



AND  
THEN  
I SAW HER





# Chapter 1

And then I saw him. Dressed as I knew he would be, jeans, a button-front shirt with his sleeves rolled up to just beneath his elbow, and leather, what we used to call, boat shoes. He looked spectacular. He had the same walk, the same look of self-confidence, and the same energy of power that seemed to crackle around him. He was, as far as I could see, except for a little aging from Mother Nature, still the great friend and endearing confidant I had left long ago.

I chose my outfit carefully this morning. I wanted to look very much like I did the last time I saw him. I searched for a familiar feeling, a peaceful vibe, and comfort to warrant a warm reception from him. Nervous is what I feel, but optimism is what I am pushing my mind to embrace. Black jeans, a soft blue pastel blouse with a high neck and all trimmed in black piping, a long black dress jacket, and heeled short black boots are identical to how I dressed years ago and so, what I settled on. Dressing with the same look of yesteryears, will hopefully appear as if no time has passed since our last parting on that devastating day.

Reaching out, I quickly wrapped my arms around his shoulders, gathering him in for a hug. The smell of him brings me back to many years ago and my crush, which was in reality much more than that, and

apparently, the memory of his cologne and the powerful fragrance he exuded will never go away. Funny, looking back on it now, it just seems silly how I felt like the betraying witch to his sister unless I veered from my feelings and altered my course. Ah, the stumbling feet of youth. Hindsight is always 20/20, right? Actually, no, I don't think it is after all, because it seems that things turned out for the best, really. You know, like they were supposed to. Fate, I guess. He is obviously happy and grateful for his family and life now.

"Garrett, you look wonderful," I gushed, elation clear with my smile, looking into his warm, reciprocating eyes. "It's as if time has not marched on." Once I am fully enveloped in his powerful energy, it is almost impossible for me to let go. I felt the long-ago strength, protection, and love... yeah, I have to admit, it was love that he had given to me freely, passionately, and unbridled. He was the one who was unafraid of what anyone else thought or said. He was the one I so much wanted to be. But once again, feeling the guilt of a schoolgirl, I backed up, releasing my dear friend, and looked at his wife.

With my smile as genuine as it looks, I now reached out to embrace this sweet, wonderful, and beautiful creature. She is also dressed as I pictured, casual jeans, a white sweater, and a suede jacket that matched her boots, all of which radiated a class that you couldn't miss, even with a one-second glance. Her long, dark, wavy hair enhances her look to that of a regal queen. It was a quick hug, but one of sincere kinship. After all, we both have strong, wonderful feelings for the same man. Embarrassed, I had to admit the truth and hope she felt no ill will or suspicious uncertainty. "I am so sorry, but all my life, my brain has remembered faces, and not names, at the most inopportune times. I confess, I am nervous today. They

just seem to slip between the cracks in my skull and disappear forever. I remember..."

"Marietta," she quickly announced, interrupting my attempt to ramble. "And this is Ken, Colby, and Rachel. Of course, Ben is at Lily Manor helping Dad with the chores. I try to pretend I understand his love for the farm and animals, but it is more than I can fathom since I never liked any of it. Maybe mom's constant cookies are the real draw, I'm not sure." Marietta laughs, placing her hand on the back of Ken's head, running her fingers through his hair. Ken looked a little irritated by that but stood his ground without a peep of protest. "It is a pleasure to see you again, Raelle. We have mentioned and thought about you so often and wondered how you were doing."

I look at the children as she introduces them, marveling at their normal, clean, and smart attire. They all seemed to be strong, self-assured, and very happy. Rachel was a beauty, but seemed not in the least influenced by it. She wasn't shy in a timid way, but not boisterous or self-serving either. Colby was the youngest but had the air of an elder in a child's body. For being under two, he was very well behaved.

To me, Ken's demeanor reminds me of his dad, who has been well-disciplined, quite tolerant, and yet never diminished. Garrett could be quite a sassy character, and I don't mean a smart aleck; he just firmly stood his ground and meant what he said. I think Ken is probably his dad all over again, and it made me wonder what other kinds of people will appear in his adult life. Will there be someone like me there one day, too?

The restaurant noise brings me back to my senses. Realizing we are still standing in the way of others, I turn and look at the table I had reserved. "Before I talk about me, let's go sit down and get

something to drink and eat, shall we?" Motioning for my friends to follow, I ventured to our table to sit down, hoping and not, that Garrett would sit close to me. What was that thought? Am I out of my mind? No... I feel the same source of protection from him that I had felt years before. That memory and the sense I have now are powerful, and something that settles and comforts me. The urge to stay close is overwhelming. My mind keeps saying, close to me, close to me, for protection that I wanted but am not sure I needed. I believe that's why we have the friends we do, to complete our needs as we complete theirs. Now, I desperately hope he feels the same way about me that he did before the last day I saw him. Before that event that changed all our lives.

"So, what brings you back to our neck of the woods, Raelle?" Garrett asked as he pulled my chair out for me.

Wow, few men do that anymore, I think. "Well, for one, I am visiting people I haven't seen for quite some time, including you all." As I spoke, I spread my arms out, cupping my hands to encompass them all in a collective embrace.

Garrett is now holding his wife's chair, waiting for her to finish making sure the children are properly seated. She seems to be a stickler for manners, and I really admire that. I was raised that way, and teaching children proper manners is a virtue many seem to have forgotten. Running around in a store or bouncing around in your chair is seen all the time these days. What happened to the good old-fashioned rules that created respectful, apposite adults? I realize my mind is rambling again, surely to evade the other facts that brought me here in the first place.

