may be in their late sixties? My eyes dart to a gal with a huge smile. I wonder what she's smiling about. I can't help but grow a smirk on my face.

This might be interesting. I look around and staring at me is Joni! Yikes, she's a massage client of mine!! What's she thinking? What will our next appointment be like? And Molly? The way she looks at me with direct eye contact. Is she wondering if I'll be back as a dedicated model? Well, I might as well continue with my wondering eyes. Oh my gosh, it's Nirvana, my yoga teacher. This is getting crazy. She's shaking her head and smiling, then gives me this exasperated look of surprise. There's a guy that seems rather

reserved, quiet like. Thank goodness I don't know him. Next to Nirvana is a Native American, just going about his business, sketching, not looking up at me. And finally I look to his left and there's a set of eyes that lock into my eyes. I feel as if I am being stared at. Ha ha, of course, I am the subject in the room!!

I decide to bring up a past experience to dwell on. Take my mind off the fact I am out of my comfort zone. What am I identifying with right now? Is it my ego that wants me to feel promiscuous. My true self knows that I am not a lascivious person. Really I am more of an introvert. I feel vulnerable and at the same time I feel some freedom as if I am being extricated from the part of me who is scared to connect with others. So I disengage my mind and just hold the pose.

# Chapter 3

Okay, now I trust my intuition for exposing myself, physically naked. I am either baring my soul, being an "open book," or I have this issue with inhibitions and I am taking the extreme way to explore that trait that I would like to get rid of once and for all. Fearlessness is the emotion I feel. What will I take away from this experience? I bare my physical body to strangers, but what I really am doing in my mind is "baring my soul." I hope that these strangers will get to know me as I get to know them. And a couple of them know me on the surface. Now maybe we'll know each other in a different way.

I look at Joni, busy sketching. Since she's a massage client of mine, I have a concern. We have a very professional client/therapist relationship. We were surprised when we made eye contact, even though we are familiar with each other. Will this have any effect when we see each other at the next appointment? She looks familiar, with glasses on, and I wonder, does she know me from another time? It's her eyes that draw me in, a silver blue, sparkling like my lost lover Julian's eyes.

The Yogi—Nirvana (African American) (Sheik)—my Kundalini yoga teacher (in another adult ed class I take). We chant, meditate, discuss the Hindu philosophy. She is insightful and a guide to raising my consciousness. Her look of fake exasperation was classic and left me with a comfortable feeling.

Then there's the Native American older man. My intuition is telling me that somehow he is here on my behalf. Am I to think that there will be lessons to be learned from him. He has the wizened look of an elder.

Frank, he is the stoical model in my sketching class. Wow, this is the third person that I have a connection with outside of this class. By now I am wondering if it's a coincidence that Frank is also in this sketch class. After all I just met him in the sketch class that I am taking.

Molly, the teacher, seems to have taken a special interest in me, protective, nurturing and concerned for my well-being. At least this is my desire, and my perception that I got from our first meeting and introduction, when she saw me looking at the help-wanted sign posted on the classroom door. And how she gave me a choice to model nude or with swim trunks. As if she felt my vulnerability. Isn't that what a true friend is? Someone who feels what you might be feeling.

# Chapter 4

I have a little time, so I meander over to the Coffee Hut. I have molded myself into the atmosphere of the Coffee Hut as a regular. I enjoy seeing the comings and goings of others. I like to sense what the start of their day might be like. I grab a cup of coffee and a donut and find a seat near the window. I like to people watch . . . it is fascinating to me. Oh, I see a man from the class I model for. It's Jerry, entering the Hut. I keep my eyes on him, literally willing him to see me and come over and sit, chat, whatever. I just want some connection, get to know somebody from the class. He sees me and comes over.

"Howdy, Jerry, please, have a seat."

"Of course, yeah, James, is it?," I nod.

I get up and shake his hand. Eager to make a friend. That is my commitment to myself, get on with my life, get beyond the grieving.

"How are you Jerry?"

"Well, to be honest with you, not so good. I get easily depressed. I have a real insecurity with decision making. I have a fiancee' but I wonder what am I doing with her and to think about marriage is daunting. A lot of times I feel obligation, that if I don't do what she expects or request of me then she won't love me. I feel like an emasculated man."

"What do you mean by that?"

“She’ll talk to me like I’m her little boy. It’s her way of watching over me, a constant reminder that she’s watching my behavior. Are you married?”

“My wife vanished several years ago. I want to believe that she’s still alive. After years of grieving, I felt it was time to start engaging with people again.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, about your wife. Nude modeling is a wild way to reconnect with people, don’t you think? You ever think about joining a grieving group?”

“I keep asking myself why am doing this, nude modeling. It’s crazy, I know. However, I committed to pose and I get paid for it. So I look at modeling as a job.”

“Listen, Jim, we have a mens group, meets regularly. Frank, he is win the class, is in it, and Joseph, he leads the group. There’s a couple of other guys too. Mind if I ask them, if you want to try it? It might be helpful for you to be around some brothers.”

“Sure Jerry, ask them. Like I said, I need to branch out and I am still dealing with depressive states. I am reaching out for friendship and I surely don’t know how. You mentioned insecurity, I know I am lacking confidence within my self. It’s almost if I fear my manhood, the freedom to be who I was meant to be, not someone’s perception of what I should be.”

“Hey, I have to do something before class. I’ll see you later, I meant to tell you, your Sunday suit looks decent.”

We have a friendly laugh about his remark. It’s so refreshing to end a serious subject with a little humor.

# Chapter 5

I am back as a model. I decided to continue on. I have this loyalty issue. Once I commit to something or someone, I don't feel like letting them down. The class meets once a week for about twelve weeks. This is week two. Folks are shuffling in . . . Jerry takes the first easel. Molly is getting the room situated.

Joni enters the room and picks the easel next to Jerry.. It's hard to believe that Joni is one of my clients. I started a small massage therapy practice after years of chasing the almighty dollar. I have settled into a different lifestyle. I went to school and picked up a massage license. It's ironic that I became a healer even as I am healing my inner wounds. Maybe to help with my own healing? Anyway, there is something about the way she is suddenly looking at me. Like she knows me? Well, at least she has a really friendly demeanor.

*Joni - Well, I have been a client of his for a while, and he's still not recognizing me. I know it's been probably twenty years since our brief encounter, but geez, you'd think by now he'd have a line, you know "Hey, don't I know you from somewhere?" Not Jim, gosh I think I'll have to be the aggressor with him. He has stayed in my thoughts for so long, wondering what might have been, and now here he is in my life, but not. I know one thing: I am not giving up on him. I know some of his history, and I know he is available now.*

Sadie and Jenny, the younger gals, are full of laughter. One of them looks at me and whoever's not gazing at me is whispering into the other's ear until giggling and laughter starts up! I pretend to ignore their amorous dalliance.

*Sadie- Okay, what's this guy doing as a nude? Men will do anything to get our female attention.I think I'll text some of my friends and have them peek through the door window. After all, it seems like he wants some kind of attention.*

*Jenny - Well, I am not opposed to men like Sadie is. He has such a look on his face – what is it, astonishment? He looks almost sheepish like maybe he is out of his comfort zone and he knows it. How'd Molly get him to do it? It's surely not the money. This will be interesting, especially with Sadie's antics. She is ready to take advantage of the situation.*

Arthur, the Japanese guy, is looking serious. He has a determination about him, to get something done, or accomplished!

*Arthur - Well, Molly has done the near impossible, getting a male nude. Finally, I have an inspiration for my next project. I hope he sticks around. Molly is good at mixing up poses. I can create a band of figures. Yeah, that would work. Oh yeah, I am inspired.*

Next to Arthur is my yogi instructor, who gives a big smile and a nod. Nirvana, tall, black, and beautiful, with a white turban wrapped around her head.

*Nirvana - Well, well, it's Jim. Unbelievable. There will be some interesting discussion with him. Maybe I can create a personalized chakra chart for him. Use his figure and add the chakras with side comments. I can create a gift for him. I wonder if he'd hang it up on a wall at home? A focus of self towards higher consciousness. Hummm, yeah, we have enough time for me to get his figure right. Oh boy, this will be fun!*

Deloris and Faye, now they seem an interesting duo.

*Deloris - Oh my word, too bad I'm beyond my prime. I hope Molly doesn't have high expectations. There might be some parts missing in my drawings. I'm still somewhat of a Puritan at heart!*

*Faye - Okay, I've seen it all now. I am amused. Well, art is a creative process, so it'll be interesting what I focus on, ha ha. I really enjoy my time spent with Deloris. Us oldies should have fun with this drawing class.*

Frank is standing ready to go. I am amazed that there are three people in the class whom I already know.

*Frank - Small world we have. He saw me in my swim trunks. So is this guy trying to one up me? Or what? Molly outdid herself this time. I got to find out what this guy is all about.*

Joseph makes his way around the horn, smiles as he excuses himself bumping into people, with a boisterous "excuse me" and a chuckle.

*Joseph - Oh my, a white man buffalo!*

And finally, Sammie, smooth skinned, tan, and reserved.

*Sammie - Oh my God! A male study and he seems fearless. Not a bad body. Ooo, I wonder what his sexual preferences are? I better settle down. I don't even know this man or his personality. He did notice me. I saw him look.*

Molly, "Hi, James, how was your weekend and week so far?"

"Very good . . . I didn't do much, got in an Alpine hike . . . and yours?"

"It was alright. I actually was able to work on my art projects! Hey, today I'll have you pose with your hands on your knees, head held up. If your neck starts getting stiff we'll rest. Can you like, hold your breath in?"

Like this? I take a yoga pose and Molly is excited. "Yes, yes you can hold that pose for a while?"

Molly has me posing on the side of the room between Joni, Sadie, and Jenny.

Nothing is happening for a while, just the quiet scratching of pencils, and charcoal. A whisper and giggle escape off to my right and Sadie is whispering something to Jenny while she is eyeballing me from head to foot. Next thing I know is she's asking me for a date! "Come on I am a fun date. Oh, look, you're getting excited already!"

I peek over at Joni. First her jaw dropped, then a smirk and shake of her head! I am feeling very self-conscious. After all, I don't even have a fig leaf to hide behind. Molly has me turn in different directions so that the artists can get different views, and I am staring directly at Sadie. I focus on being a model and relax. Who knows what she's sketching? I don't care at this point. I'm just relieved that I can stay unattached from thoughts that don't serve me (right now) and wouldn't be in the best interest of the class. All humor aside, I decide to look at Sadie with direct eye contact. She connects eye to eye. In my peripheral vision it appears that the smirk is gone from Joni and Jenny is no longer smiling. They seem to be minding their own business. First it seems that we are locked into "sizing each other up," seeing how we might connect. I am silently asking her to look at my heart, my soul.

*Jim - What do you see, Sadie? I am not like the perception you may have of men in general. Get rid of your perception, you are teasing, be a professional artist. Draw*

*me with a compassionate eye. Can you?"*

*Sadie - Oh boy, this guy is going to do a stare down. I wonder if anybody else is watching us. Or are they just drawing? I am not going to take my eyes off of him. I am not going to submit and look away. That would be like an apology. All of a sudden he's a hard (pun intended) ass? Okay, what's he thinking? Where are we going with this? Well, maybe he took me seriously, but most guys would have responded! Then I could reject the man, "Just kidding, too small." Ha, maybe he's just a shy guy and doesn't have a clue how to react? Okay, I'll pretend I am drawing. I'll let you off the hook, Jimmy! Isn't that what Molly said his name was? . . . James.*

I can hear Molly going around the room giving words of encouragement and suggestions. Sadie has decided to sketch, after she gave me a wink! A real teaser . . . or maybe not. Ugh, thank God she decided to draw.

Class is over. Soon I am dressing, and I wait for everyone to clear out before I get my paycheck. Molly has a smirk, too. "Molly, I am guessing that you observed the exchange between Sadie and myself. I know what she wants to see happen."

"Oh, what's that, Jim?"

" I don't think I need to answer that. I'm sure you know the reason why it's hard to find naked male models. I have a strong libido energy that I am very aware of. My sense is she wanted to embarrass me. Molly, I need your support or the deal is off!"

The smirk is gone. "Okay, sorry, I just found the situation as humorous. I realize that I need to maintain a professional decorum. However, there will be times when your exposure will be a test of your will power. You okay with that? Look, men's genital seems to be pretty spontaneous, so it's up to you to have self-control. I don't know what else to say. I am appreciative for your willingness to model nude. I really feel that speaks of your character. For me it indicates an openness into your soul. Am I on the right track?"

"Thanks for your insight. I have cloistered myself for several years and I am pretty much an introvert. So this is a real challenge for me. I find myself in the duality of wanting to socialize and then wanting to just be a quiet observer of people. This modeling is like shock therapy, if that makes any sense. Maybe this is a metaphor, "baring the soul", as you say. I keep asking myself, 'For whose sake am I doing what I am doing?' And right now, I am not

sure for whom I am doing this for. So I like your train of thought. It shows me you have compassion. Otherwise, I am thinking that I swallowed the hook, when you smiled at my inquiry to model nude!"

"Okay, Jim, I am here to support you. We don't know each other yet. Maybe we'll get a better connection as time goes on. Here's your check. Sorry I can't give you more . . . . School budget is low for Art. Will you be back next week?"

"Thanks, and yes, Molly, I feel committed. And thanks for taking the time to listen." And with that said I take the check and leave.

# Chapter 6

I have my second massage client showing up in a little bit. Just enough time to rearrange the room. I put new sheets on the table, I refill the oil bottle, set the lighting, and have time to relax. I was in reverie when Joni enters the office. There's a look between amusement and laughter.

"What's up, Joni?" There's a broad smile on her face. My guess is she's as amused as I am concerning the interaction between Sadie and myself. I wonder how many people in the class were aware of the exchange.

"Nothing, nothing I am just feeling good."

"Okay, the room is ready. You know what to do. Let me know when you're ready."

I'm feeling uncomfortable, especially since there wasn't any reference to her seeing me naked. What would I have said? Maybe apologize? At least that's what I am telling myself. I guess there's two ways I can approach the whole thing, especially since I have a personal connection with three individuals. I can look at them as strangers or as "family." Not in the sense of immediate family, rather in the sense of a group of people with a common interest. It sounds far-fetched. Maybe I am needing to relate to others as a circle of friends (sic) family as opposed to acquaintances that I will only see periodically."

She calls me, "Ready!"

Usually I prepare myself to give a healing massage by getting a sense of the energy in the room. I like to gently place my hands on the person receiving and call forth (silently) healing angles. But today I am waiting for Joni's questions about me being a nude model. This is the first contact we've had since three weeks ago. I start the process, gently rocking Joni's body (still under the sheets), maintaining a professional mindset. I like to start communicating with the client, being conscious of the person's needs and asking about any current injuries that I should know about. Also, asking what body parts the person wants me to focus on during the treatment.

I pull back the sheet, keeping it draped just above her upper buttocks. I warm up my hands, rubbing them to get some heat. I pour some nice warm sesame oil in the palms of my hands and start spreading the oil over Joni's back.

"Hummm, that's already feeling good. Hey, you can do some deep work today, especially around the upper shoulders and neck area."

I start slow strokes along the spine starting from the waist and working my hands over the shoulders and circling back along her side and ribs and do it again with a little more pressure. After a few times (on both sides) I slowly run my thumbs in a circular motion along the spine, feeling for any knots or any reaction from Joni letting me know what she's feeling. As the massage proceeds, I start working on her neck and upper shoulders.

Humph, something seems vaguely familiar, but I don't give the thought attention. By the end of an hour, as the massage is almost completed Joni speaks up. . . .

"You still don't know who I am, do you?"

"Am I supposed to? I mean, I know you as Joni."

Joni, "We did Life Stream together."

"That was what twenty or twenty-five years ago?"

She sits up and pulls the sheet over her breast. "Look in my coat pocket —you'll find some glasses, bring them here. It's amazing that I still have these old rims from way back. I always liked the look . . . ." She puts them on, runs her fingers through her hair and gives me a golden smile! "Well?"

"Joni . . . Joni, yeah, we roomed together about seven days, during the

life-changing, Life Stream event. With that other gal and the gay guy. We were all kissers and huggers."

Joni laughs.

I am still in shock . . . my memory taking me back many years. "That time spent truly was a wild ride of self-discovery and interpersonal relationships. It was amazing how they selected roommates."

"You would give me neck rubs to ease my migraines. And kiss we did. I thought maybe we had a chance at a relationship. But the last day when family, friends, and partners were invited to the 'graduation,' we, you, me, Cindy, and Jerod, were hugging and kissing until your partner showed up. What was her name? It was like the Red Sea parting for Moses. We all spun our heads to see what caught your attention. You stopped immediately, dropped your arms and hands from our embrace!"

"Julian, my lover, my mate destined to be together. Yes, I have that memory forever. And even the Mighty Quinn caught what was happening and looked on as Julian and I locked eyes and slowly made our way to each other for an embrace. Knowing that we both had a major change thanks to the Life Stream process. The aura in that whole room was just radiating light. And our aura must have been golden!"

"And . . . what happened to her?" *Joni - Little does Jim know that I have some history about his past relationship. This is not the time to spill the beans!*

"I lost her, five years ago."

"Really? I'm sorry to hear that . . . . Hey, I have to get going. Can we meet for coffee one of these days? I'd like to hear what happened if you're up to telling your story. I'll leave my card on the massage table. Okay? Are you okay?"

I am not okay, I am in shock. "Yeah . . . coffee next week sometime. Last time we did this, I just could not visualize a long-term relationship with you. And now you're here."

"Call me."

This sure is a surprise. My mind is in the past, bringing up memories that go way back. I start recalling the first time I meet Julian. It took a while for our relationship to evolve. I wasn't sure if I should make the initial move or let her approach me. I was a pretty shy guy back then. We started with meeting each other when she was with friends. I invited her on a road trip with a couple of people we mutually knew from fundraising events. It was on that magical trip that Julian took charge and slowly, cautiously reeled me

into her world. The trip had some intense moments mixed with the joy of discovering each other's personality. When we got back home that's when Julian suggested the Life Stream interpersonal relationship workshop. As it turned out, the people that ran the event decided it would be best to split us up. So Julian did the first event. I don't remember her sharing too much with me. I think she wanted me to go into my weeklong work with no expectations. And that is how I met Joni. The facilitators had placed people together based on a psychological test we took. And I ended up rooming with Joni and two other people. Whew, that was so long ago. What a glorious relationship Julian and I had over the years. It was real, not always a smooth ride. We seemed to be willing to do the work it took to keep a marriage meaningful. We took various workshops and worked with a therapist, read, got spiritual, whatever it took to know ourselves better and each other as a unit. And here I am after all those years, without my lover. The woman I wanted to be with forever. I am feeling sadness right now. I do not want to fall back into depression. Not now.

The word clinging comes to mind. How I cling onto past experiences and fail to stay present with the life I have now. Or clinging to future thoughts of how I want this life to unfold. Both of these patterns are so stressful. Now I understand better the term of letting go. Sounds so easy and sometimes a false sense of reality until I realize that if I cling to the past or future I am missing out on life.

# Chapter 7

I lock up the massage office and make my way over to Nirvana's yoga studio. We have a nice, intimate class. About seven to ten of us show up weekly. My yoga class started from an Adult Education Class at a community center. Then I became a regular of Nirvana's Kundalini Class. One of my massage clients told me about her. I used to do yoga with Swami Rama many years ago. It was more for stretching and staying in some kind of shape through Chicago winters. I really enjoyed the nights after class when musical instruments would appear and Swami himself would show up. With a night of chants and mantras, the place would be rocking. That was my start with Hindu culture and philosophy. Years later I would meet Maggie, who had similar interest and kept inspiring me to continue my search for connection with some form of spiritual teachings.

So here I am doing Kundalini with Nirvana. She wears a turbine, dressed usually in white with some soft colors and flowing shawls. An African American

with dark skin, which is a beautiful contrast with her garments. Dancing brown eyes, full lips, and a wonderful, calm yet energetic demeanor.

We start out with a short call of protection in some sort of Hindu language.

"Okay, let's start with some alternate breathing from our left and right nostrils.

Let's balance the right and left hemispheres of the brain. The masculine and feminine, the yin and the yang..."

It turns out to be another wonderful session of loosening the spine and sending the Kundalini energy from our lower chakras to the crown (the top of the head). I am in bliss by the time Nirvana takes us through a meditation and relaxation. As we're packing up and I am rolling up my mat, Nirvana squats down next to me. I look up. "James, what a synchronicity that you are modeling in my sketching class. What inspired you to do that?"

"I'm not really sure. I am beginning to slowly find out. I wondered how it would feel to be a model. After a couple of sessions, I feel that I am more comfortable. It was not an easy decision to make. But once I made contact with Molly's eyes and her smile I made the decision, I wanted a new experience. Something that would push my limits, maybe a courageous step to expose my vulnerabilities, go beyond my physical limitations. I might be barking up the wrong tree, but it didn't take much self-inquiry to do it. And seeing you there, and Joni who is another person I know through my massage business, and Frank, he models in my sketch class, that makes it somewhat intimidating. I am approaching the whole experience in a non-physical way. Kind of hard to explain right now. Am I making any sense to you?"

"Hummm, you know, as we get the Kundalini energy flowing, there might be some personal stuff that comes up. Then you will encounter your true self. Your karma, as they say. Karma is a wise teacher. It can be a series of recurring events in your lifetimes until one has the totality of love, which is compassion. Truly a liberation. Or karma can be a bondage of suffering in a negative state of hurt. I am just giving you a heads up, so be aware of the changing perceptions you may recognize within your self."

"Thanks, Nirvana. I was exposed to Kundalini years ago as part of a personal awakening. It was a weeklong session like Gestalt or something . . . . I don't recall all of the processes used to gain some self-awareness. I know when I started the weeklong event, it was 24/7 and I was a shy guy scared to expose my self, my ego, in front of others, and strangers. Afterwards, there was a group of us that met in a room and danced, free-form, like Sufi whirling, and spinning and floating around

each other. The music was fast-paced and meant to get the Kundalini rising in us. That's what attracted me to you. To learn the actual method of Kundalini yoga."

"I think you are in for a wild ride, James. I hope you stick with the class."

## Chapter 8

My Sketching class is coming to a close. I personally felt discouraged. My sketching skills, in my opinion were limited. However, the best compliment I received was from Eduardo...

"Jim, you are developing a style. Your style, that you own. I never asked anyone in this class to do classic sketching."

I never thought of it that way. Owning my creation.

"Stick with it, James. Let art be fun. If you try to achieve an outcome, even if you achieve a particular outcome, you'll always be looking into the future. You'll be obsessed with wanting to do a better drawing. What you did

becomes the past, the last drawing. If it didn't meet your standard you end up chasing a better result. When in fact the best result is right in front of you. What you did now. Then the creative process becomes a fun exploration of your expression."

"Thanks, Eduardo. That can apply to whatever I am doing in life. What I hear you saying is to enjoy the moment. Who am I drawing for, me or for someone's acknowledgement? It is not always reaching for a specific outcome. It's, how can I put it, it's recognizing what is?"

Eduardo is chuckling, "Yeah, something like that. We're sounding like two philosophers, but yeah, I think we're on the same page. Enjoy the moment, for whatever it is."

Frank approaches as Eduardo moves on to chat with other sketchers. Frank abruptly sticks out his hand to shake. "I don't know how you can model nude, dude. That takes balls."

"Well, it is a challenge, especially with Sadie and Jenny harassing me with what seems like sexual teasing!" We chuckle.

All the goodbyes are done, people are gone except for Eduardo, Frank, and Stephanie.

I thank Frank and Stephanie "for modeling."

"My pleasure," Frank, remarks. "If you want any tips in nude modeling, let me know. Like the pros and cons of donning swimming trunks."

Stephanie also gives a reply, "I enjoyed doing it. Thank you for your sketching. Frank told me that you're modeling in one of Molly's classes. I might model with you a couple of times. Molly likes two models to mix it up, sometimes. Then the sketchers have choices."

"Well, that would be great. And, Eduardo, I am grateful for your instruction and encouragement. Especially about style."

"James, you're welcome. I'll let you know when there's another class."

I decide to head for the Coffee Hut as a late afternoon celebration, a little latte'. Anyways, I get there, get my coffee, regular, twelve ounces, a little coconut milk or whatever else is available that's nondairy, and have a seat. I am thinking of my exchange with Eduardo. It really makes sense. Who am I doing the art for? What are my motives and do my motives give me a sense of liberation from fear of trying to please others or my own ego? Maybe I just need to have gratitude for the opportunity to create. Overcome the thought of "will my art be good enough?" For who's sake am I doing what I'm doing?

Suddenly, over my shoulder, a whisper. "Hey, James, how are youuuu!"

I slightly turn my head to the right, and it's Jenny. Waving a piece of folded paper in one hand, and giving me her broad, bright smile. She seems kind of shy.

"Hi Jenny, what's this?"

"An invitation. Hope you can make it."

As I look down and open the note, I turn just in time to watch her walk out the door. Hummm . . . I can't wait to see what this is about. I read, "You, Mr. James, are invited to dinner. Sadie, will handle the main course. Jenny, that's me, will do the salad. And you, will handle dessert." The address and phone number of Sadie's is included.

# Chapter 9

Tonight I get to have an opportunity to look at the sketches. That's what Molly told me.

"I want you to take a couple different poses tonight. An archer pose, and a runner's pose. I'll have a little stool you can prop up your foot. We'll have a couple of breaks and you can go around and see how people are sketching your poses. You ready?"

And we start with me in the middle of the horseshoe, in an archers pose. Pencils and chalk scratching, making soft, busy sounds. The artists are busy. After about thirty minutes, we take a break. Actually, I had a few breaks to loosen my muscles and drink some water. Anyway, during the break I decide to walk around and look at some of the sketches. I check out Jerry first and he is doing classic drawing. I am surprised by his skill. He is doing the archer pose and has me holding a broken bow. It is looking like a Roman Statue. Something you might find as an archeologist at a ruin. Joni has me running, looking over my shoulder with an arm outstretched as if I am in a four-man relay getting ready to receive a baton. Only there is part of an arm with a hand holding my hand. Sadie has me bending over, picking up what looks like a note or piece of paper from the ground. I did pose with a

knee to the ground, so she seems to be using that pose as the basis for the action. I whisper to her, "I got your note." She says, "RSVP," and I grasp her shoulder lightly, and with a squeeze I whisper, "Yes."

I slip past Jenny, who is busy sketching me walking versus running. There's an obscured figure that my figure blocks, but you can see long, flowing, black hair and a partial silhouette of another body. I whisper, "You?" She whispers back, "Me!"

Next I get behind and off to the right of Arthur, a tallish Japanese guy (a gentleman of grace). He has a series of my archer figures touching in a line with each other. A rather long line of human form. A line drawing.

"Arthur, what are you going to do with that line of figures?"

"I do pottery. I make special custom Japanese bowls used to cook stews, rice dishes, or soups. Keeps the food warm a long time. I am going to use this string of figures to wrap around the bottom of one of my designs."

"I'd like to see it when you're done."

"Sure, I'll let you know and have you over for a traditional Japanese dish heated and served in your own bowl. Probably be a few weeks."

"Thanks. I will be looking forward to that special dinner!"

It's time to get back to modeling. Finally, the class is over. I am slightly exhausted from three different poses. I never realized the effort it takes to hold a pose. I am fascinated by the different versions that I was able to view on the sketch pads. It gives me inspiration and reminds me of Eduardo's advice, "You are creating a style."

"Jenny, you heard Jim say that he'll come to our dinner party?"

"Yeah, that's great."

Jenny is wrapping up, putting away her tools when Sadie remarks, "Hey, is that you walking with him? Huh? You having some feelings towards the guy? You're going to make me jealous. I'm only doing this dinner thing for your sake. You're the one that wants some male interaction."

"Stop it, Sadie. It's just a sketch. Besides maybe the dinner will be fun. You're the teaser, so relax."

The room empties out. Sammie gives me a nod and a wry smile as he passes. "Nice poses, Jim. Do you do any private modeling?"

My quick response is, "I never thought about that. I think this is enough for me right now."

Molly is crossing the room (my saving grace from an awkward situation?) and Sammie continues on out.

"That was good, Jim. I think you're getting the hang of it. I mean, you have staying power, I mean, . . ."

She has me chuckling. “Okay, Molly, I know what you must have been looking at! ”

“Well, I just wanted to check your will power! Make sure you’re focused on the pose and nothing else.”

“Thanks for your concern, is it?”

“Yeah, yeah, here’s your check. And, really, thank you for doing this. It really is special and courageous. I sense that you are taking this seriously. Just let me know anytime a pose is too intense, or you don’t think you can handle it or need a break. Thank you.”

“You are welcome.”

# Chapter 10

Middle of the following week, I am back at the Coffee Hut, a really convenient and popular little place near the school. Warm atmosphere, people buzzing in an out, ample windows to people watch as customers come in or others pass by on the street. I like to sit and wonder what someone, a stranger’s life might be like. I like seeing facial expressions. I like to notice what style of clothes they choose. I wonder, who is that person under all that armor? I love catching someone’s eye and give a hello or howdy. That’s usually what I say, howdy . . . see if I can get a smile or smirk. Speaking of which, here comes Deloris and Faye from the class I model for. I watch as they enter and keep my eyes peering at them. I want to see them together in action. And I want them to feel my gaze. Deloris nudges Faye with a light elbow and I watch as Faye digs in a coin purse. They are mumbling something to each other. Looks like Deloris still has an apron on and Faye a big, old, large, brimmed straw hat. Oh, they got their coffees and pastries. They’re heading for a table in the back . . . .

“Howdy, Deloris and Faye .....”

“Well, hello, who’s that? Oh, James, our model!”

“Have a seat, unless you want to sit by yourselves.

They look at each other, then, “Sure, don’t mind if we do.”

They are seated and I pipe in, “Looks like you two have been having a good morning. Looks like you’ve been working in a garden.”

“Oh my, you can tell by my ‘Garden of the Gods’ apron?” remarks Deloris.

There’s a small laugh from Faye.

“Yep, and Faye’s dirty finger nails.”

She twists her hands and has a look. “I’ll be right back.”

Deloris, "We live close by, right in the neighborhood. Thought we'd take a timeout and grab a mid-morning snack."

Faye is back. "You're so observant, James," she says in a sarcastic tone. We smile.

"So you two live together and garden together?"

"Live no, garden yes," says Deloris.

"Whose garden?"

Faye pitches in, "I'm in a condo. Deloris still has the big house with the beautifully landscaped, big yard."

"Yes, the house is a bit much. Everyone's gone . . . kids, husband passed away several years ago. I can tell you more of the story, but it might bore you. Besides, we want to get back to our project, getting set up for the spring and summer plantings. When we finish up, if you have nothing else to do, how about coming over and have a look?"

Faye, "Yes, and we could use some muscle. You up for it?"

"Sure, great, yes, I would love to see it and, yeah, I can help. Nothing like getting involved with nature!"

Faye ask, "James, we've been thinking. What it's like to model nude?"

"We might want to try it," chuckles Deloris

Faye remarks, "You might Deloris, but not me. I have nothing to show off!"

We all laugh. I am warming up to these two elders. The sly humor warms my heart. I think I will play along with it!

"What makes you want to consider being a model?" I ask.

*Deloris - Oh boy, he took the bait, now for words of wisdom . . . .* "Well, we always get younger people to model. And I think people miss out on the beauty of an older person too. The wrinkles and sagging parts tell stories and show us that our bodies still have a beauty. There's a history to look at, and still be considered as a graceful woman, not an old whatever."

I make a comment, "I like that you are happy with your body, even what it is destined to become after youth. I was with a younger buddy a while ago. He was commenting on the young beauties as we were gawking one day, I told him at my age the older women are looking good, too! I like to journal and sometimes I scratch a poem."

"Wait awhile, Jim, to us you're a younger body. So what are you, fifties?"

I don't answer that question. "Let me see here, I have this journal I just started after a ten-day trip. Here it is. You want me to read it?"

Faye, "Sure, then we'll go to our garden. We have an old rosemary plant we need moved."

I start . . .

"Wrinkles and Old Age"

Lounging on the pool deck.
Sun beating down. Feeling
the warmth.
Legs stretched out
on the recliner.
I see the wrinkles surrounding
my knees.

I give the kneecaps a squeeze,
and an arch of thin concentric wrinkles,
wrap around the top and lateral sides of the kneecap.
Wrinkles, running horizontally
over the top of the knee cap.

I look over at my daughter.

"Hey, Susie, squeeze your knees."
Her knees look totally smooth,
and she squeezes again, still smooth.

I am noticing the lines of wrinkles,
of my peers. (As I look around the pools edge.)
And I notice the smooth skin
of the young ones.
My body betrays my mind.

My eyes note facial wrinkles, of
happy faces, of fearful faces,

of sad faces, of lonely faces, and
of faces excited to be alive.

Wrinkles of age that tell the stories of life, that gather tears
in the corner of the eyes, that show years of laughter.

Deep crevices between the eyes that reveal anger or concern.

The wrinkles that show the natural frown.
The upturned lips that push a smile broadly across the face.

I greet the new day of old age, the bright sun,

the blue sky, the puffy clouds.

And the wrinkles of the knees
of a wise old elephant.

"Shall we go? I can't wait to see your garden." We stand, get rid of our empty coffee cups, and head out onto the street.

# Chapter 11

I call Joni. She directs me to her favorite haunt, the Wildflower Bakery. I enter and have a look around. There she is, writing something in a notebook. I quietly walk over and my sense of calm turns into anticipation mixed with some anxiety.

"Hi, Joni"

She looks up with searching eyes and a smile settles over her beautiful facial features. "I was wondering if you would give me a call, or make some excuse at our next massage appointment. You know, too busy or whatever."

"No, actually I looked forward to another coffee date with you, with some trepidation. We've only done this once before and, well, we know that was the last time we connected. I seem to remember that we met after Jerod's party for us Life Stream graduates."

"Yeah, you're right, I do remember that party."

"You were radiating, introduced me to your boyfriend at the time, was he?"

"I'm sure I had some sort of male companion. You knew my story with men. And you had brought Julian along. Julian, right?"

"Good memory."

By now my nerves are settled, Joni is smiling at me, I at her, she seems familiar but a distant memory. It's like meeting someone again at a high school reunion and recalling small bits of the past. Only this is different since our reunion brings up a past reconciliation with my old self. And a commitment that rendered my life on a journey full of highs and lows, excitement and gratitude and a lot of introspection.

"Can I get you folks something?" It's the waitress.

We order two coffees black and a pastry.

Now we kind of stumble into conversation . . . . "I, uh, oh, go ahead, you were going to say something?"

Joni takes a deep breath. I watch her chest rise and fall. So I start, "The last time we did this you were taking up journalism?"

"You have a good memory, Jim. Yes, I am a journalist, freelance."

So we start like last time, when my nerves limited us to a stop and go chitchat until she announced she felt "a migraine coming on." I am calmer this time there's close to over twenty years between us. Twenty years of maturity that comes from a lot of introspection.

"How long have you known that your massage therapist was me, from so long ago? And why did it take you so long to announce who you were to me?" I asked Joni.

"Well, to be honest I looked you up. You had lingered in my thoughts for a long time. I had actually kept one of your name tags they made us wear at Life Stream. I found your name on a people search. Then I saw you had a massage business. I wanted to feel your touch again. Not sexually, but you seemed to really take care of my migraines during that time."

"Gosh, I can recall that now. I had taken an acupressure massage class and it eventually led me into the world of massage therapy until I got a license. And you, journalism, was it always a desire or did you just kind of do it for a job?"

Joni remarks, "I was wanting to be involved with other people's lives and that was one way for me to engage."

"Is that what attracted you to Life Stream?" I asked.

"No, no, I needed to find out some stuff about me and relationships. I was in and out of so many with men. You saw that."

"Yeah, remember we did some kind of psychological test, then they roomed us with like-minded people. Before Julian I was in a very sexual relationship. I end up in an apartment with three people who had sex on their mind."

"You must have had a deep inner thought process of lovemaking, to get in with us. By the way, you sensed I had feelings for you?"

"There was definitely an attraction so much so that you have been in and out of my thoughts, ever since. I seem to have this curiosity, to wonder, what people that had an impact on me are doing now. I was never good at following up with people from the past. I regret not following up and retaining friendships. I'm not sure what causes that. I think about it, and what comes to me is that I want to keep moving forward, new connections. Make sense?"

"But you did neither with me back then. I could have been a new

connection. A chance at a relationship. After all, we did have some deep, soul-searching exchanges with each other."

"I thought about that, but I also had a very strong connection with Julian, and I really had to make a choice to veer off and pursue you, or stay committed to someone who was opening me up and showing me her whole self at the same time. Julian is who suggested Life Stream, for us to have a meaningful relationship."

"Wow, yeah, we really didn't know much about each other's past other than what we shared for seven days. And at our young age, I guess it was mostly infatuation. So do you mind if I pry a little? I would love for you to share what your life with Julian was like. Before she left you?"

I look at the time, and get ready to excuse myself in a graceful way.

"Joni, I am willing to share some of my life that I had with Julian. But why?"

"I tracked you down because I have such a positive recall of our short time spent together. I am a journalist, so I know a bit about the disappearance. I am sure you still grieve. Let's just leave it at that for now. I will see you at our next massage?"

I slide my chair back stand, slowly we smile at each other, and Joni gets up and embraces me and it feels like genuine compassion. For this I am grateful.

# Chapter 12

As Frank enters the class, I greet him and thank him for his modeling in my sketch class that just ended.

"Not bad money, eh?" was Frank's response.

"No, especially if you can do it on a consistent basis. What do you do when you're not here dabbling with art?"

"Oh, I am a ranch hand, bale hay, run some cattle and horses, maintenance, repairs, that kind of thing. Keeps me in pretty good shape, though it can beat you up a little too."

Joseph meanders through the door and stops by Frank and me. "Hello, men. Frank, you on for drumming tonight? Meet at the yurt in the woods?"

"Sure, that'll do. Mind if we invite James here?"

"No, not at all. You ever been to a drumming before, James?"

"I have not. What's involved?"

"A lot of ritual, some discussion and meditation. We're a circle of six men. You in?"

"Well, I'm not much for ritual, but, okay, I am 'in.' Thanks for the invite."

Frank, "Where do you live? I can pick you up. Joseph lives on the other side of Bozeman. Near Livingston."

"Okay, I'll give you my number and address after class."

Today I am modeling with Stephanie. The two of us on either side of the room, sitting on stools, one leg stretching to the ground, the other propped up on the stool. Stephanie is somewhat glad to see me modeling. She gives me a nod, and the class starts with Molly giving instructions and inspiration. We both sit with a small sheet draped over our laps. The class is uneventful for me, except for Sadie's teasing and Jenny's smiles. My mind is mostly on the men's group happening in the evening.

Frank picks me up about half past six in the evening and we're on our way. "Hey, glad you can come."

"Thanks for the invite. So what should I expect?"

"Well, there's six of us, and Jerry from the sketch class usually shows up too.

We usually start out going around the circle. We sit in a circle around a big community drum, and just kind of see what's up in our lives. We have a story or two, then we do some drumming. There's a sweat lodge if you want to check that out later."

"How'd you find out about this group?"

"It just kind of happened. I've known Joseph a few years now, and he knew some people and we started this group."

We approach Livingston, and Frank exits before town and turns on a gravel road. He drives a ways on a gradual incline and then up a hill. We go probably a couple of miles. It's getting near sunset, with a beautiful view of the Bridger range. The Crazies are lit up to the east. Sure enough, we roll into a little parking area where there's a few cars parked. A fire is lit up to one side of the yurt. I don't see the sweat lodge.

Joseph greets us, "Good evening, gentlemen. Glad to see you made it, James. Everybody's not here yet. I want to explain a few things, some about ritual and what we do here, before we go in to meet everyone. We are going to smoke some pipe. It's a way to connect to the world, Mother Nature, and it's about our path of life, the journey we are each on as an individual. We are a small circle of men. After we pass pipe, we share something that might have

come up the past week or something you might be dealing with emotionally, spiritually, or physically. After that, we pick up some pow wow drums and other instruments like rattles or sticks, whatever. There will be a big community drum and more than one can beat it at a time, you'll see. We have some light refreshments, and some stay for a sweat in the lodge. You're welcome to stay for that too. Let's go in, my friend."

We enter the yurt. It's about a thirty-foot circumference, a beautiful structure. Reminds me of the Mongolian structures you see in the high desert that the nomadic tribes live in. There's a big stand-up drum in the middle of the room. Some chairs and stools to sit on surround the drum in a circle. There are two tables at one end of the room. One has the instruments, the other some refreshments. I see Jerry from class and decide to sit next to him. Once the chatter subsides, everyone is quiet and Joseph starts us off with a prayer.

"This is from our brothers, a Cherokee Prayer." He pauses before continuing, "O Great Spirit, who made all races, look kindly upon the whole human family and take away the arrogance and hatred which separates us from our brothers."

So we have Joseph, Frank, Jerry, and before we started I was introduced to Blue Cloud, a descendent of the Cherokee of North Carolina; Matt, a younger guy; and his buddy Bobby, a native Montanan; and myself. Joseph tells us to temporarily move outside. We are sitting around the fire.

"Now we pass pipe," says Joseph. "James, we are burning some herbs gathered from the area around this lodge. We are getting rid of evil spirits. We will pass the pipe through the smoke of the fire, north to south, then east to west, and then from heaven to earth. Then we will pass in a clockwise direction. Each of us will take four puffs."

Blue Cloud is packing the pipe with tobacco he gets from his uncle back east, from the Carolinas. Blue Cloud hands the pipe to Joseph. He starts with a deep inhale and lets smoke escape on his exhale. He then hands it across to Frank (north to south), who smokes and hands it across to Blue Cloud (east). He hands it over to Matt (west), and we go around the circle each having our puff, four times around. Everybody is in quiet contemplation, and so am I, in awe and feeling privileged and honored for the invite. Finally, in stillness, one by one we rise and head over to the yurt. We sit in circle around the big drum.

Joseph explains for my sake, "We will go around and share our journey with each other. Who ever is holding the talking stick, it's his time to share."

Jerry stands and takes the stick that is laying on the big drum. He gets seated. "I am soon to be married, and I am still unsure if I am making the right choice. I am nervous and afraid of the commitment. '

Frank, “Where are you feeling the anxiety?”

“I feel it in my stomach right now.” Jerry takes some deep belly breaths. His face is contorted, like he is not sure where to start? “I don’t know if I totally love Gerry.”

Frank, “Is it true?”

I notice that everyone is quiet. Letting Jerry be with his thoughts, his own inquiry.

“Yes, I am not sure I truly love Gerry enough to commit to our relationship.”

Frank, “Can you know that it’s absolutely true?”

“Yes.”

Frank, “What happens when you believe that thought?”

“Well, I get stressed, like now my gut is a tangled bunch of nerves. I have been alone for so long, I fear I am not going to meet Gerry’s needs and expectations.”

Frank, “So, Jerry, can you picture yourself without this thought of meeting someone’s expectations.”

Jerry closes his eyes. He is breathing slow and deep. Finally, he responds, “I feel free to be who I am. I need autonomy.”

And the process of inquiry continues until Jerry sees for himself that he has a perception of fulfilling Gerry’s expectations and he doesn’t even know for sure what if anything Gerry expects of him. He finishes, relieved from the fear of committing to a relationship. And it can be any relationship. He feels that he may not be good enough and tries to live up to an image rather than just being who he is.

We go around the circle, each person taking about five minutes, with honest sharing. And I am staring at the talking stick laying once again on the drum. Whoa, all eyes are on me. I reluctantly get up and slowly grab the talking stick. I am in contemplation. I am still standing, staring, and I start. “I lost my mate, my soulmate. Five years ago, she vanished. I came home and she was gone. No note. I think we both saw it coming. I am still in disbelief.” I say all this in a trembling voice.

It’s Joseph, “James, where do you feel it in your body, right now? Do not think about it. Where do you feel it? Let it out.”

I cry out, “Right here,” and I am pounding my heart. I am in total breakdown; anger is welling up inside. I start pounding the big drum with my palms. I feel first a hand on my back, gently rubbing it, then another arm around my shoulder and I look up at faces of compassion and fear and wonderment. I close my eyes.

Someone says, “Stay with the feeling, let it out.”

I start to heave with some deep guttural sounds. It feels strange and yet I feel

safe to be vulnerable. And I hear Joseph asking for the gathering of brothers, "Let's be here for him," and I am engulfed in love and empathy. I am emotionally drained. The grief of loss is still deep in my being. I cannot deny the blame and shame I still carry with me.

# Chapter 13

Slowly we pick up some pow wow drums. Jerry grabs a couple of rattles. Blue Cloud holds a couple of leather-wrapped mallets and positions himself at the big drum. Matt has two sticks. The rest of us have pow wow drums made from bison skins on handcrafted frames. The drumming begins as we are loosely positioned in various parts of the space. The big drum vibrates the floor. There's a couple of chants amidst the drumming, sticks holding a beat and rattles sound like snakes in the background. I have a feeling of surrender. Calling forth the spirits for healing and a spiritual connection. After about ten minutes, we are all pounding on the big drum. The floor is vibrating, and I am in a transcendent mood. I am chanting gratitude affirmations. There are other chants coming from Frank and Joseph. The crescendo builds, then *boom*, just like that, all of the pounding stops, in unison! Instruments are reverently put down, leaning against the big drum or left on a stool. We are all lingering and walking around, trance-like.

Joseph, "Brothers, let's gather around." We form an informal circle. Joseph, "Thank you, gentlemen, for supporting each other. For your contributions to manhood."

Everybody, "Ah ho."

Joseph, "There are some refreshments on the table back there."

Matt and Bobby are already heading out the door when Frank comes up to me, pastry in hand. "James, Joseph and I are going to do a sweat tonight, if that's alright with you. You are invited."

"Yeah, no problem. I have never done a sweat. I would like to join you guys if it's okay. After all, you are the driver tonight."

"Yeah, you got a point."

I grab some finger food and a drink. And see Jerry off to the side by himself. "Do you do this every week, Jerry?"

"Yeah, for a year now. I knew Frank from another drawing class. He was modeling. He turned me onto the group. It was about a year since I met Gerry."

"What attracted you to this group?"

"I needed male support. I wasn't sure about wanting a relationship

with Gerry, or anybody for that matter. What do you think about tonight?"

"Well, it looks like a few of us did some work. I really like the different approaches to getting us into conscious awareness, or feeling what physically and mentally happens during our processes. I had no idea how deep my grieving still is. I still blame myself for losing Julian. She was my mate for so many years."

"I am curious, what happened?"

"I'm sorry, Jerry, I am not ready to go there again. Like I said the morning we met at the Coffee Hut, I am working on new relationships. Getting on with my life. I kind of went into a shell of grief far too long. Grief can turn into a deep depression, and I was definitely heading into that arena. I found a group and someone who helps people during the grieving process. I consider thought as energy. I have the power to change my thought. If a thought that I have is negative, I can choose to change that thought into something positive. Turn it around kind of like what Frank guided you through."

"Yeah, I get what you mean. Hey, I'm going for the elk salami and crackers. I'm hungry, do you mind? It was good sharing with you, James."

I want to be alone for a while, so I head outside in search of the sweat lodge. Blue Cloud is exiting the sweat lodge. Before I can get to Blue Cloud, he is heading to his car. We wave and he is leaving. I am left looking at the lodge in anticipation. I walk over to the fire pit, situated just outside the lodge. I hear gravel crunching, Blue Cloud's car leaving the property. Then I see Frank and Joseph approaching.

Joseph, "You are joining us for a ceremony."

"Yes, I would like to."

"I told you we'd be doing ritual, and a sweat in a lodge is serious ritual. Some people have misunderstood what a sweat is used for. It is for healing, introspection, and connection with Mother Earth. We'll be in there for a while. Looks like you have some comfortable loose clothing. This is good."

Franks has three bottles of water for drinking.

Joseph, "It will be dark in there with some candles. In the middle is a pile of hot rocks that Blue Cloud tended for us. There are three mats so you can lay down when you want. Expect to get hot and maybe uncomfortable. You may hear me do some chants. I'll be calling for the spirits. What is it that you might want to visit? Emotionally, or do you need some physical healing? Have an intention and you will appreciate the experience."

Frank is looking at me. He nods and I enter the lodge, circle to the back, and take a mat. I notice we each have a pow wow drum by our mats. The only light is a few candles. Frank and Joseph enter and the flap to the entrance is shut.

Joseph leads with a prayer, "O Great Creator of all life, O Earth Mother,

may we have the grace to honor you. May we leave all ego behind. May we heal what needs to be healed. May our experience give us the humility we need to journey with respect to all life."

Frank, "Ah ho," and I follow, "Ah ho."

There is quiet. I listen to the breeze rustling through the fir trees. I hear the sizzle of water on hot rocks. I breath in the steam and the heat enters my sinuses.

Thoughts mingle with quiet solitude. A little cough from Frank. Another sizzle on the hot rocks. I feel some perspiration starting. I close my eyes and start the breath that Nirvana has been teaching us in the Kundalini yoga class. I am trying to let go of my thoughts. Let go of the ego mind. Stay present with what is going on right now. I start to drift and choose to lay down, hands clasped over my heart. I go to a place of past memories of regret. I regret that I focused so much on my work and achievements that I missed so much in relationship. What comes to me now is the sweet, awesome moments of living with Julian, the laughter, the romance, the personal growth. The early years of our relationship. As time passed and we raised a family, we drifted into directions that did not include the other. Maybe it was my fault; however, I choose not to go there. The fond memories are with me now, the light in her eyes, the fun we had making love. The best times when we soothed the other, listened to each other's language (body and mind). I am drifting into an unfamiliar space. Suddenly Julian is gone from my thoughts. What is that? Who's replacing her? Deep breaths, slow, methodical now. Sooo, hum, sooo, hum, Sat Nam . . . inhale, exhale into nothingness.

I become aware of Joseph chanting and light drumming. I come out of my reverie and slowly sit up dripping with sweat. I feel for the drum and mallet. I start adding to the beat that Joseph is drumming. Frank joins in and soon we have a haunting rhythm going. The sound frequency vibrates through me. We are all chanting sounds that I don't understand but feel deep within.

As we wind down, Joseph does a Native American chant and then gives gratitude to the Creator and the Earth Mother. There is quiet, and I find myself in a brief meditation. Slowly Frank exits, raising the flap. I look over at Joseph. He nods, "Ah ho," and I get up, circle around, and follow Frank, who is now standing by the coals of the fire pit. Joseph comes out, securing the flap, and joins us. There is total silence. We stare into the glowing coals. Frank gives Joseph a clasping handshake, nothing said, and heads to his vehicle. I do the same, with eye contact and a slight bow. "Thank you for this night."

# Chapter 14

I make it home. My sleep was full of dream states. It was broken sleep, needless to say. I decide to get breakfast and think about the Wildflower Bakery. I hustle over there after a cold shower, something I got turned onto in the yoga class. Starting the morning with a brush massage to invigorate the lymph system, oiling my body and hugging myself, I go out the back slider to get some early sun. I look up to the sky and make a call to the Sun.

"Helios and Vesta, Helios and Vesta, Helios and Vesta, let the light flow into my being. Let your light expand into the center of my heart. Let your light flow into the center of the earth. And let the earth be transformed into a new day."

After my salute to the Sun, I turn and go back inside. I jump into the shower, cold only, and chant, "Ang Sang, Waha Guru," several times. A Kundalini thing that Nirvana told the yoga class about, a morning ritual to get the energy moving. I am starting to understand ritual as more than routine. More like gratitude and acknowledgement of powerful forces. If only I can let them be more part of my life. I am thinking now that it's not something I need to achieve. These realizations are always right here. Very present if I just pay attention. Waha Guru ... wow, I am revitalized!

I dress and hop into the car, and, looking up Moby Grape's "It's a Beautiful Day" on Spotify, I start singing along. "I love to hear them people say at the start of every new day . . . I love to hear them people say, 'It's a beautiful day today!'"

I whistle it into the eatery. I hear another whistler joining in and there she is, Joni! We lock eyes smile and of course I slide into the seat across from her.

"You're chipper today."

"Well, the sun is shining and your smile infatuates me."

Laughter. "That's nice to know, James; however, remember I am still one of your clients, so behave."

I chuckle. "I think I used the wrong word? Your smile endears me. It sends chills up and down my spine."

"Go place your order, and I would like another cup of coffee, no cream please."

I come back with a couple of javas.

"I hope I'm not disrupting your morning."

"No, no, I was just putting together an article, for the paper. It can wait. What's new with you?"

"Tonight I have been invited to a dinner with—"

"Don't tell me, Sadie and Jenny?"

"Yep, I'm not sure what's going on there, but I am openly amused, especially the way they invited me."

Joni has a look of concern, is it? Or maybe disappointment. She's not exactly smiling anymore.

So I am quick to say, "Um, what's that look about?"

"Well, they are a little younger for you?"

"Joni, my intention is to have fun, an adventure. I had a night full of grief, revelations, past thoughts creeping into my consciousness. I woke up today and wanted to be in a beautiful state, loving what is."

Joni, "What did you do last night, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I went with Frank and Joseph. They have a group of men . . . . You won't believe it. Jerry was there too. We did drumming, and sharing, and I even did a sweat lodge."

"What does a group of men do? Is it like interpersonal relationship building? Like the group circles we did at Life Stream?"

"Yes, similar, but Native American style. It was beautiful. I got in touch with some old stuff. Amazing how it just loops back, especially regrets. What could I have done different? You know what I mean?"

"Yes, keeping the past in the past, working beyond old history, or else it gets in the way of being present with right now?"

"Something like that, yes. It amazes me how the subconscious stores so much, and if we let it take over, we live a roller coaster life."

"So why have regrets? There's nothing you could have done different. It's all part of your life journey. Look at the benefits that you have gotten from the worst times. They gave you lessons, so you can be there for others. So you can feel in your heart. Isn't that how we learn to have compassion?"

Wow, what Joni shared was simply put and had a major impact on me. Why continue to live in regret when I can choose joy, or gratitude, or love? Just the word "joy" puts a smile on my face, and once I start smiling it just feels so good. What is that old song . . . ? "And when you're smiling the whole world smiles with you." And gratitude humbles me. The beautiful gift of the Creator's natural abundance is so vast, way beyond what I can experience. The stars and planets, sun and moon, cultures and people, plants and animals. When I am high on a ridge, and look around me, the universe seems so big, it humbles me. Then there's love. Connection that goes deeper than physical or verbal contact. The deep connection of someone's inner state. The flow of love from one heart to the next. The oneness of love from me to another and me to the world and that same love flowing from another to me and the universal love of the world flowing back to me.

*Joni - Hum, Jim must be having some inner thoughts. He sure looks contemplative right now. Gosh, I really want to get to know this man. Maybe this*

*time, after all the past relationships, I have found a man to connect with. Oh, eye contact. . .* "What are you contemplating right now?"

"What you just shared with me, Joni. It sounds so simple yet so profound. The thought of feeling the heart, like maybe I could let my heart talk to my mind instead of the other way around?"

Joni is laughing. "Yeah, yeah, crazy, isn't it? The heart has a mind of its' own, pun intended. After all, it is connected to the electromagnetic field that connects us to energy! What do you think about that?"

"You sound like a guru!"

She's laughing again. "You're your own guru, and I am not a teacher or master or anything like that." She's laughing again. "I am still trying to figure out my life and purpose."

*Joni - Boy, this is fun. Gosh, too bad we were so young back then. Oh, I wonder how he'll take this, I can't hold back . . . .*

"Jim, I think I love you. I mean, I want to . . . ugh, I don't know how to articulate this feeling welling up in me."

"Joni, Joni, Joni . . . after last night, oh my, during my sweat lodge, I drifted into past moments with Julian, then suddenly someone took her place. I went comatose, never saw what or who came to me in the vision. Please, I need some kind of, oh, I don't know, I want to commit to exploring our new born feelings towards each other. Is that okay? Let's back track. The way we started this morning, you told me to 'behave.' I think what you wanted was for me to slow down.

"Jim, I need to finish this article. Wow, I promised myself not to move fast with you, and now that we have this connection, a blast from the past, whew, I just went off like a teenager. A Hollywood movie . . . a quick, instant love!"

Joni's laughing again. It's somewhat of a nervous laugh. She scrambles for her pen and notebook. "Hey, I have to go. You have a fun time with the gals. Thanks for having breakfast with me."

And with that closure, she's up, with a wry smirk on her face. I want to say something, but I don't know what to say. I give her a weak smile and a nod.

I go back home and decide on baking a chocolate swirl cheesecake to contribute to tonight's dinner with Sadie and Jenny. Just the thought of having a night out and being in a joyous state has me wanting to create something special for the occasion. A coconut cashew cheesecake sounds delightful. Simple ingredients: cashews (which I have already soaked), honey, lemon juice, and vanilla, maybe a little (just a touch) of coconut butter. Some dark chocolate, sweetened with maple syrup to create the swirl.

A little later after the cashew cheesecake is done, I decide to make it to

the yoga class with Nirvana. I get there in time and settle into a place on the floor, where I roll out my mat and other props I use during the hour session. After about forty minutes of various yoga poses designed to move the energy of the chakras, Nirvana starts with a little discussion about meditation and mantras. Megan, a class attendee, contributes a sharing and tells about a place in southern India, Ekam, a powerhouse temple for enlightenment, built by Krishnaji. A oneness philosophy. There are guided meditations from Preethaji that cover all sorts of issues from connection and relationships to health and wealth. She talks about a monthly manifest that touches on various topics and processes to transcend into a higher state of consciousness.

Nirvana then talks about Nanak, who was the oneness guru of northern India from centuries ago. Nanak was from a Sheik sect, apparently. Nirvana is a Sheik. Nirvana acknowledges that she's heard of Ekam and talks about the Kundalini yoga session we just completed. She cues up some Kundalini music, takes us into a meditation. During the meditation, we are guided to inner stillness. To stop the chatter of our minds. A stillness settles over me as I recall my morning with Joni. How awkward it got at the end. If only we could have both had that still mind and been rid of our anxiety. I go into the similar space I had in the sweat lodge. The music and thoughts dissolve into nothing until we are guided back by Nirvana's gentle voice to slowly open our eyes.

In deep contemplation I make my way to Sadie's house. I eventually get to Sadie's address, that Jenny handed to me. I sit awhile in the car. I am still in that quiet state of mind from the yoga class. I take a deep breath and come back to earth. I look up at the house sitting up on a little slope, above a rock wall. It looks quaint with some shrubs and a flower garden that beckons me. I am glad for the scene. It has a soft feel and opens my heart. I rid myself of any perceptions of what this night might be like. I walk up the short steps and through the flower-lined sidewalk and knock on the door.

"Come on in," both chime at almost the same time.

"Hellooo?"

"Hey, Jimmy, you bring the pie?" asked Sadie.

Chuckles all the way around . . .

"Yes, ma'am, I sure did. A coconut cashew cheesecake, with a chocolate swirl."

"Ooooh, beautiful," chirped Sadie

"Yum" came from Jenny.

"You want to help chopping salad fixings? Jim?" a request from Sadie. The casual tone is so warming I feel like I belong and am grateful for this field of friendly energy.

"Sure, you gals have a good day? Do anything special?"

Jenny chimes in, "Great day. I got in some sketching. Up at Hyalite Lake. I was able to observe a moose as it ate tender bush tops. I like sketching live things. Like you. We're so lucky to have a male model who is not obsessed with what he looks like."

"You mean what 'IT' looks like," Sadie blurts out.

"Oh, that thing that changes in size, when it wants to?" I go along with her persistent teasing.

Laughter and giggles . . . "Wine, Jim?"

"Yes, thanks." Jenny goes to grab a bottle. I'm thinking about Henry Miller's escapades in *Tropic of Cancer*.

"What are you putting together for the main course, Sadie?"

"I've got a Moroccan lamb stew going. You okay with meat?"

"Yeah, once in a while. I really like lamb. The stew sounds good."

Jenny pours us each a glass of red wine. We engage in a little more light conversation and we're ready to sit and eat. So we're seated with this nice little feast in front of us and the atmosphere is eclectic. I wonder if there's anticipation for a ménage à trois with the three of us. Or maybe that is just in my mind. I choose to not go to a physical outcome or any outcome whatsoever.

"Let's bless this food and give gratitude to the universe. Hear, Oh Universe, I am grateful!"

They're smiling, looking amused.

"So what's your source, Jim?" Ask Sadie.

"What do you mean, Sadie?"

"You know, like, I'm a feminist. For sure you have some notion what that represents."

"I have some reference of what that means. However, I consider feminism a belief, not necessarily a source of your inner being. If we take away all of the labels that we might identify with as a person, where does that leave us? Strip away everything, all of your perception of self and start with a different meaning. Anyway, that's what I am exploring, who am I in relationship to the universe."

"That seems pretty vague, Jim. I mean, the universe, as you say, the whole shebang? The moon, the sun, stars, plants, animals, human life. What do you mean when you reference the universe?" Jenny inquires.

I look at Jenny, and take a pause before I respond. I make direct eye contact, think from the heart, not the mind. That's what I am telling myself. "It is a broad statement, and, yes, that's what I mean, the whole shebang, as you put it. I want to recognize everything being alive. An energy forcefield that has a bearing on my being. Does that make any sense?"

Jenny, "A toast. Let's clink our glasses to that."

As the hums and chuckles subside, I ask, "So why the invite, why me?"

The ladies look at each other. "Ah, hum, well, we just thought it would be intriguing to see if you'd take the invite," Sadie responds, "and we needed some man energy for a change. You seemed like someone that we might have fun with."

Jenny's eyes were glistening with anticipation. Sadie looked a little apprehensive. They are both staring at me, total quiet.

"Fun with?"

"So, Jim, do you know that Jenny and I are mates? Lovers? Lesbians? You mind me being so blunt?"

I just about choke on my mouthful of food. I wipe my lips and smile. It is kind of humorous in an amusing way that Sadie would blurt that out. "No, no, cut to the chase. I like that. I kind of had a sense of that."

"Oh, so you had a perception?"

Jenny's turn, "You see us as lesbian lovers? Not just part of the universe?"

"Touché, Jenny. Gosh, this stew is so good and you two are so charming. The way you engage with me is so delightful and alluring. I don't know if you're teasing me or if you're being sincere."

We're looking at each other. I'm not sure if I put "my foot in my mouth" or what. What must they be thinking? Oops, the mind chatter is starting. Stay with the flow, Jim, enjoy the moment! "I have an idea. Let's go to the Toy Store downtown and get the game Twister!"

"Huh?"

"Twister, it's a ball. You want fun, let's play Twister!"

Sadie, "In the nude?"

Laughter, and another clink of glasses. "Let's take the truck." Sadie grabs her keys.

We hop in, me in the middle. We head into Bozeman. Sadie's gas pedal leg is leaning against my left leg. Jenny has her left leg grazing my right. I am loving it. Innocent touch, but the bodily contact feels comfortable, trusting. I have discovered that my love language is touch and service. After all, I am a massage therapist. It used to be touch and acknowledgement; the ego liked to be acknowledged. Now as I am engaging more with others, and not chasing the money, service has become one of my love languages.

Right now, touch is feeling good.

"So, Jim, let's get back to 'what is your source.'" Sadie's getting serious.

"I recognize that we are all form; it's my molecular theory. Every unit of matter is a molecular form: the tree, this truck, you, me. We happen to be human form, but we're all one. And whatever way we use a form other than our own form becomes an extension of our existence. We coexist with the other material forms. Could be for a short time or a long time, coexistence. It doesn't matter. We're one together. That's my source, because the alternative was pretty self-centered, in the sense that I do not feel connected to all of life if I am just ego, all about me. So right now, I am enjoying being with your human forms. Sadie, your truck is a mechanical form. Do you ever talk to it? Does it have a name? Jenny, you ever give a tree a hug and thank it for how it serves the environment? Am I making any sense or am I rambling?"

Jenny, "Yeah, yeah, I like that, so you have no judgement that Sadie and I are partners, even sexually!"

"No, right now at this moment, our molecular structures and energy are merging. Physically, our legs and shoulders are connected, our thoughts are mingling, the truck is humming down the road. The road is supporting the truck, and here we are rolling in front of . . . the Toy Store!"

"Ahhh," Sadie screams. We laugh and chuckle and pile out of the truck, drunk on our vibes together.

Finally, we're back at the house. I am still in my loose-fitting yoga garb. The gals decide to change "into something more comfortable to move around in."

I rip open the box and unfold a large, thin, rip-proof game mat on the floor. There are circles with primary colors, a spin wheel with matching colors, and instructions with where to place hands and feet.

They come back out in dazzling, white-sequenced, loose-fitting, bell-bottomed pants and nice purple-and-yellow, sleeveless tops. Smiles on their faces, an aura of fun and readiness.

We start, Sadie first, a hand on red. Me, foot on blue. Jenny, hand on yellow. And we continue until we are a tangled mess. Somehow Jenny is bent over in front of me, that is, rear end up against my groin area. I've got arms

draped over each side of her. I'm not sure what Sadie is doing behind me, but it's her turn and whatever color she spun, she is bumping me into Jenny's buttocks, and suddenly I am uttering, "Honka, honka, honka . . ."

"What are you doing? What's that sound?" screams Sadie.

"Haven't you ever seen sea turtles copulate? The male is banging away uttering, 'Honka, honka . . .'"

And before I can honka again, Sadie is pulling me off of Jenny, saying, "Get off her, you big brute."

Next thing you know we're falling over in a heap of legs and arms. We are in hysterics, laughing so hard our guts are about to split open. Then in unison, "Honka, honka, honka . . . ," and as our laughter dies down the coolest thing happens. Jenny is sitting in a yoga posture and instinctively Sadie and I also are in a yoga posture. No words spoken, our knees touching, my left knee with Jenny's right knee, her left knee with Sadie's right knee, Sadie's left knee with my right. We're a mandala forming.

Jenny reaches out and places her right hand on my heart, her left hand on Sadie's heart. I place my left hand on Jenny's heart and my right hand on Sadie's heart. I feel Sadie's left hand on my heart and observe her right hand over Jenny's heart. We hold this pose. We make eye contact. Searching for love. Not sexual. No, we are connected in love as one.

"Jenny, your ready smile is endearing. Your chipped tooth and long, black hair and smattering of freckles bring joy to my heart," is how I start.

"James, your dark brown eyes, your soft body hairs, and young playful heart is refreshing," says Sadie.

"Sadie, your willingness to let another person join us and opening your heart to James means a lot to me," says Jenny.

And as we go around the mandala with sincere connection, heart-to-heart. We share an eclectic, causeless love.

## Chapter 15: The Japanese Pot

I am up early and decide to take a walk over to the Wildflower grab a breakfast and maybe see if Joni is there. She has a massage later, with me! I want to go by Deloris and Faye's place, get a smell of herbs and flowers. As I get close, I can see them both in the garden.

"Hello, Deloris. Hi, Faye." I am waving.

"Hi, James, come on over here." Deloris is waving me over.

"You two are getting an early start today."

Faye, “Well, summer is kind of winding down so we are at the start of harvesting.”

“I love your garden. It’s on the wild side. I feel as if I am walking in a forest and onto a plain.”

Deloris, “Yes, a lot of what you see here came via the birds and the wind. It’s amazing to see what we have transplanted from the wild and what we planted domestically. We really try to create an environment that encourages bees, birds, and insects to thrive. I like to think of it as an eco system, an urban oasis amidst houses, lawns, and concrete. A lot of permaculture concepts.”

“Yeah, my wife and I used to do a garden. Same methods you’re using. Creating a permeant culture both in nature and in community. Making for a more resilient way to live. Wouldn’t you say?”

Faye, “You got it, Jim. Do you want to help us a little? Maybe cut some lavender flowers, and St. John’s wort flowers?”

“Okay.” So I collect the flowers and l tie the stems to hang the flowers for drying. Their gratitude gives me a tremendous feeling of joy. And me, I am grateful for the opportunity to relive some fond moments with Julian creating a homestead and gardening together. Deloris, Faye, and I say our goodbyes and I let them know I’ll come by again. I am willing to pitch in.

Suddenly, Deloris says, “I can feel your wounds. You are a wounded warrior of love lost, still in some grief. Am I right? Broken heart?”

“Yes, Deloris. Last night I really had some fun with Sadie and Jenny from the class. It’s been a long time desiring to interact with people. I realized too late that I was so engrossed in working, thinking that was my main role in our relationship, that I missed a whole lot of fulfilling Julian’s—that was my wife’s name—needs as a partner. Yeah, I am feeling kind of alone, not quite fitting in with society. It’s all my own doing. So by connecting with everybody in the sketching class, I am starting to come out of my self-inflicted exile. How do you heal a broken heart?”

“You’re a good man, Jim. You are courageous to look inward and dig deep for your true self. Love yourself, love who you are, and if you can’t do that, it’s best to change what you don’t love about yourself. I love my wrinkled knees. I had to change my attitude towards my body aging and love it,” remarks Faye.

Deloris, “We both had to overcome our losses of mates and children. There’s so much written about grief. For me, I chose to grasp onto the vibrant life of nature and new relationships. It brought joy back into my life. And gratitude for what I had been given thus far. Healing a broken heart isn’t an easy task, and it doesn’t have to take over your being. I found I could acknowledge grief when it came to me, yet I could continue on with my souls’ personal journey.”

"Thank you for that insight, Deloris and Faye. I am heading over for some breakfast. You gals want to join me?"

Faye is quick with a response, "No, Jim, you go ahead. I have a hunch that you need to connect with someone this morning."

I nod and give them a warm smile. I am touched by their ability to tune in to my needs and their concern for my well-being. "You gals are amazing. I feel blessed to get to know you both. I'll see you next class."

I move on. Next stop is Wildflower, and, yep, there's Joni. Now meeting her from so many years ago is a coincidence that's sure to have consequences.

Joni looks up. "Hey, you." She has a big smile that just sucks me in. "Breakfast? Join me?"

I nod affirmative. And I naturally return the smile. It's an effortless smile. Smiling is sure contagious.

"Alright, last night, with Sadie and Jenny . . . come on, tell . . . I am all ears."

I have to chuckle, "Are you being a journalist after a story?"

"No, just jealous."

And with that remark reverberating in my ears, and scrambling my brain, I proceed to tell Joni everything, all the details including the most beautiful ending of our heart-to-heart connection.

*Joni - Wow, he is so straight forward. All the details, even the "honka, honka!" So I wonder what his past was like. Seems like he's having fun now. Was he always this way? I wonder what his life was like with Julian. What's it like to really love, that description of what Jenny did, that seems so different than what I am used to? I really want to know what it's like to feel love.*

"So, Jim, you explained your theory and oneness with the universe. How does it relate to love? Loving all there is?"

"Yeah, that whole molecular theory is so full of mind. Sounds good, but unless I can feel a heart-to-heart connection with a tree, or animal or a human being. Even with Julian, there were times when the connection was heart-to-heart. Those were our best times together. Then there were times when that connection was missing. I am still on a journey to feel what love is. I want to get beyond words, to really feel love when it rocks my soul."

"Hummm, I hear you. I am definitely searching for love's meaning too. I haven't been in a relationship for quite some time now. I know there are emotions that define love so it's not just a cliché. I hope you don't mind if I get a little personal. What was it like with Julian, I mean, concerning the love connection? Did she have a grasp of truly loving 'molecular form,' as you described with your theory?."

*Okay, I figured sooner or later Joni is going to want to know about my past with Julian. Her eyes are on me. She's not being shy about it. She really has a curiosity.*

"Okay, here's what I observed and witnessed. Julian had an uncanny way to open her heart to all beings, whether human, animal, plants, the whole deal. So I was sometimes uncomfortable how she could get so close with someone. I was pretty much an introvert, unless I had too much to drink. She could relate to all sexes, and age brackets. It was beautiful to watch. Sometimes I would get insecure, especially when she would relate that way with other men. It was natural for her to just be there for someone. Gosh, I'd even hear her talking to plants, and animals as if they were a human. She was a tree hugger. I asked her one time, what she felt when she hugged a tree. She said gratitude for its' existence. Its' root structure for support, its' strength and longevity, its' branches for reaching beyond. If it produced fruit, for its' abundant supply. That was the soul of Julian. That's whom I loved. It overshadowed any of her anger, impatience, anxiety, or any state other than her love. So yeah, she lived as if she was one with all beings."

I am finishing the last bites of breakfast and realize that I need to get over to Arthur's studio. "Joni, I have to git. I'll see you later at the massage office?"

"I wouldn't miss it. Enjoy your day. Hug?"

And we do, a nice hug, but it feels a little different. Two lost lovers, clinging to loneliness? Whew, I don't know. I do know I feel a lot of tenderness and compassion.

"Joni, when we last met it got a little awkward at the end of our conversation. It seems that you have not taken my apprehension as a 'do not pass' sign. I am glad for that."

As we slowly release from our compassionate hug, Joni is gently rubbing my back with her hand. Her free hand has mine, a soft grip.

She looks up. "Yeah, I did not like the way we abruptly left each other. Actually, how I abruptly left you. Gosh, I seemed so desperate."

I don't even think of what to say or do. I just move into another hug that has a whole different meaning I am witnessing right now. I am just feeling the physicality of our embrace. Nothing more is said. We free each other. A mutual understanding that words might get in the way of our hearts talking for us. Compassion, is that what I was feeling? And now again this hug is feeling meaningful. We loosen our embrace. There's a twinkle in Joni's eyes. My guess is that mine are sparkling too.

We both stumble through, "Have a good day," and have a mutual chuckle and giggle.

I am off to Arthur's studio. He has some special bowls for me. I arrive and approach the front door.

There's a thick metal (is it copper?) bell hanging alongside his door. I yank on the leather strap, give it a few twirls, and a resounding sound of a beautiful tone resonates loudly.

"I'm back here, behind the house. Go through the gate, it's open."

There's a rock wall about six feet high with a thick, wood, slat door and heavy, black hardware. It creeks open into a court yard with different size clay pots over fire. Smoke and steam and food smells filling the air of a small courtyard.

"Wow, hi, Arthur, you really have quite a thing going on here." I look around and see different stages of clay pots and bowls sitting on benches. A large work station with an overhead shed roof. Tools, and other artifacts that a potter uses.

"Hi, James, how are you doing? You caught me in work mode."

"Looks like you keep yourself busy. Do you market these?"

"Yes. I have this special clay sent over here from my parents, who live in Japan near the region where the clay comes from. I make these pots and bowls for a distributor who sells them. I have a rep who gets the artistic ones into galleries. And some I give away or sell myself locally."

"So your sketching, is it mostly for designing patterns to put on bowls and pots?" I ask.

"Mostly, but I do some art too. Traditional Japanese art work gets me into galleries. The pots are considered Banko ware, and these clay pots can be used over an open flame for use in Japanese cuisine. So as you can see I have some food slow cooking. The pots are called donabe and used quite often cooked at the table over a gas flame burner. Like a crock pot, a nice slow cook. But more of a traditional Japanese way to cook. I want to show you what I made using your poses from sketch class."

Arthur takes me over to his workbench. There are three bowls. A beautiful faded blue surrounds the lower portion with a white band above that merges with the blue. In the blue area are various human forms that go playfully around the entire blue band. It's really pretty, creative. Each bowl has a similar design with a small variation. I feel gratitude that somehow I contributed to his inspiration.

"This is the one I want to recreate for the galleries and shops. These other two I am gifting to you, James. But you'll have to come back later, when the food is in them. I am cooking you a meal for tonight. These bowls will keep it warm for a long time. Do you recognize the repetitive DaVinci pose? Molly had you do the pose in the first class. I used the sketch of you from the class. There are some of the other poses that I used over the blue band."

"Yes, I do. There have been quite a few poses. Gosh, you're cooking a special meal for me?"

"I am. Some Japanese traditionalists only bring their pots and bowls out to cook a special meal for a special person. You inspired this design. The meal and bowls are my gratitude for your willingness to pose nude. Can

you come back about six this evening? I'll have a meal for you in the bowls. My intuition is suggesting that you will be dining with someone special. If you're not, you can dine with me."

I have nothing to say about his intuitive thought. My breakfast with Joni is still buzzing through my thoughts, and I'll be seeing her again, so maybe Arthur is onto something. Is it possible when one is so in tune with his or her surroundings and the energy of another that their intuition is so strong they can connect heart-to-heart? The neurons of the brain connect with the heart? Is that how it goes? I love the grace that I am feeling from Arthur and to say traditionally these bowls are brought out for special people? I am humbled. "Thank you so much. I will. And thanks for going out of your way doing this."

"Dinner takeout is at six." Arthur gives me a beautiful smile.

As I'm leaving, I wonder why I said what I said . . . "going out of your way." I'm aware that rather than being in a state of gratitude, I felt undeserving. Where is that thought coming from? And is that true? I'm sure it's some past, distant thought about worthiness. It's time to let the past not affect my life now, not at this moment. I can recognize past thoughts. I realize I have the power to let them pass. I really do feel gratitude for Arthur's art and being part of it. And Arthur, cooking up a meal "for a special person." I need to learn to have grace and be a grateful receiver when someone gifts me. The giver is giving his or her love. Yeah, I really need to work on giving gratitude with grace!

I decide to make my way to the Coffee Hut. I find the gals, Sadie and Jenny, sitting in the back of the room. Jenny holds up what appears to be a pie, and blurts, "The cashew cheesecake, with the chocolate swirl!"

I give them a thumbs up, and with coffee in hand, I am at the table with smiling faces.

Sadie, "We never had desert!"

"How'd you know I'd come here now?" I ask out of curiosity.

Jenny, "We didn't, but I guess intuition. Besides, we'd chomp into it anyway!"

"Well, I'm glad you waited and followed intuition."

As we're enjoying our pie, along comes Molly, right to our table. Another smiling face. Boy, this is getting contagious, four smiling faces. I take a very quick look over my shoulder to see if there are more smiling faces!

"Howdy, Molly, come join us. Cashew cheesecake with a chocolate swirl!"

Molly, "Okay, thanks for inviting me. Looks scrumptious. Well, it's interesting to see the three of you together outside of sketching. You all know each other from before?"

Sadie, "No, but we're getting to know each other, in a really friendly way."

Molly's right eyebrow raises. And I notice her taking a deep breath. "Yum, who made the pie?"

And all eyes are on me. "I did. I love to bake. I used to bake at a natural food bakery. We had dinner together last night and forgot to eat desert."

"Sounds like fun?" Molly says with some hesitation.

"Yes, a very enjoyable, fun night. At least, I have fond memories," is my response.

Sadie and Jenny are laughing lightly. "It was a wonderful dinner and time. We played Twister. Have you ever played that game?"

Molly shakes her head with a wry smile.

Sadie, the ever-playful Sadie, comments, "Wow, Molly, how'd you ever talk Jim into being naked? Did you charm him? What'd you do?"

"I did not charm him. Not what you think!"

Out of character, I say, "She captured me with her smile."

"Okay, you two. I do want to request that you, Sadie, stop teasing Jim in class. We might end up with an embarrassing monument."

"Well, that was the plan, but I don't think it's going to work with this guy. Unless he turns into a turtle!"

Molly gives me a look then turns to Sadie, shakes her head, thanks us for dessert, and leaves, with a half-smile, like she doesn't even know what she's smiling about.

*Molly - Well, that was an interesting visit. I guess I was told to mind my own business? Or not have any perception with what might be developing in their friendship circle. It's time for me to be more observant with what's going in in that class. I wonder whom else Jim is forming relationships with. Let's see, he was invited to the men's group that Joseph and Frank are involved with. Seems like he already knows Joni and Nirvana. Who else? I've never seen this much involvement with one of my models before. I wonder what's going on with this man. This could be an unusual semester.*

Suddenly, Sadie bolts up and says, "Oh, there's Marge. Excuse me, I need to pay her for the massage table!"

It's just me and Jenny, staring at each other in such a loving way.

"Jenny, the other night, when you sat up after our laughing fit, and had us all touch our hearts, what instinctively inspired you to do that?"

"Hummm, Sadie and I got some books on tantric love, and Sadie and I did a position one night where we sat in each other's laps and touched our hearts with our right hands. So you started the round robin of appreciation for each other. How did you know to do that?"

"My wife and I had several books on tantric. It changed the way we connected with each other during lovemaking."

Just then Sadie came back. "Okay, we have a massage table. Jim, we want you to come over and do massage with us. The invitation is for real."

"I really appreciate the trust you have to invite me into your relationship."

Sadie, "Well, I wouldn't go so far as to say that, but, yeah, we trust your discretion. My teasing was a test. Just because I'm a feminist and we're her/she doesn't mean we dislike men. Let's call this an experiment. You in?"

With a smile I say, "Thank you for considering me as a subject! Yeah, I'm in. It's been a while since I have connected with female companionship since losing my wife."

Jenny, "I'm sorry to hear that. We didn't know."

"Someday I'll share the story with you both. But not now."

The compassion in their eyes told me that an empathic relationship was forming.

# Chapter 16: Dinner for Two

I am still at the table, by myself now. Sadie and Jenny want to have another "get together" and they confirmed a night of massage. I cautiously accepted with great eagerness, too. I'm all set to leave when I see Sammie ordering a coffee and pastry. Looks like a couple of those great cinnamon cake donuts that I love and he has two cups of java, and here he comes heading in my direction.

"Hey, Jim, I saw you as I came in and was hoping to have a chat with you. Here, I have a donut and coffee for you."

"Thanks, how'd you know . . . ? I love these donuts."

"The word gets around. Someone told me about your addiction. I want to share some news with you. I signed up for massage school. I heard from Joni that you are a therapist. So I was excited to track you down and see if we could get together on a regular basis, for massages."

"What do you have in mind?"

"Well, first off, I wonder if I can be a client? Do you have room in your schedule for another client? I'd hope to pick up some pointers, especially with the various strokes and pressure and who knows what."

"Of course. I'd love to have you as a client. Have you ever had body work done on you?"

"No. So I really don't know anything about massaging. When I had my orientation at the school, we were told that we should recruit someone to give

massages to. I wonder if you'd let me practice with you, and when I need a model at massage class, if you'd be available. You'd have to come to the school clinic. It's a discounted massage. And maybe at my house when I get a table, we can practice once in a while."

"Well, we'd have to set up a schedule, and I'll see what days work best. I'd love to help you out if that's what you want to pursue."

Sammie, "Yes, I do want to pursue massaging. And I was hoping we could get to know each other. I would appreciate any help."

"What's your intention for starting a massage service? I think women have a better opportunity. It's been so much part of the beauty industry over the years, it takes a while to establish yourself as a male masseur."

Sammie, "Well I want to do massage for men. Gay men. That is what I want to specialize in as a service."

*Sammie - Well, nothing like being blunt. Joni told me he likes to get to the point. There's not any shock, or hesitation that I notice. Maybe he's okay with gay guys.*

"I see. You might want to consider not just confining your clientele to gay men. That's up to you. Of course you know gay men are a big part of the beauty industry, so you could end up with some spas as satellite massage offices. Just something to think about. I'll let you know when I can be available."

"You'll do it then?"

"Yeah, like I said, I'll see what days work best for me. You get your schedule and we'll figure it out. As far as being a client, I have an opening on Fridays. Around six p.m. Is that a good time for you?"

"Yes, I'm so excited! Joni said you have terrific hands! I can't wait."

"Sammie, thanks for the donuts and coffee. I have to get to the massage office, so I'll see you at the next art class."

"Thanks, Jim."

"You are welcome. My pleasure."

After I leave the Coffee Hut, I am heading for my office to get ready for Joni's massage time. I get to the office and start preparing the room when I remember about picking up the special dinner at Arthur's! Oooo, it's already 5:40 p.m. I hear the office door opening and some rustling out in the reception area. Of course it's Joni, and I welcome her. She has a pensive expression.

"Hi, James, it's been a crazy day. I really can use a massage today."

"Ah, how about taking a raincheck and having a dinner date and watching the sunset? I know a great place just past the Boz summit. What do you think?"

"What's the occasion? And a 'date' yet, are you kidding? I've waited

over twenty years for you to ask!"

"Alright, let's go. Arthur has a meal waiting for us!"

We're on our way. "What restaurant is Arthur cooking at?"

"He's not. He crafts these special Japanese bowls and pots and markets them. They are called donabe bowls and are made with a special clay, for a slow cook, like a crock, and keeps the meal warm for a long time. He had an inclination that I'd be with someone." Smiles from both of us. "Usually, some traditions have it that the host brings them out to cook a special meal for a special person. Arthur made three, and gifted me two, so somehow he knew I was going to invite a special person. Synchronistic, eh?"

"I feel so fortunate. Gosh, thank you. You know I tracked you down? Like I said, before I read about the disappearance, I recognized your name and recalled your . . . I should say our kissing escapades."

*Joni - Back then, how could I forget? Of all the men I had in my life up until then, when I first met Jim, nobody made my whole body feel a kiss. And that was it, nothing else other than his neck rubs and acupressure to relieve my headaches. No other signs that he wanted me for sex. He would just nurture me. I vaguely recall the guilt and blame he felt when He shared his story about a previous girlfriend. How he felt that he used her for his pleasure. It was a mirror image of me, but I did not have the same remorse. Gosh, I wanted him back then, and here we are, on our first date.*

*Jim - Even though I did not respond to her statement, I heard it, loud and clear. I just did not know how to acknowledge her and was relieved to be arriving at Arthur's place. I tried to block out most of those memories. Yet they always seemed to resurface. They are stuck in my subconscious mind. Even after all the years with Julian, how do memories like that keep coming back? Okay, Jim, just get back to being present. I take a few deep breaths, just like at yoga. What's the meditation that Megan shared with the group? The Serene Mind with Preethaji, three minutes to a peaceful, calm mind. Yeah, that's better. I glance over at Joni. She appears to be in deep thought.*

We pull in front of Arthur's home. We are slow getting out of the car, admiring his house with Japanese accents. And probably we're both coming out of wherever our thoughts took us. Joni rings the bell, fascinated by the tones, vibrating sound waves through the crisp, late, evening, fall air.

"Back here, in the courtyard."

We enter, the thick door creaking like it did earlier. Steam and smoke, with food smells in the air. Arthur's got this big smile on his face this time.

"Good thing I made two bowls. Come over here. We'll fill them from the big pot. I made a fish stew and rice."

Joni speaks, "This is quite a backyard studio you have here. You did all of this? Built the workshop, and fire pits and the pottery? It is beautiful!"

"Yes, I've been at it a long time now. My father was a potter and I picked it up from him. A family tradition. But come on, I want to get you two fixed up and on your way."

"Arthur, I am a freelance journalist. I wonder if I could write an article about you and your craft?"

"Sure, Joni, I would be willing. As long as my agent can use it for marketing purposes."

"Of course, I'll call you. Thanks so much for this wonderful meal."

"Hey, you take care of our model. I have benefited from his poses."

I am probably blushing, but I don't think they notice me right now. We say our good nights, and give Arthur more gratitude. I feel like I am receiving this gift with much more grace than I had earlier.

And so we are driving up the pass, towards Lightening Strike Road. I know a pull off with awesome views.

Joni has one bowl on her lap and is admiring the human forms around the bottom and top of the bowl she's holding with a set of work gloves I have in the car. They are hot, the clay radiating warmth into the food.

"So it's you, on the bowl. I recognize some of the postures Molly had you pose. Is that right? Did he tell you that?" asks Joni.

"Yes, beautiful, and the best pot he kept to put in a gallery with some of his other work."

There's not a lot of conversation. The beauty of the forest, the clay bowls, the mountain views on the way up keep us preoccupied, and we finally reach our destination.

"Look at that, Jim. Amazing. What are we looking at? Is that Lone Mountain way out there?"

"Yep, the Gallatin's, the Madison, Tobacco Root Mountains and maybe the Gravelly Mountains way out there."

The sun is starting to set. The clouds are making for a magnificent romantic setting. The hot steam is coming off the bowls as we take off the lids. We slide our seats back. Pull out some chop sticks and start to dig in. With each bite, we look up and admire the setting sun. The windows are fogging and we're wiping the condensation with our hands, rivulets of water dripping onto the dashboard. There's more than enough to eat. We put the lids back on and set the pots on the back floor. We roll down the windows a bit. There's a chill in the air. I look over at Joni and we lock eyes. With our bodies twisted and leaning over the counsel, we start out tentatively a meeting of the lips, back off a little, look into each other's eyes again, just to make sure, and we reunite at the lips again, full on with combinations of a variety of kisses. I am feeling lost in the kisses, very present, as if time and space has been suspended for twenty years.

# Chapter 17: The Massage

Joni makes a request, "Would you mind if I took you up on that rain check tonight?"

*Joni - I am feeling a bit bold now, and I want our connection to continue. I want to feel Jim's touch. Sometimes there's a communication that I receive from his massages. A tenderness, caring hands that seem to find the right spots on my body. The areas that need some healing. Tonight I need healing from all the past relationships, from the memories of the men who somehow missed what I really needed. The love, not the sex. A teammate to help me realize the full potential of energy that invigorates and rejuvenates me as a whole person.*

"Hummm, sure, Joni, I can't think of any better way to continue our exploration of our new found relationship." *I am feeling a rekindling of a short past experience, not desire. I still feel how gracefully we let the other take the lead while kissing. Ummm, like dancing, only the male doesn't always have to lead. Communicating tongues, we communicated with our kiss, not for pleasure, rather as a way to connect without words. I wonder what she's thinking right now. Do I dare try to find out? Or maybe I could just let this sensational feeling wash over us. It was more than physical for me. It had a deeper connection that I can't quite describe right now. There was some flashes of Julian. Who was I kissing? I really do not want to bring up the past. I just want to stay present with Joni right now. Yeah, giving a massage, seems like a way to connect. After all, when I give there is an energy I receive too.*

There's not much said on the way down. The late evening dusk is light enough and we enjoy the ride down in silence. We get back to the office . . . "I'll set up the room, while you get ready."

I find a couple of candles, and keep the lights low. I am reminded of the fireside massages with Julian. I am feeling love again. Joni walks in naked. The lighting makes her skin look tanned. Slowly she walks to the table, which is between her and me. We are locking eyes again and she has a gentle smile. I must look awe struck.

"Joni, I want to make sure that there aren't real high expectations. I want to move slow. I'll mix some Swedish, and deep tissue, with some sensuous massage. Just receive the healing of love through my hands." Now I am beginning to understand that compassion is love. Connection is taking the

time to love someone and all of life.

"That sounds great. How about some acupressure too? That's what you were doing back then."

"Oooo, yeah, I took the acupressure classes with Julian. That's what I knew massage to be back then." She lies face down for starters.

"No sheets. You have the room warmed up nicely," is Joni's request.

While I warm up my hands, I am calling forth for the healing angels. I am sensing we are both in need of healing some wounds. I am asking my divine self, my higher self, to guide me now. Take over these hands, guide them towards right action. Let them send messages with good pressure and a healing touch. It is said that if you have two willing participants with the same thought form, open and receptive, then communication can become telepathic.

I gently start rocking Joni side to side. I can see her body relaxing, trusting me. I am in a beautiful, nurturing state, to give tantric love energy. "You are receiving, so let me know what your needs are concerning pressure and touch. Just receive and relax."

As a massage therapist, it is really special when my thoughts are not about the mechanics, but rather feeling what a particular stroke or touch feels like, as if I was receiving it. Suddenly I am one with the person I am massaging. The groans and moans signifies that the recipient is in bliss. As I finish up the back, legs, and feet, I do a raking motion with my fingers spread, alternate strokes from the ankles, up the calves, along the quads, over the buttocks, along both sides of the spine, and then I have my fingers in her hair and give a scalp massage. Some more light strokes and then I have Joni turn over onto her back. She gives me a sweet look and closes her eyes. I do her arms, fingers, palms. I do some raking, reaching over the opposite side, starting from the back about where the kidneys are located and coming up and over the belly along the outside of the hips and legs and swishing the whole motion off her toes. It's part of the lymph massage and balancing.

As we wind down, Joni has a request . . . "Can you do my breast please?"

It brings back a funny time at my finals to get licensed. With Julian as my model, the three judges ask me to do her breast and I am freaking out. "Breast?! Breast?"

"Yes, heck, she's your wife!"

So Joni gets a breast massage. Avoiding the nipples is the correct therapeutic way so as not to arouse the receiver. Joni moans softly. I take her hands and place them over her heart. I place my hands over hers and ask her to focus on what she is grateful for. "You don't have to say it aloud. It's up to you" With eyes closed, I am calling forth the healing angels of the green ray to heal all that needs to be healed in this woman. We are transferring energy.

A Samadhi experience.

"I am grateful for one of the best experiences in my life. Thank you, James." What a day and night. The abyss of feeling nothing but love. And what is love?

Kindness? Connection? Empathy? Compassion? I can write a zillion words describing love and still not know what love is. And when an earthquake trembles the soul, can I rise above desire and allow the energy just be a state of love? What's that song by Johnny Cash? "The Ring of Fire?"

The next day I arrive a little early for modeling and Molly is in the room setting things up. I offer to help.

Molly just can't resist, so she ask me, "I'm just curious, what are you doing with those girls? You know they're partners, right?"

"Yes I know that. And the Twister game had a beautiful ending, and there was no sex, if that's what you're getting at. It really was a surprisingly fun night for all three of us. We are developing a trusting relationship. At least that's where I want to go with it. Love through connection."

"Well, I guess I'm just concerned that being a nude model isn't empowering you to co-mingle with the students. I'd hate to see anybody get in trouble."

"Thank you for your concern. As for co-mingling, I am finally connecting with people in a more real, heartfelt way than I ever did in the past. So far, I seem to be forming some friendships with people. Did you know that Joni knows me from twenty-plus years ago? And Jerry I can relate to. He's on the quiet side, like me for many years. Did you know that Frank and Joseph have a men's group? In fact, it meets tonight. I've had some nice connections. The only person so far I haven't done anything with is Sammie, and he just asked me to be a volunteer client for his massage school training. As for the girls, it's a refreshing kind of connection, and I think we're going to be alright."

"I had no idea. I am amazed at the students' interaction with a model. I've not seen that before. Do you want to share what it is that has inspired you into this new found 'connection' with people?"

"Have you ever read *The Water Dancer* by Ta-Nehisi Coates? That book made me take a good look at some deep feelings of loneliness that creeps into my being. I know for a fact that my observations and perceptions of the life around me, especially in crowds or with a group of people, friends, and even family, silences me. My emotions freeze as if in a cold fog. I have nothing to say and yet I want to participate. My silence is like a wall just as Hiram describes in *The Water Dancer*. Only his wall was created by the wrath

of slavery. And even when he was set free, he realized he was still a slave to his new found freedom with many conditions. For me, I create conditions with the thought of not belonging, not fitting in, fear of not being accepted for who I am. A slave to some subconscious thought. The love and affection that comes my way is hard for me to reciprocate. I am coming out of my shell. I am exploring, being fearless, if that makes sense."

Molly has taken it all in, I can see that. Her bright eyes are tearing up. There's nothing she can say or respond to. She approaches me and takes me into nurturing arms. A sincere hug that I will feel in my memory for a long time.

We hear some people starting to shuffle into the room. As we release the hug, and squeeze our hands, I turn to see Frank and Joseph hovering over us, kind of shielding us from the others. Frank looks at me and says, "Men's group tonight. You in?"

# Chapter 18

Sammie is due any minute at the massage office. I hustled over there after class and everything is ready to go. As I am waiting, seated reading a Shiatsu massage book, my mind starts to chatter. I have massaged men before, never a gay guy. It occurs to me how I perceive Sammie as a gay man. In fear? Of what? My masculinity? I become very aware of how my prejudiced or phobic mind wants to subvert my kind and gentle mind. So why is it that I have to put Sammie in a box? All it accomplishes is a biased perception of a person I know nothing about. As I gather my thoughts, I close my eyes and focus on breath and watch my hands glide over the curves and facia of a body, just a body in need of touch and healing. I can feel an exchange of energy that is about to transpire. As my apprehension comes to a resolve, I am startled out of my reverie and open my eyes when I hear the office door open.

"Hummm, Sammie, how are you doing? I'm glad you showed up."

"Hi Jim, I have been looking forward to this massage."

His demeanor seems a little shy or maybe somewhat apprehensive. Perhaps I am sensing my initial feelings and he picked up on it? I go through

the typical procedure of having the client fill out a form, asking questions concerning recent injuries, or anything I need to be aware of. "Tell me, why are you desiring to be a therapist?"

"I'm intrigued by the human form, especially men. I have an attraction towards men. Nothing against women, it's just, I don't know, I have a strong sense of my feminine side. Maybe it's an imbalance, but maybe it's just who I am."

"Okay. However, that's not what I asked. You mentioned about wanting to massage gay men, and yet you asked me to be a client as you go through massage school. A model is how you put it."

There's a little nervous laughter. "Well, since you model nude for our sketching class, you know, I thought you would be willing to . . ."

"Sammie, I don't mean to make you uncomfortable. I'm just curious, and I'll admit I have some perceived notions about your sincerity to give massage as a healing practice. So it's my uneasiness of our potential relationship as a mentor and student. And nothing more. So I am guessing that you might be feeling some of my nervousness?"

"Jim, you know I am gay, and I'll cut to the chase, I have a bit of a physical attraction towards you. Can you still be willing to give me a massage knowing that?"

Whew, what a bombshell. I had that coming. His truth with no hesitation to say it. Now what? Breathe, Jim, breathe. Sammie is looking at me waiting for a response. "So why are you choosing to go to massage school?"

"To massage gay men, in a therapeutic, healing, nurturing way. Are you able to do the same as a professional masseur?"

"Okay, typically," and he is starting to take off his clothes before I can finish, "I would leave the room and instruct the client to slide under the sheets and let me know when they are ready."

As I circle around the table to grab some oil, Sammie says, "I don't want any sheets. Is that okay?"

Oh man, this is starting to be a habit with clients. "Well, that's alright with me, but when you start massage school, one of the first things you are going to learn is the art of draping. And if you want to pass the state exam, you will want to be well versed at it." He's lying on his back. "I'm going to have you turn over. We'll start with the back."

As he's turning over, he apologizes, "I'm sorry I didn't shave my legs."

"Don't worry about it," is all I can think of saying.

I put on some soft meditation spa music. I softly grab his ankles and lean back to pull for some traction. Now I am focusing my energy on Sammie. When I give a massage, I put my mind on the transfer of energy. I start with placing my fists in the arch of each foot and apply some downward pressure. Next, I start some light fist pounding along the calves, then the hamstrings. Then I spread oil along his long legs and massage the calves and hamstrings and along the side of the legs. I am sensing how that might feel. It's all part of me being intuitive to what the person receiving massage might need . . . the giver and receiver being connected in one way or another, as one source of energy. All I touch or connect with is an extension of me. We are exchanging energy. I am the giver; he is the receiver. I continue on with a foot massage, more leg strokes, then working on the hip with circular motion using my fist. I knead the buttocks like I would knead bread dough. He gives me some feedback with a few moans. I work the back and eventually have him turn over.

He is looking up at me and ask, "Do you mind if some semen escapes?". I have to chuckle at the word choice "escapes."

"No worries, I'll be changing the sheets anyway."

Of course now I am in thought. Alright, Jim . . . no judgment. Uh, what's Sammie's expectations? Stay professional. And I start the front side routine, with no sheets, and readjust my thinking, staying focused on the massage and hoping he's not anticipating more than a professional massage.

"You have wonderful hands, Jim."

I don't respond and I stay away from the groin area, for sure! As I finish with a head and ear massage, I ask Sammie to place his hands over his heart and I place mine on top of his. And I ask him to focus on what he is grateful for. I close my eyes and give him a sort of blessing heart-to-heart. Slowly I open my eyes and give him a nod and smile. "Take your time getting up. I'll see you in the office." He looks blissed out. Very relaxed. I am feeling satisfied with what appears to be a good therapeutic result. Not only for him physically, but also for me mentally. I was able to stay present as the giver of a healing touch.

He hands me $175 for a two-hour massage. I give him $25 back for a "discount for students."

"Thank you so much. I apologize for coming on strong towards you. I am so grateful that you didn't turn me away. You didn't show any form of disgust or disdain. You made me feel accepted for who I am and allowed me to be honest. Thank you for that. Did you figure out any time that I can give a massage to you? Would Wednesday work? About three p.m.? I have massage classes on Thursday."

"I think so. If we have to adjust schedules, I'll let you know."

When Sammie leaves, I take some time contemplating what it might be like for a gay man who might have an attraction for a heterosexual man. Now that I know Sammie's infatuation towards me, how will that play out? How will he honor my space? Can we develop a mutual understanding and appreciation for each other without physical involvement? Will I be able to overcome my fears?

I strip the sheets, turn off the lights, and lock up the office. I get home in time to warm up the left overs in my new donabe before Frank arrives. I'll bring it with, pot and all.

Frank pulls up to the house. I climb in and we're off towards Livingston way. I'm enjoying my leftovers from the night before. The warmth of the donabe on my lap compensates for the fall chill in the air. I am enjoying the ride, the warm food, and the anticipation of the group meeting tonight, when all of a sudden—

Frank asks, "So do you have a photo of her?"

"Who?"

"The woman, your wife you said disappeared about four or five years ago?"

"Yes, I do, in my wallet." I place my bowl on the seat and reach into my wallet.

"Here, both of us about six years ago."

Frank takes a look. Frank's eyes do not give away much with his facial expressions. A pretty serious guy, seems to me. But this time I see something other than a straight face. He almost looks surprised?

"There someone you recognize in the photo?" I ask.

Frank just purses his lips and with a light nod (looks like a no?) hands me back the photo of Julian and me. Probably one of the last photos we ever took together.

"Nice picture. How long were you two a unit?

I tell him, "About twenty years."

"What happened?"

"I think we figured we were on different paths. She was heading into a more spiritual path faster than I could keep up. I was never sure of myself as a spiritual person. I feared having to be in some sort of discipline. I think I took being on a spiritual path the wrong way. I had some misconceptions and feared I'd have to give up too much of what I liked to do. Also, my job ate up quality time with her. I started to resent having to make money to survive, and the

time it took away from my time living life. As a result, I cherished what I wanted to do with my free time. Not so willing to 'sacrifice' my time to be fully present with Julian's needs as a partner in marriage. One day I came home and she was gone, vanished. No note, nothing. Just gone."

"Did you file a missing persons report?"

"Yes, I did. The story even made some local papers for a while. I was embarrassed and crushed. I felt as if I blew it. I felt selfish, and deserved what I got. I was mad and blamed every circumstance on everything else except for me. I suffered the consequences. Once I stopped denying the fact that I played a role in our disseminated connection, I was finally able to realize that grief wasn't just about losing a loved one to physical death; grieving also is about loss of connection."

"Well, I think you are fortunate to find this men's group. It's a good bunch of guys for support. Yours isn't the only story of losing a woman."

With that last statement, we're pulling into a parking space. I notice the bonfire. Looks like we'll be outside tonight. A nice, clear night as the sun goes down. We'll have stars above. We meander over to the circle of men. Everyone is here. Matt and Bobbie are collecting firewood. Blue Cloud is stoking the fire. Jerry is conversing with Joseph. There are pow wow drums scattered about, next to some stumps and camp stools around the fire. The breeze is blowing smoke around, so I'm guessing we'll be moving around a lot tonight.

Joseph sees us and with a quick tongue he says, "Gentlemen, let's gather around and get started."

And with that statement we are seated and Blue Cloud lights the pipe.

Joseph, "Tonight we will pass pipe six times around. This means we will all tell our story, tonight."

"Ah ho," we all respond.

The pipe is passed, six times. We're ready to start.

Joseph, "Matt, how about you telling us what's going on at work."

Matt, "I am thinking of quitting. My boss makes me feel worthless. I'm not sure he appreciates what I do. Half the time I'm the whole crew, framing, siding, sheet rock... He's always stressed about deadlines and then blames me if a job takes too long. I have no help."

Joseph, "So what are you feeling when you're left at the job site on your own?"

Matt, "I get pissed. But I end up just doing it all, best I can considering the circumstances. By the end of the day, I am beat. Tired is what I am feeling right now."

Joseph, "How long has this been going on?"

"For a couple of years now, no raise, no thank you, nothing. Instead,

he's pissed because he expected three rooms framed or all the siding done by now, blah, blah, blah."

"You ever tell your boss? You ever tell him you need help? Or ask for a raise? Or how about asking for some gratitude?"

"Yeah, I need to do that."

Jerry, "How about starting with one request at a time and give him a timeframe to fulfill the request? You can even remind him every couple of days."

Bobbie, "Yeah, how about it Matt? Can we hold you accountable to have made the request by next group?"

Matt, "Okay, I like the idea of one request at a time. See how he responds. AH HO!"

Blue Cloud speaks up next, "I was at Yellowstone a few days ago. They have the bison hunt. I was sad. The bison that roamed the land before made their way to Livingston way. To the grasslands. That is what the bison today still knows. And they are trapped in the park. The park service cannot manage them properly because the bison have been stopped to roam free. Many years ago, the ranchers feared the bison. They said the bison was responsible for disease to their cattle. And all of the free roaming land has been taken away from the bison. Their territory to roam is small. I am sad. Ah ho."

Joseph, "Blue Cloud tells the truth."

Jerry is next, "Well, I am not sure how I feel about Gerry anymore. I'm not sure if we're going to make it as a couple."

Frank, "Jerry, what makes you think like that? Have you had some disagreements, or serious conversation about your relationship with her?"

"No, not really. Right now, it's all the little stuff or fantasy of what a couple should look like or be like. It's a state of being fashionable. Neither one of us starts a conversation that has any real substance."

Blue Cloud, "Do you tell her why you love her?"

"Hummm, I say it, but I don't feel it whole heartedly. You know what I mean? I still feel like keeping a little distance, some privacy."

"Sounds like you fear what your truth is and can't face the truth of whether you feel love beyond physical attraction or love for who she is," says Frank.

Jerry starts tearing up a little. With a broken voice, he continues, "I have never been so scared to make a commitment and I never had a desire to commit to anything. Let alone a relationship as a husband. I don't have a clue what that might look like on an emotional level. I'm not sure if I love myself enough to be worthy of someone else loving me. Besides, I am not sure what she sees in me. I don't seem to be "cool" enough for her friends, yet

all I can be is who I am."

Bobbie, "How about taking some deep breaths right now?"

Jerry closes his eyes, and you can see his breath change into a rhythm, a slow deep inhale filling up his belly, then his lungs, which he blows out with a sigh . . . .

"Again," and Bobbie is about to lead Jerry through a little exercise of calm thought through breath work.

They do several breaths together and we are all following along. I can feel a subtle energy of men connecting as one with Jerry and his anxiety. It truly has a calming effect.

"How you feeling now, Jerry?"

"Good. Good. Wow, okay, so I will commit to starting a conversation with Gerry and cover some deeper topics about us. Expectations. Spiritual, or non-spiritual beliefs, family, and anything I want to talk about that concerns me. And maybe how much time I need before we even think about marriage. AH HO!"

Now it's my turn, and I am baffled about what to talk about, so I ramble on about the disconnect between man and woman. "We're really a personality first, not man versus woman. What if we thought that way? Maybe we'd be on equal terms, no judgements of our male/female sex. Why can't we just have this heart connection, even though we may think differently in terms of masculinity and femininity? What if we took the time to feel the vibration of the other person? Acknowledge it, and respect the person for who they are? Who they want to become? And where they're at on their path?"

Frank butts in, "You are one crazy dude!"

Laughter and chuckles, even from me.

"Whaaat . . . ?"

Frank, "We are so different, man and women. Can you just accept that? Just be who you are."

"Well, who I am can use a lot of work. I am learning about compassion and empathy. I am opening up about spirituality and how it relates to love. I am striving to be a better person than what I was. No more self-centered actions. I want to be of service and inspire my partner, this time around. Whoever that might be. Ah ho."

Frank shares, "Crazy dude, but that sounds like a good direction to go. And just now we heard about you! The first crazy stuff you were talking about was thoughts. Well, my turn, I guess. I have a problem on my hands. I have affections for a woman, living on the ranch. A sweet gal, homestead type. I've known her now for a while. And I know she has feelings for another lover. Best way I can put it. I am not sure what to do."

Joseph, 'You've been through this before. What's new?"

"This time it's different. A new variable for me. Best way I can put it. I need to be truthful to myself. Respect her needs, not be so domineering or me demanding her strict attention. Ah ho."

Joseph, "Not so fast, Frank. I happen to know a bit about your past. These other fellows do not. I know what type of affections you had in the past with women. Is this gal at the ranch another attempt at a replacement? How long you think that relationship will last, again? Let me explain the Medicine Wheel, briefly. Then I want us all to contemplate the women in our lives. And then you will answer the two questions I asked you, Frank. And we still haven't heard from Bobbie. And I have some sharing too. This is from the book *Seven Arrows*.

> In the North are found tools of both building and destruction. The power placed Woman to the North, my son. Her hair is white and she will never grow old. She, my son, is what Man must Marry, this concept, the being of wisdom. Your children with her are the reality of gifts from the North.
>
> In the South, the power placed a Man. His hair is green. The South is the hardest way to walk. All must walk this way of trust and innocence in Brotherhood. Gifts of another spirit are found here. And there is also marriage here, my son. It is with sister of the south. Only he can offer her in marriage, and always only through the brotherhood. The gift of reality here is the touching within love.
>
> The place of the East is total illumination, but is only true if man has visited the North and Married, has visited the South and has also been given the sister there for marriage. Man is able to see far when he visits the East, my son. The East begins the new day for man, and lights the way, to the West and paints the colors there. For all the colors are the children of these marriages.
>
> The West is the place of looking within. When one looks within, he is able to recognize the stars that guide him in his times of darkness. This is the Great Medicine Wheel, the Universe Dance. "AH HO!"

We are all quiet for some time. As I think of the Woman of the north, I immediately see Julian and the role she has played in my life. I recognize how I did not give her the fullness of my being. How many times was I not there for her? I see Joni now, the Woman of the South. What will that relationship turn out to be? What have I learned from my past with Julian? I see myself now wandering in the East. I am looking for that illumination. I

see that I must go within to the core of my being. Now I see myself naked, facing the warmth of the sun, a warm breeze ruffling through the hair on my naked body. I feel the warmth, nurturing. I see a gentle nudge, my shadow whispering to be kind to self. Forgive and learn.

*Jerry - I am being tested. I need to make sure that Gerry is the woman of the north that I want to be with. There is no woman of the south in my life, but am I searching for her even when I have to be shown the woman of the north? I am so far from being illuminated as to what I want. I feel scared. I feel that I need self- discovery and I have hidden my true feelings from this group. What is it that keeps me from really sharing? Digging deep for true feelings from the heart, not thought from the head?*

*Matt - Now I see that I allow myself to suffer. I have no woman to honor. Acquaintances, yes, but not a true mate to take me to higher realms. I choose to work until exhaustion. It deadens my experience to enjoy another. My boss is not to blame. Maybe it is my self-worth that I need to work on. I need to commit to searching for my soul. That would serve me better. Maybe me taking the steps to voice my needs to my boss is what I need to do. Maybe it is symbolic of the steps I need towards self-discovery.*

*Blue Cloud - I am nephew to my uncle, Joseph. I am on a journey to the east to seek illumination. I am to be a medicine man. Joseph is my mentor and teacher of the way of the Cherokee. I do not seek the woman of the north or south. She will come to me when it is time. I am here to learn, to serve, and to guide.*

Joseph clears his throat, "Gentlemen, it is time to hear from Frank and Bobbie. Then I will share. Frank, have you given any thought to the two questions?"

"To the first question, I will only answer that this woman I speak of looks into my soul. I have not had that experience with other female relationships, except for the woman that she would replace. I am confused since I know this woman also had affections for another man. Our relationship has meaning beyond the shallow relationships I have had with other women. She speaks her wisdom. She challenges me to go deep and seek my inner truth. I am confused because I have a desire to be her lover and she shows affection without physical desire. I don't know how else to express our relationship.

I speak up, "Frank, it seems that you have a desire for physical connection with this woman, is that true?"

He gives me a glare that unnerves me. What can that be about? He looks down, then up, and looks at each one of us in the circle. "I have had some love making with her. I couldn't tell if I fulfilled her carnal needs or if

it went beyond that. I did not bother to ask. She continues to reach out to me, but not in a sexual way."

"And where are you feeling that now?" Bobbie asks.

You can see Frank taking some deep, deep breaths. There is a big exhale, a huge sigh. He seems sad. He places his head in his hands, and covers his eyes. Frank is sitting bent over. I can see his back heaving. Is this "stoic like a rock" man, crying? Suddenly Joseph nods at all of us and we gather around Frank. Some of us are laying hands on him. I am kind of off to the side. There's some kind of energy that has me unsure of sending him compassion right now. What is that resistance I am feeling? Bobbie is looking at me. I shuffle over to lay my hands on Frank, but my sincerity is lacking. Joseph speaks, "Let's give our brother some love and compassion. Visualize his dilemma as if it is your dilemma." After a short time, we say, "Ah ho," and go back to where we were sitting.

There's a silence, then Bobbie speaks, "James, I noticed some hesitation from you when we gathered around Frank. What was that about?"

All eyes are on me. I must have a look of shock on my face. I can feel my body tensing up. "I can't explain it. All of a sudden, I did not feel part of the group. What Frank described brought up past pain for the woman I loved for so many years. And when I lost her, I felt an emptiness. I felt as if I lost a soulmate. I felt sad and remorseful. I wanted to scream at Frank and shake him and tell him to communicate all his inner most feelings towards his woman!" Damn, when will we get beyond sex as an expression of love! Carnal fulfillment? How about taking it to an exchange of energy, a feeling of oneness, two body forms uniting in oneness? Feeling what the other is feeling. So close that there is a divine intervention that takes place. An energy exchange. I am she and she is me and we are together one being. Gosh, maybe I am one crazy dude! I look up and have to smile at this last thought. Everyone is peering at me. Various expressions, gawking at me. And my eyes settle on Frank. We stare at each other. Neither of us exchanging any words. I hear the fire crackling as Blue Cloud is stoking it. Smoke moves in my direction. I stand up to move out of the way, relieved that our locked eyes have been broken.

"Bobbie, we haven't heard from you," Joseph bellows out.

"I am feeling intensity right now. I am very present with a lot of mixed energy that has been shared tonight. I don't think I have ever shared with you all that I am. A pastor for a small Christian church. If my constituents saw me here, they would think that I am with a group of unbelievers. Or they might think that I have lost faith in the word of Christ. That I have flipped. This makes me feel hypocritical. Maybe that's an evaluation. Let's see, how about frustrated and that I need to have some authenticity of self-expression?

That I can be free to explore other beliefs?"

Jerry pipes in, "So what do you preach to your flock?"

Bobbie chuckles. "I am not Jesus. Good one, Jerry. Well, that's why I am in this group. I am on a self-realization trip. A journey into the unknown for me. I was raised in a strict Christian family and have a lot of Christian beliefs. I am realizing that in truth they don't differ much from what we all share here. No offense, Joseph and Blue Cloud, but the old-school of thought would have me trying to convert you to my beliefs. And here I am listening to the teachings of the Medicine Wheel! Am I being a hypocrite? So right now, I am feeling embarrassed and resentful that I feel this way. I need integrity, trust, and honesty."

Jerry, "And are you getting that tonight?"

"Yes, in such a pure way that I feel at home. God is my Creator and He created choices and free will. And here I am, practicing my free will. Ah ho."

*Joseph - I am a medicine man of the Cherokee nation. I am feeling healed by this group of men who have left their egos behind. They are so pure right now, so honest, I am humbled.*

"Men, my share has shifted. I feel a deep appreciation for all of you. It has made me feel proud to be a man. Tonight was special. We circled the Medicine Wheel. I am spellbound and feel as if I am in a trance. Let us drum."

We silently pick up our pow wow drums. There's a tambourine and some rattles. Someone starts and slowly we are merging our sounds of instrument and vocals. The beat goes on.

No sweat lodge tonight. Frank and I drive home in almost all silence. Then he asked, "How long did you and your wife, in the picture you showed me before, how long was your marriage?"

And I responded, "Twenty-two years. It was a marriage of the North. We moved west after being in the south awhile."

# Chapter 19: Heart-to-Heart

Looks like Molly invited Stephanie for modeling alongside me. As I come through the door, I head on over and say, "Hello, Molly, hi, Stephanie. We both on for the night, Molly?"

"Yep, I have an idea."

Oh boy, you should see her mischievous smile. "This ought to be good."

"Yeah, I already talked it over with Steph and it's all good. I was thinking, I'll have you two pose facing each other and your right hands over each other's hearts and your left hand clasping the other's right hand over your heart. Looking in each other's eyes. What do you think? Want to try the pose?"

And not only does she have the mischievous smile, but she's also giving me the Jack Nicholson raised eyebrow look, which is saying, 'Huh, huh, will you do it?'

"Hummm"—I'm a little apprehensive. But what the heck?—"okay, let's do it. We'll have breaks, I presume. This could get a little intense." I look over at Stephanie. She's cool as a cucumber. Just looking at me.

"Jim, this might be an opportunity to connect, heart-to-heart, soul-to-soul," says Molly.

And so we take the pose as the artist are getting ready. We settle into each other. Hands on hearts, and giving each other direct eye contact. No looking at lips, or over the right shoulder to avoid eye-to-eye. Nope, directly into each other's eyes. Stephanie has beautiful grey-blue eyes. They have a glisten to them. Eye lashes and eyebrows a light blonde-brown color that matches her hair. I am feeling her warm hand on my heart. I detect a little moisture. Sweaty palm? Nice and warm feeling. A tender touch. It doesn't feel like a push or stiff arm. My thoughts start to light up. Wondering what her life journey has been like up to now. Just the thought starts up a smile. I notice her start a smile too. Pretty cool. A first message getting through. Alright, I wonder what she is thinking right now. Of me? Maybe she's not thinking anything, maybe she's just feeling the vibe. I take a deep breath with a slow exhale and do it again. I get calm. I feel my hand relax and catch another smile from Steph.

*Stephanie* - Jim's got dark brown eyes. I'll bet he's got some Italian in his blood. Hummm, a little tense with his touch. Must be because we're in front of several people. He's a little shy in front of a group? Well, I bet he's feeling my sweaty palms. I didn't think I would have some inhibitions. Ooo yeah, a deep breath. Yes, I'll do it too. One more. Okay, I'll follow his lead. Yeah, I can

feel both of us relax. I love his smile. It radiates joy for the experience. Makes me smile. I feel my cheeks expanding. Feels good to be smiling.

*Jim* - I can feel both us getting into a rhythmic breath. I feel a softness with her breath, the slight movement of her chest.

*Stephanie* – Ummm, seems like we are connecting with a similar breath rhythm. Nice, very calming, just focusing on each other's breath cycle. There's some depth to this man. What makes him tick?

*Jim* - Her eyes seem to be inquiring about something. My ego will take my mind to all sorts of places. My brain waves send out a message, "Do you want to know what I am thinking?"

*Stephanie* - My guess is that Jim loves to experience his life. From one third eye to the next. Are you a seeker, seeking self-truth?

*Jim* - I am so glad that I gave the green light on this pose, part of the journey. With a complete stranger, heart-to-heart connection. Right now I feel that I have overcome the physical fear of touch. I think we are connected somewhat telepathically, through the touch.

*Stephanie* - Well, you don't have that big smile anymore and neither do I. I think this is about to be a serious exchange. What are you feeling right now?

*Jim* - Whew, love comes with so many concepts. I am feeling love through connection. I have no sexual thoughts. I hope Steph can sense that. I hope she can sense my sincerity to connect as spirits, as souls.

Molly, "How about a little break, you two? It's been a while. You're really locked in."

With that slight interruption, we slowly disengage the posture. We are still locked eye-to-eye. I feel the intensity. The air is thick with our energy. We don't say anything to each other. Verbal communication is unnecessary. I can hear some chatter in the room. I do not look up. I am lost in thought, and strong feelings. I can sense some sort of process or phenomena happening. I am very present with that awareness. Nobody is coming over to chat with either one of us.

Suddenly I feel fingers softly wrapping around my bicep. I look up.

It's Molly. "You alright, Jim? Let me know if this is too much for you."

I respond with a slight shake of the head. "I'm okay. There is some kind of connection happening beyond anything I can explain right now. Yeah, I am okay. Thanks for your concern."

I see Molly's nurturing eyes. She knows this is intense for me. I love her for that unspoken acknowledgement.

We are back in the pose. And we both start at the same time with a couple of deep breaths as we lock eyes.

Stephanie, "I am glad we're back, Jim."

I say, with a slight smile, "Alright, let's reconnect."

This time, there is no palm sweating. This time we have a stronger, more immediate connection. I give her a slight nod.

*Jim* - Okay, Steph, I am feeling your physical breath through my hand, up my right arm and the energy returning to you from my left arm to your right hand and arm and creating a loop, a field of energy flowing between us.

*Stephanie* - This posture forms a loop. I feel as if I am transmuting my energy into Jim. There is such a strong sensation where he is touching me, connected with me, that I can not explain or even want to stop and think about it.

*Jim* - I wonder now if we let go of our touch, will we still be connected, with a ray of love? All of a sudden I am feeling a physical sensation. Stephanie does not feel like a stranger anymore. I feel like I've known this woman for a long time.

*Stephanie* - Whew, okay, I feel done. I have looked into this man's soul. I have gone beyond judgement, inquiry, anything connected to ego. Where did this last twenty minutes go? Wow, okay, Jim, James, wooo, alright. Time to come back to earth. I am going to start to release my touch. Let's see how he responds.

*Jim* - Woah, I never felt this between two strangers before. Maybe we're not such strangers when we connect like this. How can I implement this feeling, this love connection? I'm not sure what love is, really. But this connection is something. Okay, yeah, time to end? Pretty intense. Thank you, Stephanie. Thank you for your willingness to connect. I wonder if she feels my gratitude.

I feel Molly's arm around my shoulder. She's got an arm around Stephanie's shoulder. Our three foreheads softly meet slightly bowed down. I can feel three people breathing deeply, releasing whatever it is, where this pose took us to. I can feel the nurturing of souls in human form. I can feel . . . and that is quite a sensational experience.

I put on a robe and decide to silently walk around, see what the artists are painting. Stephanie is dressing and chatting a bit with Molly.

Jerry is sketching us with foreheads butted together, arms over each other's shoulders.

Joni's sketch looks like a portrait of her and me. Stephanie's figure is smaller in her sketch and looks like Joni.

Sadie has characterized us as turtles! It's crazy and funny. Jenny has nothing on her sketch pad. Both their eyes are on me. I sense that they're sensing the power of what Jenny did several nights ago at the Twister party.

Arthur has us looking like the Statue of liberty, with our bodies entwined, our right and left hands clasped reaching to the heavens, holding a flame of freedom.

Nirvana is sketching exactly how we posed. She has been able to capture the aura field that surrounded us.

Faye has us as two trees, roots and branches intertwined. Our profiles looking into each other's eyes, which are hidden in the trees.

Deloris has sketched the pose but has birds, butterflies, and bees fluttering around us. Steph has a wreath of flowers around her head. Grass beneath our feet and vines wrapping around our legs.

Frank's sketch throws me for a loop. His profile of Stephanie looks like someone I know! "Frank. Why, how, are you able to sketch Julian, my wife? What's going on?"

And Frank calmly says, "You showed me her picture the other night. I sketch pretty good from memory."

Joseph has me looking like a bison with Stephanie staring at the bison's eyes. "Why do you always draw me as a bison?"

Joseph responds with a chuckle, "Well, you are hairy like a bison. Maybe it's your animal totem?"

Sammie is sketching me looking into the eyes of another man. "Are you still coming for a massage after class?"

I am contemplating….what is the basis of a relationship. What is the foundation that holds them up? I heard this recently….nothing external, it is connection that holds a relationship together.

"Yes, I'll be there, Sammie."

# Chapter 20: Sammie

Everybody has left and Frank approaches Molly. “Look at this.”

Molly, “Is that Julia? Is that who you sketched? The woman at the ranch?”

“Yes, Jim showed me a picture on our way to men’s group, at Joseph’s place. What do you think?”

Molly has a look of remorse and concern. “I don’t think we want to say anything yet. Let’s check in with Julia and get her to tell her story. Let’s be sure, and we don’t need to tell her about Jim. That’s going to have to be their reconnection. How are you doing, Frank.?”

Frank, “Well, I love her. This is going to be hard for me. I have never put so much into a relationship.”

Molly, “It is amazing, the turn of events. I have never felt so much for an individual, as I have for Jim, during all the years of doing this service. As an art teacher and missing persons investigator. Didn’t we say long ago to never get emotionally involved solving a case?”

Frank, “Yes, we did. Now we need to stay true to our commitment.”

Molly, “Yes, I want Joseph to be part of this.”

Frank, “What do you have in mind?”

Molly, “A ceremony, a cleanse.”

This morning I am at Nirvana’s early morning yoga class.

As we’re sitting on our mats, Nirvana starts out with some sharing. It helps set the stage before the exercises. For me, it gets me to be introspective. This morning I am recreating the previous day’s modeling experience.

Nirvana is giving us something to think about and encouraging others to share anything that might be of consequence to our daily lives. “I have a guided meditation we’ll listen to, that Megan brought to my attention from the Ekam group of meditators that she’s involved with. You want to give us a preview, Megan?”

“Sure. I do these various meditations every weekday morning. It’s a small group of us ‘seekers’ that do a Zoom, share a little, and then meditate. We’re kind of a prayer group. We give healing or an exchange of energy to a circle of family and personal friends. Sometimes we include whoever needs healing and give them Deeksha. A sort of blessing with its source coming from a golden orb infused with light, a flow of energy that comes through a vortex where the Ekam Temple is located in southern India. It’s been really

good for me to connect with like-minded people from other parts of the country. I love it, keeps me going within, discover who I am and who I can become."

"Sounds similar to the Golden Temple in northern India. Okay, thanks for the share. Let's get started." Nirvana uploads some music and we settle in. "Let's close our eyes, take a deep breath, exhale, another breath, exhale, and let's begin."

We start out with a prayer of protection and intention. Eyes closed, in unison we all chant the prayer Ong Namo Guru Dev Namo. A recognition of our higher self to be present. We start with some alternate breathing, right nostril, then the left nostril. Then it's rotating the head, switching directions after a while. We do twisting with hands on shoulders, left to right, aware of our breaths. We continue on doing various movements that apparently get the Kundalini energy moving up the spine. Every so often we lie down on our backs, take a little rest, and let the music and any thoughts wash over us. Today, the guided meditation from Ekam, is about love and connection. It asks pointed questions about our personal concepts of what love is, what judgements and prejudices we might have towards loving others. With brainwave music as a background, our personal process begins. It's different for everybody, depending on how truthfully you respond to the questions posed. I have a lot going on, especially since I have been involved with so many connections from the art class. What comes up immediately is how this applies to my relationship that is slowly forming with Sammie. I am swimming in thoughts and can't quite get a grip on relating to gay men and women. My relationship with Sadie and Jenny, what's that about? What am I feeling? I am having a hard time connecting with love outside of physical form. I am experiencing physical and emotional sensations in my body right now. I am confused about what happened when I gave Sammie his first massage as my new client. Even though I was casual about my reaction of his responses to my touch, I know I was uneasy because of the beliefs that I inherited from societal norms. I also know that there is a professional decorum to adhere to. And I also know that I do not want to send out vibes of rejection. Needless to say, I am in a very ego state right now. It is very difficult to stay present with the meditation. I am glad when it ends.

We all linger for a while when the class ends. I am still mentally exhausted from the last few days, with the men's group, the sketch class, and now I have Sammie's first massage practice.

On my way to Sammie's, I stop by the Wildflower hoping to check in with

Joni. I peek through the window and see her writing in a notebook. I enter, and a bell rings. She happens to look up, and gives me a smile. I wave with two fingers. She nods. I order two coffees and grab two cherry Danish pastries.

"Looks like you just got done with yoga? Thanks for the coffee and Danish. How sweet. You thought I'd be here?"

"Yes, I had a great yoga class that Nirvana does. And I was hoping you'd be here. I have two questions. One, I saw that you sketched Stephanie as you. I can only guess what that's about. And, two, are you writing an article or are you journaling?"

With a coy smile, Joni responds, "Well, in regards to your first question, I was in fantasy land. I was seeing us, together. And to the second question, yes, I am journaling and happen to be writing about our steamed car window date."

"Any details?"

"They're private right now. Maybe in the future I'll share."

"Oooo, okay, keep me in suspense. When I went around the room, it was amazing to see how everyone sketched the pose. Did you feel the energy that was going on between me and Stephanie?"

"Jim, it was so intense and thick, I can't imagine what was going on between you two."

"Yeah, it was quite an experience. And actually, in a different way the energy we had going on the other night was just as intense and more so than being in the pose. And with the meditation I just experienced at yoga, there was confusion that came to my attention trying to define (in my mind) physical love versus connection (as love energy) with another person."

"Why not be who you are? Just you in the moment? You seem so alive and excited with the way you interact with everybody in the class. You talk about connection being love. Why not embrace it?"

Quickly I joke, "Is that a pun intended?" Then I remember Sammie's massage. "Hey, I gotta go. I'm supposed to be at Sammie's in twenty minutes. It's gonna take all of that to get there! Hug?"

Joni does not hesitate. She's up and in my arms in a hurry!

I respond to her quick embrace, "Thank you, Joni, for shedding some light on my dilemma. It is all about living your truth. That's what I am hearing?"

She grabs both my arms as she backs off from the hug. A smile starts to crawl across her face. "Yes. Your circumstance will have consequences. You definitely have your hands full! With a lot of people."

Suddenly I am at the address that Sammie gave me. I knock on his door.

"Come in."

We casually say our hello's. He takes me to an extra room that he set up for massage.

Sammie, "This is what I set up for my massage office. What do you think?"

"Looks nice, not too therapeutic like a doctor's office, but cozy, and warm with your lighting, some nice frequency music, you have your physiological poster on the wall. I like the setup. Makes me comfortable, as a client."

He's standing there, kind of dumbstruck, and I say, "Okay, I'll get my clothes off and slide under the sheet."

With that comment, Sammie briefly leaves the room and I get ready.

I shout, "ready!" Okay, so far so good. This is what I was hoping for a therapeutic clinic. A good start if he wants to be a therapist.

Sammie comes in and warms up his hands by rubbing them. He has warmed up some oil and there's a nice scent in the room. Aromatherapy. I like it. He has me stay on my back. His preference, whatever side he wants to start on. With a light touch, he starts applying the oil. He adds a little pressure and starts spreading the oil over my chest, along my arms and shoulders. Good, firm touch, and I let him know. He does clockwise rotation on the stomach. Works on my arms and hands, then he goes after my legs. Starting from the feet, he strokes the top of the feet and massages my ankles. He strokes up the lower leg, works on the kneecap, and starts up the thigh. As he is working the inside of my left thigh his touch becomes a little sensuous with gentle squeezing and stroking. He moves up to the groin area. I am thinking…. Where is this going?

So I ask, "Sammie, this is feeling very sensuous. I'm not sure how this will play out concerning the school and you achieving licensure. Also, I notice that your draping needs improvement. My vital area needs better covering, don't you think?"

"Oh, sure, I wasn't thinking, especially since you don't seem to have an issue with being nude."

"Well, you asked me for a favor, to be able to practice massaging and to be your model for the state testing, right?" And I say this with sincerity. I do not want to make this about anything else except where it concerns massage and an ethical practice.

Sammie has let up a little, but with fingers still caressing the groin area, he remarks, "Oh yes, okay. Mind if we start over with the draping? Maybe you can give me some pointers?"

"Sammie, I think that is a good idea. In fact, at state testing, they will be a

stickler for proper tucking, making sure that the vital area is safe from any exposure. As far as your touch goes, you started with good firm pressure and it's okay to mix in a few gentle strokes, just to give the area you're working on a little nurturing. My suggestion or feedback as a perspective client would be totally different than what I am about to say. I sense that you have an attraction for me, am I right? I mean, you previously stated that when you came for your massage."

"Yes."

"We don't really know each other, and I am a heterosexual. I don't have a problem with your sexual preference. I would have appreciated you having communicated to me your aspirations, or desire, is a better word. What I will suggest is that your love flows through as healing energy. Connect with me through healing. Put love into working out stressed muscle areas that you feel. Feel your stroke as if it was you being massaged. Being healed of stress. Muscles relaxing. Feel it, stay focused on loving me that way. Through connection versus sex. Is that doable?"

"Thanks for understanding. I hear you. I am glad that you are able to stay calm and give me what's true for you and not totally reject me with disdain and judgements. I will respect your preference. I would like to be your friend and I hope you will help me become a massage therapist."

"Alright, you want me to roll over? You know how to use the sheet as a privacy curtain?" And we continue on with the massage. As we finish, I have been enjoying the work and renewed pressure and touch. I feel a sense of relief, and I am glad not to have shamed Sammie.

Our departure ends with a sincere hug and eye contact. All is good. We hug one more time. I can feel some disappointment from Sammie. I hope he can feel my love as connection. As oneness from one human form to another. No judgements, no rejection, just being one.

# Chapter 21: Trees, Understory, and Compost

The next morning, I head over to the Coffee Hut and see Deloris and Faye at a table. They wave me over, and with a coffee in hand, I join them.

Faye, "Good morning, Jim. We were just talking about you."

Deloris, "Yeah, winter is going to be upon us soon enough. The weather has been too nice this late into October."

Faye, "We're done harvesting and are starting to get garden beds ready for next year."

Deloris, "We could use some help. You game?"

"Absolutely! I'd be thrilled. Hey, I have a question for you, about your sketches the other day. Trees, and statue-like figures with branches, wreaths, birds, bees, and butterflies. What were you two thinking. Why did you not sketch the pose as it was? Seems like nobody did! I am curious."

Faye, "I did the trees with your profiles sketched within the two trees, facing each other, branches and roots entwined. Supporting each other. Sending signals to each other. Swaying in the breeze with each other. The world of trees are like that. They create a whole society. They receive and give. They populate. What I witnessed was an intensity between you and Stephanie that filled the room like a giant redwood or sequoia. You two were communicating with one another at some level. And it might have been mundane thoughts or a profound connection, but for sure, energy was flowing. That is what I sketched."

Deloris, "What I saw was life wrapping its sweet energy around you both. You both became alive and attracted to beauty in the form of nature. A garden of Eden, Adam and Eve, in Paradise. A sense of searching for relationship. Joined together, understanding oneness with each other and the Earth, the Heavens, the Universe."

Nirvana appears out of nowhere, and asks, "May I join you all?"

We look up. "Yes, yes, come on, have a seat."

Nirvana, "Wow, you three were in deep discussion about something."

Faye, "We were discussing the class the other night. You were there. How did you sketch the pose?"

Nirvana, "For me, I wanted to capture the aura they were transmitting. The feeling for me was a transcendental experience. It brought me to my connection with my divine self. My inner being. So I saw this white, golden light surround them. I saw a loop of energy coursing through arms, connecting with hearts, and third eye contact penetrating through the maya of life."

Suddenly we were all holding hands, slowly circling our eyes from one to the other. It was a beautiful feeling. I am blessed with a circle of friendship. Real sincere and intimate relationships are forming. Something I have missed until this reawakening I am having with life. The connection as one with all.

It's been a beautiful exchange. We all need to get on with our day. Hugs all the way around.

I follow Faye and Deloris home. We still have gardening to do. I am looking forward to the physical labor. We walk in silence. My present thought is centered on the "be here now" or conscious thought of whatever we are doing or thinking. Our personal present moment is different than another's present moment. That leads to a variety of emotional misunderstandings, unless we are in an advanced state of oneness. I was reading through my Yellowstone Journal last night, and came across a side note written on a page, and it stated, "The most important trait necessary to see the natural beauty of our earth is patience. We need to cultivate rapt patience to wait and let the experiences wash over us and to see all that we are capable of seeing."

We go through the yard gate. "Let's have a seat, over there on the bench beneath the apple tree." A request by Deloris. "Whew, that was quite a morning gathering. I still need to get my wits back so I can function. Faye, you remember what we had in mind?"

Faye gives a chuckle. "Missy Deloris, my dear, it's slowly coming back. I think we wanted to develop a forest garden, over there under and around the cherry and plum trees. So we need some earth moved, compost hulled over, rocks stacked for raised beds that will meander beneath the trees. That sound about right, Deloris?"

"Yeah, throw some straw over the heaps and see how the soil is after the spring melts off the winter snows. The theory being that the top dressing of compost will slowly seep its fertility deep down under."

I ask, "What did you have in mind for this forest garden? Any berry bushes, what kind of crops?"

Deloris, "What do you think, Jim? What do you see here?"

"I think over there, under the three young aspens. I am not sure about handling new aspen shoots. I think there's a way to saw the main tuber that slows down or prevents new growth. Anyway, I can see a free-flowing, stacked rock, raised bed. Maybe put some old wool carpet or cardboard over the area, then fill in the bed with layers of leaves, compost, soil mixture on top of that. Then a couple of rose hip bushes with some wild currant bushes. Over to the north under the fir tree, the big aspens, and

Russian Olive, there's a spot I'd try doing some mushroom habitat, with rotten logs and moss on a bed of compost soil. This whole area will be a haven for birds with the protection of the Russian Olive. The established fir tree is a great place for a magpie to build a nest."

"As you visualize the entire concept that you have created in your mind's eye, what else is there that talks to your soul?" ask Faye.

I observe that lone tree
in the field.

All alone on its' own
In the distance, forgotten
about?

Left as an outcast?

Left to fend for
itself in nature's
elements.

I observe the flock of
birds.

Landing unto the lone
tree.

The birds rest, and pluck
at the seed pods.

They take shelter.

They are nourished briefly
before they continue on their flight
over here, into the forest of trees.

Where the trees support each other.
In a mass of branches and roots and
leaves.

As I look at the three aspens here,
I recall memories when

I gave a homeless man five
dollars, and he gave me three
jokes, that produced laughter
before I was on my way.
To the next stop light where I
gave a man, who was holding a
biblical sign, two dollars, and he
gave me a blessing and a smile,
before I was on my way.

As I glide to a stop at the next corner,
I gave a woman three dollars and she gave
me gratitude, before I was on my way.

Into the mass of humanity
for support, comfort, and caring.

All I have to offer
the forest of trees is
Humility.

We all sit in contemplation. We hold hands for several silent minutes. Then Deloris says, "Let's get to work."

# Chapter 22: Frank and Julia

I wake up in Joni's bed and look over at her coy smile. We had a beautiful Asian dinner last night. Hot and spicy, just like our lovemaking. The atmosphere Joni set in the house was alluring and afforded us a romantic time to get connected. The start of a relationship? Conversation was sincere and deep as we exchanged some of our past lives with lovers. Our feelings of remorse and regret led to a connection of compassion. And from that space, a time of healing and transformation from our grief concerning misused energy. Taking others for granted to fulfill our personal needs. Receivers versus givers. I gently caress her arm, hip, and upper leg. "I must admit I did not expect us to get to this type of connection."

Joni, "Hummm, well, your caress feels soothing right now. You know, how we surrendered into each other, and slowly rekindled the sunset night? Only the exchange last night felt different for me."

"How so?"

"Well, just starting out facing each other, I in your lap, hands on hearts similar to the pose you and Stephanie were in at class a while back. I wasn't just playing out a fantasy. I had a real sense of giving, real surrender, and I knew you felt the exchange and . . ."

"I did feel that you were ready to surrender, and I, too, was in the same mindset. Staying present took a while for me. Especially after all we shared at dinner and through the night. Maybe the wine was a truth serum? Usually it has a numbing effect, but my anticipation was greater than the effect of wine coursing through my veins. I felt a loving sensation." I chuckle. "Anyway, it has been an amazing experience for me. A new life after Julian. A lot of mixed emotions and new discoveries of loving the whole of life again, and you are part of my wonderment. A sacred love is what we shared. That's how I perceive our connection."

We are searching each other's eyes, for some reassurance?

"Jim, how do we move on from this experience? And I'd like to know what you are thinking. Or should I say feeling?"

"I am glad you went to feeling, because right now, this very moment I am feeling an honest connection of compassionate love for what we shared. I really feel a connection of oneness. The last several months, since I started modeling for the sketch class, has been transformational in so many ways. My heart has been opened up. I hesitated at first, the whole concept of posing nude in front of strangers. Then for whatever reason, once I committed myself, or I should say surrendered to the unknown in a fearless way . . . Well, here we are, I would have never anticipated where I am at right now!"

We embrace, we kiss, and we relish the warmth of two bodies, two minds being transformed from the past to the present.

"Hey," I say, "how about meandering over to the Wildflower to savor the smells of the bakery, get some breakfast, eh?"

"Alright, sounds good."

The bakery is quiet today, a few customers sipping coffee, reading, scrolling a cell phone. The bakers are busy and we order our breakfast.

Joni, "I am enjoying this time spent with each other right now. I have no expectations other than a desire to deepen our relationship as we move forward. I want to give you some space, and to be honest with you I feel possessive. I have a fear that what we shared the last few days won't last."

"I'm not sure how I can give you any reassurance how our relationship will continue. I feel like I just take things one day at a time. I have learned to be the creator of my way, and then acknowledge the completeness of the day. For me to look into the future presents an unknown that I want to

control for a desired outcome. Rather than being grateful for all that has transpired in the course of one day."

"I'm guessing that you are picking up on my anxiety? Do you feel that energy in me like you felt my love last night?"

"I'm picking it up just by the way you are talking. The fact that we are having this conversation, did you already forget the energy we shared? Has it worn off or are you afraid that we won't get to that type of sensual, love again?"

"I realize now that I need to be feeling gratitude. It's a pattern of my past, learned behavior as I floated from one relationship to the next. The physical desire as a need. Not taking the time to know what love is. "

We finish breakfast in silence. Finally I share, "Joni, I found it difficult to taste my food. I was in thought about what we just discussed. I hope you didn't feel that I was so wrapped up in myself that I wasn't hearing what you had to say."

"Well, my mind was still racing, I was regretting what I said."

"Your fear of the recurring event that keeps coming up in your relationships with men, desiring a lasting relationship then sabotaging it. Can you actually know that it is absolutely true, how you experience past outcomes, will result in the same way with us?"

Joni looks at me and takes a long slow breath. She keeps eye contact, stays silent for awhile, then responds. "No, absolutely not true. I do not intend to sabotage our relationship."

We are done for now. We both seem to sense completion with Joni's last remark. We stand, hug each other and exchange a nice smooch and say our goodbyes for now.

I decide to head for the hills and get in some skiing. There is an early snow in the higher elevations. And I know of a good sloped grassy meadow with few rocks and debris. I head home to gather up my ski gear, glad that I did not slip away in the middle of the night. Keeping the connection and love we shared, kindling like a hot fire in the morning, was meaningful for me and I could feel the gratitude that Joni had, too.

Frank wakes up to a nice fire burning in the cabin's wood burning stove. Julia has a hot pot for coffee waiting for him. She is sitting cross-legged by the window, her back to him. Frank figures she is in silent mediation of some sort. He's thinking, How do I do this? Tell her that I know who she really is? I know about her relationship with Jim. I have to tell her that he needs to know. Tell her that's what I do, find missing persons, dead or alive. Why'd I spend the night here anyway? Because I think our relationship will end?

*Julia - I hear Frank rustling in the background, stirring around, getting dressed? My eyes are fixed on a distant figure up on the hill thousands of feet away. Trudging up the opposite ridge, above creek bottom, where I live like a will-o'-the- wisp.*

"Coffee's on the stove waiting for you."

"Smells good and strong, the way I like it."

" You meditating?"

"I am watching that figure way over yonder, that snow lover."

Frank pours a hot cup. The steamy coffee smell permeates the room. He places an arm over Julia's shoulder, and peeks out the window.

"Trespassing, again."

"Why don't you do anything about it?"

"Aw, he or she isn't doing any harm, I don't know. I've driven out there a few times and watched, but turned back to the ranch. I figured that I didn't want to disrupt the solitude of the mountain that he or she is experiencing."

"You are a nice person, Frank. I really appreciate what you have done for me too. This is the perfect place for me, in nature. And I do enjoy our relationship. There's a respect I feel from you. A gentle caring. And you give me plenty of space to be me."

"You are most welcome, Julian, and I appreciate our relationship."

"Huh?"

"I need to show you something. Let's get dressed and go up to the ranch house.

I want to show you my sketches from the art class, see what you think."

"Wait, what did you call me, just now? Julia or Julian?"

"Come on, throw on a coat and hat. I'll start the truck" And with that, Frank slips out the door.

*Julia is thinking - Boy, that came out of nowhere. What's this about? I think something is about to change. I better get ready for something, brace myself?*

Julia gets up into the cab, feels the heat, and slams the door. They drive in silence. The ranch house where Frank stays is about a mile or two away.

"Frank, what's going on? Did you have a slip of the tongue and call me Julian?"

'I've known you for five years now as Julia. Is that your real name?"

"You want to know my name? Yeah, it's Julian, Julian! Damn it, I'm sorry, I have a past with someone. And yeah, it's Julian, that's my name."

*Ugh, maybe I am reacting too fast.*

"I have never told you. I work privately, with a couple of other people. We investigate missing persons cases."

Frank parks the truck, and immediately climbs out. Julian sits awhile, not long, but memories of the past are welling up in her gut. She jumps out, feet landing in the soft overnight snow that fell. About six inches. She follows him into the house. Before she can take off her jacket and scarf, she sees all of Franks sketches tacked to the walls. Every open wall space that doesn't have anything else hanging on it, is filled with sketches of . . .

"Jim! High me. It's him! Where did you . . . how did you know?"

*Author's note:*
*Spanish name for James is Jaime…Julian would write notes using High Me in other words "James was her high"*

"He's in our men's group. Joseph and I, we invited him and he came. I'd pick Jim up and drive to group, got to know him pretty good. One night he talked about you, how he lost you. I asked if he had any pictures of you and he had a wallet photo. Gosh, you guys looked young, but I knew it was you. He said the photo was several years old."

"You didn't tell him?"

"I wanted to make sure. Now I know, for sure. The first men's group was very traumatic for him, about losing you. A lot of grief, five years' worth, he was very emotional, screaming and pounding that big drum."

Julian has tears streaming down her checks. "We're meant for each other. Always in this life, we are soulmates, soulmate lovers!"

"What's next, little lady? I've got to tell him. What about us?"

"Frank, I love you, but not like I love him. I am sorry. You have done so much for me and I am so grateful. I have lived with denial for so long, knowing the pain I must have caused that man and my family."

*Julian - I have so much sorrow I can't stop the tears from streaming down my cheeks. I am wrapping my arms around my body. I don't want a hug or any compassion from Frank right now. I need to forgive myself, love myself, but under the circumstance I cannot. I feel so naked in front of Frank. What must he be thinking? It took years before I surrendered my body to him, and when I did I could never love him the way I loved Jim. I wonder if he felt how I was just going through the motions? Thank God we only had sex a few times, just to fulfill a bodily need. Was it the same for him?*

*Ooooh, I feel so guilty. Have I defiled myself more in the eyes of God? What must I do? I am so confused. My journey seems so self-centered now. To leave my love and family behind, as if being responsible to my own needs was greater than realizing the responsibility I have to others. I am not greater than the whole. I see that now, the lie I lived thinking I was liberated when in fact I justified my choice. I ran in a rage of suffering. I found comfort in the suffering. Was that God's compassion? Will I be forgiven? I am scared of the consequences I have put in motion. Now what? I look at Frank. He is not showing any emotion I can sense. He is looking hard at me. I feel ashamed.*

"Do me a favor. It sounds like he is seeking, on a journey. I would appreciate it if you let him find me. That's him out there skiing that ridge. I know it. It's his passion. He finds his inner self and his true connection with nature and the world out there. Thanks for letting him ski the ranch land."

*Frank - This is a hard situation for me. I thought we had the start of something meaningful. It's taken a long time to get to this place of a common relationship with Julia. And she's not Julia at all. I don't think all of her being was under a pretense. Surely I felt a lot of sincerity from her. She's hurting. Look at her. She aches and cries "Just like a Woman" of deep sensitivity and emotion.*

*Joseph knows me too well. What he said at group the other night was truth. I was using Julia to take the place of my lost lover. Yeah, we connected, but she couldn't take the place of Bertha. Now I can see how our relationship was a lot of noble distractions. We both gave to each other, not really from the heart. At least I can admit that now. We fooled ourselves thinking that we could replace our suffering with kindness, and false pretense. I wonder what's going through Julian's mind now. Surely she is Julian in tears, not the strong-willed Julia I've gotten to know.*

"Darling, we have to at least give him a hint."

"Just tell him I'm right below his nose."

"Alright, have it your way. Let me drive you back to the cabin."

"No, I want to walk."

"Julian, I shared a lot about us in the group the other night. I have deep feelings for you. I love you and what you just said about loving me but not like him—well, I do feel crushed."

"Maybe you mean rejected? Hurt, angry? Maybe you spent the night last night with me because you needed connection, some acknowledgement from me that we are 'lovers?' Gosh, Frank, I need some space right now. I am so sorry. I have so much guilt right now. Maybe we used each other to replace our lost true loves? You think that was an underlying mutual understanding?"

"Joseph nailed me on that one. He called you a replacement."

"A replacement!? Well, that makes me feel unappreciated. I gave myself to you. How about some consideration?"

"It's not what you're thinking. Joseph knows about my past, my loss. And he knows about my failed relationships with women, until I met you. I have a huge dilemma. I love you, Julian. Now what do we do?"

"What has Jim shared in men's group?"

"He knows he blew it with you. Apparently you have children together. He is searching his soul. I've seen him outside of men's group too. He is modeling nude in the sketching class. You see the sketches. And it's turning into quite a therapy session that we're watching. He is bearing his soul."

*Julian - I cannot handle this conversation any longer. I can feel the emotions welling up here come the tears, once again.*

*Frank - I see Julian starting to shake and sob. She looks so diminished. Standing alone in the middle of the room.*

I slowly walk to her and embrace her. I really feel compassion now. "Julian, know that you are loved. And as hard as it is for me to say this, it's not just me that loves you. Jim has grieved for five years, and still, he grieves more. I know what that feels like."

"Oh, Frank, oh, what have I done? Please, I need to walk. I need to be with myself right now. Whom have I hurt, the people I love I have hurt for my own selfish needs!"

"Go, Julian, be with the cold of winter. You are the woman of the north. Go now, be kind to yourself, and know that you are serving a purpose. You are a catalyst for two men who are lost trying to figure out what love is."

"And one woman."

*Julian - And with that statement I release myself from Frank's embrace and walk out the door, in the cold morning air. The white snow gives me a sense of purity right now. I need to feel whole. I created my circumstance and now I get to live with it. My past is now very present. Here comes the tears again. Oh, soul, I cry for redemption. What lesson have I learned? What will become of the future? I feel agony. I am so sorry, Jim. Please forgive me. I am sorry. I love you, and thank you for your grief, the real sign of your love for me. How have I forsaken you? Find me, find me, and I am screaming now, into the early morning frost, FIND ME!*

# Chapter 23: Ski Terrain

About a week later, Joni and I step into the bakery, the smell of fresh-baked breads and pastries. Egg scrambles on the grill, and people pack the place on this snowy day. We spot Jerry and decide to meander over and see if it's okay to sit with him. There are no other tables available. The place is hopping. A lot of skiers fueling up before a day on the slopes. It's still early.

"Good morning, Jerry," we both chime in. "Mind if we join you? There's nowhere else to sit."

"Sure, grab yourselves a coffee, come on over."

We head over to the counter and place our order and get a hot

brew.

"It might just be me, but he's not looking too good," remarks Joni.

"Yeah, guess we'll find out what's going on."

We take off coats and sit.

"Thanks, Jerry. What made you come here today? Usually you and Gerry are Hut regulars."

"Yeah, well, I was hoping to find you two here. I know you guys come here often."

Joni, "What's up, Jerry? You look a little depressed."

"Well, I don't think Gerry and I are going to make it together. I need some support. Jim and I are in a men's group together, and I wanted to talk."

Joni, "You want privacy? Mano, Mano?"

Boy, Joni just cuts to the chase.

"No, I'm glad you're here too. Sometimes the men's group is all about us guys trying to figure out you gals. And we're just a mess trying to help each other out. I wish that guys and gals did more group stuff together instead of going our separate ways."

"I hear you, Jerry. I feel the same. The feminine aspect of the equation seems to be missing when it's just us guys drowning in our sorrows. Half the time we don't know how to get in touch with our feelings without getting reactionary, or physical, first. Then we have all sorts of regrets and self-pity and who knows what."

Joni, "What's going on between you and Gerry?"

"We seem to be heading in two different directions. She likes socializing; I'm more of a homebody. When we're with people she is such a free spirit, chatting with whom ever, having fun mingling, and I'm lost, don't know how to engage. You get the picture?"

Joni, "How would you like to try something different to get to your true feelings. Be honest to your true self? I have some techniques we can try, right now if you want. After we eat. You have time?"

"Yes, I would love to. I have the whole day free."

Joni, with a nod towards me, "Okay, this guy here is going skiing. We can go over to my place and do some communicating."

"Jerry, do you feel that I am abandoning you by not going with you and Joni? Please be honest with me. I need to know if what I am thinking is absolutely true."

Jerry, "Jim, you've been there for me at men's group. I really could use a woman's perspective and empathy. Go ski."

And with that, we part our ways.

As I am driving to my part-time cabin at the mouth of TM Basin, to gather my gear, I have some thoughts washing over me. Just like snowflakes and snowpacks, my old programs and new paradigms keep changing. And now I'm in an avalanche of shifting emotions. The buried past is digging up old wounds. I want to be able to let go of the wounds. I want the healing to be an effortless transition into a beautiful state of ecstatic freedom. I want to feel a freeing up from one thought to the next, like a series of linked ski turns. My mind is in a whirlwind as I drive up the basin road and finally arrive at my destination. I am out of the car and watch the snowflakes fall. Catching them with my gloved hand, I examine them, each flake, as they melt. Disappear, into liquid form, then they are gone. I am renewed now that the recollection of the past has served its purpose. The previous storms have all packed into varying layers of strata.

I am all buckled into my Scott ski boots with telemark bindings and skins on the skis. I start my ascent. All the while I am climbing, my thoughts are focused on the perfect turn when the initiation of the turn becomes the past rather quickly as the centrifugal energy takes me through the apex of the turn and merges with the present moment of initiating the next turn. I use it as a metaphor as future becomes the past and the present flows quickly again and again. That present moment happens so quickly that it can be there always, unless I linger through a turn, but if I fail to release the pressure or the downward forces on the ski edge, the turn fails, then I fall into the maya of illusion and am buried in the snow. I have to get up, shake off the layers of fluff, and attempt to get back to the flow of being present again and again. I hear Frank's voice, "You are one crazy dude." I laugh out loud.

As I continue upward and onward, I think of Julian. I can feel her near. I have gratitude for what she was able to give me. Her whole hearted love. I don't think she knew any other way to love, heart-to-heart, with whomever she was with. It was always so beautiful to observe, especially since it was so hard for me. My shyness was fear. Fear kept me stuck in a disconnected state to life, to people and to happiness. I wonder, being the nature woman she was, did Julian just decide to wonder off into the woods? To the realm of the unknown? To be with the animals, the grizzlies, like Anastasia I look up to the heavens and with gratitude I say, "My thoughts are with you, Julian. We've been through a lot together. I am so grateful to have been with you. To have loved you fully. To have raised a family with you."

I'm almost there. I have traversed to the nose of the ridge near the top, where the wind scours the snowpack. I see some old tracks imprinted in the snow from my last time up. It's a long sweep, then two short switchbacks to my destination. I wonder about taking a steeper, more direct route. I feel good

lung-wise, but the legs are a little sluggish today. I'll stick with the easier route. Save my energy for the dissent. I stop look to the north and see the mighty Yellowstone, the river meandering through the valley floor like a series of ski turns. I'll keep this visual in my mind's eye.

I get started up the first switchback and face west towards the Gallatin Range and the bottom of the basin, where the ranch sits. I see the ranch houses, my car in the distance. I turn up the last switchback and face east, to the Absaroka Range. I finally get to the top. And face the south, towards Yellowstone National Park and then take in the 360-degree view and let out a yelp of gratitude. I notice some smoke, probably that cabin the ranch uses for winter-paying guests. I take in some water, skins come off the ski bottoms, a eat an energy bar for little nourishment, and I am ready. The first turns are slow and smooth with a few telemark turns, then as I get around a Juniper I go into more of a downhill turn. I brush against a snowy fir branch and get showered with snow. The next two turns around some tiny young firs, then an opening of pristine white cold smoke, a series of concentric turns as I approach the part of the slope with brush to meander through. I approach cautiously with a couple of telemark turns. I see an opening and turn on the throttle, weaving like a ball carrier through the line of scrimmage. Like a solemn skier through the gates. I see some open ground. Three turns, and the past merges with the present, which merges with the future, which becomes the past, which becomes the present moment, and I ease onto my ascension path with a long lingering telemark turn that takes me to the fence. And now my only thought is to glide, push, and pull back to the car.

Last class tonight. Last time to model. I need to get back. The exhilarating feeling of fulfillment calls for more yelps of gratitude. And I am on my way to Bozeman. Wondering if I'll be able to spend the night in town so I don't have to deal with driving back at night in the predicted winter storm that's supposed hit, late evening.

# Chapter 24

As I drive, my being is full of gratitude. I have so much to be grateful for in this life. I am so happy for my children and how they are able to live life on their terms and gain their personal wisdom. It's been a while since I checked in with my grown-up adult children. They have showered me with so much compassion

the last several years. The beauty of it all is that they have matured into their individual journey through life. We have grieved together, about the loss of our matriarch. Yet they have been able to stay positive and I am witness to their strength and love. We all have memories and stories of our time as family, yet they understand that they need to live their individual lives free from our family tribe with all its' bondage of past events and disciplines. The three of them have achieved many of their desires and their fate has been good. Perseverance and determination have carried them through all of their trials and tribulations. The rewards have been a fulfilling life up to now. So I feel blessed as a parent.

I have a little time before the art class, my last night modeling. What will Molly have in store? I decide to take a peek into the Hut, hoping to find one of the artists. This desire to socialize is a good feeling. Since I have been an introvert most of my life, I am aware of this new inspiration to connect with others in a way I have never done before.

I am hungry and could use a sandwich, and if there's any hand-rolled, odd-shaped, cinnamon donuts left, that would be a nice addition for desert. I place my order and take a coffee and the last custom, sweet, mouth-watering donut to a table. Just me tonight with my own thoughts, of gratitude. I am grateful for the day, grateful for my family, and grateful for the years spent with my soulmate. I take a pen and scribble a reminder on a napkin:

I have known me
by my family.
I have known me
by my past.
It is all I have known.
Now I know,
I am part of more.

I am part of a whole.
As I connect to a more powerful
source. My higher self.
I am part of
all that I now know.
I am more than
tribal attributes.
I am more than this
physical body.
I am more!

I satiate my hunger and make movement to the unknown night still ahead of me. In the swirling snow, of which I am no stranger. As I walk into the building, I catch up with Deloris and Faye. "Good evening, ladies." There's a subtle energy of remorse. "How are you two doing?"

Deloris, "Faye and I have just been discussing. We're sad this is the last class. The semester is ending for us. We wonder if we'll still see you after this winter."

Faye, "Our gratitude for your garden help this summer and fall is great. Thanks for all you've done."

"Gosh, thank you. I have truly received more from you two than you'll ever know. Whenever I come to Bozeman for errands and appointments, I'll make sure to call and meet up."

I hold open the door as we enter the room. Most everyone is setting up. I see Molly and Stephanie chatting in the corner. Great, Stephanie is here for the final pose.

"Hi, Molly. Hi, Stephanie. Last pose. You must have something special tonight?"

"Yes, we were just discussing an idea. I want to challenge the artists to sketch the emotion in a scene. I was going to have both of you wrapped in sheets. I'm thinking that Stephanie will be standing palms out looking down at you. You will be in a supplicant pose kneeling with your head bent down, forehead on the floor, hands in front."

"Hummm, this is sounding like it could turn into a therapy session!" A chuckle from Molly and a laugh from Stephanie!

Molly, "Well, if it seems like that to you, then maybe that energy will transfer over to the artists and we'll see some interesting sketches. You have to admit the last time we had you two together in that hands-to-heart pose, with the intensity, the sketches were varied and profound. You saw them, Jim, what did you think?"

"Yes, and I asked Deloris and Faye why they sketched what they sketched, the trees and the statuettes. It was quite a profound explanation. Okay, I'm game, let's do it for art's sake! Is there a mat or something for me to kneel on?"

"Yes, I brought a yoga mat. And of course we'll take a break when you two need to. Stephanie, you ready?"

"Yes, looks like everybody is here and getting ready."

There are some wraps of cloth about a foot and a half wide, a few feet long. Stephanie and I take our positions. She's standing in a pose with one foot slightly ahead of the other as if she is taking a small step forward. She's at one end of the mat. I kneel with buttocks on my heels and bent at the waist, hands and arms stretched out in front of me, hands straddling either side of Stephanie's

feet, forehead between my arms, on the mat. Molly drapes one of the cloths loosely across my waist and buttocks. Stephanie has her wrap over her shoulders and brings both her arms forward with palms open facing towards me, head and eyes cast downward.

And that's the pose. There's a familiar tune starting up. I recognize it from yoga class. The instrumental starts up, it's a Simrit tune . . . Guru Ram Das. And I hear the scratching of pencils.

When we end our yoga class with Nirvana after a meditation, we do this child's pose giving gratitude to whatever it is we are grateful for, usually our inner teacher, our guru, our divine. It can be a very emotional experience. So I wasn't kidding when I said this is feeling like a therapy session. At first, I was settling into my breath and getting comfortable, adjusting my legs a bit, and taking some pressure off my feet. Relaxing my shoulders and neck. I settled into the posture, let the sounds of the music wash over me. And Simrit started singing, "Do you know who you are?," which means the wisdom that comes as a servant of the Infinite. The thoughts of this being the last class became apparent. I was appreciating the new friends I made and the desire to hold them close to my heart and stay connected. I knew I'd still be seeing Jerry, Joseph, and Frank. I planned to stick with the men's gathering. Jerry, a quiet man connecting with people, trying to fit in a social network. It took a lot of courage for me to plunge into a social life. The people in this class will always be dear to my growth as a human being. And the men's gathering is a place where guys like me and Jerry can get support. I see us both mirroring each other and in awe of each other's efforts to fit in. Joseph, the Native American medicine man of ritual and a simple spiritual connection with nature. The beauty of his wisdom gives me comfort. Frank, he is down to earth, the ranch hand, straightforward no beating around the bush. Easy to get to know. Sadie and Jenny, so much fun, and their partnership seems so solid. I can sense that they are starting on a journey and together they are discovering their true selves. And we still have a massage date. It warms my heart, the Twister experience, the laughter, and the intimate connection. Arthur, wow, I want to take some pottery lessons from him. I want to help him with his bowl making. Will he be open and receptive? What a beautiful artist. A cornucopia of cultural knowledge. Nirvana, the teacher. I love her openness to other modalities of yoga. So many teachers are stuck in one way of thinking. One belief system. Nirvana has shared her journey with us yoga students and guided me gently through the Kundalini experience. Deloris and Faye, so glad to know them. The memories of me and Julian in the garden, their knowledge and practice of permaculture at their age, is enduring. And the encouragement to move on from grief to live again with nature. Sammie, his truth and love and respect inspires me towards our growing friendship and

mentorship. He will be a good massage therapist. And an enduring friend. Stephanie, she puts her heart and soul into modeling. Beneath that calm demeanor is an intense lady. And Molly, the nurturer. I can't say enough how she was first amused by me as a willing nude male model and then her concern for my well-being. And now I am getting in touch with raw humility. I feel gratitude for this existence. My personal trip. My loss and gain. Joni, what kind of partner could she be? How can I ever be able not to compare her to Julian? After all, Julian and I had such a deep connection, our souls connected. When we hurt each other, we felt the pain. We felt each other's joy. We felt each other's love. We felt the oneness of each other. Maybe, and I am just thinking now, that this separation (her disappearance) was so we could find our individual spiritual enlightenment?

"Do you know who you are? You know nothing. Waha Guru" is playing and suddenly I realize that I am my own master, My divine is in me. I am part of the Infinite. A form on this planet. A human form of presence in a world of form. I am he and she is me and we are all together. I am so fortunate to be part of this existence of the great Creation. Oneness. And with that final thought of true humility, I am emotional, letting all the tears flow, hands over face. I am swaying back and forth now, out of control from suffering to joy. Such a beautiful state to cry for joy of knowing. And they are all gathered around as Simrit sings, "Humble me, Guru. Humble you, guru, guru, Waha Guru, Guru Ram Das " Stephanie and Molly have me in their loving arms. I am being gently lifted off the ground and I find myself in a circle of friends, of dear hearts, a soul circle. Through my tears I start laughing and I see tears, and concern and laughter starts to break out. We are in a huge hug, nothing said. We are feeling each other. A group connecting, it's so beautiful, and the music suddenly dies out. Slowly the crescendo dissipates and we are staring into each other's eyes and the hugs start as we break the circle. And as I get a hug from Molly, she whispers in my ear, "I know where she is".

# Chapter 25: Going Down to the River to Wash My Spirit Clean

After all the hugs and acknowledgement, people start to exit. It was agreed that Molly will share contact info with everybody so we can all stay connected. Also, the artists agreed to finish sketches from memory and send photos to a general email that Molly has with an explanation of what emotion was captured in their sketch. I am still stunned by Molly's whisper of a message. What the hell does she mean, "I know where she is"?

Joni is looking at me. "Are you alright? Your look is pretty intense."

"I'm a bit confused right now. I need to talk with Molly. I'll see you later, maybe tomorrow?"

"How about spending the night? It's storming outside and you have a long way back to the valley and over the summit."

"Okay, thanks for the invite. I'll see you at your place. First I need to chat with Molly and get some closure, and my check." The room is emptying out and I see Molly with her back turned, gathering up props that we used for the pose. I quietly go over to where she is and just stare at her back for a short while. Not ready to hear what I think I heard her whisper. She turns, and a bit startled, says, "Jim, hey, I'll get your check and—"

"—and, you know where she is? Who?"

Molly has a serious look. There's a crease between her eyes. Furrows on her forehead. Slowly she relaxes her face and begins to respond. "Julian. A source of mine thinks they have found Julian."

"That's it? Alive or dead?"

"She's alive and well." *Molly - How can I gently slow Jim down? He has no clue what I do, or who I am. My background has not been made known to him. He's waiting for me to say more. I can't tell what he must be thinking, I can't keep him hanging.* "Listen to me. There's a good possibility that Julian is quite satisfied with her life just the way it is, without you. Have you ever considered that, all these years, that you kept hoping?" *Oh boy, that wasn't easy. He looks broken.* "I don't mean to sound negative, and I may not know what I am talking about. I'm just wanting to protect you emotionally, if that makes any sense. I have a lot of compassion for you. I love you, who you have become the last several months. How you have related honestly and connected with this class. I have never seen that from a model, never. I do not want to see you suffer. You shared your previous grief. What if Julian left you because she was done with your relationship? Do you think you

have the tools to overcome her rejection if that is the case?"

I am truly at a loss. I am feeling numb. Molly, she has been such a nurturing soul, always looking out for my best interest. Okay, where am I feeling this? Stomaching her inquiry is a punch to the gut. She's right. What if our relationship was over? After all Julian did leave without warning. Now I am feeling disappointment. I sit down on the floor, Molly also sits, not taking her eyes off of me. I can sense her concern. I take a deep breath, another one.

"Jim, please lay down. Here, I'll fold these sheets so you have your head supported."

I am open to whatever it is Molly is about to do. I feel trust now. I do as she says, in silence.

"Gently close your eyes." I sense Molly getting up, suddenly the lights are dim. I hear the wind howling outside, the snow pelting the windows. The room feels warm. I hear Molly quietly approaching. She is next to me. I feel her warm hands caressing my face. I start to relax. She is gently rubbing my temples. Then she is loosening my jaw, thumbing the mandala right where the lower and upper jaw connects. I feel her gentle grip on my chin, opening and shutting it until I release all of the resistance. Now my scalp is being massaged, then Molly slides her hands down to the back of my neck. There she starts some acupressure with her thumbs along the top of the shoulders outward. "Jim, just relax, and receive. Please, you have given so much of yourself in a most unusual way, naked before us. You have been a model of openness and self-discovery. Just receive the rest of my massage as a gift. Know that Julian loves you. All you need to feel is this love."

And with that, I am gifted with all of Molly's love, or is it Julian's, or Joni's or Joseph's? I am back to feeling everybody, a oneness field of love and compassion. For what is love but compassion for another human being, a human form that holds the soul (being)? Now I am feeling a warm body lying next to me. I feel a soft hand caressing my face. There's a whisper, "Jim, you can come back now. Take a breath. Yeah, that's it. Another breath and now gently open your eyes."

I turn my head and see that smile that I first saw when I met Molly. The smile that will haunt me forever. She has her head propped up with her elbow. "I want you to meet some friends, at my house. These are people that know about Julian and her whereabouts. Are you willing to do that?"

"Molly, you have created a true mystery and I am intrigued what will happen next. You are way more than I ever imagined. An art teacher, huh? I don't think so." And that causes Molly to laugh out loud. We get up look at each other with loving eyes, hug, and without saying much more, she gives me my final payment, and her address. I venture out into the storm, walking into it, much like a buffalo faces a storm in the wild.

I drive over to see Joni, thinking it's a good idea to take her up on her offer. I find myself sitting in Joni's kitchen. We're seated across from each other at the little kitchen table, with a hot cup of coffee and lights dimmed low. I am grateful that Joni invited me for the night since the winter storm had gotten worse.

"That was another intense art class. I was not expecting that. What got you laughing through all of the tears? The tears of Joy? A Sea of Joy!"

I place both arms and hands on the table and motion for Joni to reach across and join hands. I feel her tender hands in my grip. I am looking down at our hands. Drawing hands in my mind. Trying to slow down my thought processes. There's a lot of recent past memories flowing through my mind.

"Well, first off, all of you. You beautiful souls that I have gotten to know. Over the years I have made many friendships, and realized that I never really stayed connected. As time passed and people moved on, I just moved onto new relationships and never made an effort to contact old friends. Sometimes we'd meet by coincidence. But mostly people passed through as if on a revolving conveyor belt. So some of my emotions was about true friendship and wanting to do it different this time. I don't want to just move on and lose the friendships I have been blessed with. I see how in the past I craved friendship and love and expected it to be a certain way. This time I was able to let friendship evolve, on its own, in a divine way. This time it was so spontaneous and I was ready to just receive and not be in control. Does that make sense?"

*Joni - Does that make sense. That's what he asked me? Of course, my love. Yeah, you make sense to me. The final pose you did was amazing. I'm not sure how Molly pulled that off. The two of them, Stephanie and Jim, together made for some interesting and emotional modeling. I just have to ask him,* "Jim, the pose with you bowing at the feet of Stephanie, seemed very humbling to me. That you agreed to do that pose. What were your thoughts?"

"I had a lot of gratitude at first and I did a short summary of each one of you. I realized the freedom I allowed myself with each of you. No judgements or perceptions. I really freed up my mind the last several months. It made for heartfelt relationships. I saw that I am a master of my own destiny, too. It's not fate that creates my state of mind; it's choice. Do I want to be in a suffering state or beautiful state? I get to choose. What I found out was that a suffering state does not serve me. It may show me something that I need to change, but it's not a place where I want to hang out. There are so many ways to be in a beautiful state, so many emotions of joy and laughter, and gratitude, appreciation to live life at its' fullest."

"What do you mean when you say a suffering state? Do you mean

emotionally?"

"Yes, but even physical suffering can be connected to a state of mind. I think a beautiful state comes from the heart. We get to have appreciation for the presence of the moment. Whatever is happening, I accept. I might have to check with myself, see how I am affected, but realize it is me, not the external, that is either suffering or accepting. I just had a first hand look with Molly before coming here. What she told me, and how I was in fear of what might be, and angry too."

"What was that all about, if you don't mind me prying?"

For a short while I just stared into her loving eyes. Eyes of anticipation. I gripped her hands a tad tighter.

"Molly whispered into my ear, 'I know where she is.' Julian was also in my thoughts as I was bowed at the feet of Stephanie."

I detected a tear streaming down Joni's left cheek. She started to withdraw her hands. I wouldn't let her.

*Joni - I am in your life now! You have got to be kidding, not now. There is no Julian. We are really getting to know each other in a deeper way than I have ever known with any other man. Please don't do this to me. I am ready to cave in emotionally. I am feeling that suffering state of despair, and anger and resentment! I blurt out with as much hurt as I can feel,* "Where does that leave me?"

"How about us? Joni, us . . . two beings beyond physical form, us. Can we talk about relationship without the me ego? I feel a very strong connection with you. You remember me sharing the Twister night I spent with Sadie and Jenny, the way we connected beyond our perception of each other? Remember I told you how I felt love as connection?"

Joni stopped resisting my grip. I let up on the strength of it, her hands relaxed, and empathy and compassion started to emerge in our presence. Our feet touched under the table. A calm state started to settle between us. The anxiety of the situation started to subside.

*Joni - What can I do but surrender right now? As much as I want to control this situation, it's not my nature to want control over someone that I love. That would not be love. Oh Lord, give me the strength to have compassion.* "Did Molly tell you where Julian was?"

"No, I am supposed to go to Molly's home and she'll give me more information when I get there tomorrow. Joni, you must understand that Julian and I are soul mates as lovers. Our time on this earth has been a mutual journey. We've been through all sorts of personal growth, together. We've invested a lot of time with each other and a lot of time with forgiveness. Our connection was and remains forever. Even in death. I doubt if it was just me in five years of grief. My sense is that Julian was living in some sorrow too. Our bond was too strong, even though our paths took a detour. I don't know who I

will find, when we're reunited. All I can do is reconnect with her heart-to-heart. What happens when we meet, your guess is as good as mine."

We release each other's grip of desperation, we rise, and her head is slightly bowed away from me. I wrap my arms around her slightly trembling body. Here is a woman that didn't really know me and tracked me down after all these years of distance. Someone I met and left behind on the revolving conveyer belt. It occurred to me then that I can create soul circles of past friends and relatives. All those souls that I left behind, I can reconnect with, through memory, and send blessings and well-being in a telepathic way. We can all become one. After all, we are individually a microcosm of the universal macrocosm.

Joni is resting her head onto my shoulder. She reciprocates my hug with a hug of her own. Joni looks up with her piercing eyes, glossed over with tears, and we kiss long, and with compassion.

As we release and our bodies separate, I say, "I have a desire to go home tonight. Joni, I am so glad for this connection tonight. The news from Molly is a lot for me to process. I am wanting to drive home tonight."

"In this storm? You're going to break my heart again? Tonight?"

*Joni - Oooo, I am sounding desperate, but I am craving a meaningful relationship. I do not want to let this guy go. So many other men in my life and none that I have been able to be so free with. So what am I craving? Jim or the type of relationship that I perceive as the ideal? So maybe I am not so free and liberated as I think. I don't want to let him go, and I surely don't want Julian back in the picture. I have a hard look at what my thoughts are right now. So self-centered, I know he loves me, and my guess is his confusion is as great as mine. Maybe what I can be doing right now, this night, is to pray for the outcome that is written in the heavens.*

"Joni, I hope you can feel my love. I'm not sure what I can say that would make any sense right now. There is something about being in a snowstorm, and it has diminished." We look out the window. "I just need its' solitude right now. I need to sort out all that has transpired these last several months. My mind is swirling, and a long drive alone is what I need right now."

She chuckles. "You're a crazy dude! Be careful."

"You must be talking to Frank? He calls me that."

"Ummm, ah huh."

We have one last hug and I am released into the quiet of the night. The moon is full or nearly so, and the snow is glistening white. I take in a deep breath of cold air and exhale cold smoke . . . . Ha, that's what the skiers call the "pow" around these parts . . . "cold smoke." And I am on my way, a slow

creeping journey home to the hinterland where my cabin is waiting.

I awake late in the morning and start up a fire, get a fresh brew of coffee going, and start to grab some breakfast fixings. Eggs, baked beans, some toast and jam. I am still going over thoughts. The ride home was relaxing for me. I put on a couple of short meditations and music, playing softly. With the lingering thoughts of following the late-night snowplows on the highways. I can't say I spent much time with anything but future thoughts of meeting Julian. After five years of memories, I felt that I had let the past be the past. The moments spent day-to-day and actually living a life of connection and self-realization had a profound change for me. I was seeking a more spiritual way for my life journey's path. Thinking of the future was just an added stress. The meditations along with the music kept me present. I had a good night's sleep. I was ready to get on with the day.

With the fresh snow on the ground, I looked out the window and up the canyon and decided to pack some skies and make some turns before going to Molly's.

There is something about the climb that is invigorating. Picking a route, checking snow conditions on the way up, thinking about what area I wanted to ski. Determining how far I want to climb. Stopping, taking in the scenery, feeling the sweat dribble down my back. All this kept me right where I needed to be, an occupied mind that had no other thoughts than what I was experiencing.

I reached my destination. I had a look around. Some high winds swirling the snow on some of the peaks. Puffy clouds peeling off the mountain sides. Blue sky, bright sun, and sparkling fresh snow waiting for my carving designs. I peel off the skins, pack them, get a drink of water, strap up the little backpack, and pick my line knowing that it might change depending on the varied snow conditions. I start my first turn and know that this day will be an easy turning descent. Yeah, it's knee- deep, soft, almost champaign powder like the dry snows of Taos, New Mexico. Not much moisture in this storm. I could go anywhere today, a free glide, no bushwhacking. Plenty of open space between the brush at the bottom to make more sweeping turns. I get to where my trail started near the fence line, stop, and let out a yelp as a hawk circles overhead and swoops down in front of me, about twenty feet away, and lands on the top of a spruce, sending down a cascade of snow. A good omen. I give gratitude for my life partner, to have been found. Did she achieve what she wanted to these past years? Did I? I am grateful for Julian's honesty and truth. She spoke it and stayed persistent to get me on board towards a more fulfilling relationship that made it a lasting one. I am grateful that we respected each other's choices enough, so we could always come back to love. Five years of Julian missing in my life

was a blessing in space and time. The space we both needed to find our true individual selves, to recognize our codependency. For all of this, I am grateful today. At the same time, I have some trepidation. Who will I find? Surely a changed Julian. Will she recognize me for who I am now? How will she know the changes in my life that I made. How will I understand her changes? Is there someone else? And does she know that I know she has been discovered?

I cross over the fence, slide about three-fourths of a mile back to the car, and I am off to the address Molly gave me last night. "I know where she is" is still reverberating in my being.

As I pull into Molly's driveway, I see Frank's truck. I knock and Molly answers, her perpetual smile is gone. She's looking pretty serious, and I must be too. "Come on in."

"Is Frank here?"

"Yes, come on follow me."

I am led into the kitchen, the remaining scents of cooked food in the air. Frank and Joseph are leaning against a counter. "Well, hello. I wasn't expecting to see you guys here."

Frank, "Sit down, Jim, coffee? We're going to be a while tonight."

I nod yes to coffee, "What's going on?"

Joseph, "Ritual. We are going to smoke pipe and address the spirits of four directions, woman spirit of the North, man spirit of the south, enlightenment spirit of the east, and the free spirit of the west. We will ask them to hear you when you pray."

Frank, "We found Julian, and she asked that you find her."

—Molly enters the room—

"Wait awhile, what is going on? And why ritual if you know where she is?"

Molly, "The hot tub is ready. You guys didn't tell him

yet?"

Frank, "Just started going over things."

Molly, "Jim, we work as a team investigating unsolved cases of missing persons. It's something we've been involved with for years. When you went to the men's gathering with Frank and Joseph, they mentioned to me your experience that first night, regrets of 'losing her,' something like that. Anyway, that set us into motion. It was pure synchronicity that you volunteered as a model and then shared the photo of Julian with Frank."

"Wow, you mean to tell me that somehow you have known that Julian was alive all this time and did not connect the dots of her disappearance? It was on the news back then, five years ago."

Molly, "We were not a unit five years ago. It's just been three years."

"Well, that sounds like Julian, wanting me to find her. She loved setting up scavenger hunts! Any clues?"

Frank, "She said to tell Jim, 'I'm right below his nose.'"

I try to look down, under my nose, and there's chuckles and a laugh. By now we're all seated around the circular table. I realize it's some kind of symbolism like the pow wow drums. The circle of life? We are seated across from each other like the four directions (North, South, East, and West). Joseph lights the pipe filled with Blue Cloud's tobacco. At this point I am reminded of when Jesus ascended and basically the disciples were in dismay and wondering, "Now what do we do?" And I recall Julian doing readings with her friends. She always had books that describes following the path of Jesus. And I realize that with faith I will find Julian. Is that what the accession scene in the book of Acts is all about? Hummm, I'll have to contemplate on that and definitely keep the faith and trust that I will find the way and know what to do.

*Frank - At one time I was a preacher of the word of Jesus. It is through the strength of the Lord that I found my way through the grief of losing a loved one. I was compelled to assist lost souls in the way of Jesus. I don't preach anymore; I do share in prayer. I am in quite a situation now, the woman Julian, she is who I love. My dichotomy is to serve both Jim's and Julian's best interest. How can I be strong and not interfere with what is to become? The Lord is testing me. Oh, give me strength, Father. I need to be shown The Way.*

Joseph, "We honor the woman of the North, Julian, the soulmate of Jim."

As the pipe is passed to me, a stream of memories flood my sphere. The pipe passes hands. I sense something in Frank's body language, his face, and bowed head. Next Joseph speaks, "We honor the man of the South, the soulmate lover of the woman of the north." The pipe comes to me again and I feel the love that bonds me and Julian and the love we have the opportunity to share with the world. Love from the heart. This time Frank gives me a glance as he passes the pipe back to Joseph, who fills the pipe with more tobacco and lights it with a long inhale and puff of smoke, then remarks, "We honor the enlightened spirit of Jim, who has learned new lessons on his journey." Molly puffs, and gives me her haunting smile with eyes piercing my most inner being. Joseph fills the pipe for the last time, smokes, and says, "We honor the freedom of the west, and Jim's freedom of bondage from grief." I take the pipe and let out a sigh of relief. I smoke for the final time in this circle of compassion. I think of all the endearing souls from class who reached out to me and enriched my life. May all be blessed.

Slowly we place our hands on the edge of the table and hold hands forming a mandala, a circle of life. We nod at each other and without a word spoken we slowly rise, and I am led to a changing room where there are bathing suites and

towels. I change and I walk out the door to the outside hot pool. It is surrounded by a beautiful natural landscape. Steam rising, I wade into the pond and Molly directs me towards her. I notice a pow wow drum and watch as Joseph seats himself on a rock and grabs the ceremonial drum. He starts a beat. Molly wades in behind me. Frank places a hand on my crown, the top of my head, and raises his right hand to the heavens. "I am drawing forth the higher self, the Divine that the Creator of all life gives to us. That energy will flow through you and bless you." I feel Frank's power like I never witnessed before.

Frank reaffirms the blessing, "You are receiving the intuition and inspiration you will need to find your beloved Julian."

There is a background song sung in Cherokee, then English, playing in a loop about "washing your spirit clean." Joseph starts drumming and chanting. I feel Molly's nurturing hand on my back between the shoulder blades. A direct line to my heart is what I am thinking. And suddenly, ritual, of which I don't usually take seriously, takes on a whole new meaning. And I am humbled by the energy of love I am receiving. It's a pretty wild ride, as Nirvana had warned me, the Kundalini is definitely rising! And I feel as if I am preparing myself, by washing my Spirit clean, with forgiveness and compassion and literally a penance of sorts. I am making way to receive the grace of God. Suddenly my awareness takes on a whole new meaning. Being aware of presence, the Divine Presence of Jesus, in a formless way. His light that I can tap into. "I am worthy, I am worthy, I am worthy," I quietly say this three times. I am humbled by the thought of God's grace.

# Chapter 26: The Spring Storm

The essence of my Now Consciousness or present moment of whatever I am doing or thinking is different than other people's present moment. That leads us to a variety of emotional misunderstanding unless we are in an advanced state of oneness. I love this little bit of thought from Tom Murphy's *A Yellowstone Journal*. "The most important trait necessary to see the natural beauty of our earth is patience. We need to cultivate rapt patience to wait and let the experiences wash over us and to see all that we are capable of seeing." I like to change the last word to BEING. "All that we are capable of being." Or how about this, "Cultivate rapt patience until the next time, when we come together in a state of compassion, joy, and being who we are. And connecting in a natural way with others.

I decided to go have breakfast at the Wildflower, expecting to see Joni. And yep, there she is, writing away. I really need to talk with her. My heart weeps with sorrow, for her heart may be broken. I can only hope that she feels my compassion for her. I wonder how painful the shocking turn of events must be for Joni. She was so courageous when I told her about Julian. Joni, trying her best to be supportive. I feel her pain. At the same time, I feel anticipation for reuniting with Julian. My emotions are in a state of flux. A numbness is what I am feeling, for I don't know what I am feeling right now. I am witnessing the state of non-feeling. I feel cut off from my connection with Joni and wonder why I am seeking her out right now. I slowly walk to where she's seated and am greeted by a nod and half-smile. I ask, "Do you mind? Can I join you, or do you need to finish an article to meet a deadline?"

"Yeah, join me please." *Joni - Are you kidding? Join me, join me . . . I need to listen, I need to talk, I need some comfort from you. What can you tell me? Do you feel my sadness? My craving for your company? What else can I say?* "It's not so easy to let go for me. What if Julian burst your bubble, and after all these years you find out that she really is done with you?

"Coffee?"

Wow, did he hear the question? Or is he ignoring that what I said. It might be true? "Please, and thank you."

I go fetch some dark brew and ask the server, "Are those cinnamon donuts? Like the Hut makes?"

"Yep, we order them now. We knew you'd buy them. That woman over there"—she nods in Joni's direction—"she has us ordering them by the dozen so you keep coming back." She lets out a giggle.

Well, this is going to be a tough conversation, especially with the question she just asked me before I even sat down. Wooo, okay, Jim, take some deep breaths, just tell your truth. No right or wrong answers. Just speak from the heart.

"Two donuts please and some cream in one coffee" I head back to Joni.

"Oh, you found the new surprise!" *Joni - Referring to the donuts. How nonchalant is that comment? Geez, the energy is not feeling right. This is feeling like a first date small chit chat. Come on, Joni, say your truth.*

"Speaking of which, I am on a scavenger hunt!" *Jim - Gosh, what a deflective response. I still haven't answered her question that I ignored.*

"Huh?"

"Okay, so last night I happened to do a spirit cleansing ritual with Frank, Joseph, and Molly! I found out to my surprise that they team up to investigate missing persons. At first I thought, oh boy, this is getting weird. But then once I surrendered to the ritual of the cleanse, the energy became

surreal, as real as it was."

"Whoa, first off you never answered my question I asked a few minutes ago. I want to believe that we have more depth than the direction that this conversation is heading. What if Julian burst your bubble, and after all these years you find out that she really is done with you?"

"I have thought about our situation . . ."

"Yeah, so tell me. Tell me your truth."

"Joni, we had that one night of ecstatic lovemaking, and, well, I have found, or will find Julian. We are like magnets right now. I feel a strong energy pulling us back together. After twenty-five years together, and raising a family, there's so many memories. And this space in time, this separation, maybe we left each other to find our true selves. If that makes any sense. And now to be able to share our journeys as soulmate lovers is beyond any thinking I can muster up. It's a whole new experience filled with wonder and joy. And the joy is not only anticipation to reunite with Julian; it is a result of having made new connections with people that I have taken the time to know. And I am grateful for our relationship. Know that you are loved, please. I mean it. There are images of certain people that pop up periodically in my memory bank, and you have always been one of the beautiful memories I cherish. Somehow I periodically had visual memories of you through all these years. So I never forgot the short time spent with you."

"Where does that leave us? I imagined that our relationship was starting to blossom into something more than romance. Help me understand. Will we have some sort of connection? Some kind of intimacy? Again, I ask, what if she does not want you back? Am I to wait for your decision? Am I a replacement just in case?"

"I am not really sure how to handle the whole situation right now, Joni. Like I mentioned the other day, I don't even know what kind of reunion Julian and I will have. The depth of my desire has always been towards loving relationships. I feel I have held back forever because I feared what that meant. How and with whom I share love with. I still hold onto the misconception that the deepest love becomes physical. So I have searched my being and created a belief that love is felt heart-to-heart. From one person to the next no prejudice, no judgements. Compassion, joy, connection, that's what has become the upmost sincere trait that I have to work with. It has not been easy for me to let go of the fear, the fear of connecting deeply with another. There are so many conditions that rattle around in my subconscious thoughts of what love is. You are not a replacement by any means. Does any of this make any sense to you?"

"Yes, yes," Joni agrees. "I too have struggled with it for many years. My definition of love included expectations, physical touch, sexual innuendos, and it

resulted in polyamory relationships."

I carry on, "Can one have an intimate relationship and get beyond the sexual desire purely for indulgence? When love becomes sacred, it heals through a hug, heart-to-heart. It becomes a Divine connection."

"I actually did take a different approach and had concluded that my life had a higher purpose and meaning, then, as you put it, 'sexual desire purely for indulgence.' Then I saw your name about the disappearance of Julian. And suddenly I was on a mission and desire played a role in tracking you down. A lot of the old tapes started running through my mind again, touch, expectation, and a sexual encounter that we never had for the brief time we knew each other. So what you said, about having periodic thoughts of me, maybe that has something to do with me tracking you down?"

At this time, there were no more words to be spoken. We just stared into each other's knowing eyes. It was amazing that the intensity produced no tears. There seemed to be an air of acceptance, compassion, and understanding. It's as if we were both surrendering to universal law. Fate may be another way to look at our situation. When thought is no longer present in one's conscious mind, there's no point of reference to experience just presence. With everything sacred, there are no circumstances with consequences. There are only Divine connections. Judgement divides everything; Divine is eternal presence. The eternal NOW.

*Joni - Amazing how all we could do is have deep eye contact and say nothing. And I didn't even cry. Somehow, Jim made a case that eased my craving, at least for now. I feel selfish for wanting his ultimate connection with Julian to not work out. Gosh, I wonder if he was able to recognize that my thoughts, my thinking mind, prevented me from feeling compassion for his situation. We didn't even hug. Just a squeeze of the hands and departure. I don't even know when we'll see each other again. I plan on keeping my massage appointment, that's for sure. I am not going to let him just disappear.*

*Jim - I left the Wildflower, with the only thought being the next step. It took a little time to focus on my breath. That got me centered as to what I was doing . . . walking, step by step. Like a calm walk through the garden. I did not want to revisit what just transpired. I can't bury the emotional connection I have with Joni. That's not going to work. Right now I am numb. I just want to go home, to my little cabin.*

**Three weeks later….**

I go to Bozeman for supplies, when I decide to stop in to say hi to Molly. She had started a new semester. Oh, boy, I see that she is early, setting up the room. An opportunity to connect with her. I walk in and we greet each other.

"Still no luck finding where Julian is,"

"Where have you been looking?"

"Mostly just keeping my eyes on people wherever I am. Hoping to see a familiar face."

"Do you meditate? Or pray? Or visualize? Or ask your higher self? Maybe use some intuition? Do you ever do any of that?"

"Well, honestly, I am very inconsistent with all of that. Thanks for the reminder. I really feel me finding Julian will just happen. I don't need to stress over it. I am relieved to know she lives. The funny thing is, I get a smile every time I think of us together again. I'm excited to know we can share what we have achieved with our new awareness and interaction with life."

*Molly – Boy, that's pretty naïve of Jim. After five years he sure has high hopes. And what about Frank? He loves her so they must have developed an intimate relationship over that time.*

"Alright, well, I wish you well. There's no telling who you will find. So be ready for any surprises. You feel like modeling again? I pay well." Molly smiles and gives me the Jack Nicholson raised eyebrow look.

"No, not this round. You know what, everybody from the sketch class, with the exception of Frank, Joseph, and you, has become a massage patron. So anytime you need some bodywork, let me know. I give nice discounts to friends."

"Thanks, Jim, and great to see you in good spirits. Be careful with what you perceive to be true. And know that it is not your will that changes things. The will of God. I am sure you've heard that before. And, Frank, seek him out, I think he could use a heart-to-heart connection with you."

I run by the Wildflower to see if Joni is there. No luck. I order a dozen cinnamon donuts. The server (the same person I saw last time) gives me a note. "She asked me to give this to you. She knew you'd be back. Your addiction?"

I open the note right there in front of the server. I read it. "If you get this note, that means I am not here. I think we both have an addiction. I want to create some space between us. I will not leave the area. You know where I live. And I do want to connect, but first I want you to find her. Julian. Go find her and tell me your story. And next time I come for a massage you can love me through connection. With your nurturing hands. I am giving you a

month to find your soulmate lover, before I come for our monthly massage appointment. If you have not found her by then, or if your relationship takes on another meaning, you better be ready for me." I look at the server and she's giving me this look, like she wants to know what the note says. I tell her, "It's all about addiction."

As I am heading home along Trail Creek Road, it starts to snow. I was unaware of any storm fronts. We'll see if this is a spring snow shower or snowfall. The scenery is gorgeous with views of the Absaroka Mountains behind the foothills of the Gallatin range that I am driving through. I start to wonder if I should take a more aggressive means of finding Julian. Humph, one crazy clue, "I am under your nose." I look under my nose and see my lap as I am driving. Hummm, under my nose and in my lap. Crazy, crazy, crazy is all I can think of right now. Julian is one crazy lady.

I wake up the next morning early. It snowed all night! White fluff. I feel the urge to ski, get out there before the temps warm up. It's supposed to get to forty-seven or maybe over fifty today. I head out with excitement. I figured this was going to be my final tracts of the year. This storm is a special late season treat for skiers, an early spring storm. The temperature actually dropped to nine degrees, calm blue skies with wispy clouds caressing the surrounding mountain tops and meandering through the valley. Six to eight inches of fresh pow, cold smoke, great snow! I trek to the place where I cross the fence, with an eagle's wing in hand. I found it a few days before. The entire left wing span ripped from a shoulder socket. I return it to its place in the snow, next to the tree that must have caused the damage. No sign of the bird's body. Just the wing. I look at it, wondering what might become of it now. To me, it was a real piece of art, a creation of feathers and delicate bones to manipulate like a Japanese fan that folds and opens, to fan the face on a hot day. That's what it could have been, if I kept it. A bird fan! But I knew I had to return it to nature, where it belongs. I continue my trek on towards the ascent to the top of the ridge. My recall of the passing winter takes my mind to an accounting of my previous sojourns and ventures. The beautiful curvy patterns left after a successful ski down the slope. I climb effortlessly. The winter discipline of the alpine climb has conditioned me with leg, shoulder, and arm strength. The heart is strong and full of gratitude for the beauty surrounding me. I make it to the top and I know I can do this route three times today. I get my visual of the winding, mighty Yellowstone River. I am ready and I swoop down, like the eagle in search of food, me in search of a sensation. Finally the last turn and final whoop of joyful emotion. The freeing up of thought, the mind present with what is. I repeat four times! I make my way back to the car. It's already warming up outside. I take a little time eating a sandwich, enjoying the warmth of the sun, admiring the several sets of

tracts left on the snowy canvas. I am looking at the south end of the basin and notice the smoke that I saw a few times this winter. Thinking it was coming from a winter rental on the ranch. Wait a minute. Can she be there? In the old pioneer cabin? Right below my nose? I quickly pack up and head for the ranch entrance. I turn in and drive to the ranch house. Is that Frank's truck? As I park, he's standing out on the front deck leaning against a deck post that supports the overhang.

"Frank? You work here, on this ranch!"

"Yep, I have been waiting for you."

"The cabin? Is she there?"

Frank nods his head. "Hop in the truck. I'll take you down there. It's about a mile."

We are on our way. "This is too much. Julian has been here for how long?"

"About five years. I picked her up. She needed a place to park herself. Get away from it all, is what she said. At that time, I was not involved with Joseph and Molly. I don't have TV out here and I don't follow the news. Shoot, we made a deal. She would garden for our dude ranch guest, you know, the garden-to-market concept or garden-to-table for our cooks to have fresh produce for the guest. It never occurred to me that Julia, that's what she told me her name was, had left a husband in a lurch. It's been a pleasure having her here. Dedicated, and introspective, she has a niceness about her."

We are just about there. Frank is turning the truck around and there's a path through the tall dogwood that the moose have been chomping on for forage. Frank comes to a stop, and now we're looking at each other, two men sizing each other up. I am recalling some of the intriguing body language I saw the last day of sketch class and at Molly's that night about three weeks ago, when I ask, "So tell me Frank, have you loved her?"

He has a smirk and responds "Yes, and I still do. But she doesn't love me like she loves you. Take that path. Don't veer off of it. Straight ahead, you'll find the cabin. You'll find Julian."

I get out of the truck. We nod at each other. "Thanks, Frank, thanks for taking care of her." And he slowly drives back towards the ranch house. I turn, take a deep breath, and slowly walk down the pathway. One step at a time, gathering myself, becoming aware of breath, making sure I'm breathing. Paying attention to each footfall as I trample the melting snow. Finally I stop and look up, and there she is, in all her glory. She's wearing a one-piece house dress sneaking under her winter coat, on down to her ankles, bare feet in the cold, wet soil. Looks like she's planting, early seeds? Arugula? Snap peas? Radish? Salad greens? I inch closer, nervous. Julian looks over at me, like she

knew I was coming.

"Good timing, High Me. I need a hand forming a swale to keep the rising creek from wiping out this garden plot! You got muscle?" A smile across her lovely face.

As we cautiously approach each other, the smiles widen. The dribble of joyful tears light up our cheeks, and the embrace is long and strong. "We have a lot of catching up to do, Julia."

She shakes her head, and smiles. "Julia? Yeah, we have catching up. A new you? And a new me?"

"A revised me and a revised you?" *When a new seed that was sown in the past has ended its' cycle, a new order is set in motion that brings an awakened state of joy and connection. The key is to stop nurturing the old seed. Let the new seed grow.*

"I have a hot pot of coffee waiting, and I heard that you're fond of cinnamon donuts, from Wildflower? Come on, let's get the swale dug and we'll share by the warm fire."

Just like that, we are reunited. Doing what we love best. Being in nature, on a homestead. My gratitude is great for this moment. I grab the shovel. Julian goes back to finish her planting.

*Jim - My thoughts are speculating about journaling our past five years apart. Combined, how they would have a relevance that affects us individually? And I wonder would she have written about 'us' or would I have been a long footnote from the past? We are witness to two different thought forms as we journey together through this mystery of life. Our combined discussion will undoubtedly open up an ocean of awareness to all sorts of personal connection to emotions, feelings, and beliefs. As our past stories dissolve and new awakenings emerge. It will be quite a comparison as we merge into oneness with not only each other, but all life forms. The simplicity of our inner knowledge combined after all the years together and the years apart, might be a shocking surprise of context.*

We finish up our garden work in silence. I jab the shovel into the earth. Julian stretches her back, and turns towards me. "Come on, let's go inside."

The one-room pioneer cabin is cozy and warm. There's a pot of coffee and a bucket of hot water. "Let me wash your feet." There's a chair near the door and Julian sits down and pulls up her skirt. I grab the bucket and bring it over so she can dip them into the warm water. A nice smile lights her face. I grab a towel and a brush. I start to brush her feet in the warm water. As I begin to dry them, I tell her about my experience bowed down at Stephanie's feet. "The last day that I modeled at the sketching class, I'm guessing Frank told you? I actually felt my Divine presence and realized that I am the master of my own domain. I am that I am. I felt so free, so much joy. No more codependency of varying belief systems. I can't be certain, but by then Molly knew about you. Frank had to tell her. So maybe that's why she had me at the

feet of the Madonna, figuratively speaking."

"Hummm, this feels so good. How about giving each other a foot massage, on the couch like we used to do on those cold winter nights? We can reconnect and then 'talk story.' Remember the guy who used to say that to you . . . 'talk story?'"

"Yes, I do." The foot massage lying on the couch, with feet on chests, was such a nice ritual in our relationship. We finish, giving the final taps and slaps to the sole of the feet. And slowly head for the small table, where Julian places the coffee pot and a plate full of, you guessed it, cinnamon donuts!

We are quiet, getting use to each other after five years. We're just looking at each other in a gentle way, holding hands over the top of the little, wooden table.

My chair squeaks slightly as I adjust my posture.

"It's so good to be with you again. I want you to know that I am grateful for all your support, patience, love. I am also amazed at your courage to do what you had to do to take care of yourself. I grieved for years, for both of us. And this last year I felt the freedom of just being part of life. When you left, I had so many judgements, then I had shame and guilt. Now I no longer carry that burden of suffering. It is so beautiful to be part of this wonderful world. Full of beautiful people. And I have so much gratitude that we have an opportunity to be together again. I . . . all I can think of right now is the fond memories of our time together. When you left, what was going through your mind?"

Julian, "At the time, I just needed some space from us. I needed to discover who I was. I was so tied to your world. I had some resentment, not necessarily at you so much as to the fact that our time together seemed so short. Even though we had each other physically, I didn't feel the connection or maybe the full attention I desired from you. It's hard to explain. I was so angry the day I left. I had no idea where I was going or what I was going to do. I was reacting to a situation and I blamed you for not recognizing what I needed."

"How'd you end up here, at the ranch?"

"I packed a backpack and started walking down the highway. Finally, a truck pulled over and I made up a story that I was on my way to the Park, Yellowstone, looking for a job. We, Frank and I, got to talking and somehow the conversation touched on gardening and he told me that they needed a good gardener for the dude ranch. Next thing I knew, I had a job and a place to stay with some pay. I felt free and, yes, I had to work through the guilt and shame of leaving you, not telling anybody, the kids, friends. I woke up to the solitude of the ranch, nature all around me. And space to just be."

"It took a while for me to figure out you left. Nobody had seen you. The kids didn't have a clue and I called around, nothing. Finally, I filed a missing persons report. It was a brutal awaking, taking our relationship for granted. I blamed myself for not being there for you. I was so involved with my achievements I never recognized yours."

"Oh, Jim, I am so sorry. So many times I asked for forgiveness and hoped that you heard me. I felt my remorse through the cosmos. I was so selfish, to just disappear from family. I could have done it differently. At the time I was just so determined to do something without anybody's input. Can you understand that?"

"Now I can, but back then I feared for your life. That was the brutal equation of losing you. And all these years, no sign of you. Nobody found a trace of you. What might have happened. I went through a lot of support groups for a while. I changed jobs, got back into massage therapy. It slowed down my life a little. Giving massages helped me to connect heart-to-heart. I realized then what taking someone for granted really meant. A false connection of love. At least that was the realization I came too."

"I'd see you every winter, trekking up that mountain and skiing down. I came to realize that was your freedom to just be. You always went solo. And I could not get myself to go after you. Tell you I was alright. That I was here. There's some kind of lesson concerning codependency that I used as reason to leave us to be free of each other. I had no idea how long or if ever we would find each other again."

The coffee got cold, and not a single donut was touched. The sun was changing the night into dawn. We sat quiet for a while. Julian grabbed the pot and put it back on the stove, threw another log in the firebox. She gently walked over to the window and looked out.

Julian remarks, "Looks like you had some fun out there today."

I got out of my chair walked over and put my hands on her shoulders. "Yeah, last tracks of the year. It's been quite a year for me. Hey, I am feeling vulnerable right now. I am not sure what to say. Being with you right now feels so new."

Julian, "Remember how we used to give each other sensual touch? How about we lie down while the coffee is warming and just be with each other for a while? Feel each other's physical touch again. Readjust and have a present moment, settle each other down?"

There's a nice soft light filtering into the room. The sun is hitting a crystal hanging in the window, sending prism colors against the wall. We settle into the bed, and Julian starts with gentle, smooth strokes. I will reciprocate but for now it's her telling me to just receive. Her love energy. Her heart connection. I close my eyes and I am relaxing into her caring hands.

# Chapter 27: Coffee and Donuts

The next morning we are finally having coffee and cinnamon donuts.

Julian was never a coffee drinker. Out of curiosity I ask, "Since when have you started to have coffee and donuts?"

"Oh, Frank got me started one morning. I don't do this often, eat donuts and especially drink coffee. Of course you know that."

"I'm curious . . ."

"About me and Frank? I don't know how or what moved me to have sex with Frank, the first time. I was definitely vulnerable. I missed you. Frank had been so nice to me. He cared about my situation, helped out with gardening. After some time, we got to know each other. We connected at some levels and I saw the good in him. The gratitude he has for his opportunity to work in nature on a ranch. There's a tenderness to Frank. I wonder if you could feel any empathy for me in that situation?"

Whew, Julian cuts to the chase, as usual. I take a deep sigh. "Yes, I do have empathy for you, especially since our life journey had taken us in the directions we needed to go to fulfill our personal purposes. I always said to myself that it's your choice, whom you choose as a lover. I never felt like I owned you or possessed you. I'm grateful for having to share time on this planet with you. It's not easy thinking that I might lose you again."

"I'm not leaving you. I love you. You found me. We are soulmate lovers. Frank and I did not have a lot of sex. We had our times with each other. I always had you in my mind. I think Frank knew that, even though he didn't know my whole story."

Well, I am breathing pretty hard about now. And I have this huge feeling of love for Julian. I think it has more to do with how she took control and now has ownership of her life. Her personal empowerment has emerged. And I am excited.

"I must say, I actually am loving who you are right now in this present moment. Gosh, it took me a while to move forward with living life again. This past year I have been so determined in a sincere way to connect with people. And the strangest thing happened. First off, I was a nude model for a Body Anatomy Sketching Class. By 'the grace of God' I formed a family circle of friends and friendship."

"Yeah! That sounds crazy and exciting. It doesn't sound like something most people would do. You always did have a streak of fearlessness. And Frank told me you guys are in a men's group?"

"They call it a gathering. Same thing, I like gathering. Do you know Joseph?"

"Yes, yes, he built a sweat lodge, just a little ways from the cabin. He comes over and we all do a ceremony and sweat."

"Beautiful, okay. I can tell you about the modeling. It wasn't easy at first. And the people in the class, I'll tell you about all of them, eventually. There is one person whom I need to share with you right now. Do you remember way back at the beginning of our life together, that gal Joni, the last night of the Stream of Life event when you entered the room, we were embraced in a kiss?"

"Hummm, yeah, kind of."

"Well, she has been a freelance journalist for a long time. Joni came across a piece about your disappearance. And remembered my name, saw a photo, and tracked me down. She was in the sketch class and she's also a massage therapy client. One day I am about ready to massage her and she bolts up in a sitting position, and said, 'You don't know me do you?' And of course I didn't until she told me the whole story. Love is such an elusive definition for me. Love is connection, connecting with all forms of life. We have a pretty nice relationship forming. So I am feeling empathy for her and guilt too. She loves me. It's painful for her and hard for her to share my excitement that you were found. It seems like we both have some serious emotional work to do with Frank and Joni. Would you say that's true?"

Julian responds, "Yeah, funny how physical love takes on a whole different meaning than love as connection. I'm not sure, maybe a deeper connection. You know what I mean?"

"Well, when you connected with Frank, before or during your lovemaking, did you have some deep eye contact? Like peering into each other's soul?"

"Like what we're doing right now? Honest communication? I took on a whole different demeanor being Julia. Some of my attitudes and beliefs changed. With Frank, the sexual love I gave him was a noble distraction. I felt like I owed it to him. I love him for how he has cared for me. However, you had such a strong hold on me, all we've been through together, that I really sense that Frank knew I didn't always have him in my heart. I mean, we'd have heart-to-heart contact, and many times when I looked into his eyes, I'd be seeing your eyes."

There's a knock at the door. "Come on in," we say in unison. It's Frank and Molly?

Frank, "I hope we're not interrupting anything. Julia, Molly is one of my partners investigating missing people."

"What, this is a shock! Frank? I know you know Jim, but Molly? You also know Jim? You find missing people?"

*Julian - Oh brother, this is getting to be intense for me. I could have prepared better for this moment. Of course, how was I to know when I would be discovered? And what is my responsibility to Frank? He must be hurting. Trying to be the strong man. I feel his touch on my shoulders, rather firm, an indication that he is having a hard time letting go. As for Molly, I'd see her around the ranch once in a while. Talking with Joseph and Frank.*

Molly, "Yes, I don't know if Jim mentioned being a model in one of my sketching classes."

"Yes, he mentioned that it was like a therapy for him. After grieving."

We invite them to have a seat "grab a coffee." Molly sits between me and Julian. Frank positions himself, still standing to the right of Julian. Molly instinctively takes my left hand and Julian's right hand. Julian gently clasps my right hand. Frank shifts over behind Julian and starts massaging her shoulders. Molly looks at us with those steely blue eyes and says, "I am so glad that you two are reunited. It seems like you both have a couple of close relationships to unravel. Jim mentioned Joni to you Julian?"

"Yes, he did. Just a while ago."

Frank clears his throat. Julian and I make eye contact. I am not sure what to make of our eye contact. There's nothing there, just a stare. Molly gives me that haunting smile of hers that I have come to expect, ever since our first "interview" for modeling. Wow, she knows Frank. She has been a God sent soul, sent to nurture me from my grief. Frank has a raised eyebrow look, and the position he took behind Julian, is that some sort of message? He is not giving up on his relationship with Julian. I remind myself that I do not possess Julian. She has ownership of who she is and what she wants. Who she wants as a mate. Still I am nervous. I am not letting go of the outcome.

"I suppose we're going to have some intriguing men's gatherings in the near future, eh, Frank?"

"We might not be riding together, Jim. Look, let's just say for now that this is not going to be an easy time for a while. And I'll bet Joni is going to be broken hearted, too." Julian takes a hand and squeezes one of Franks hands, still on her shoulder. A tear dribbles down her cheek. Okay, so what I just saw unnerves me. A mixed message. I am reminded of what Joni and Molly warned me about. What if Julian actually is not wanting to reunite with me? And Frank, with the shoulder rub, I can understand him not wanting to let go of Julian. And Julian, is she just giving me false hope?

Frank, "We have the sweat lodge set up and wanted to invite you and Jim to join us. Joseph and Blue Cloud are here."

Molly, "We wanted to do a ceremony for your reunion."

We both look at each other, and nod our approval. We grab a couple of robes and everybody starts shuffling out the door. I notice an *Emergence* magazine on the bench near the fire box as I go to put another log on the fire. It's opened to an inscription by Irhaan Rae Chandran. I read it.

> O God, part the curtain of light so that I may see your face, gaze at your beauty, and drink in your love.
>
> Part the curtain of light so that I may witness the majesty of your awesome power that creates the mountains and the oceans and the cosmos.
>
> Part the curtain, O God, so that I may touch your gentle face, so that I may sit in the bosom of your heart and feel loved, and so that I may become whole once again.
>
> Part the curtain O God, so that I may take your hand and walk on the lands in togetherness, healing our Mother Earth, and in this togetherness, let us sow the seed of a new reality, a new thought, and a new paradigm.
>
> Part the curtain, O God, and help us remember who we are in your ever-present light and glory so that we celebrate you in all moments and for eternity.

I head out to the lodge, following the footsteps in the melting snow.

# Chapter 28

There is a fire pit in front of the lodge with a circular bench around the pit. With fire heating the rocks, Blue Cloud is making ready the lodge. Joseph greets us. "Hello, my friends. Greetings, brothers Frank and James, sisters Molly and Julian. We know each other. May the light shine upon us and the fading sun warm us." Joseph appears to be sitting on the east side of the circle. If I recall correctly, east is enlightenment. Joseph directs us, "Julian, I want you to sit on the north end of the circle, for you represent the Cold Woman of the North. James, please sit in the south position where the Man of the south resides.

Frank and Molly, sit in the west node, to represent our new couple Julian, the woman of the north, and James, the man from the south. As they reunite this evening and visualize the unlimited potential of relationship. Thank you, get comfortable and we will pass pipe."

The ritual commences. Blue Cloud drums quietly in the background. Joseph takes the first puff with a long inhale. Blowing smoke on his exhale, he greets the woman of the north.

"In the Seven Arrows by my sister, Hyemeyohsts Storm, I will give the wisdom of the Circle, how it pertains to you as Sister of the North, your hair of white, your skin of white. You will never grow old and you are the one the man from the south chose to marry. He must marry this concept. The Being of Wisdom and your children with him are the reality of gifts from the north. My Brother from the south, your hair is green. Your walk is the hardest way to walk. You have walked the way of trust and innocence in Brotherhood.

Gifts of another spirit are found here. The gift of reality here is the touching of love. But you the seeker must learn feeling. Your seeking was more of the mind than the heart. Now you are growing into fullness of the One. You must visit this way in total trust. I sit in the place of the east, the way of total illumination. I narrate this story, so you will know that your marriage has been good. You can see far in the east. The east begins a new day for you. It will light your way to the west. Jim, you have been with the woman of the north and you have been given a woman of the south. Your path takes you in the direction of the west. My brother Frank and my sister Molly represents the Stars that guide you in times of darkness. There is the Northern Star and the Southern Star. The West is the place of looking within. The morning Star of the east is the way of the people.

This is the great Medicine Wheel, the Universal Dance. I ask that the sister of the North rise now and I ask that the brother of the South rise now. Circle the wheel we have formed and meet in the west."

We both circle to the East and acknowledge Joseph, our guide. Then we turn and Julian circles past the North node and heads towards the West node. I pass the South node and head towards the West. We meet in front of Frank and Molly, who have risen from their seats to face the setting sun of the west. Julian and I embrace. We are circled by Blue Cloud, Joseph, Frank, and Molly, and there are some native sounds (like a blessing?) and we kiss.

"Ah ho" vibrates in the quiet of the evening. The rippling stream and some chirping birds create a symphony. There's a grunt in the distance, a grizzly digging up caraway. We single-file into the lodge. There's a covered, three-sided shed alongside the lodge to hang our robes. The lodge is framed with the willow and dogwood branches that frame the area where the stream

meanders. It's oblong. As I duck in, I notice two pits. The rocks are steaming. Blue Cloud was busy preparing the setting, and for this I am grateful. There are pillows to sit on and animal skins to lie on. It's quite the deluxe lodge. We all settle in. I am reminded of Nirvana's teaching about the third eye, the flame in the middle of the brain, and the occipital in the back of the head.

Thought enters the third eye and flows through the brain and leaves through the occipital. Like a passing cloud. It is so relaxing as I drift into a meditation. I focus on breath to center myself. I observe the events of the last couple of days and this last year of awakening. All of my newfound circle of friends have given me a sense of belonging, a oneness with all forms of life. What a beautiful mix of people and personalities, all of us finding our true selves. Jerry, Joni, Sadie, Jenny, Arthur, Nirvana, Deloris, Faye, Frank, Joseph, Sammie, Stephanie, Blue Cloud, and Molly. I give them all a blessing and thank them for connection and true relationship. After a while, as I am in a sweet sweat, on the fur of a bison. I drift into unconsciousness.

It's all behind me now, life as I knew it on this earthly plane. Whatever it was, how would I know? I am not around to find out. I finally arrived at that still place. No thought, no ego, no will, no awareness of anything. All love is gone, all sadness is gone, all excitement is gone, all joy is gone, and all sight is gone.

Nobody here to touch, to hug, to kiss, or peer into soft eyes. No birds to chirp or sing, no animals to howl or growl. It's all gone. I am just being into nothingness.

*As I write these thoughts now, I wonder what I will depart with when I die, when I'm gone, is there only one life to carry on? What beliefs will I depart with?*

*Will my mind remember this body it visited for this short existence? There's a history that will be forgotten, my destiny on earth. My loving partner, my loving children and my lovely life of trials and tribulation, of struggles and success of joy and love. My gratitude gushes from my heart for all that was and all that is to become in this stillness of just being.*

# Chapter 29: Aloha

*A Dream?*

The heat of a meal, steaming our car windows, like teenagers making out on a dead end road. Julian and I are in awe, a new found dinner venue of hot Thai food in the Hawaiian countryside where cows munch on grass in the lumpy volcanic rock overgrown now with vegetation. The heat of our breaths in this romantic setting with sunset and snow on Mauna Kea and the ancient Ohia tree with white bark and a Lehua flower. We two lovers forever joined together, in the heat of the night. Our eyes blaze with our love, with bellies full, windows steamed, we kiss, in the heat of the night.

# A Journey of Love

## A New Dawn

Lift the stone and you will find me; cleave the wood and I am there.
—David Schiller in the voice of Jesus, *The Little Zen Companion*

Julian and I awoke with the new day's sunlight peeking through the curtain. Prism light coloring the cabin walls. We crawled out of bed. Ambers from the night fire made it easy to throw a log in the fire box, and get the flame roaring. The night was a long night of soul searching for Julian and I. What did Molly say before our sweat in the lodge? "You both have some relationships to unravel."

Julian is silently getting some coffee going, placing a pot on the wood burner. Gosh, it's so good to watch her again after five years of exile. We're back together. Or are we?

I ask Julian, "How'd you sleep? You seemed restless until we made love."

"Yeah, thank you for still loving me. It does feel good being in your arms again, snuggled in bed. I must say, the night session after the sweat was a bit intense. I am not so sure what to do. Frank, Joni, you, the kids, all the past memories and me running from you, us, I don't know. I am overwhelmed with emotions right now."

**Here's what transpired after the sweat —**
Joseph and Blue Cloud said their goodbyes. We thanked them for the ceremony and Molly, Frank, Julian, and I meandered back to the cabin, in our robes. Refreshed and perplexed at the same time. When Joseph said that I was the man from the south, and I married the woman from the North, Julian, who bore our children and that I also now have a woman of the south . . . the thought catapulted me into an unknown field of reckoning. As we entered the cabin, Joni was at the table!

Julian was the first to enter, "Hello, and you are? Wait don't tell me, you're—" Before Julian could guess, I blurted,

"Joni! What are you doing here?"

Joni had such a mixed look of rejection and sadness. "Hi, Jim. Hi, Julian."

As Frank and Molly shuffled in through the door, Molly said, "I apologize for the surprise. I invited Joni to meet us here after our sweat."

I looked over at Julian. Her body language and facial expression showed some discomfort.

Frank had a stoic look, and he calmly gave Joni a hello. "Was this place easy enough to find?"

Julian said, "I'll grab another chair from outside. I'll be right back."

We all started to make our way around the table. I was musing at Joseph's comment, "You now have a woman of the south." All I could say was, "Joni, your presence here, now, this night, shocks me."

"I was hoping for something other than that from you. I'm needing some compassion right now." Joni wasn't looking to good, emotionally, for sure. I did what came naturally. I went to her and wrapped my arms around her. The hug was warm and loving. The compassion was flowing from me without words. I was feeling Joni's pain. Why did I react in such an unfriendly way?

While we were still in our embrace, Julian walked in with an extra chair. "Wooo, it's getting cold out there . . . . Ooooh, Joni, hello. Um, yeah, Jim told me about you from Stream of Life?"

Joni and I turned as we loosened up our embrace. There was tension in the room. And here we were, Julian and I having to face one of several consequences we were to face in the coming months. Molly then spoke up, "Please, let's all have a seat. I wanted a celebration at first. You two, Julian and Jim, finally reunited after all this time spent separated? Then I thought maybe Joni should be part of this since Frank was here, too. I'm sorry, please forgive me if I have crossed a boundary of ethics. I just wanted to—"

I was definitely upset with Molly. "I know you mean well. Problem for me is that I need to sort things out with Julian before I'm ready to address the situation with Frank and Joni. You could have asked me, at least a warning!"

"Jim, it's alright. Calm down. It's all good." This coming from Julian. "I'm okay with this gathering of friends and friends to be. Remember, we circled the Medicine Wheel, we met in the east for enlightenment and circled to the west for

freedom. Freedom from our past, to move forward. A new way, a new paradigm. Joni it's my pleasure to meet you. When I walked in with the chair and saw you and Jim embrace, well, I finally recalled the day at Stream of Life when I walked into the room to see you both in more than just a hug. My heart took a leap of faith then and I was already feeling vulnerable. We were all younger then. My guess is that you are feeling that way now? Vulnerable. Wondering where do we go from here? Am I guessing right?"

Joni locked eyes with Julian. "Thank you for your understanding and compassion. Yeah, where do we go from here?"

Frank, "Hey, I am in the same boat. Jim, Julian is the woman I brought up in our men's gathering several nights ago."

Molly interjected, "Hey, how about we all sit down? Maybe hold hands? Physically connect for a bit? Eye contact, in silence?"

There was nothing spoken; rather, we followed Molly's lead.

*Why is it that the relationship with Molly, whom I posed for her art sketching class as a nude model, keeps taking me down a road of self-inquiry? Who is she? Really, always having my well-being in her best interest. And Frank, Molly's partner in missing persons investigations, how is it that somehow Frank and I met through the medium of art. Then a men's group. For five years he cared for and loved my estranged wife and soulmate lover?*

# Part II

# Chapter 1: Circumstance and Consequences

Molly starts the conversation, "Julian, I am curious why you decided to split, without warning?"

"It took me a few years to finally recognize that at the time it was my little inner child, who was unskilled at expressing her stuffed emotions. What she wanted to say was, 'Please hear me, please see me, please feel me, please find time for some quality connection.' I was infuriated that Jim was unable to hear her struggling inside of me. I was very sad that I felt no compassion from Jim. He was not able to respond to my suffering. He would escape and take his 'little boy' out to play. I can clearly see now how mirroring, disrespect, or control can choke out a relationship."

Frank pipes in, "What about you partner? How'd you let your relationship to this sweet gal get to that drama?"

My turn, "I also recognize my part in this was falling into a habit of not keeping our relationship as a priority. We had several similar situations in the past, when we lost connection to each other, prior to the walk out. When Julian disappeared, it was the most drastic event of our time together. And let me tell you, Frank, I'm not sure what kind of a relationship has developed between Julian and you, just remember our relationship stands over twenty-five years. Your connection has been for what, four or five years?"

Molly, "Jim, this inquiry is about you and Julian right now, your time spent with Julian. Frank asked a question."

"Oh, so now we have marriage counseling?"

Julian, "Jim . . ." *Just the way she responds to my reaction is so settling. She knew what was coming, and it wasn't going to be pretty.*

We lock eyes for a moment, and past memories of us in a disagreement, me reacting, begin to surface. . . I take some deep breaths. That's what I learned in Nirvana's yoga class.

"Sorry, I am getting defensive. This is an old pattern. I was unable to feel her pain at the time. What you just witnessed was how I would get. Worse. And yeah, the little boy would leave in a huff, cursing, escaping into his world of play. That's what I knew at the time. My coping mechanism. My emotional world was out of balance. I can see that now. Most of my feelings were anger, resentment, disappointment, and joy was when something positive happened. So I wasn't always there for Julian. Most of my feeling world was centered around my accomplishments or disappointments. Julian would support me there. And very rarely did I take the time to check in with her."

*Wow, confession, do I really need to be sharing this? I look into everyone's eyes. Humbled. Shame? How I want to be so perfect, an image that was not real. What is that song . . . ? "Oh, Lord, it's hard to be humble, when I'm perfect in so many ways . . . ." Who sang that country tune, Hank Williams?*

I finish, "So there you have it. I've had five years of regret. I am crawling out of a hole I dug so deep, and I am finally finding my way out. It's still a roller coaster ride, but I am making progress."

Joni is squeezing my hand so hard. Even though we had all released our casual hand holding that we started with, Joni never let mine go. "Jim, even though we were younger when we did the Stream of Life together, I still have memories of our work, the whole group. It was intense, and I saw your true spirit of letting your emotions be seen and known by all. You don't need to beat yourself up right now." She says this with bravery and as if she knows me well.

*Julian - That's enough, we need some space. This is all happening too fast. It's getting to be a therapy session, and right now I need Jim one-on-one. All of a sudden, this whole situation is in our face. It's too abrupt. It's getting to be about Frank and Joni. What a paradoxical dilemma. I can recall a long time ago, even before Jim came into my life, that the message in the Bible concerning marriage is very distinct that when a man takes a woman in marriage there is to be no other woman (in his bed), and when a woman takes a man in marriage there is to be no other man (in her bed). This is a predicament of my doing. Even though I have disrespected that law of God a long time ago, now I need forgiveness and I need to forgive, too. I need time with my man right now and my man is Jim.*

Julian comes to my rescue. “This has been a very special and intense day for us. I would like to have my time with my husband right now. Thank you for all of your concerns. Please, let us put some of our personal life back together. We have a lot of territory to cover.”

*God bless Julian. I am not ready to sit here with two women I love and a man whom I feel threatened by. Threatened because he obviously loves Julian. I am so in my head right now that I find it hard to go to my heart, where compassion lies in wait.*

And with that, slowly chair legs scrape the floor and hats and coats start to reappear. We all look at each other and in unison we slowly do a group hug. That seems so naturally necessary. Without further ado the cabin is empty of bodies except for two, and the energy still lingers. Julian and I stoke the fire, take off our clothes, and crawl into bed as if we never missed a beat.

## Chapter 2: Now What Do We Do?

We awake in the middle of the night.

I whisper, “You awake?”

Julian, “Yeah, lots of thoughts.”

“I’ll stoke the fire.”

Julian swings out of bed right behind me. She slips on some pants and a sweater. She reaches for the coffee pot and places it on the wood-burning stove while I get the fire roaring.

As she peers out the window she says, “The starry sky is full tonight. Let’s go out for a walk. What do you say?”

“Aye, me lass, a walk then . . .”

The door creaks open and the milky way is streaming overhead as our bodies exit the cabin.

“This way,” as Julian takes my hand and directs me down a path.

We're silent for a while. We stop and look up. Wow, a star lit sky in the wild with no light pollution from neighbors or towns is so exceptional.

"Do you recall the nights with the kids when we lived up in the mountain?" asks Julian.

"Yeah, first thing that comes to mind is taking the kids for a full-moon ski up Golmyer Creek. Remember? The sparkling snow, the laughter?"

"Ummm, and little Susie, what a trooper. Finally crying she was so cold after falling a few times. We took turns soothing her whims and then carrying her back to the house."

I recall, "Oh, by the time we got back we were all icicles! The fire was still going and we got out hot chocolate and cookies. So many memories. We need to talk about how we are going to break the news to them. You, being found. How do we move forward now, as a couple as a family? There's going to be an abandonment issue."

"The abandonment issue? Is that what you're grappling with or are you referring to the kids? Our young adults? That they will bring that up."

I have to take a pause and think about what it is that I am feeling. "I have worked through feeling abandoned. I have been working on my issues with, as you put it 'my inner boy child escaping to play.' Isn't that the way you said it? Actually, what I recognize now is how you gave up your power of self to raise a family and meet my expectations. Or at least what you thought that I expected from you as a woman? A wife? A lover?"

Julian takes her time to respond as we look up again, with constellations, hovering overhead . . . . "I am glad that you brought that up, Jim. The part about giving up our power. I have felt so free out here. On my own, doing what I want. Is that being selfish? I have spent time with guilt and shame. It was a lot to work through. Especially when I'd watch you out the window skiing that hill in the winter. I just knew that was you. And I couldn't make the choice to run up the road towards the hill and shout out at you, 'Hey, it's me, come get me!' I was frozen in this new life I created. I was sad, for us, for you, the lover I lost. I tried to replace you with Frank."

"How long did it take you to replace me with Frank?"

"Jim, I do not want to approach that subject right now. I do not want to go into the details about Frank and me. Can you allow me some space with that relationship?"

"You may have to come to grips with that part of your past, just to make amends with the kids. And me? Right now, I am not holding anything against you. No judgements. As we get to know each other in the present, there might be times that bitterness and resentment raises it's ugly head. I'm just 'sayin'."

"Molly brought up a good point, that we both have relationships to unravel. I can feel the energy and even some anxiety between you and Joni. Is that true?"

"Yes, I will admit it. You mentioned that you felt Frank sensed you weren't always there for him. How do you know that? Me, well I feel a strong connection with Joni."

"Whoa, maybe we should focus on resolving our relationship with the kids first and foremost. Or are you saying . . . What are you saying, about Joni?"

We have stopped walking. The early dusk light and fading starry sky cast dark shadows across our faces. We are facing each other. We unconsciously reach out to each other. Gripping each other's arms. I take a deep breath. There's some steam coming from both our mouths. The early morning chill catches our breaths.

"Like you, my dear, I need some space and time to reconcile all of my new found relationships."

And with that tender, fragile connection, we hug, we kiss long and gentle, and then we walk in silence back to the cabin.

# Chapter 3: What It's Going to Take

There's not much said at the cabin. Just ordinary words and activity as we decide what our day is going to entail after breakfast. I decide to go back to my cabin. I tell Julian that I have some massage appointments in the afternoon. We are both tentative about contacting the children yet. "Let's give it another day. Sort things out, before diving into that unknown." We both agree to that. A hug, a kiss, a tender look from her to me and me to her. I depart up the path taking the road back to the ranch house to get my car.

Later, at the massage office, I am waiting for a new client, a friend, a teacher. Nirvana, my yoga teacher and one of the sketchers that I modeled for in Molly's art class.

The room is ready and Nirvana is right on time. "Hi, Jim. We missed you at the last Kundalini class."

"Yes, I was pre-occupied. What did I miss?"

"Megan brought in a wonderful meditation from the Ekam group. Gratitude for your partner. It was awesome. It brought up a past partnership, I should say relationship, I was involved with for several years. It's really something when relationships go through a rough time and how we tend to forget the role gratitude can play."

Wow, this message couldn't be more timely. "Funny you mentioned that, so synchronistic. I have found my lost soulmate lover. After five years, staying at a ranch, where Frank works!"

"You have got to be kidding! That is happy news, Jim."

"Yes, it is. That last day at Molly's class, when we were all hugging and saying our goodbyes, Molly whispered in my ear, 'I found her.' It's been an amazing turn of events. There are some issues. We've both started other relationships. Julian, that's her name, has assured me that we are soulmate lovers forever. I am still trusting that she is committed to come back to our relationship in marriage. We have challenges since the people we are involved with love us dearly."

"Jim, you have spent a lot of time finding who you are as a person. You are discovering your inner soul. Can you trust that Julian has been doing the same? She has opened the door to reconciliation. A new beginning. Yoga is tomorrow. Come. Get grounded."

And with that, she heads for the massage table.

When Nirvana is ready, I enter and pull back the sheet to the top of her buttocks. I warm my hands with some friction, rubbing them vigorously, put some warm oil on her beautiful, black back, and gently spread the oil over her torso.

"Jim, what I'd like you to work on today or at least pay attention to is the areas of my chakras. I want you to recall what each chakra represents and ask yourself how they apply to your life right now. Check in with all of the self-help work you have done."

With Nirvana face down, I start with the second chakra, the sacral chakra of self-acceptance. It's between the navel and pubic area. Since I am working from the back, I decide to do some acupressure along the spine, starting from the neck and down to the coccyx bone. Then I take the heel of my hand, place it on the coccyx, and apply some slight pressure upwards. I do this three times. As I am working on this sacral chakra, I realize how I need to accept myself fully, with joy. I am in the midst of healing old wounds. Nirvana mentioned herself healing an old relationship with gratitude. I am guessing she means gratitude for the life lessons learned. So as I am giving her sacral balance, I am also receiving the same. Next, I move up to the Manipuri, the navel area and solar plexus. The area I am working is the lower back. I do some percussion across the bony area of the upper pelvis, then some circular strokes using my thumb, just above the upper pelvis. The yogic symbol for this chakra is the Ram. It's all about personal power, uninhibited behavior and respect for self and others. A never-give-up attitude is the trait of one with a strong Manipuri. I continue in each area of the back, revisiting what I have learned about chakras in Nirvana's Kundalini class. As the massage session winds down, I am grateful for what energy I received. It has been quite an exchange.

I give Nirvana my customary side-to-side, gentle rocking and healing hands calling forth the green ray angels, to heal any discordant energy.

Before she leaves, we hug. I look at her and say, "Thank you for suggesting the work on your chakras. I really tuned into what you have taught in class. I hope you felt the vibrant flow between us."

"Yes, the massage felt different than most. Your touch went beyond the physical manipulation of the fascia. Thank you."

When she leaves, I sit for a while, soaking it all in. The events of the past few days have been overwhelming. I need to just be. I need stillness. I close my eyes and reminisce a time at the Grand Canyon.

No quiet, here above the canyon
rim. Along the rim, people roam.
I stare into the abyss of
the bottomless canyon.
I recognize the void in my heart.
I see the river, just a very small part
of it. I see the flow of life, deep in my
heart.
Flowing through my arteries and
veins. I stare into the abyss.
Even up here on the
rim, I hear quiet.
In the abyss of the
canyon, I see quiet.

# Chapter 4: My Therapist

The office door creaks open. I am startled back to an awakened state and looking at me is Molly!

"Oh, wow, Molly! Hi!"

She's got the smile that I've loved from the first day we met.

"Howdy, Jim," she says with a chuckle. She knows that's my usual greeting.

"Are you visiting or . . . ?"

"I am here for two reasons. First, I want a massage. Everyone from our previous class said you're better at massage than posing nude!"

I laugh out loud!

"And second reason?" I inquire.

"Let's do the massage first, if you can wait in suspense. Can you leave your thoughts behind to give me a decent massage."

I have another good laugh, "It's not my strong trait, but let's give it a go." And with that, Molly heads for the massage room. "Hold on," I say. "I need to change the sheets and set the room up. I'll create a mood."

"A mood?" And Molly has that sweet smile. "It's just a massage, right?"

"Therapeutic!" I reassure her (and me, too).

So now we're situated, she's draped in sheets, I'm warming my hands, and we get started.

With Molly, I start at the feet, still covered by the sheets. I slide my hands under and grab her ankles, straighten out her posture, and lean back, using my body weight to apply gentle traction. I release the traction, then push my fist into the arch of each foot. I push and release several times. After this, I gently rock Molly. After slipping the sheet off her back down to the waist, I pound her calves, hamstrings, and quads with the side of my fists. I like starting out with some Shiatsu to get the circulation going. I rub some warm sesame oil in my hands and slowly start spreading it on her back, waist, and upper buttocks, which is still covered by the sheet. I do some light tapping across the waist along the spine, and then cup my hands and tap the lung area. I quiet everything down with some alternate stroking over the back. While I am working on her back . . .

Molly speaks, "This is feeling really good. I don't remember the last time I received a massage. So the girls told me they purchased a massage table for their next date with you? Is that true?"

"Did Sadie and Jenny tell you that? "

"Sadie told me. I saw her at the Coffee Hut one day. Are you actually going to take them up on their offer? Especially, since you are with Julian again?"

I am working on Molly's shoulders and neck area, trying to think of a response.

I say, "You are one mother hen, eh?"

"Maybe so. If they were my daughters I would be concerned, and if Julian was my friend, I'd be concerned. And I do have a vested interest in your well-being."

I am gently pulling on Molly's ear lobes and squeezing and twisting the outer ears, ironically listening to what she's saying.

"Molly, I've been meaning to ask you, are you some kind of therapist?"

"Yes."

"I thought you were going to tell me the second reason you came here today, after the massage?"

"I will, soon."

It's amazing to find out what I suspected for a while. The poses she had me do took me to some inner depths of my soul. The way she is inquiring about my relationships has my mind spinning. What kind of karma am I creating or have I created in my life?

The massage is eventually over. I give her my customary blessing, but my heart's not really feeling it. I am in thought, mind anticipating what's

next. I exit the room and wait in the office area for Molly. I feel I cheated her with the final blessing for her healing. So I do a "Ho'oponopono," a Hawaiian blessing: "I'm sorry. Please forgive me. Thank you. I love you."

Molly comes out of the room, shakes her head, and her hair falls into place. I am patiently waiting to hear what's next.

Molly eyes me mischievously. "Jim, I am wondering if you and Julian would be open to having a discussion with Joni and Frank concerning your relationships?"

I take a deep breath before I respond, "We need to discuss how we break the news to the children first. Everything else is secondary."

"Yes, absolutely, the family dynamics is priority."

"I am spending the night with Julian at the ranch. We are going to be dealing with abandonment issues. There's a good chance we may need some guidance in dealing with abandonment issues. Can we lean on you if need be?"

"Jim, for whatever reason, our paths have crossed. I now know, for sure, why I am here for you. You can trust me."

# Chapter 5: Empathy for the Children of the Woman of the North

I pull into the ranch where Julian is staying. There are no vehicles at the ranch house. I hope that Julian is expecting me. I drive to the cabin area and park. The late afternoon sun is starting to set behind Ramshorn Peak. Soon it will be dusk. I make my way to the cabin. No sign of life. I enter and decide to start a fire. I put on a pot of coffee. I am thinking that this could be a long night. I settle in, sit at the table, and gather thoughts. I close my eyes and start a short meditation, "The Serene Mind," to quiet my mind. As I am ending the meditation, I hear some laughter and voices outside. I look out the window and see Julian and Frank. They talk for a bit and I watch as they hug and have a short kiss. They part ways and Julian is walking towards the cabin with a smile on her face.

She enters the cabin and quietly shuts the door.

"Ummm, it's nice and cozy in here. Thanks for starting the fire. I wasn't sure you were coming tonight."

"Julian, we need to figure some things, for instance how to proceed, not only with our relationship, but also with the children."

"Yes, of course. Can I get a hug?"

I have some resentment with what I just witnessed between her and

Frank. I get out of my chair and face Julian.

Awkwardly I say, "Looks like you and Frank had a very friendly goodbye."

"You saw us? He hugged and kissed me? Hmmm, please trust me when I say how much I love you. That we are partners again. It's just that I am still not quite sure how to end with Frank. I don't want our relationship to end abruptly. Can you understand that? Can you feel what he might be going through? When you do Kundalini Yoga, you are opening up your chakras. There are the three lower chakras. The navel chakra, the Manipura, is our power center. Here you have an opportunity to create well-being for self and others. If it is under active you might have low self-esteem, not feeling worthy. One might become self-obsessive. Let's use love as an example. Maybe in a state of not feeling worthy, one becomes obsessed with seeking the need to be loved, and only feels worthy if the love is physical, a sexual exchange. Then there's love as compassion for our fellow human being. In this case, you, Frank, Joni, and me. Whom of us is obsessed with the physical need for love? Whom of us wants to control the circumstance we find ourselves in? Whom of us wants to dominate, be the victor, in getting what we desire and not consider the other? We are all part of the whole. I have been studying the Way of Mastery, the path of Jesus. And I realize now how we are all part of the same body. The hand needs the arm, the foot needs the leg, the leg needs the hip. Frank, you, Joni, me, we are all a part of the cosmic womb, one with the whole. We need love as compassion. That is the love that Jesus teaches."

I approach Julian, and we lock eyes. "I guess it's not going to be easy for all of us, you and Frank, me and Joni. Where did you come up with the Manipura explanation?"

Julian points to the Emergence magazine on the table. We envelop each other in a strong, warm hug. We rub each other's back and I have a fear of letting Julian go. As we release the hug and pull away, there are tears in both our eyes. Something makes us chuckle, nerves? I don't know. I lick her tear dribbling down her right check and that jester causes laughter. I feel relief and her sincerity.

We pour a cup of coffee and Julian says, "Hey, I have a few donuts left from the other night!" There's nervous laughter. It's as if the donuts are an offer for peace. Julian grabs the donuts from a shelf. "Let's sit and talk."

I start, "I would like to share with you some of the trauma I went through when you went missing."

Julian takes a sip of coffee before responding, "Fair enough, I knew I would be dealing with this, this . . . denial."

*Julian - Whew, I knew in my heart of hearts that someday I would be faced with the circumstance of my actions. It's as if God showed me His way through Jim. Five winters of watching Jim climb the mountain from my cabin window. In my gut I knew it was him. And yet I feared the wrath of my "wrong action". It never occurred to me to ask for forgiveness. I lost sight of humility. It wasn't until Frank handed me a book, The Way of Mastery, Frank the ex-preacher I later found out, handed me the book without any reference to the contents. I wasn't ready to be with Jim at the time. I used my "power" seeking approval for my actions, obsessing to be loved by others. I choose Frank as my compass. I denied feeling like an adulterous woman. Instead, I justified my craving for physical love from another man. And all the while, there is Jim on his journey, alone, climbing up the mountain, bearing the passion of his cross. Oh, what burden must he have been carrying with his suffering? And now I must face my fear, my self-judgements, of what I set in motion. I must be responsible for the consequences.*

I pipe in, "I'll try not to blame you. Let me know if you start to feel that way, okay? First off, when you left, and not just the last time, there were a couple of times earlier in our relationship too, I blamed myself. There was anger and resentment too, towards you. I thought you gave up on me. Maybe not meeting your standards or needs."

Julian puts up her hand. "There, right there, I'm feeling some responsibility . . ."

"Okay, yeah, I'm just being honest where my head was at during those times.

"The last time you took off and ended here—thank God—I felt abandoned. I realized how much I depended on you and our relationship. I went into a depression. I didn't want to talk to anybody, socializing was rough. The reason I bring this up is that you . . ."

*Julian - I can sense where Jim might be going with this, abandonment. I interrupt,* "Can you use 'we,' that when 'we reunite with the children,' please?" *As I make this comment, I realize that marriage is a commitment to whom you have chosen. If there is a separation, hopefully we don't forget the commitment. I vowed to be with Jim, "forever do us part." I was lost and now I am found, and Jim never lost faith in me. My intuition knew we would be together again. I wonder what led me astray? My ego was so strong and needed attention, so much so that I left him, and then I had the gall to have him find me. Ugh, and now what remorse have I shown him?*

"Yes, okay that's a good point. However, that's not where I was heading. You talked earlier about the navel chakra. So in retrospect, my power was under active. I suffered with lack of self-worth. So much of my journey was about seeking approval in the eyes of whomever I was trying to please. My actions weren't sincere. They didn't come from the heart. This was my discovery this

last year, with the nude modeling. I see now how I was seeking help in an unconventional way. I stood naked, 'here I am for all to see.' I stripped back all my armor and was willing to be vulnerable. I also had a desire to be loved. I found that I needed to love myself. I recently came across a video of Francis Chan interpreting the Book of James. And he talked about how our suffering can actually contribute to a state of joy. That we suffer so that we can gain wisdom. Experience the wisdom of our suffering state. How beautiful is that? And here we are, Julian, reunited. I am not sure how any of our current circumstance will turn out. I do know for me, I am excited to be back with you. It seems so natural that we are with each other. It's as if we needed the time and space to have a deeper understanding of ourselves, us in relationship with others, and us together as one. And you mentioned being part of the Cosmic Womb. A mother knows about that. I must tell you, when I opened myself to receive, I felt a lot of nurturing from the relationships I was fortunate to be part of. I felt like a part of the whole. Universal oneness. I am hoping that the kids can realize that they are witnessing our personal journeys as a couple and our separate journey independent from each other. I hope that they don't react in a resentful way. Are you prepared for that, if they do?"

Julian has a little hesitation in her voice, "I really don't know how I will feel when we meet them. Even now there is some insecurities with you, them, Frank, the whole scene."

She's shaking her head. I can tell she's in thought. Her eyes are a little glassy.

"Julian, I just found out that Molly is a therapist. She actually asked me if all four of us— you, me, Joni, and Frank — can get together and untangle our dilemma. I told her we need to address the situation with the children first."

"Yeah, maybe she could shed some light on what we're dealing with now. Just between us."

"It's not too late. Shall I call her? Maybe we'll get some kind of direction."

"Yes, let's do it. We'll have to walk up towards the ranch house to get reception. You have your phone?"

"Yep, it's in the car. Let's go." I am so grateful for Julian's eagerness to work on some kind of resolve tonight. I grab a donut on the way out. The air is crisp and clear. We're silent as we walk the path. Deep in our personal thoughts. Then I mention to Julian, "In the yoga class I have been participating in, one of the participants, Megan, talked about checking in with oneself to notice if we're in a suffering state or beautiful state."

"What do you mean?"

"A suffering state might be anger, resentment, sadness, for instance. A beautiful state is joy, gratitude, or love, as examples."

"I like that. So let's check in with each other as we proceed. Let's go for the beautiful state of compassion, empathy, and connection. What do you say about that?"

I smile, stop, and grab Julian. She is ready for my embrace and deep, soulful kiss. We trek on towards the car.

I call Molly, "Hi, how's my alter ego?"

"Jim?, is that you? I thought you were seeing Julian tonight."

Julian, "Hi, Molly, we're together. Trying to figure things out. You know about our situation. Jim said you are a therapist?"

"Yes, I specialize in couples therapy. What's up?"

Julian, "We can use some guidance concerning abandonment. We are getting the courage to connect with our grown children. I must admit that I am fearing how they might resent me. And I am really feeling sadness and regret that I walked out on my family and mate."

"Okay, I can imagine what you might be going through. Let me just go over some traits to look at tonight, and between the both of you, choose what might resonate. Then as parents, you are working on your meeting with the children, right? That's two different issues."

Both of us blurt into the phone speaker, "Yeah, yes."

"Okay, then as parents, see if any of these traits are recognizable that may have been passed onto your offspring. Their traits tend to be similar, learned behavior. Does that make sense?"

Julian, "Okay, we have a notepad."

"Alright, here you go . . . Have you ever or tend to lose yourself in a relationship? In other words, do you give up your power, your personality? Wanting to be accepted by the other, thinking that you'll then be loved by the other? Do you feel insecure about your partner or children when they show any kind of independence or separation?

Do you feel threatened that any disagreements or major issues that might arise will end the relationship?

How about past traumas or wounds from the past, whether from your parents or partner? They can be passed onto the children.

Does that help for now? That should get you through the night. Hopefully you'll be able to get some sleep, too."

Julian, "Thanks, this will be very helpful. You have any questions, Jim?"

"No. I appreciate our connection, Molly. Really, the first time we met, do you remember, you caught me looking at the sign . . . 'male models needed?' I felt like there was something beyond just modeling for your class. Your nurturing soul and your interest in my well-being means so much to me. I am so grateful."

"You are both welcome. Take care of him, Julian. You have a keeper. Jim, you

have found your true soul mate. Love her dearly."

Julian presses the red dot to end the call. She places the phone down on the hood of the car and turns, full body pressing into me. Tears are flowing from her trembling body. Her grasp is strong like hanging on for dear life. I melt into her. Hold me, squeeze me, love me, are the desires of my mind. Gratitude is the feeling in my heart.

# Chapter 6: The Midnight Retreat

We walk back to the cabin along the pathway. The stars are starting to pop. We solemnly open the creaking door, and it seems like we can hear each other's thoughts. We head for the couch. Look at each other and nod in unison. Using sign language for a foot massage, we plop down on the couch, take off our shoes and socks, and swing around in a prone position with a right foot on each other's chest. We grab each other's foot and start with slow strokes.

Julian starts the conversation, "Okay, let me see what I wrote down. Do you give up some of your personality, who you are, to be loved by the other? Hmmm ... Well, as a mom I must say that I felt like I lost some of my independence. And even before that, before raising a family, I know I gave up some of me to love you. At least thinking that's what I had to do, to kind of fit into your world. Does that make sense?"

"Yes, I can relate. Being young, looking for a mate. Being influenced by movies or books and parents. The ideal of what a man, then husband, should be like as the male component of a typical male/female relationship. The man as head of the household. An image to live up too. With that kind thinking, I am sure that I had expectations of what your role should be."

Julian, "So our kids basically follow in our footsteps. We modeled our learned behavior while we were in the midst of trying to find our true selves. Searching for our destiny as individuals, parents, and lovers?"

"Yeah, we may have done things out of obligation thinking that's what we had to do to be loved by the other. And lost our connection with each other."

Julian has my big toe in a tight grasp. "Truth or consequences . . . did you have expectations that I should surrender my desires to fulfill your needs?"

I can't help but chuckle as she wiggles my toe! "I'm sure I did. The old way of thinking was so ingrained in my genes. It was the model I was exposed to at an early age. It is quite an effort to transcend the ego mind of Me, Me, Me and not consider You, You, You!"

Julian, with the prettiest smile on her face, says, "Alright, so how does this relate to Susie, George, and Dillion?"

"See if this makes sense. We abandoned each other trying to find our true self. Meanwhile, we lost intimate connection with our children. All of a sudden, figuratively speaking, we disappear, self-absorbed with our obsessive mind. The children are left with peer group influence. We might consider that as abandonment."

"Hummm, hard for me to think about it that way. I feel so much guilt as a mom."

"What's the next thing you wrote down?"

Julian looks at her notes. "Do you feel insecure about your partner or children when they show any kind of independence or separation?"

"I know I did in the past. When I saw your exchange with Frank this evening, I felt insecure.. As far as the kids go, I seem to remember telling them several times that it was their journey now. Even though we were there for support, I recall encouraging their independence. I wonder, now, if they felt like I was trying to get them out of the house."

Julian chips in, "Being the mom, I've been worried or concerned about their whereabouts and their personal growth. I know I felt insecure with some of your business relationships having precedent over our relationship. And how you dedicated so much time to your self-interest. My thought was that you took me for granted. It's a real dichotomy thinking I needed more of your attention rather than fulfilling my own needs."

"Speaking of which," I interject, "I can think back to my family dynamics growing up. My dad, up early working on his school plan for the day, very rarely seeing him at breakfast. Absorbed in his work. I observed how his busy schedule and desire to serve others might have had an effect on our family dynamics. The long hours he kept as a teacher, then coaching, and a life filled with social events, and doing what his desires were, whether it was camping, fishing, hockey, whatever it was, the family tagged along. We had a lot of fun. What I am saying is that I don't recall times when it was just us being family. Maybe that's what I am working on with my own personal growth. I changed my occupation when you left. I realized how much all the self-interest didn't really include your interest or even the children's interest all the time."

"What made you want to pose? Were you thinking it might be a way to get a woman? I'm not judgmental here, I am just curious."

"Come to think of it, I was feeling pretty desperate and confused about how to get back into relationship. And yeah, I sense that my subconscious mind had hope for a new relationship. What ended up happening is that the underlining thought or desire was not what prevailed. I ended up with heart-to-heart connections with people, that gave me a different

perspective."

Julian has pursed lips and a furrowed brow. "So that was in the last year? You finally reaching out for relationship in an unconventional way?"

"Yep, I see that now. And Molly did too. That must be why see took such of an interest in me personally. Her being a relationship therapist. She was somewhat protective of me interacting with the class. She'd never witnessed that before. And especially my relationship with the younger women, Sadie and Jenny. When I told her my story and she realized my sincerity, our relationship changed. Molly's choice of poses became therapeutic in the sense that I had profound personal realizations."

"Hummm . . . I see that now. And my self-exile from us was a desperate attempt of escape from . . . I don't know how to explain it . . . co-dependence? I surely didn't want to hurt the children. It's like war: they were the innocent bystanders. And I have a very similar memory of my family dynamics. That being from a big family and mostly raised by my siblings, it had an effect of feeling abandoned by my parents, then my sister. And then me feeling liberated, thinking I was taking care of my needs. But something was missing: you for one, the relationship with our adult children. I missed our continued growth together. I tried to bury my emotions and reached out to Frank. He must have sensed something. Since he gave me the book *The Way of Mastery*. To follow in Jesus's foot steps. I was reaching out to him for all the wrong reasons. He is having a hard time realizing that we, you and me, are reconnected. I think he has hope that I'll reject you, and want to remain here, without you. I found a Bible floating around in Frank's ranch house one day. I happened to open it to a page where God created woman as the perfect mate for man. In His image. And as I paged through the Bible, the synchronistic ways of God had me find a chapter about marriage. That a man in marriage is not to leave his wife and a woman in marriage is not to leave her man. And here we are. Oh, God, you are so magnificent!"

"We have a lot of forgiveness to ask for. You might be the 'cause of the effect' in the children's eyes. But really, it's both of us that deserted each other. Souls lost and then we are found!"

Julian remarks, "And now we have other carnage to consider, too. Frank and Joni!"

"Molly wants to help with that entanglement. I think we have some understanding that we just worked through. You feel comfortable and ready to approach the kids?"

Julian, "I wouldn't say that. Willing would be a better word."

The dawn light is starting to filter into the cabin. The prism rainbow colors from the crystal hanging in the east-facing window above the bed is decorating the west wall. We get up from the couch. Julian pulls the shade down. I shut off the lamp light and start humming Bob Dylan's song "I'll Be Your Baby Tonight."

# Chapter 7: A Day of Reckoning

"I'll call George and Dillion to see when they can fly home. We'll make arrangements with Susie so she can pick them up at the airport. You know Susie's going to want to see you right away. She'll probably be pissed that I didn't tell her you had been found. Especially since it took a while for me to actually find you!"

"Jim, I'm feeling nervous and even scared. The family scar. The wound that will need healing."

"How about we keep that Hawaiian prayer for forgiveness as our mantra? You remember it."

"Yes, I've said it so many times over the last five years. I'm sorry, please forgive me, thank you, I love you."

"That's beautiful, Julian. I feel so fortunate to have found you. I didn't care how we might relate to each other again. I was just so glad you were alive."

Julian smiles, takes a deep breath, and releases the exhale with a big sigh. We hug and hold each other for a while. Melting into each other's embrace.

Julian releases from the hug. "I'll walk you back to your car."

When I get back to my cabin, there is a lot to think about. There is this thought of planning what to say and how to best announce the news that Julian is alive. That her being alive will be enough to short fuse any animosity that the children might have when Julian walked out on the family. My ego is very strong right now. I need to get into a different state of mind. It's such a nice day that I decide to sit out on the deck and gaze at the mountains, the sky, and feel the breeze. I want to listen to the sounds of nature and get out of my head space right now. So what I do is practice silencing the mind. I breathe as if I am breathing from the heart. I inhale and exhale . . . . I am silently saying "Sat" during the inhale and "Nam" during the exhale, then I find myself doing Hum in Sa out then I in Am out, and slowly it's just breath.

The Magpie is squawking
The wind is rustling in the tree tops
The Creek is gurgling
The Sun is warming

I open my eyes
And I see the collective nature
Of consciousness

I slowly go in the house and phone Susie. She picks up on the third ring. "Hi, Dad! How are you?"

"Howdy. I'm doing good. How about you? Are you done working today?"

"Yes, I was just going out to get something to eat."

"I've got some great news . . . ." and then the emotions kick in. My voice trembles. I am holding onto - a full out - bawl. "I found Mom!"

"What……? Where, how, when?!"

I am shaking with emotion, "She's in the valley, staying on a ranch. It's a long story. I wanted you to know. It's hard for me to talk right now."

Susie sounds apprehensively elated. "Oh, Dad, are you alright?"

I can tell she's about to cry and I let her know, "I have tears of joy. I'm choked up, just letting you know. We have been together for several days now!"

"And you didn't tell us! Did you call George and Dillion?"

"Not yet. You're the first to know. We needed some time together. We needed to reconnect. I wasn't sure how to break the news."

"Is Mom okay? How come she's not with you?"

"She's working at a ranch in TM Basin, gardening for the dude ranch kitchen. We want to have a family gathering. Get us all together, a long overdue reunion."

"Wow, you're going to keep me in suspense? I want to come over today. I want to see Mom!"

"I hear you. We need to see how soon George and Dillion can fly in. How about you call Dillion, I'll call George? I'll see when I can get ahold of mom and bring her over here, at the cabin."

"Dad, you alright? I'm in shock. I don't know how to react right now! Like, what's the story?"

"There's a lot to dive into. We are definitely in unfamiliar territory."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Let me call Dillion! I'll call you back as soon as I do. Then I'm coming your way."

"I love you, Susie."

I immediately call our eldest son. "Hi, George? You there?"

"Dad, hi, I'm driving. What's up?

"I found Mom, alive and well!"

"Wait, let me pull over. Okay, you what?"

"I found mom! Living on a ranch in TM Basin!"

"Say it again....."

"I found mom! We're together."

"Let me talk to her."

"Well, she's not with me right now. She's working. I wanted to see when you can fly into Bozeman. Susie is calling Dillion. Once we get your flight dates, we want a family reunion. There's a lot to discuss."

"Oh man, this is a lot to digest right now. Yeah, should I bring the whole family?"

"That would be nice. But right now, your presence is enough!"

"How are you doing, Dad?"

"Talking to you and Susie, I'm pretty emotional right now."

"That is an amazing miracle, so I can imagine what you're going through. I'll call you back. I'll take the rest of the day off. Get a reservation. I'll let you know when I get a flight. Tell Mom I love her. WOW."

"I love you, George."

*George - I am the oldest son. The firstborn. The love that Mom and Dad gave me from birth and through my growing years will always be felt deeply in my heart. I am so fortunate to have parents that gave it their all. Maybe they could have done some things different, but now that I am a parent I can see the huge learning curve they went through. I am so happy for Dad. And there is nothing I can possibly think of right now or feel that does not have joy written all over it. What amazes me is how God operates. Even if one does not believe in God, how is it then that miraculous events happen when one least expects it? How is it that when we "let go," as the saying goes, our life changes for the better? How is it that our life is full of lessons, and if we are paying attention we move forward with our life in gratitude for the lessons learned? What was mom's favorite saying . . . ? "Hear, O Universe, I am grateful!" I know she was always grateful, whether she was suffering or not. Oh, dear God, Creator of this universe, I am grateful. It is time to celebrate with family!*

I get a call from Dillion. "Hey, Dad, I just got off the phone with Susie. How are you doing? Man, what a surprise! Unbelievable! I am looking at flights. How did you find Mom!"

"It's a long story. This guy in my men's group is a missing persons investigator. He saw a photo of Mom that I showed him and he knew where she was at."

Dillion, "Where's she at?!"

"A ranch up TM Basin. Near where I ski! Mom and I have a lot to share when we're altogether. Contact your brother so you guys can coordinate a date when you'll be here."

"Yeah, Dad, I love you. Give Mom a hug when you see her next. This is unbelievable!"

"I will. I love you, Dillion."

*Dillion - I am the middle son. Whoa, as much as I am happy about Mom being found, there's going to be a lot of explaining to do on her part. What drove her to split? Was she just tired of the family life? What was Mom and Dad not sharing with us about their relationship? Maybe I was too busy growing up, taking their relationship to each other and to us for granted? What did I not see? I wonder how they are reconciling after five years of separation. Of course Dad and all of us were wondering if she was alive or dead for the past five years. I sadly had written Mom off. I can't say I was bitter since I feared for her life. Now I am in awe. What was her life like without our family dynamic? Was it something Dad did to drive her away? Gosh, a family gathering, to meet Mom, not as I knew her, but now somewhat of a stranger. It's with trepidation that I am excited to see her. What will our reunion be like?*

My phone rings and it's Susie. "I talked to Dillion."

"So did I. He called me. So him and George will figure out a date."

"I got an urgent call from work. I can't come down today. You alright? You want to come to Boz tonight?"

"No, thanks for asking. I'll probably head over to the ranch. I'll let you get back to work. I love you. Talk to you later."

*Susie - I am the youngest of three. So busy in my life, I want to be there for dad. I wonder what he is going through, after five years. I can't be pissed at Mom, really; I thought she might be dead, even though not a trace of her was ever found. Maybe she was kidnapped and taken to another state. Ugh, I can't bring up those old emotions right now. The first few years were full of nightmares and tears. Then I had to watch Dad become a shell of himself. It amazed me how he kept his faith that she'd be found, alive and well. He used to tell me he just knew by some kind of Divine intervention that they would be reunited. I wonder where he garnered enough positive energy, despite his depression. Where did that inner strength come from? Mom, I hope you realize how much this man loves you. I hope you realize what you mean to him! And to me. You raised me into my womanhood. I trusted you, and appreciated your love and watchful eye. I sure hope I wasn't the cause of your disappearance. I cry tears of joy and confusion. I want to understand what happened. Will you tell me your story? All of it? Woman to woman, we must talk.*

Whew, I realize the call to the children took a lot out of me. The thought of dealing with all the consequences that Julian and I put in motion. I think of what we are really responsible for, or is it whom we are responsible to? I think I really need a therapist. I am grateful for Molly and Joseph. I feel confident that they will be here for guidance. And Nirvana with the Kundalini aspect and Megan introducing our class to the Ekam phenomena. Hummm, maybe Julian and I can investigate that whole scene together. I head over to the Wildflower for some lunch.

## Chapter 8: Broken Hearts Need Repair

When I get to the Bakery, there's a bunch of people coming out. I head to the counter, and the server, Madeleine (she's the one that knows about the special donuts), nods her head to the right. As the group of people pass by, I see Joni, bowed over, head sunk into her arms on the table. She looks like a drunk who had one too many.

"Maddie, how long has she been here?"

"Gosh, a few hours. She was crying for a while. We all decided to leave her be."

Faintly I hear a Beatles song on the speaker system. "Maddie, can you crank that up a notch and put it on repeat?"

"Oh my God, you're going to make me cry, Jim."

When I find myself in times of
trouble Mother Mary comes to me
Speaking words of wisdom, let it be
And in my hour of darkness
She is standing right in front of
me
Speaking words of wisdom, let
it be Let it be, let it be
Let it be, let it be
Whisper words of wisdom, let it be
And when the broken-hearted
people
Living in the world agree
There will be an answer, let it be
For though they may be parted

There is still a chance that they will
see
There will be an answer, let it be
Let it be, let it be
Let it be, let it be
Yeah, there will be an answer, let it
be Let it be, let it be
Let it be, let it be
Whisper words of wisdom, let it be
Let it be, let it be
Ah, let it be, yeah, let it be
Whisper words of wisdom, let it
be
And when the night is cloudy
There is still a light that shines on
me
Shine on until tomorrow, let it be
I wake up to the sound of music,
Mother Mary comes to me
Speaking words of wisdom, let
it be Let it be, let it be
Let it be, yeah, let it be
Oh, there will be an answer, let it
be Let it be, let it be
Let it be, yeah, let it be
Whisper words of wisdom, let it be

*Paul McCartney*

I take a deep breath, then another, and slowly head over to Joni, the floor is creaking. She doesn't even know anybody is approaching. I kneel and place my hand on her bent-over shoulder.

*Joni - I feel a very familiar touch. I want that gentle touch to embrace me. It's so familiar, and in my stupor, I slowly lift my head and look over my left shoulder. Through blurry eyes I see him . . . . "Jim, Jim, oh, where hast thou been?" What a crazy thing to say. Am I acting or mocking? No, no, I am craving his love. I am craving for Jim to be my man. I am so mixed up. How on earth did Julian . . . ? How did she jump into this scene! My new life, with Jim . . . shattered!*

"Joni, come on, let me get you out of here."

"And where are we going to go? You found her. You belong to her."

"I am going to take you to my cabin. We are going to walk in the pine forest. We are going to heal the grief together."

*And with that, I feel Jim rising from the floor and grabbing me under my left arm, gently lifting me. His touch is what I desire and instinctively I wrap my arms around him and all I know to do is look up into his compassionate eyes and kiss him long and strong. He breaks off the kiss and as I cling to him I say, "Don't let me go, don't let me go." We make our way to the door. I am leaning into Jim, and with the entire kitchen staff gawking, we exit.*

Frank is in the high country looking for a few cows.

*Frank - I just can't seem to get my mind off of her. Damn, after five years we are supposed to break it off? I wonder what Jim and Julian have been discussing. Maybe it's not going to work out for them to get back together. The other day before she went back to the cabin . . . what was that all about? We laughed, hugged, and kissed. She seemed willing. Damn, hard not to get emotional when investigating a missing person, but I never knew until Jim showed me the photo. And why'd she wait until he found her? Hell, I'm not going to find these cows today! Come on, Smitty, let's go find Julian.*

Julian is in one of the greenhouses gathering vegetables for the ranch kitchen.

*Julian - There, that should be enough Swiss chard for whatever is on the menu tonight. Thank you, plants, for your continued growth. Agh, what else did Matthew need? Oh, yeah, some zucchini. There you are. Wow, some nice ones today. Smooth-skinned and thick. Oooo . . . Where is my mind going? What took me and Jim so long to reconnect? I just needed time to find myself. Me, me, me, then the relationship with Frank had to evolve. How'd I let that happen? Does he feel my love for Jim? How would he? Why did I let him caress me the other night? God, I keep getting these mixed messages. What kind of energy do I keep sending? Why does love have to come to a physical need? I wonder how Jim is handling the situation with Joni? What was their love like? How involved did they get?*

Frank guides his horse, Smitty, back to the barn. There are some tourists checking in for the dude ranch experience. He's taking care of Smitty and sees Julian going into the kitchen with her bag of garden groceries.

*Frank - I know I am fooling myself. I am not being straight forward with myself. From that first day when I picked up Julian, walking along the highway, I knew I was meeting a woman in distress. I know that my silence, not to ask her what had happened even though I had an intuition that something was not right, was unbecoming of me. From that day on, my acts of kindness towards Julian had an ulterior motive. I have lived with this lie because I had such a craving for female companionship. Even though Julian was willing to form a relationship with me, Julian was not willing to talk of her past. I sensed that there may have been someone else in her life, but I wasn't willing to inquire. I was so focused on my need, my craving, and I knew better. I am guilty and still I want Julian. I want, I want, I want! I was a*

*preacher once. I followed the word of the Bible, the way of Jesus. When I lost my wife, I lost my faith.*

As Julian leaves the kitchen after delivering the vegetables to the ranch chef, she is met by Frank.

"Frank! I thought you were looking for cows today."

"I was, but I couldn't stop thinking about you. I'll walk you back to the cabin. I need to talk about us."

# Chapter 9: The Pine Forest

*Joni - We get to Jim's car. I am still clinging to him. I am so grateful that he is taking me to his cabin, to the forest. "To heal our grief?" Is that what he said? I don't want to heal grief I want him. I want him with me. I reach for his free right hand as he is driving. He allows me to grasp it, his hand, my lifeline right now. I chased this man down, not because I knew him, heck, I have no clue about his life these past twenty some years. I was chasing a brief encounter with a man that was different than any I have known. And now that I have gotten to know him this past year and a half, I do not want to give him up to any woman. Even his wife. I have no compass to go by. I am rudderless in an ocean of love. And I don't even know what love is!*

I am feeling Joni's desperation right now. Instead of going to the cabin, I turn up Big Creek Drainage. I need two hands on the wheel to navigate this narrow gravel road through the pines along the creek. I squeeze Joni's hand and release our hand hold.

I glance at Joni and ask, "Joni, no matter what your circumstance might be, do you feel joy? Or do you find comfort from someone else's energy to fulfill that longing, to be joyful?"

*Joni - Where is this leading too? Oh man, he is going to go deep with me. My circumstance is that I felt joy with us, with our connection, with our love making, when you massage me.* "Jim, this is a loaded question. No, I am not feeling joy. I sense that you are trying to ease my pain, and yeah, I am in a suffering state right now, as you say. And joy is that beautiful state you expect me to just switch over too. It's not that easy. You can see I am broken, unfixable, if that's what you are trying to do."

I park the car at the trail head.

"So why are we going for this hike right now?"

"Well, I have been reading about flower essences to include into my massage practice. Pine essence apparently is a remedy that alters our perception of self-imposed responsibility. It liberates us from emotional paralysis. And it

releases the tendency to judge ourselves."

Joni hasn't quite settled down and asks, "Where'd you read this?"

"An article by Mary Ann Antenucci. She's a life coach and one of her modalities is using flower essences. Come on, let's take a hike. It's a gorgeous trail." We get out of the car and start up the trail.

Joni says, "So is this remedy for your benefit or mine?"

"Maybe for both of us? I am feeling responsible for your emotional world right now. And I definitely have emotions I am not able to connect with right now. To be honest with you, it seems as if I am being manipulative, I want to feel genuine compassion, and I am feeling thwarted by thoughts of indifference to the whole situation."

"Okay, so tell me that night we had dinner and love making. I was sure at the time that it wasn't a fling, a one-night stand. I really felt your physical love in a way I never have from anybody else. What did you feel at the time?"

"Gosh, I was in the flow of life. The attraction I had for you became very present. I felt a oneness in love that's hard for me to explain. I can throw a lot of feeling words out there; however, they won't justify what I felt. This melting into your being, your soul. A connection beyond words that I hadn't felt since Julian."

"Yeah, so that memory is what has me in this desperate state. When you told me you found Julian, I feared I'd lose you. Tell me, what have you and Julian worked out? Are you going to get back together?"

I stop and turn to look directly at Joni. She looks so brave right now, on the outer. Intuitively, I sense her insecurity.

"Joni, Julian and I still have our relationship to straighten out. And it's not just with us. We have explaining to do with our children. We have our personal selves to deal with. And I have our relationship to consider. Julian has her relationship with Frank. There's a lot of emotional repair to heal. What I can truthfully tell you is that we are grateful to be reunited. We are grateful to be soulmate lovers again. I am sorry if it pains you to hear that. Please forgive me. Thank you. I love you for who you are."

Joni is starting to tear up. I bring her to me. I hug her with a hand on her back and a hand in her hair. Her head is in the crock of my neck. I can feel the dampness there, from her tears. I can smell the pine forest. The aroma is strong. My mind registers a thought of what or whom am I accountable for. I gently rub Joni's back and utter a statement, "My intention is to have a relationship with you as a soulmate. We are connected for a reason. Part of some kind of collective consciousness. I feel your pain right now. I hope you feel my real compassion and empathy for you and us."

I feel Joni gently rubbing my back now. There's some kind of mutual energy, and understanding between us. What is it? We kiss…. It is hard for me to let go too. How does one stay detached from this intensity. Am I kidding myself that I can control my heart felt intentions and not feel the magnetism of physical attraction when it's mutual?

"Okay, Jim, I'll be okay. As hard as it is, I want to respect your position. I watched what you went through modeling for our class. You have been so courageously honest with everyone. God, how I want to support you now. Honestly, I am in a dual state of mind. You sharing about the physical as the final destination, yeah, I hear you. I know that is my suffering now. So in answer to your first question, right now I feel empty and envious. That's not the answer you're looking for, I'll guess."

"No, I did not expect this to be a smooth transition. I do want to share something I recently read in the Bible. It was about the apostle Paul. No matter where he was or what circumstance he was in, he felt joy when he thought of Jesus. And not just Jesus as a physical entity. Rather that God gave him, and all of us, the power of the Holy Spirit. So he had a belief that gave him joy. Let's go to my cabin. I'll give you a massage. A therapeutic massage" I say this with a raised eyebrow and stern look.

Joni gives me her great smile, sniffs. and nods. "Thanks, JC! I believe in you, us, that gives me joy!"

# Chapter 10: Back at the Cabin

*Julian - We, Frank and I, start our walk back to the cabin. It feels a little awkward for me. I'm waiting for him to start, to say something, anything. Silence, just the sound of the breeze and a few birds chirping.*

"Frank, you wanted to talk? So what is it you want to say?"

"I am confused about you and Jim and where I stand."

We are approaching the cabin and I'm not so sure that I want him thinking that he can come into the cabin. However, it doesn't seem like we're going to get anywhere in a hurry. The big lie I created five years ago is coming back to haunt me. The circumstances of returning karma can be painful. I am not in a position to defend any of my previous actions. This I own up to. God, I am so fortunate that Jim is so willing to understand my conundrum. It seems the easy way out is for me to remain here with Frank and let Jim have his relationship with Joni. Agh, what would that be like? I am realizing how much Jim fulfills my needs. I see so much growth in him. And Molly and Joseph have definitely had an effect on him. I wonder who else

he's connected with in his new relationships. I can tell he's chosen to connect with his feminine side. Gosh, how lucky is that, for me, and for our relationship? He is getting in touch with some feelings and spiritual aspects. How can I continue in my relationship with Frank without creating any vulnerability for Jim? Maybe Jim has worked on his insecurities. Hummm . . . how about my insecurities? Joni, I wonder what's going on there? How will Jim and Joni define their relationship?

Frank opens the door and walks right in!

"I'll put on some coffee, Frank. I'm guessing we'll be a while? Once you start talking?"

Frank responds, "Yep, I reckon we will be a while."

Julian reaches in the back of a cupboard and pulls out a bottle of whiskey. "What you got there Julia?"

"Truth serum. I'm going to add it to our coffee and we're going to talk. And from now on, please call me Julian. I am Julian."

"Okay, cut me some slack. It's been five years that I've known you as your alias."

Julian abruptly puts the cups and whiskey bottle on the table.

Frank looks at her. "I have never seen you like this before. What's going on?"

"What's going on? What do you think? Maybe you can help me out here! Maybe you need to come up with some feelings. What do you do at that men's group?"

Julian pours the coffee and adds a shot of whiskey to each cup.

"Whoa, slow down, little lady. I do have feelings for you. I love you and am having a hard time letting you go, back to Jim. It's not quite what I expected you to do."

"Okay, I'm sorry, Frank. I am feeling a little tense and overwhelmed." Julian blows on the hot cup of Irish coffee, takes a hardy sip, and continues. "You must accept the fact that my partnership with Jim is a lot stronger than you might realize or want to believe."

"Does that mean this conversation is over? Our relationship wasn't good enough for you?"

"Frank, listen to me, please. Love in a relationship needs nurturing. And relationships and partnerships are always put through a test of time. In the end, with two souls dedicated to the power of the union, they find a way to move towards the light."

"I'm not sure I am following your thinking!"

"Let me continue. My partnership is with Jim. It does not mean that you and I can't have a beautiful relationship. Both need nurturing for different reasons."

Frank responds, "I don't think I can love you while you are still loving

Jim."

"Let's take physical sex out of the equation. Can you still love me? How might that feel? Just the thought right now. What do you feel? Disappointed? Rejected? What?"

"Well, yeah disappointed is a good word, I mean feeling. And cheated . . ."

"Cheated is more of an evaluation. That's what you're thinking. And us maintaining a friendship might be too painful, for both of us."

"Yes, I see what you are saying. Truth be told, I feel resentment towards Jim right now."

"Yeah, we have put quite a lot into our relationship. You have been kind to me; you've given me solace when I needed comforting. You've loved me and I acknowledge that."

Frank is looking bleak right now. Julian reaches across the table and gently places her hand over his.

"I'm sorry, Frank, I really am. I feel your pain. And it pains me to be telling you my truth. I didn't know how you'd react. It's all a blur right now. I've got my children to connect with too. I don't have a clue what that will be like. Oh, Frank . . ." And with that, Julian is starting to tear up.

Frank's reaction is true compassion, as he puts his strong arms in an embrace that comforts me once more. I can sense that he wants to spend the night and take comfort with my body. I can feel his desire so strongly and I don't want the situation to escalate into that kind of love. It feels good to be hugged. He knows that I am in pain too. I have neglected my morality and it is fueling my confusion. Where was it five years ago! Back then and even now I feel so lonely and scared. I needed inclusion and participation back then from Jim and instead of requesting it I gave up. Frank gave me the consideration I needed. Jim would have too. He'd done it before, and if my moral compass was working I know he would have heeded my call for wanting to matter. I let the whole family down. I know what family needs, dependability from both parents.

"Frank, thank you for your tenderness. Please, leave now. I need to gather myself and I do not want you spending the night."

And with a sullen look, Frank takes one big gulp of his coffee and grabs the whiskey. He's gone, just like that. Was I rude? Did I read him right? Oh, God, you gave me my destiny. Will you forgive me too? How does that work, if you gave us the power of the Spirit, and your Son, and you are the Trinity, and you reside in us, in me. Is it my Divine soul that I need ask for forgiveness? Am I forgiving myself so my Divine can forgive me? I need your strength and support right now. I need to know Your love. Let me be free of all suffering. Let me be bathed in the Light.

# Chapter 11: The Sculpture and the Sculptress

Susie calls, "Hey, dad, looks like Dillion and George have their flights figured out. They'll be coming in on Thursday. I'll pick them up at the airport and we'll head to the valley on Friday."

"That'll work."

"Dad, any chance that you and Mom might come to Boz before then? I want to see her!"

"Yeah, I'll find out. I should see her today."

"Dad, how are you doing?"

"I am feeling a lot of empathy for Mom and myself. We spent a whole night talking about abandonment issues. It's best that we talk about it when we're all together."

"Honestly, Dad, I'm just glad she is alive and well. Send her my love."

"She'll appreciate your love."

I decide to call Molly and ask if she is available to talk later today. It's a definite yes and I drive to Bozeman. When I get there, I decide to swing by the Coffee Hut. I'm sitting at my customary table and see Jerry coming through the door. He looks around and gives me a nod, grabs a coffee, and heads over to the table.

"Hey, Jerry, how's it going? I haven't seen you for a while."

"Yeah, yeah, it has been a while. I miss you at the men's group. You haven't come the last few meetings. What's going on? You still in?"

"Yes, I'll probably start coming again. Jerry, I found my wife. I am spending time getting reacquainted with her and our relationship."

"Wow, that's wonderful, Jim! Where, how'd you find her? Man, what's that been like?"

"The beautiful side is us being reunited after five years. I found her because I showed Frank a photo of her one day. Frank, Molly, and Joseph investigate missing persons, I guess as a community service. Anyway, Frank saw the photo and next thing I know, at the last sketch class, as we're all hugging each other, Molly drops a bomb - whispers in my ear, 'I know where she is.' Do you believe that? How on earth does that happen? The most difficult aspect is that we have both been involved in other relationships. I with Joni, Julian, that's my wife, with Frank.

So go figure, we have a lot to untangle. There's a lot of forgiving and abandonment issues, too. So it's not an easy situation."

We both nervously shift in our chairs and sip some coffee. We look at each other not knowing what to say. Finally, I "break the ice."

"Jerry, before I ever met you, I was a pretty quiet guy. You seem to be that way too. I have felt your quiet energy since I've known you through the art class and the men's gathering. Is that true?"

"Yes, you have me pegged correctly. I'm sure that's what might have been the reason Gerry and I didn't go through with marriage. She was vivacious and I was subdued. Sometimes as I observe others it's hard for me to want to participate. Either the conversation seems mundane or the alpha male in the room is too domineering for me to want to engage in conversation."

"I hear you. It's very hard for me to connect with people, especially when I sense that I'm not able to experience life. If my autonomy to live life experientially is thwarted by 'you should,' 'don't do that,' 'right,' 'wrong,' or any other put-down, my ego gets bruised and I get into the 'fight or flight' mentality. I feel hurt and appalled being treated like a child. I tend to shut down. The domineering person has an effect on me."

Jerry remarks, "Oh yeah, I'd rather be the observer. I feel uninspired to want to participate. I just go through the motions just to appease someone's ego. I don't share much of myself with others. I've gotten to know you enough that I feel safe to tell you that right now. I am going out on the limb here. The spirit is moving me right now. I just want you to consider that God has your back. You are right where you need to be right now. Just trust that whatever happens is for your best interest."

"Wow, Jerry, I never realized you had faith in God. I keep referencing the Divine, my Divine self, my higher self as God within me. And I get confused sometimes. Like if I am made in God's image, then I am God?"

"Well, that's where you're at in your journey. For me, God is my anchor. He loves me for who I am. Maybe, if you set your ego aside, you might consider that God has given you the power of the Holy Spirit. That is the connection to what you call the Divine. When I said the spirit is moving me right now, I was being guided by the Holy Spirit to speak of His truth."

We sit silently for a while. We both lower our eyes, and take a sip of coffee. When I look up, Jerry is looking at me.

"Jerry, that day when Joni and I saw you at the Wildflower and I went to ski and Joni reached out to you with empathy, was she able to help you at all?"

"Yes, I received a lot of compassion. She was able to encourage me to go to my heart and feel the pain and fear I was hanging onto. We did some roleplaying. She took on Gerry's role as a dominant woman. A lot of what we just talked about surfaced. It really was helpful to see the female perspective."

"So were you able to visit your past and see what experiences you might have had that triggers your feelings now?"

"What do you mean?"

"I am beginning to recognize how growing up if I was criticized, my self-criticism would put me into a state of alienation. I would want to retreat and fall into depression. If I play that forward, it's like watching a rerun of a movie! In the yoga I do with Nirvana, we talk about the suffering state or beautiful state. So now when I recognize alienating myself, I'll look at what's causing that feeling. Then I can go to a loving state. A compassionate state. I think that's the wisdom you just gave me when you mentioned 'God being my anchor.' The image of kindness, joy, or loving who I am and what I can become when I choose joy over anything negative."

"Hey, I like that. It fits in with some of what Joni shared with me. Wow now that your wife is back into your life . . ."

"It is painful for both of us, Joni and I, and I am not sure how everything will shake out. Plus, you know the woman Frank was talking about in group that one night . . . ?"

"Don't tell me....."

"It was my wife!"

"Oh man. Hey, I gotta go, and it looks like you're about to have a lovely visitor.

Feel His blessings, Jim, and all will work out the way it is supposed to."

"Hi, Jerry, I haven't seen you in a while." That is Sadie's voice I hear!

Jerry, "I'm doing good. How about you and Jenny?"

"We are doing good also. I've been looking for this guy right here. I think I remember his name, Jim?"

By now I'm looking at Sadie, with her beautiful smile and light heart! We're all smiling, glad to run into each other. Jerry gives Sadie a hug and departs.

"So, Jim, I do believe we still have a massage date? You remember that I purchased a massage table?"

"Yes, absolutely. And I apologize for not connecting with you. I've been

busy. I found my wife!"

"Really? Wow, that's great news. So that explains why you haven't been around lately?"

"Yes, we've been busy sorting things out, reconnecting. We recognize how much our lives have changed. I slowed down, changed my lifestyle, and found a beautiful group of friends, all of you in Molly's class. I am not a two-dimensional person anymore. I was just reading a book I got from the library, *Atlas of the Heart* by Brene Brown. In one of the chapters she talks about boundaries. She mentions that 'if there's no autonomy between people, then there's no compassion or empathy, just enmeshment.' That's what was missing in my relationship with Julian, my soulmate."

"Hey, how about a couple of donuts and I'll get your coffee topped off?"

"You're on. Thank you."

As Sadie walks to the counter, I am watching her and admiring her carefree spirit. She returns with the goods and sits down.

"Okay, explain what you just said."

"You don't really know my history. We had three children while raising a family. I was a workaholic; Julian was raising the family pretty much on her own. I was either working, or when I wasn't I had other self-interest, playing like boys do. We had to work through that and things balanced out a little. However, parents give up a lot of their life if they are really dedicated to their children. Once the kids were on their own, after a while, I was back to being two-dimensional. There were no boundaries. I did not take any interest in things Julian liked to do. We were really disconnected from each other, so there was no compassion or empathy. Julian was desiring to have more time with me, with us. She left and discovered her truth, who she was as an individual, separate from a relationship. She gained her autonomy." *How many more times will I have to give this story? It's beginning to be like a contrition.*

"And what about you? I've watched you break down in class modeling. What was that all about?"

"Well, it was a combination of self-discovery and getting over the grieving for Julian. My mental processes where all over the place and I didn't know how to give myself empathy, let alone forgive Julian. The Kundalini yoga class with Nirvana had me on a spiritual journey in the sense that I was, and still am, facing my truth head- on. I am not burying my emotional world any longer. I feel more connection with my higher self, my Divine, as they say in the "spiritual world. That heart-to-heart pose and the supplicant pose with Stephanie made me realize I am my own master. I, we

have been given a gift of spirit, and once I got in touch with that, my gratitude humbled me.

"And what about her, Julian?"

"She has also been on a journey, and during the time away from me, she has discovered how to meet her needs and be who she really is as a person."

"You bring up something that I need to recognize in my relationship with Jenny. Wow, I want to make sure I don't suffocate her freedom. That's why she was so grateful that one night when we had you over for dinner, and Twister." She gives a little chuckle. "I understand better now how compassion works. Being aware of the other person's feelings and needs. Feeling them heart-to-heart. That's what Jenny did that night, right?"

"Yeah, that was so spontaneous, and I know we all felt the deep love of the moment as one."

"So about a massage date . . . ?"

"How about me bringing Julian and I'll pack a table, and we can do four-way massage, feel different pressures . . . ?"

"And she will know where you are and whom you're with!!" Sadie laughs as she says this last statement.

*Sadie - What a lame attempt at a joke. This guy is sharing his story, and found more than his mate, and I say something like that.* "That was crazy of me to joke about, Jim. I'm guessing you are still trusting that you are back in a soulful relationship with your wife. I want to thank you for the grace you have shown Jenny and me. I want to thank you for that offer. I hope Julian is in agreement."

"I want her to meet everybody. You have all given me so much, whether you know it or not. You all have been such a support system for me. I'm sure Julian will want to meet you, too."

Sadie and I reach across the space between us and do the heart-to-heart with our hands a couple of inches from our chest. We pose like this with direct eye contact and feel the energy radiating from our hands to our hearts. I know that we are both on the same compassionate wave length. No judgements, no perceptions, just God as love!

*Joni - I just can't believe it. How is it that Julian and I have crossed paths twice and she gets the man? I need to talk to someone. Molly's the one that wants to get us all together and straighten out the predicament concerning our relationships. That's what she said at the cabin. I'll call her.*

"Hi, this is Molly."

"Hi, Molly, this is Joni. I need to talk to someone and you are it!"

"Okay, Joni, slow down a little, you're coming at me kind of hard and demanding."

"Sorry, but damn it, I am having a hard time letting go of this relationship I have been forming with Jim. You might not know this, but we have been in each other's lives before. Briefly, and it was an attraction that I thought could have led into a relationship, with some depth, until Julian showed up!"

"I was unaware of your's and Jim's past."

"It's not important right now. But I have a lot of resentment. Maybe jealousy? I don't know."

"One thing I noticed, your sketches when I paired Jim with Stephanie, you replaced Stephanie with yourself. What inspired you to do that?"

"I want him in my life. I want him to be with me. You know I have been one of his massage clients for a couple of years. He never knew that it was me. Our brief history goes back over twenty years ago. When I told him who I was and that I tracked him down once I read about the disappearance, we eventually started developing a serious relationship. So I am in pain."

"I hear you, and I think Jim feels your pain. He is a compassionate guy. Somewhere concerning his past, he has discovered parts of himself that were missing in his life. My sense is that he and Julian have a very strong and deep relationship. The fact that he did not hold onto any animosity when he found Julian tells me something about their love, a flame that can never be extinguished. I think Julian called themselves soulmate lovers. That means something."

"So what are you saying, Molly?

"You might want to take a look at what is driving a division within your heart, when relating to their situation. What would it be like if you were in Julian's place? Is there any way you can have compassion for both of them? Feel their pain? What they have set in motion both with you and Jim, and Julian with Frank. You don't think it pains them to see your pain? Jim is coming over to my studio shortly. I need to get ready."

My emotions are all over the place now. I am in self-pity. Poor me, I want to cry. I ask Molly, "Can I come too?"

I pull into Molly's driveway and see Joseph's truck parked there, next to the barn that Molly uses as her art studio. I haven't seen Joseph for a while, not since that night in the sweat lodge with Julian. The Medicine Wheel night is in my memory. I knock and open the door. Woah, the studio is an art gallery! As I enter, there is an old cash register positioned on a small counter, something you'd find in

an antique store. There are displays of Molly's art? And I see one of Arthur's bowls. I notice various other art creations with different artist names. Must be old students? There's a stairwell off to the right. I take it up and walk into a huge loft with all sorts of sculpture equipment. There's a ramp leading to another loft. I stop midway and look down. There's Molly, sculpting an image of Joseph. In a circle are sculptures of the class. Jerry (a thinker pose), Joni (in an action pose of sketching with a smile on her face), Sadie (a pose with lips moving), Jenny (with laughter), Arthur (inspecting a donabe bowl), Faye (sitting on a tree stump), Deloris (with a butterfly lit on her garden hat), Frank (serious with a cowboy hat), and Sammie (with a very feminine pose, hand holding a pencil near the right ear, looking at his sketch).

"Wow," I yelp from above. "Molly, Joseph, howdy!"

Molly invites me to where they are working, "Come on down."

"So this is your medium, Molly?"

"Yes, it is my favorite."

"Why are you doing everybody from the class? Is this going to be an art exhibit?" Molly chuckles.

"I don't know, Jim. As far as doing the class, it was an exceptional class. I've never seen such a group interacting with the model. Now that you know I am a relationship therapist, you might understand or appreciate my fascination and love I hold for each of you in this group. You all were like a small art community, and then some! Jim, I think Joni might show up. I told her you were coming. She was very upset and seemed desperate. I just want to forewarn you. It was not my plan."

"Okay, thanks. It's not an easy situation, Molly. I wonder, Joseph, if you'll have anything to say about our dilemma. And why are you hugging a bison head?"

A chuckle from Joseph. "Because I sketched you so many times as a buffalo. Molly thinks that's funny."

"Jim, there's some hot tea over in the corner, and I even got you some cinnamon donuts."

"Golly, Molly, you take such good care of me! Joseph, can you shed some Native American wisdom concerning me and Joni?"

"When she gets here, we will talk."

I go over to get some tea. I sit at a small table that's in the studio and have a look around. It is so astounding, the sculptures and their authenticity. I can really relate to my new friends. A circle of friends that have, in an indirect way, helped me develop into a new soulful being. I am so humbled, to be able to relate to others in an honest way, with no regrets, no judgements, no comparison, just me respecting the individual personalities. It is the nectar of life for me. I am so glad to have jumped back into a vibrant life, after all the grief. And the universe rewarded me once I allowed and accepted "what is".

There's a knock on the door. I can see Joni's face through the window. Molly motions her to come in. We are all staring at her. Joni surveys the room and locks eyes briefly with me and turns back to gaze at Molly. All of us are focused on Joni.

"Gosh, you all, stop it. I'll be okay. I mean, I'm not okay, at least right now. I'm suffering, and I don't want to lay the blame on anybody. I'm beginning to see it's my issue to deal with."

Molly responds, like the nurturing matriarch she is, "Your issue is our issue, Joni. Look around the circle, at the sculptures. We are a small community of souls wondering on this earth plane, seeking a higher self. We gathered and found each other in this special art class. We are all magically connected.'

*Jim - I'm flabbergasted. Oh my God. Where did that come from? Molly, is viewing her sculpture as community? I like that it reminds me of the conversation with Deloris and Faye and how they sketched a pose that Stephanie and I took.*

Joseph speaks, "We are all circling the Medicine Wheel. Think of it as an upward spiral. As we go up the spiral, we leave the past behind. We visit with the past, however; we grow from it and move forward. Toward enlightenment and freedom from the ego. We become beings of light and carry the wisdom of our past lessons to assist others on their journey."

Joni has moved towards the center of the room. I meet her there. We slowly reach out and gently hold each other's hands, in front of us. We look deeply into each other's eyes. I see our brief past history. I feel the sincerity and innocence of our union. I feel the pain. I feel love. I feel gratitude. I feel compassion. We are silent. I'm not sure how long we hold this pose. I am lost in Joni's eyes. We are in a hypnotic state.

Then Molly breaks the spell, "Joni, Jim, come back, be with Joseph and I."

We let go of each other's hands. What was that? It was reminiscent of the heart-to-heart pose with Stephanie. I wonder if Joni was going through a similar sensation. I know what I felt for myself. What I want to know is what Joni was going through or might still be experiencing.

*Joni – Jim, we do have a soul connection. I sense that you can feel my pain, my grief of losing you. You shared so much of yours, how could you not feel mine?* "Thank you, Jim, thank you for our time spent together. Friends? Can we be friends? I'm

not sure yet. It might be too painful. Physical connection is what I need with you. That evening, the best day of my life in relationship, was divine love that I experienced. How do I let go of that?"

Joseph reminds us of the journey, "Joni, you are the woman of the south in Jim's journey on the Medicine Wheel. However, his soul is tied to the woman of the north, Julian, whom he has children with. He must continue his journey up the spiral with her. You also have a spiral, and your journey has had a blessing. Divine love, which is your addiction now, is meant to nourish the soul. Receive it with reverence and you will know it forever."

# Chapter 12: The Gardner and the Cowboy

I am driving home. It's been one hell of an experience today. As I reflect on this past year, I have a sense that all that has transpired in my life, up to now, was meant for my personal growth. Once I started to pay attention to life's energy, outside of my own perception, I was ready to connect on a deeper level with others. Life has become meaningfully intense.

My car phone buzzes; it's Molly. "Jim, I want to run an idea by you real quick."

"Shoot!"

"I want to have a class reunion, one more sketch class and a celebration of you and Julian united once again. Would you consider one more pose, like the one you had with Joni today, only it will be you and Julian? Just think about it for now. I know you'll be seeing your kids tomorrow."

"Molly the therapist. You know, I think I can handle it. I'll ask Julian and you can pick the date."

"Thanks. Drive safe."

I pull into the ranch and pass the ranch house. I see Frank's truck. I continue on to Julian's cabin. I park and walk along the path to the cabin. When I get there, Julian is gone. It's still mid afternoon. Maybe she's working at the greenhouse. I survey her little garden here, at the cabin. The sun is feeling good. I check out the lounge chair and decide to get a little snooze. I close my eyes as the last cloud floats on by. Like the last thought, it appears and then it's gone. I am feeling the warmth of the sun, and the gentle warm breeze as I doze off. When I awake, the sun is lower, and there's still no sign of Julian. I go into the cabin and notice some paper and pen on the table. I take a peek and it looks like Julian's been journaling. I look at parts and can see that she is having some fear of meeting the children, the tension between her and Frank, and the regret she has abandoning me. It's amazing that when returning karma comes to jolt us, the consequences of our actions can be heavy. I decide to check the greenhouse and walk over to the vacation cabin lodge. Nobody in the greenhouse. I walk into the kitchen through the back door and ask for Scott, the chef. He comes.

"Hey, Scott, have you seen Julian?"

"Yeah, she and Frank were on horseback. He has a hunting camp up in the hills, a couple of miles from here. Up Slough Draw. There's a road and trail. I don't know where the camp is located."

"Alright, thanks, Scott."

I wish I would have called Julian before coming here. I head back to the cabin, thinking what was the reason Julian decided to go up there with Frank? Especially now, she sure is trusting that everything with Frank will come to a resolve. I am back at my car and happen to look west toward the draw Scott talked about. I notice in the distance of the pine-covered draw a string of smoke, from an open pit campfire? My intuition is up and I decide to hike up towards the smoke. The grizzlies are out and have been seen on the ranch. I pack my gun and pack some snacks and start my trek with the campfire as my guide. Dusk has settled in and it is getting dark out. The hike isn't too bad, mostly a well-used trail that the guests must use. I climb to a high spot to see if I can see the smoke, get my bearings. It doesn't appear to be far from where I'm at. I go across the road and up a small incline. I see the camp tent and a couple of horses. As I approach the tent, I hear voices.

"Come on, Frank, stop it. I don't want to..."

It's Julian's voice.

As I burst through the tent flap, I see that Frank is straddled over the top of Julian, her legs pinned down with his feet. He is trying to fondle Julian's breast. SHIT, he's got her shirt unbuttoned. I shout, "Frank!"

Startled, Frank rolls off and Julian is looking at me. She scrambles up off the camping mat and comes by my side, hanging onto me. Frank looks up from his sitting position. I follow his eyes, knowing he sees that I'm packing. He puts his hands over his eyes and starts to weep. "I'm sorry, Julian and Jim, I'm so sorry."

I recall my confusion of love satisfying my carnal desire. It took me years to honor love making as a sacred act between two souls. I take a deep breath, then another, before I speak . . . .

"Frank, what were you thinking concerning the circumstances? Was it out of desperation or anguish?"

Julian, "What has me pissed is that you had no consideration for my choice. I am trying to come to a mutual resolve with you, Frank. What you just did is repulsive."

Frank looks up. We can see the confusion in his eyes. "I am truly sorry, Julian. Please forgive me."

I can see that Julian's still shook up; however, she is taking command of the room. "Do you have any candles in this tent?"

Frank mumbles, "Yeah, over there in the chest."

Julian goes over and pulls out a candle, lights it, and places it into a candle holder. She sets it on the deck and says, "Let's sit in a circle, and do some 'soul talking.' The eyes are the gateway to the heart. Come on, Frank, we're going to work this out."

Frank crawls over and I sit down. The candle is in the middle of our little circle. Julian puts out a hand to each of us, and then Frank and I follow her lead and hold hands. There is direct eye contact between Frank and Julian now. It reminds me of the pose I just took with Joni. It was intense. I am wondering what they are thinking.

Courageously Julian starts, "I am not a possession. Just because we had intimate times in the past does not mean you have free rein to do what you like. Especially forcefully. That's what I meant when I said you did not consider me when you aggressively started coming onto to me, Frank."

"Julian, when you agreed to come up here with me for the night, I got a mixed message. I . . ."

"Ugh, men, you had one thing on your mind. Did you ever think that maybe I wanted to console you? You are obviously grieving about my choice to reunite with my life long partner, or what we like to refer to as soulmate. All I was wanting to do was have a private time with you. I wanted to talk and have a mutual understanding of where to go henceforth. Maybe I was naive in thinking that we can still have a friendship. I trusted that you would understand and be willing to see another way we could stay connected. I thought that I communicated that to you. So what was the mixed message?"

"I am having a hard time with the thought that our relationship is ending. I love you and want to have you as my partner."

"Is it painful for you that Jim is my life partner? What are you feeling?"

"Yes, it is painful. I am feeling loss, of someone I love."

"Can you love me without the intimacy? Was our relationship based on a couple of intimate, sexual encounters? Or was there more to our relationship? When there's no suffering, all that's left is love. Love of self and love for others."

"Well, sure there is more. Our times together were mostly good conversation and fun. And just the feeling I have for you. I can't explain it, all my emotions. I thought we had a chance to make a life together, here on the ranch."

"Frank, that was your perception of what it might be like. Next thing you

know, there's expectations, followed by manipulation and then control. All suffering states."

Now Frank turns his attention to me. We make eye contact. This is a tough situation for all of us. All I can do right now is to have the eye contact. I don't have a clue of what to say. The last thing he needs is me talking in some idealistic manner. Wow, Julian was on point in my opinion. I can recall many a night and conversation between us over the years that had a similar twist. All that we had to work out to relate better and not give up on each other. Julian definitely pushed me towards truth, I ate a lot of "humble pie" and learned a lot about myself. I can see that Julian also knows herself better too. And she has an inner strength that is stronger than ever before. She mentioned to me that she's changed some of her perspectives about herself. Now after five years I can tell it's not going to be entirely a bed of roses. We'll be testing each other out.

Suddenly Frank talks, "I don't know what your history is with Julian, why the attraction is still so strong between you and her. Even after five years. I guess I figured wrong. When a woman dumps a man, in my book it's over, finished. You know, Jim, in the men's group and this past year I have gotten to like you. I didn't mean to do any harm here. My emotions got the best of me in a physical way. I had feelings for Julian before I discovered her as an unsolved missing person case. When I signed on as a missing persons investigator, I committed to not be emotionally involved with the people we are working with. I didn't even know that you or Julian was a case until you showed me her photo. I really am sorry to both of you for what I just did."

I still don't know what to say. I don't have anything to add to this situation. Julian couldn't have said it better. Frank felt genuine remorse. I have the same situation going on with Joni. Finally, I say, "I think Julian couldn't have said it better," and I look over at Julian, "when you pointed out what leads to a suffering state of mind. When we get beyond the suffering, what's left is joy and love. We have all experienced the suffering tonight."

Julian has an idea. I can see something brewing as she looks at both of us men. "Okay, guys, it's getting late and I do not want to go back down below while the grizzlies might be out and about. So I have an idea, that maybe we can lie down the bedding and sleep together, sleep being the keyword, with me in the middle. After all, I am in the middle of this drama."

Frank responds, "Ohhh, I don't know. Jim, you'd let your woman do that?"

"Frank, get your mind out of the gutter. I understand that you were a

preacher once. My sense is that deep down you know what you need to do for the betterment of the three of us."

"I'm a fallen soul. A failed man in the eyes of God. Deep down I have given up."

"Come on, Frank, this is about trust. I am trusting that you can forgive yourself so God can forgive you. You gave me *The Book of Mastery*, and in it God is the Holy Spirit and Jesus the son. He gave us the power of the spirit to reside in each one of us. So God is in us. If you can't forgive yourself then God can't forgive you. Talk to your Divine."

And with that, the situation is defused. As we lie down, I feel Julian grabbing my hand and am guessing Frank also has a hand to hold.

"You know what, guys? We are all working towards compassion. When we treat others the way we would want to be treated, then we can move to a oneness consciousness. When you think from the heart, you get love; when you think from the mind, you get thoughts. Good night, Frank. Good night, Jim"

*Jim* - I feel apprehensive about the whole situation. My ego is shattered. I keep thinking I could have handled this differently. Protected "my woman" like a knight in shining armor. Used force and humiliated Frank. Instead, I froze. I didn't know what to do or say. Julian took charge; it was her courage that changed the energy. I am still a bundle of nervous energy. How does this play out? That last remark by Frank, "You'd let your woman do that?," like I'm going to be alright to have a threesome relationship. Where are my thoughts going? Trust Jim, trust have faith like Jerry said, trust that whatever happens is in my best interest. Let go, let God. I've heard that mantra before. I take some deep breaths. I slowly do my Hum, Sa with my inhalations and exhalations. I close my eyes. I breathe as if I am breathing through my heart. I send a clear message of love to Julian. I want her to feel my trust and empathy.

*Frank* - What have I done? After what I realized the other day, I go ahead and cave into my craving for love. Even though I know the circumstance. I feel shame and regret. And what comes out of my mouth is so calloused. I can't blame them if they no longer want anything to do with me. I have taken a wayward path of lost faith and honor. There's no graceful way to reconcile this situation. I have failed my oath. I let myself be controlled by wanton desire. I release my hand from Julian's and roll over on my side. I want to isolate myself. This will be a hard night's sleep.

*Julian* - What are my "brothers" thinking? What thoughts might be coursing through their minds? Can they or will they check in with their hearts? How is it that we compete instead of support each other? I feel this underlying current of confused energy. I want to be supportive of both men. I want to have meaningful relationships, with men or women. I ask you, Lord, how can I be liberated from conditional love when all I seek is friendship and fellowship? I know I have faltered, and let physical desire enter into my relationship with Frank. I weakened and became comfortable with my life without Jim and family. I ask for forgiveness from my heart. I am grateful to have Jim back in my life. How I must be hurting him right now. And Frank, why did I let friendship turn into something more than what I wanted? Show me, Lord, how can I reconcile this situation. Guide me now, back to my marriage with Jim. I truly believe we were meant for each other. And somehow, you have this plan for us. You have a plan of our life together.

# Chapter 13: Family Reunion

The three of us, Frank, Julian, and I solemnly ride down the mountain back to the ranch house. Julian and Frank on the mare, and I on the pack animal. Before we broke camp, Frank thanked both of us for our compassion and love. It seemed like a resolve. Where the friendship will go from here is anybody's guess. When communication is honest and honored from one individual to another and when forgiveness is achieved by all, the world is a beautiful place. The lower basin opens up into this expanse of meadows, high brush, and meandering streams. The high mountains, with the last of the winter snows still in deep protected crevices, are a thing of beauty. We ride in peace and friendship, at least that's my hope. Joseph enters my thoughts. His guidance and ritual made me feel strong and peaceful. The Medicine Wheel resurfaces in my mind.

When we get back to the corral, we are still in a solemn mood. "Frank and Julian, I need to ask you both what thoughts you had during the night, after we laid side-by-side. This morning when we had the three-way hug and some sincere eye contact, it seemed like a mutual exchange of compassion for our situation. I am not so sure I feel that we came to a total resolve."

Frank, "Jim, why don't you start? What thoughts did you have?"

"Okay, I'll go. I must say I felt my manhood being tested. Your off handed remark, Frank, didn't help. I love Julian so much I do not want to possess her. Julian, are who you are and I love that you take charge of your life and own your circumstances. The perception of marriage has so many nuances of how a man and women shall be with each other that individuality can be stifled. I must admit, some of my thoughts questioned how Julian and I are going to proceed as a couple. I can only trust that whatever happens is in best interest for all. 'Let thy will be done.' All I can do is have forgiveness, kindness, and gratitude that what could have happened against Julian's will didn't play out. I am still feeling nervous, since I do not control the outcome. I need to remain detached, even though I feel concerned."

"Frank?"

"You go, Julian."

"Well, I still have a lot of guilt and regret for walking out on Jim. And I am frightened by your power, Frank. My need is to be caring, nurturing, and supportive. I need consideration for my emotional and physical well-being. And safety, I want to feel safe around you, Frank, if our friendship is to continue. This is going to be painful to hear. The times we had physical love was me desiring sex more than feeling us as one. The oneness in love is what I missed most, that I experienced with Jim. And I attribute that to the many years we worked on it, and grew our relationship. I am sorry for the confused message I gave you. I am so grateful for all you've done for me, and the sex was the way I thought I could reciprocate. I deceived myself and you. That's my truth."

"I am a failed preacher and a failed man. I betrayed my vows to God when I lost my faith. I did harm to you, Julian, and you, Jim, my fellow sister and brother. I betrayed my partners, Joseph and Molly. Our agreement was not to get emotionally involved with the people we are assisting. My thoughts and actions were wrong. I feel that I cannot be forgiven. I am destined to a life of wandering in the desert."

"Whoa, Frank, stop it," this from the lips of Julian. "You are forgiven. You are not receiving our love that we offer you. Please do. You are not a failed man. You have the power of spirit within you to rise above what you perceive as unforgivable actions."

"Frank, perhaps Julian and I are messengers of forgiveness. Perhaps God is working through us for He is all forgiving. Maybe all that has transpired in the past up until now needed to happen so that you could be born again. A new man, with the courage to continue on your journey of love. Loving yourself, having compassion for others, and loving God back into your life. I just want to share with you this past year in my life. I had no idea how posing nude in front of strangers would change my life. It was as if I stood naked in front of God, and all of my past actions and thoughts, were exposed. My actions of neglect for my body temple and the well-being of others. And my thoughts, nasty thoughts of jealousy, sexual perversion, hate, being vengeful, and all that does not serve the great cause, were exposed. Right now, I believe that I was given a clean slate to start anew. I learned how to receive forgiveness with grace. You can say I was 'born again.' It's as if I had to spend five years of 'wondering in the desert,' as you put it, before I could forgive myself and find Julian. I opened my heart to all of you as a circle of friends. I gained faith and trust, compassion and wisdom from each one of you. And more than anything, I learned to gracefully receive love. Julian and I - forgiving you. This is us loving you. Can you accept our sincerity as truth and friendship?"

Humbled, Frank says, "What now, my friends?"

"Do you have a muck bucket in your tack room? Some hot water and towels?"

"Yes, why?"

"The first day when I saw Julian, the first thing I did when we came in from the garden was to wash the mud off Julian's feet. Perhaps we can wash one another's feet."

And that's what we do, in silence. First Frank dips his feet in the muck bucket. I wash his right foot and Julian the left. Then Julian dips her feet, and Frank washes her right foot and I the left. And finally Julian washes my right foot and Frank my left. After, they wipe my feet dry, we stand, peering into each other's eyes, and hold our gazes for seemingly a long time. We hold the gazes with all of the love and forgiveness we can muster, from the depths of our souls. There is emotion emanating from each of us. The energy is intense and real. The aura around us must be nuclear!

The silence is broken as I say, "May you be blessed, Frank, and may our union be strong, for we are all part of the whole. We need to go meet our grown children now. I'll see you soon, brother."

Julian moves towards Frank and gives him a heart felt hug and a kiss of friendship.

It's time to meet the children. We head to our car and leave Frank, in what I hope is a new sense of our newly formed relationship. A new start of companionship. We drive in silence and finally Julian and I arrive at my cabin. This is the first time Julian sets foot into the threshold of where we will meet with the children. They're on the way from Bozeman territory. This is where all the current family dynamics will be addressed.

Julian, "Nice, Jim, you really have a nice setting here and such a cozy cabin. I think I can see your winter ski hill from here too!"

"Yes, you can. That's one of the reasons I picked this property out. Do you need something to drink?"

"Water, please. Jim, I am nervous. I am trying to stay calm; however, whenever I think of my children and the fact that I walked out on their dad and literally the family, I don't know. I can't help but project what they might be thinking."

"I know this is not going to be easy for you. Even for us, you seemingly no longer had affections for me when you left. The estrangement from family is a hard pill to swallow. I am surprised you are willing to come back to us, humbled to say the least. And brave enough to face our wrath. My sense is you are going to receive a lot of love instead."

> "I already feel it from you. God, you are so magnificent! I'm so glad you came back to me. You never gave up with your knowing that I loved you. I so wanted to be back together. I yearned for the work that we put into our relationship. The ranch scene was getting old. I missed our interaction with each other, all of it. The disagreements, the struggles, the support, the giving, and the receiving, it was all part of the marriage. And most of all, the compassionate love."

"We've been fortunate. The kids have all grown into responsible adults. Their journeys are much like ours in a sense. I'm not sure they see how much of us are in them. To a certain point, they recognize traits passed on

from you or me. Someday, they'll get into more depth and notice the affect we've had in their lives. Whether positive or negative, our contributions to their personalities can be seen as gifts. A chance for them to grow from their past knowledge of their earlier life with us."

"Hummm . . . I hear a car coming up the hill. Jim, please hold me."

I can feel Julian shaking a little. Like a shiver from the cold. So I say, "Let's take some deep breaths. Listen to the hum of the car, the crushing of the gravel, the fierceness of the wind. . . "

"Agh, stop it. You still have that dry humor, drives me nuts!"

"What, the natural sounds aren't soothing?"

And with a smile and a poke of her elbow, I have a feeling we are starting to get "back to the future."

We meander out onto the deck and watch our three beautiful adults come up the short path. As George looks up, I hear a "wooo!" It breaks the ice, and smiles adorn the faces of all three.

Dillion bounds up the last three steps and throws himself into Julian's arms. The hug looks like it could break a bear's back! So beautiful to watch. George is next, then Susie, and it turns into a huge family hug. Tears, laughter, and joy subside in the presence of love. I can't help but think of the Hawaiian Prayer we had been saying: I'm sorry, please forgive me, thank you, I love you. Aloha what more can I say? I know in the future there will be much discussion about the disappearance and where Mom has been, and how her life was in those five years. Forgiveness heals so many wounds. It really is a great feeling to forgive someone who has sincere regret. I can write about the feast and celebration we had that lasted late into the night. The discussions were detailed, and emotions ran strong. The love energy was heaven-sent.

This might seem unreal. For me, this is the essence of life. The reward for a family that is moved by spirit. It's the highest of all energies and I wish it for all families that need healing. To raise a family and nurture your off spring is one of the greatest gifts on this planet. I feel so fortunate and honored to have been given the opportunity. And Julian is so humbled that the children can understand that Mom needed to have her journey to connect with her soul. It is so "cool" to be able to give support to family. And to receive the gratitude from family. And to see a family rejoice despite the

differences between the dad and mom, and the parents and children. To not hold grudges. To overcome set backs together.

Wow, what a journey, more so than a sacrifice. I used to look at fatherhood as sacrificing my life ambitions, then at some time in the space of parenthood, fatherhood became my destiny. And the suffering of sacrifice was left in exchange for the beautiful state of love and joy. And my life became exciting. This night of celebration, for the return of the matriarch, has a very special meaning for the existence of family. A special meaning for the existence of soulmate lovers!

Our celebration lasted through the weekend. Hikes in the mountains, casual talks, and talks with depth and understanding. Clearing the air with heart felt truth. Games, and night fires under the stars. We howled, we cried, we laughed, and we were able to connect through the eyes, the heart, and the mind. Sometimes no words needed to be said. Hugs replaced verbal communication. When the children finally left, Julian and I waved feverishly, blowing kisses until the dust obscured the site of the car. We followed the dust trail as far as we could see, and fell into each other's arms. God, it felt so good. So much of the past was dissolved like the road dust settling to the earth.

While we were cleaning up the weekend mess, my phone rang. It was Joni. "Hi Jim, I was wondering, do you mind if I meet with Julian?"

Now this throws me for a loop. She does not need my permission. "Hold on for a second."

I put down the phone and walk over to Julian. "That's Joni on the phone. You mind if I invite her over here? She wants to talk to you, and I have her on schedule for a massage. It'll save me a trip to Bozeman and maybe we can have resolve like we did with Frank. What do you think?"

"Well, whew, I suppose. It'll surely be as different as the night with Frank compared to the celebration with the kids. Back to drama and love? It's probably best I don't think that way. I can be as compassionate with Joni as I was with Frank. Yeah, let's do it. Here, give me the phone . . . .

"Hi, Joni, this is Julian. I am at Jim's, and he said you need to talk. He has you scheduled for a massage. So why don't you come on over and the three of us can talk? I really want to be able to connect with you, with honesty. What do you think? Otherwise, Jim can leave and we can talk, your call."

Wow, why not? "Okay, I'd appreciate that. I'll see you soon."

Later, a trail of dust comes up the road. I am aware of the crushing sound of gravel as the vehicle approaches closer. A swirl of dust blown by the wind, and a few seconds later a car door slams. Julian and I are watching from the

front window as Joni climbs the path and then the stairs. As she gets to the top step, Julian is already out the door and I am witnessing a hug that radiates love, compassion, and sisterhood. The two of them in an embrace that is so beautiful to watch. The essence of love between two people. The aura is astounding, and up to this time I have never seen someone's aura. Amazing. I come out to greet Joni and also give a "healing" hug. At least my intention is to help heal her pain. We usher ourselves inside. The massage table is set up in the middle of the room. The day's sun has warmed up the cabin nicely on this summer day. The light is subdued and a mood of divine connection is prevalent throughout the cabin. I am hoping that Joni can feel our sincere desire to welcome her as a true friend.

Joni has the first words, "Well, that was quite a greeting. Thank you both for your warmth. What do you want to do first? Talk or . . . ?"

"I thought we'd both give you the massage. Massage first, then we can see where it goes from there. How's that sound to you?"

"Wow, two sets of hands, hummm . . . Okay, how is it that I deserve this?"

Julian, "Joni, we're not going to try to fix anything emotionally. That's not our intention. Our intention is to connect with you from our hearts. Feel the love we want to give you. This is all we can give you. Maybe you'll be able to feel our compassion through our touch."

"Thank you, Julian. It is a little daunting having you here. I actually am glad. I want to get to know you better."

"Yeah, well, Jim and I do not want to leave you and Frank hanging out to dry. We hurt too, seeing the pain the circumstance our reunion has caused you both."

"Thank you. In a twisted way, I am happy for you. It's hard for me to say that, so I'll just leave it at that for now. I'll get ready."

And with that last comment, Joni starts to undress. Julian and I rearrange the sheets. Julian goes to the head of the table and I position myself at the foot of the table. Joni slips under the sheets. I straighten her out and apply some light traction. Since I always like to start with gentle rocking, I move over to the side, and instinctively, Julian does the same. We start rocking Joni's torso, buttocks, and legs. Julian goes to the head and starts working along the spinal area doing a spinal flush. It opens all the channels to the heart, and I

start on the feet with some reflexology. As we're taking care of Joni's physical body I am wondering about her emotional body. In the past, I'd be asking a higher source to use me as a conduit to transfer energy of healing. As of late, I've had a realization that I am the source of Divine God realization. I am that I am. I have the power to heal. As a massage therapist, I've read various books about healing. One was *Hands on Healing*. Fascinating book about using one's energy to heal other people.

Anyway, the heart connection makes a lot of sense to me. When we open our heart to love, then everything becomes sacred. My Divine self as a healer flows through me in the hugs I give, or like the hand-on-heart connection that I've had with Sadie and Jenny and even Joni. This day, right now, I have an awakening, when I realize everything as being sacred, then there are no circumstances, only Divine connections.

An amazing transformation is taking place in my world, and I do not want to limit myself with belief systems. They're just thought forms anyway. What's real is what is happening in the present moment, and right now Joni has been on her back, and before I know it, Julian and I have our hands on Joni's heart, right between her breasts. Julian is asking Joni what she is grateful for! Wow, I seemed to have missed something as I was lost in thought. I am visualizing a huge flow of energy coursing through the crown chakra, continuing through my heart with streams of golden rivulets, coming from the tips of my fingers into Joni's being, her physical form.

"What I am grateful for right now is your compassion. I am grateful that you are willing to consider my feelings." And there are tears slipping down the sides of her eyes, down her cheeks. Instinctively, Julian and I are wiping the tears with our thumbs, our fingers gently caressing her jawbone, and for whatever reason, we start licking our thumbs! Joni's eyes open wide, and she starts laughing, and the tears of gratitude become tears of joy. And we're all laughing now, taking in the joyful vibes of relationship.

As we settle down, Joni says, "I really would like to keep a friendship going, with the both of you."

I give an invite to Joni, "Let's talk over dinner. We have some great leftovers from our celebration with the kids. We'll go warm up the food while you get dressed. And we insist, so don't plan on leaving in a hurry."

It's been a lovely dinner with some light discussion about our past. Our initial meeting at "the Stream of Life" event many moons ago. About Julian and our relationship and marriage. And how Joni tracked me down. As we finish up the dinner conversation, we switch over to where we're at right now.

Julian starts, "Joni, you mentioned maintaining a friendship. I like to

think of it as forming a relationship, like a best friend relationship. A place where we can support each other woman to woman."

"Well, you know that I thought maybe Jim and I were going to have an intimate relationship, especially after the lovely experience we had that night with the donabe bowl dinner that Arthur prepared. You know about our love making? Right?"

"I do, and that was all part of what was supposed to happen. Let's just call it universal law. And in our relationship, you, me, and Jim, let's feel our Divine love. I read once that God is love and to love God is to love all people. And we start with loving ourselves first. We owe it to ourselves to love ourself so we can receive love with grace."

Joni blurts, "Kisses?" Gosh, I have to at least ask! "And what if I do lure Jim into some passionate connection?"

Julian chuckles, "I don't know, I've seen you two kiss before! That's not what I am talking about, and you know it!"

I'm in shock. And Julian is serious. She means what she says!

"I hear you, Julian. If I am really honest with myself and the both of you, I know I still harbor some resentment that you have made the decision to continue your relationship with Jim. Jim, the other day when you saw me at the Wildflower, in my depressed stupor, I felt cheated. I was hurt and angry. I needed fairness, and now I see how I tricked my mind thinking that justice would be Julian rejecting you, and me having you. It's really a sad manipulation of energy. Rather than feeling joy for the both of you, I had envy. And I still have pain, or grief, that I am losing him to you, Julian. I'm being honest. I also appreciate you reaching out to develop something more than a friendship. I like how you put it, develop a best friend relationship. And I want to be able to have that same relationship with Jim."

*Jim* - I am starting to grasp what love is, like I have never done before. Julian's reference to God's love resonates, especially in my heart. As I am looking out the window, at the various cloud formations moving above the peaks, I recall someone mentioning to me to 'think with your heart', not with your mind. I turn to face Julian and Joni, and I start crying. The ladies approach me and gently have one of their hands on my heart and the other caressing my back. All I can ask is for forgiveness. I am not able to speak it. The emotion is too stifling to talk. I need forgiveness for the way I have loved conditionally, expecting something in return. Thinking of myself and not the other.

Their hands have moved from my back to the top of my head as they stroke my head as if petting a cat. I feel nurtured.

Joni whispers, “It’s okay, Jim. You don’t need to say anything.”

Julian, with a soft voice confirms, “You have surrendered to your heart, where all love resides.”

We end the evening with a three-way heart felt hug. We promise each other to support and love like we never have loved before. We have been guided by our spirit to give love rather than seek to be loved. For in giving, we understand the power and grace of receiving His love.

There’s still some light, a good time for Joni to head home.

The gravel crunches,
Under the weight of the
car. And a plume of dust
Rises and descends to the
earth. We watch and in
perspective,
Julian and I feel a weight has been lifted.
The fog of conditional love
the plume of dust has a settling
effect. Joni heads for the pavement,
Where the road widens to unlimited
possibilities. We watch. Joni turns back to a
gravel road.
The plume of dust rises again.
“She’s heading to the ranch,
darling!”
“Frank?” Julian whispers.

# Chapter 14: The Class Reunion

We go back into the cabin. Both of us look at the massage table, then each other. We nod.

"Massage?" I ask.

"Most certainly. It's been a long time, mate. You better go first, or I'll be sleeping!"

"You're so kind, Julian. Your touch is going to feel

good."

"Hop on. I'll get some oil. Sesame or arnica?"

"I like the roasted sesame, please."

I start a small fire just to keep some warmth in the cabin. As dusk comes on, the temperature starts to drop. It's feeling like rain is coming our way. I get on top of the sheets. A habit I'm picking up from some of my clients. Julian enters the room with some water in a pot and wash clothes. She puts the pot on the wood stove and drops the clothes into it. Then I am feeling her tender touch, applying the oil with long strokes from ankle to neck.

"Julian, do you feel the way your strokes might feel to me?"

"Well, I'm not exactly sure. I do know that they probably feel good. Have you missed my touch?"

"Yes, I have. I've missed you for more than your touch, too. All of your banter and naturalness. I've missed your tears, and fears. I've missed your laughter and steadfastness. Your independence and your empathy. Your compassion and your nurturing."

"Okay, you can stop now. Thanks for all the acknowledgement. Just feel now. You're receiving and it's my time to give."

And with that, the massage continues. It is very thorough. Then it's time to reciprocate and Julian gets the works. While I am massaging Julian, we listen to the pitter patter of rain on the roof. It's music to our ears.

As I'm finishing up with giving Julian her massage, she suggests, "Hey, let's shower in the rain. Remember our old homestead days?"

"Yeah, how about the gully washers? We'd run out naked hauling George down to the dry wash and splash in the flash flood!"

"Come on, let's do it. I'll grab some towels."

"Okay, I'll put another log on the fire."

We go out onto the deck. The rain is coming down just right and we enjoy a summer late evening shower in nature. I ask Julian, "Are you sensing the oneness with the elements right now? The oneness with our Divine connection in this Universe?"

"Yeah. Are you going to give me your molecular theory right now?" Julian giggles.

"No, I'm just saying . . ."
"What? Tell me what you're saying."
"How about we join in Divine Union?"

"Not in the rain. I'm getting chilled. What say we dry off by the fire, and you go warm up the bed, and then you can be my furnace? You can warm me up. And we'll take our time with becoming one in Divine Union, one with each other. A slow, loving connection. I think we are both yearning for that. It has been a hectic several days. I do want to savor this moment with you. My soulmate lover. High me!"

The next morning, I have coffee brewing, and a breakfast cooking. Julian is lingering in bed, taking her time. The night was special. We fell in love again. And not just physically. The conversation, the reminiscing, the tender touch, the heart-to-heart connection was all very special, and gratitude was felt by both of us. Today, we head to Boz and Molly's studio for a final sketch class. I think this is going to be more than a class reunion of sorts. I think Molly needs more material to finish her special sculpture. We'll see. Molly is full of surprises.

Julian and I decide to hike up Rock Creek. The day is bright and warm. The thick scent of the fir trees is so refreshing, The quiet solitude has us both in a peaceful state. We are walking in silence. My thoughts are a collage of the past events when I ask Julian, "The night with Frank was so different than the time with Joni. Do you feel we achieved a resolve with both of them?"

"I do. At least they know our commitment to each other. My guess is that they will both be in pain and disappointment for a while. I think it will be considerate of us if we check in with them periodically. Spend some time with them."

"The situation with you and Frank, if I hadn't come into the tent at the moment I did, what do you think would have happened? He had you pinned down and he's a pretty strong guy. Do you have any fears being alone with him in the future?"

"I'm not sure what would have happened. I don't know if he would have come to his senses, with me resisting like I was. I can't relive the situation, since everything happened so fast. I remember having my arm around him, trying to ease his pain. I wanted him to feel my love, and compassion flow through my hug. He may have taken that as an innuendo. I don't know. If I judge him, then all I do is start blaming him and chastising him. Judgement leaves no room to experience the circumstance. Maybe I need to look at myself. There was probably a message there for me. This hike has given me time to be contemplative."

"What did I hear the other day in Nirvana's yoga class? When we perceive everything as being sacred, then there are no circumstances. We are present with what is. Everything becomes a divine connection."

Julian responds, "Like now in nature this is such a divine connection. A divine experience, even the circumstance we now find ourselves in." Julian nods in a westerly direction. I look and there's a grizzly mom and her cub, eating late season berries. Luckily they are upwind from us.

"Look how focused the mom is to show her cub the berry bushes. They are so present with their environment, for survival. They have such a grace about them, even though they are so big. They live in a God-like realization. They live because of the abundance of nature. They don't even have to think about universal law. The bears are just part of the all of nature, the all of the universe!"

"That's a nice way to look at the entire animal kingdom, Julian. I like that. Remember the book we read a long time ago? *Simulations of God* by John C. Lilly? It covered a lot of areas of how we create beliefs such as wealth and abundance, philosophy and so much more. What I am learning is if I am present with whatever it is I am doing, then I feel a part of the whole. There aren't any beliefs that separate me from that. There's not a disconnect between me and everything or anybody else. Like the momma bear over there, totally focused on what she's doing, including protecting her cub. Maybe we should leave this area?"

Julian chuckles. "You have some fear. You think she might lose her focus and look over here at us? Come after us, chase us down the hillside or up a tree?" Now she's laughing and I'm trying to quiet her!

I whisper, "You better get ready to drop into a heap, if you don't quiet down!" She pokes me in the ribs and we move on out of the area.

We get back to the cabin and I drive Julian to the ranch so she can do some gardening before we head to Bozeman. We pass by the ranch house and I drop Julian off at the greenhouses.

"Jim, you want to come check out the garden system we have going on here?

Come on, I'll show you around."

"I was actually thinking about finding Frank and checking in on him. I haven't been to the men's gathering for a while, and my guess is that Frank is still dealing with the emotions from the other night, with you. Is that disappointing to you?"

"It is disappointing. On the other hand, you need to follow your intuition. It's kind of you to consider Frank's situation, his personal battle. Go on. Keep track of time. I'll only be a couple of hours at most, then we need to get to Molly's."

"Thanks for considering me too."

I backtrack to the ranch house and see Frank saddling up the mare. He's preoccupied and does not notice my arrival. I park and walk over to the corral.

"Hi, Frank."

He looks over and greets me with a nod and responds with, "Hey, partner, how you doing?"

"Good, Frank, what about you? I wanted to check in with you about the other night."

"I want to show you something, Jim. How about we get you saddled up and take a short ride?"

"Okay, I'd like to do that."

We are on a trail to a part of the ranch that appears to have had a fire several years ago. As we approach, I can see some very small pines and fir coming back. There is a lot of nice foliage and exposed rock formations. There are still-standing, burned trees, blackened and eerie-looking. The light is really illuminating the entire area. We're stopped, seated atop our horses. A slight breeze bends the tall grasses.

Frank looks over at me, stoical as ever. "This is where I lost her."

"Who?"

"My wife. She was on a local fire crew. The wind apparently picked up

in a hurry and trapped her and another guy down in that draw over yonder. The fire was burning hot, and a gust ignited everything around them. It happened so quick, all anybody heard was the screams."

"Oh, Frank . . ."

"About seven years ago. Broke my heart. The other night, I been doing some thinking. I think a bad memory got ahold of me. Sometimes you think you buried the past, and it comes back to haunt you. Do you get what I mean, Jim? I think I was desperate, and I don't know, I took out these pent-up emotions on Julian. I snapped. No excuses, just trying to figure things out."

"I can feel your pain. Thanks for showing me this site and sharing your story. I'm not sure what to say, other than after you spending the last five years in a relationship with Julian . . . I don't know, I mean I was witnessing a potential rape. When you pulled off of her and started to weep with so much agony, I was grateful that you were able to restrain yourself."

"Well, yeah, I was so headstrong and possessive that I wanted Julian to be mine. And who am I to declare a woman as my property?"

"We're getting deep, Frank. I'm just glad Julian can fearlessly express herself. And set clear boundaries. And I am glad that you were aware enough to realize what took over your soul. I am hoping that we really did reach a final resolve. I wish you the best fortune to find another mate. And that you can love her with grace and heart felt gratitude. The other evening, Joni was over at my cabin in Grizzly Meadows. When she left, Julian and I watched her turn towards the ranch. Did she tract you down?"

Frank has his stoical look. "Yeah, we talked some. Jim, to be honest with you, I still love Julian. Hey, I'm going to ride up the bottom of the draw. I have a memorial for Bertha, that's her name, up there at the end of the draw. I need to talk with her and ask for her forgiveness too. I might not make it to the reunion tonight. I hope you understand."

"I do." And with that last exchange, we swivel in our saddles and guide the horses in opposite directions. As I am slowly riding back to the corral, I stop momentarily and look back at Frank's slow ascent. I can sense his tears, because I have them too. Two men, one with a renewed love, the other in sorrow and with a broken heart, because of one woman that we both love and one that passed from this earthly plain. I continue my ride on down to the ranch house, to find Julian and share this moment with her. How will we all heal our wounds and move on with our lives in divine grace?

Julian has a creased furrow between her eyes. Deep in thought, she responds to my assessment, "I came across a teaching one day a few years

ago. It was by a Hindu fellow. I think his name was Krishnaji, something like that. Anyway he talked about living in two states, a state of suffering or a beautiful state. The suffering state is where Frank resides in right now. Shoot, I could be hanging out in the suffering state too, after the other night. But I choose to be in the beautiful state of joy, and love, and kindness. Ever since I read that teaching, my life has had more happiness and now I have the absolute power within my being to observe or witness my state of being and change it."

"I, too, have been exposed to the potential of being in a beautiful state. In fact, Krishnaji is the guru that Megan introduced my yoga group too. Ever since I have started yoga with Nirvana, I have learned so much about what you just described, Julian. I can recognize my suffering, whatever it might be, and then move into that beautiful state you just described. It's not always that easy. However, I am getting more consistent after several years of grief and depression when I lost you. There is a reading in the Bible I read recently, about Paul. He kept his focus on his belief of Jesus, and it would bring him joy no matter the circumstance. I have been focusing on the power of the Holy Spirit as my Divine and it brings a smile to my face when I do, my joy! Hey, we need to get over to Molly's. We are the models tonight! Do you think Frank will be alright? Have you ever seen him this way during your relationship with him?"

"Yes, I have. He seems to pull out of it, and I haven't seen him like this for a long time, not until you showed up on the scene."

"Oooo, the way you said that, do you have any regrets?"

"No, of course not. Get it in your head we are meant for each other! I love Frank for who he is. You're going to have to trust me concerning Frank. Let's get to Molly's!"

It's a beautiful summer evening with a late sunset happening on our way as we take a slower scenic route along Trail Creek. There's an elk herd on one of the ranches. We spot a coyote dashing across the roadway. Cattle spread out along a hillside, where there used to be a pig farm. The sky is brilliant. The clouds are multi-colored with an azure blue background. We see what must be Venus alongside a sliver of the moon. As we pull out onto the interstate highway, I ask Julian, "Are you a little nervous about posing nude?"

"Absolutely, I don't know what to expect. Maybe a little anxious because of the unknown. I can't say I'm comfortable, quite the opposite.

We pull into Molly's driveway and park. As we walk to the barn studio, we hold hands, and Julian's hand is a little clammy. We enter and we are greeted by Stephanie.

"Hi, Stephanie, what a surprise. Meet Julian, my wife from long ago!"

"Hi, Julian, so nice to finally meet you. I'll be assisting Molly tonight. I wanted to meet with you as soon as I could. I am a regular model for Molly's classes. I actually did some poses with Jim. If you don't mind, I'd like to steal you away for a while just to get you feeling comfortable. Maybe I can give you some tips. Is that alright?"

Julian gives me a look, then looks over at Stephanie as says, "Sure. Really, I don't know what I'm getting into. Seems like quite a production."

"It is, Julian, Molly has a huge sculpture series she's working on with this whole group. It is a special project. You two are the main attraction."

"Okay, take me away." And with a wink and a wry smile, Julian exits with Stephanie. "Guess I'm going to the powder room, partner!"

Suddenly I am left alone at the front door and feeling shy, a little sheepish. Not quite knowing if I want to be here all of a sudden. "The main attraction?" that's what I heard. Oh brother, something doesn't feel right.

As I walk into the studio, I have the same sensation I felt that first time as a naked model. I am curious as to how many eyes are on me. As I look around, people are either preparing their space or looking at all of the sculptures. I see Jerry, he smiles. I give a thumbs-up, and my facial muscles automatically broaden into a smile. Joseph has his eyes closed and looks like he's meditating. I walk over to a chair in the corner of the room and see a large white towel. I drape around my waist. I scan the room once more. I notice Arthur and Molly critiquing the sculpture of Arthur as a potter. Deloris and Faye, the "trees of life," give me smiles and winks. Sadie and Jenny wave in my direction and go back to their preparations. Sammie, too, has a smile. He's standing next to Nirvana, who gives me the namaste greeting. Joni is here and Frank is missing. I begin to feel a little awkward. Everybody here has seen and known my naked soul. They have been part of my journey. With my back to the room, I slip on my pants and shirt. This is seeming like a big event. I start to feel overwhelmed and sit down and decide to shut out all the activity, and choose to close my eyes and drift into a meditation. When I open my eyes and peer into Molly's eyes, she has the smile that hooked me the first time we meet.

"Jim, I'm sorry to disturb you. We are ready when you are."

"Molly, whew, hi, wow, you really have quite a production going on here."

"Hummm, I probably should have fore warned you, but I was afraid you wouldn't want to do it."

She's right about that. There is a lot of emotion coursing through my body right now. Molly touches me tenderly. The room starts to quiet down. Her eyes are piercing my soul. She takes my hand and leads me to the center of the room. I am in a hypnotic state. Standing alone for a short while, then I see Julian in a robe. Joni and Stephanie are on either side of her and she steps up to join me. Molly is looking at us, "are you both having some inhibitions?" We are facing each other, eye contact is essential.

"Molly, I am not feeling comfortable doing this pose. I do not want this, this ... whole production, or whatever you're doing to be about me."

"Oh, Jim, it's about you and Julian and . . ."

Julian is looking at me and I feel her apprehension too. Similar to mine. I know her well enough that she knows we did not put up our "resisters" and just went along with this whole thing without feelings.

"Molly, this reunion is about all of us here," I say!

Molly is looking crushed, disappointed, yet at the same time her eyes are letting me know she understands.

"I wonder if you'd be willing to change directions and maybe, I don't know, maybe we all sketch each other? Something like that," is my suggestion.

By now I think everyone in the room has heard our discussion and my reluctance. Julian has positioned herself at my side and gently grasps my right forearm with both her hands.

Nirvana approaches and looks around the room. She speaks, "Thank you, Jim. Molly, I think he has a point. All of us in this room has played a role in his life, just as his existence has touched our lives. We are part of the whole, each of us. And we all just happened to connect at this specific time in our lives."

Molly shifts gears, and says, with gratitude in her voice, "Alright, alright, yes, of course. Wow, you all are the best class I have ever had. The most

remarkable, creative minds and fellowship I have ever been connected with. Thank you. Yes, how about we just flow and sketch how we see each other? And Arthur and I will create, from your drawings, a sculpture of Oneness."

And we all bellow in unison, "AH HO."

It is during this creative process, that all of us, in Molly's studio, endeavor to capture the flow of love. I come to a realization of my existence. Every single moment, every thought, everything, anger, joy, sadness, love, happiness, bliss, is in the present moment. I live in the presence of Divine being. I am that I am. I grasp that meaning that I've seen inscribed in various ways, forever. All that is past and all that is future is swept away into one moment. Like the apex of a ski turn. That's my point of reference.

## Chapter 15:

The impact that we've had on each other becomes a fascinating moment captured in the sculptures being created by Molly and Arthur. The sketches of each other took on a fresh meaning. As we sketched each other that night, not long ago, we laughed, and hugged, and cried, and joy buzzed through the room. When I sketched Joni, Sadie, Jenny, and Sammie on the same page, I realized that their impact on me was how love could be given and received in different ways. Through touch, and compassion with grace and honor. When I sketched Jerry I felt the commitment it takes to work out differences in relationship. The passion it takes to come to resolve and love again. When I sketched Arthur and Molly, I sketched the two artists busy creating sculptures together. The power of coordinating talents exchanging ideas and skills to create a final outcome. I sketched Deloris and Faye as the gardeners taking care and giving back to the Earth Mother. Connecting human form with nature form with the natural abundance of the plant and animal kingdom. Nirvana and Joseph I sketched as the sacred guides who watched over me and pointed me into the spiritual seeking that I needed and my soul was asking for. I sketched Stephanie, alone, the uninhibited woman who was willing to share herself in innocence. I sketched Frank with my beloved Julian, my soul mate. What impacted me most was that I could have no animosity towards a brother whose full impact I have yet to feel. I wanted to sketch the gratitude I had for the years he took care of Julian. I wanted to sketch the compassion I felt for him losing his beloved Bertha. I

wanted to sketch his hurt, his unfulfilled desires with Julian. His self-realization that he bellowed out that night not long ago. When he said, unbeknownst to him, a former pastor, a Psalm verse from the Bible. It reminded me of Donovan's song title, "Try and Catch the Wind."

When rain has hung the leaves with
tears I want you near to kill my fears
To help me leave all my blues behind

For stand-in' in your heart
Is where I want to be, long to be
Ah, but I may as well try and catch the wind.

And then I sketched Julian. And her sketch was about us as one together with all our hurt, misunderstandings, devotion, independence, anger, joy, parenthood, commitment, sharing, and loving each other, loving life, loving others, and loving the journey.

This day, right now, we head into town to view Molly and Arthur's creation. We drive over to Molly's place. No cars are visible in the driveway. We knock on the door of her house and hoot for Molly. No answer. We walk over to the studio and turn the doorknob, then enter Molly's studio. It is quite astounding. The room is filled with figures. The original figures are scattered around in an outer circle. It's all of the group in different poses. Sammie, Frank, Nirvana, Sadie, Jenny, Joni, Jerry, Deloris, Faye, and Joseph. There's me bowing at the feet of Stephanie! The inner circle of figures are all of us sketched during the reunion, some of us conversing, a few hugging, some with arms on shoulders and a couple kissing. There are trees sculptured within the circle and the branches are touching and intertwined above our heads. There are tree roots circumventing under our feet and around our legs. It's as if we are the roots, connecting as a family of trees. A community of cooperation and love, unencumbered, God as love!

*Julian* - What I witness with this creation reminds me of a chapter and verse in Corinthians, "So that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is part of it." My thoughts linger there for a while. We are one, "a microcosm of the universal macrocosm," a community of beings that are not separate from the whole.

"Jim, do you feel the connections that have been created, and how Molly and Arthur took the inspiration from the group and intwined us with nature? God's best example of the way to live with each other?"

"Yes, we seem to forget about us as a collective consciousness."

There's gravel crunching in the driveway. We hear a car door slam and someone walking up to the studio. There's a knock on the door and Julian shouts, "Come on in!"

Jerry walks through the door, sees us, and meanders over, while looking around the room filled with the sculptures. "Hi, Jim. Hi Julian. So this is it, huh?"

"Yeah, Jerry, hello, I am glad to see you. It's been a while."

"Joseph told me the sculpture was completed at men's group last night. You andFrank did not show up. Anyway, what is this? Looks like some sort of idolatry?"

*Jerry* - I do not believe in false worship. There should be no idols in place of God. This is what Molly and Arthur created? I am not so sure how to act. It's a beautiful art form, but it looks like we're all in awe of a tree! I have some fear and trepidation to have my form be part of this sculpture.

Julian speaks to Jerry, "Sweetheart, you have a perception of thought that seems rigid to me. Is that true?"

"Julian, look, Jim is bowed down at Stephanie's feet at the base of the tree. What's Stephanie doing? Hugging the tree with one arm and the other hand open and raised up towards the top of the tree. Her head thrown back looking up, like she's praising an object."

"Jerry, how about this thought? Jim is bowed in gratitude for this tree of life. The tree, it wraps its roots around us in support. Stephanie, is loving the tree and honoring the Creator. Look at Deloris and Faye, on their knees planting herbs and flowers, and wild things, and an understory of God's abundance is growing around them. There's Joseph with a white bison, a sacred being of good things to come. And Sadie with her arm around Jenny's shoulder and Jenny with her ever- present smile. They are both radiating. Frank and Joni with eyes on Julian and I, as we are embraced in a kiss of love. Look at Sammie, hands in prayer mode, thumbs on chest, eyes closed. And Nirvana

in a yoga tree pose off to the side of Joseph and the bison. Arthur with a bowl of food for all to share. And there you are, Jerry, with your shirt partially open, a heart with rays of light spreading over your chest. You have opened your heart to love. And all of our human forms around the perimeter of the sculpture, observing, and witnessing our being, our Divine Self, our soul, connection to the Holy Spirit, within the sculpture. The roots of support and interconnectedness entwined with our beings."

Julian speaks, "As it is said in Corinthians, 'You are the body of Christ and each one of you are part of it.' So here we are, Jerry, you, me, Jim, all part of a whole. All of our suffering is felt by all. All of our joy is felt by all. We are part of a collective consciousness. That includes you, Jerry!"

Suddenly I feel a trembling hand over my right shoulder. My peripheral vision catches Julian turning her head up to look at Jerry. I follow her gaze and Jerry is sobbing, his body racking with emotion. He has his arms wrapped over our shoulders. Instinctively, Julian and I turn to face him and embrace in a hug. Our heads buried into his chest. I feel drips of tears on my bald head. I feel Julian squeezing harder and hear her soft sobs. I squeeze harder too. Emotions are at a high level, and we all start to chuckle and look at each other, smiles cracking open upon our face. The laughter starts. Joy permeates our entire essence of being. Slowly, we back off, now holding hands, darting eyes connecting with each other. Ahhh, sighs of relief and subtle joy.

"Whew, thank you, Julian and Jim. I am feeling liberated. Wholly connected to people for once in my life. This has been an epic moment for me. I feel true friendship and purpose of being part of this phenomena that was created by this group."

There's not much more that needs to be said. We nod to each other with a deep understanding of each other. A heart felt experience. We slowly make our way back to our cars. Wave and bow good bye for now.

Julian and I are humbled and grateful for knowing this wonderful group of souls. We slowly head back home, stopping at the Coffee Hut, then the Wildflower. Hoping to see someone, get a coffee, and reminisce, to share what we just experienced. Nobody is there today. I am saddened that we aren't able to share our discovery of the sculpture. Dusk is turning into night, and we decide to drive to the ranch and spend the night in Julian's cabin. The night is gorgeous. A warm August night in Montana.

Julian comes up with an idea. “What say we sleep under the starts tonight, over by the creek?”

I agree and we gather up some blankets and sleeping bags. We lay them out in the grass, slip into the double zipped sleeping bags, and snuggle up to each other. The stars are magnificent tonight. The constellations are vivid, the stars vary in size, and they are abundant. They don’t feel so far away tonight. It’s as if the story of the universe is hovering just above us. The Milky Way stretches across the whole array, as far as we can see. I turn to Julian, and in a low, soft, awe struck voice, I say, “These stars are like pieces of our souls, scattered all over the universe. And we are looking for the parts of our soul that make us whole. Like Isis flying up and down the Nile River looking for the chopped-up parts of her beloved. Gathering them to remake him whole again.”

“I never want to lose you again, Jim.”

# Epilogue

"Where are you?"

"Here!"

"What's your name?"

"James Elmore"

When were you born?

Who are these people staring at me? What is going on? Whoa, I am soaring just above the clouds, a rather grayish sky. I float above the most consistent white puffs of cloud. So peaceful. I see Bliss, I feel Bliss, I know Bliss. So soothing. I am just being. I have never been here before and yet I feel that I belong here. The clouds slowly race by, or am I floating past the clouds?

Suddenly it's noisy. There are the faces and voices, again. Who are these people?

"Temperature is still back up to 104."

"Put some ice pacts under his arm
pits."

"Here's one for between the groin."
"IV, please"

"Blood pressure dropping!"

"Get some fans on him. We have to lower that body temperature quickly!"

I am shivering, uncontrollably. The next time I peek, I notice fans blowing at my iced body. My mouth has tubes shoved down the throat. I can't move. More ice. I'm shivering, naked, strapped down, cold, ice cold. I can only communicate with my mind.

"Turn off the fan. I'm cold." They must hear me. I see them!

"Fever still 104, not coming down. Let's get another ice pack on him."

I am in a battle with the devil. It was so peaceful where I was. What happened? I can't move. I shiver severely. A major battle for my soul? My body is wracked with cold pain. I am sure of death, I thank my human form for this wonderful body. I start to say good bye to all the wonderful people and family I have known. I look up at my being, my soul, my Divine, my Holy Spirit, and thank it for occupying this human form for all these years. My Spirit nudges me, "You're not done yet. You are in the ring of fire. You are ridding yourself of your past suffering.

My spirit, the Holy Spirit, wills me to live another day. I bear the burden I must endure for now. My being is looking down at my struggling human form. I surrender to the outcome.

I see four blurry faces, staring at me. The fans are gone. A small woman grabs what has been choking my throat. She pulls on a long rubbery tube that is yanked from my raw, compromised throat. Someone unstraps my ankles; another unstraps my wrist. The lights are dimmed. I hear some distant beeps. I am breathing. I don't feel any ice packs. Someone places a light sheet over my body. I hoarsely ask in a whisper for a blanket. It's placed on top of the sheet. I am breathing long, slow, deep breaths. The lights have been dimmed. I feel a kiss on my cheek. My body still shivers, but slowly I drift away, far away to a place I do not know. It's not the clouds like before. It just seems far away. I am exhausted. I drift and go to a new depth of inner most wisdom. A new life is born. I feel a void. I realize that I made it.

With no reference to time and space, I open my eyes and recognize Nirvana to my left. There's a woman from our Kundalini yoga class who shared Ekam meditations with the class; she is to my right. And there she is, my beloved Julian slightly to the right of the woman. A big glaring smile across her radiant face. Julian looks like a beacon of light.

*Nirvana* - I am awed by what this man has survived. He is a warrior. I told him long ago that he may be in for a wild ride, but I never thought that would include a visit with death. I am seeing glimpses of bright gold-white light peeking through his shredded aura. When he looks past Megan over at Julian, there is a slight smile crossing his lips. When Julian asks, "Are you staying with us?" Of course he is, for I know he has seen the essence of presence. Not the present moment or enlightenment that we seek to achieve. No, Jim has met his Divine. He has had a real "Jesus" moment and must

know his true purpose now.

*Megan* - I am a yoga partner. I am also an Ekam warrior of the Oneness movement. Nirvana and I set in motion a powerful prayer circle of like-minded beings who are all here to help each other. That is our mission, actually, to serve by assisting and praying that all human beings evolve from a suffering state to a beautiful state of joy, happiness, kindness, and love. He had Christian prayer groups praying for him, Ekam prayer circles, his community of well-wishers, and more. It was the power of prayer that I truly believe prevailed in the end. To conquer the devil incarnate.

*Julian* - I am Jim's compassionate lover, his soul mate. It has been a wild ride for both of us, and our reunion has been special. This seeming set back of near death has brought forth the most gratitude that I can ever experience. I have been studying *The Way of Mastery*, the teachings of Jesus as the way of life. It has liberated me from being so self-absorbed. Making life all about me. Now I can see how I am here in purpose to help others achieve their glory, their love energy. I sense that Jim will come out of his recovery with more stillness in his life. A depth of connection with nature and all beings. After all, his journey has been a journey of Love. God, I love this man more than ever before. That he never gave up finding me, and taking me back with no judgements, has been so liberating. I have had the freedom to find myself and pursue my purpose. It is so freeing to have a mate that respects me and accepts me for who I am.

"Jim, where have you been?" asks Nirvana.

With eyes closed, in a very restful, peaceful state, with my throat still raw, I respond in a whisper, "I have floated over heavenly clouds. I have been in a great battle. I have met The Divine, the great Holy Spirit, and I have landed back on earth with a purpose I cannot describe. With much gratitude, I thank you all. I need rest now." And I am focused on my breath inhalation and exhalation. I have been Blessed.

To accept the wonder of
love with gratitude
is to amplify that
power until you feel
it's currents and
surges as the
lifeblood
flowing through your veins.

—Elizabeth Clare Prophet

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