Once we are all seated, the unsaid words are just stuck in my head. Suddenly, I don't know what to say. There is so much to say, so much to hear, and yet no

sentence or question will form in my head. What's wrong with me?

Garrett didn't seem to notice or skip a beat. "Well, when you called Elle, and out of the blue I might add, I was stunned, and yet excited to hear from you. I mean, we haven't heard from you in quite some time. I can't even remember the last time or how many years it has been. But it's marvelous to see you anyway. You look wonderful, sound fantastically happy, and seem to be... content and right with the world."

Trying not to have a stunned look on my face, certain he must be able to see something is up and is just being polite, I cautiously reply. "Five years, and thanks, Garrett. You know, I have always thought about you guys as well. All the time, in fact. It's sad how we all march to the beat of our own drums and lose track of our real friends and relatives who love us. If we strove to hold on to those connections, I think our lives would be much richer for it."

"Umhmm, I can sense your impression, and I have to completely agree. Both of us should have made this connection without letting five years go by. So, what have you been doing? Are you on vacation, business, what?"

Marietta appeared to be quietly contemplating the conversation as she watched Garrett and I with a keen, yet almost non-interested look. She is not worried about me, at least not yet. That may change when I spill my reason for being here. The children sat composed and proper, drinking their lemonade, watching other people, and whispering to each other about things that made them laugh. All was at ease, so far.

Hearing those questions, though, put the matter of my visit, especially with my dear old friend, to the front and center of my thoughts. Dreading this moment, I hesitate to answer. My mind races to summon my

courage and principles to lay out my life in front of them, so to speak. What they would think, wonder, and maybe not understand was something I strongly did not want to face. Or did I? Isn't that why I was here? No, I had to be here. I needed him. In more ways than one. It was time to face the facts and see where it hits him. Square in the face or off the shoulder. So far, I am still the girl who grew up with Garrett, loving him as much as I always did, but I am not certain of his affection for me. I am sure he still cares for me, but is it enough to want to help me? I pray that it is. Here goes nothing.



## Chapter 2

I am looking directly at Garrett, but my mind is seeing another time and place. The scenes playing out in my head give me pause. My breath stops; my heart is still. I feel like I have just entered another dimension with only my spirit, leaving the heavy, drowning weight of my body behind, as the picture of her brands my brain once again.

"Raelle, what is it?" Garrett spoke softly in a concerned tone and compassion clearly showing on his kind and handsome face. The touch of his hand on mine radiated strength and love, implying that his support has never wavered. I am so thankful if my conception of this is true.

Garrett's voice brought me back from my flight with a startled jump. Noting the look on his face I quickly glanced at both Marietta and their kids. All were still and silent, watching me. I could feel their emotional energy. Curiosity, wonder, and love were the mixture coming from them all, except Colby, who happily munched on his fingers, ignoring any drama. Garrett could always see beyond my front to the depths of my soul, crumbling my emotional wall. Hiding anything from him was a hopeless venture.

Resettling in my chair, I cleared my throat and addressed Marietta. "You know a mother's love is a bond eternal. Wouldn't you agree?"

Marietta looked to Garrett for a sign of guidance, or is it to see if his face would give her a hint of what I am going on about. I didn't understand why she needed it. It was a simple question, but he didn't seem to give it to her from what I could tell. Glancing at her children next, she began her response. "Yes, I would agree. It's a bond that can never be broken, no matter what happens, and though each child is unique, each bond has the same strength and resiliency as another."

I could tell from her questioning look that she wonders where I am going with this and isn't sure what to say next. I think she may believe she sees what's coming, but I can guarantee the world, she does not.

Garrett quickly took up the cause, making me feel like the pity pot of the party. "Raelle, are you okay? Is there something I can do to help you?"

"No, Garrett, I... there is a... something I need to talk to you about, but..." I look from Garrett to the children before continuing. "I think we need to enjoy our lunch first, and then we can go for a walk and get some fresh air." My tone has risen to a nervous pitch with my feeble attempt to seem relaxed and nonplused.

"Absolutely," Marietta chirped, "let's order, shall we?"

Lunch quickly converted to bantering stories about kids, their antics, their dreams, and our hopes for them. It was heartening and refreshing to talk and catch up on what we have missed with each other. I surprisingly started to feel safe and secure as I pushed the reasons for my visit to the back of my mind.

It became clear from conversing with them that dwelling on the scenes and thoughts of my reality was something I yearned for and yet feared to face. Seeing

another life, another possibility, is intriguing and frightening, but oh so very inviting and exciting all at the same time. I must do what I have come here to do, yet I'm not quite sure how I will do it, and not hurt, confuse, or alienate anyone else in the process. I have to present the information in a way that assures them I am not crazy.

Our lunch was finished way too quickly for my shivering soul, but time cannot be wasted. After signing the check, I address my dear friends, "Shall we go for a walk in the park?" Waiting for the response, I notice the kids perk up, hoping to get outside on this beautiful fall day, I'm sure.

"I think the kids and I should head back home; we have a lot of things to do before our trip to the Ozarks," Marietta replied. "Of course, Garrett, if you don't mind bringing him home, Raelle, you should go and catch up with your friend. Please forgive us for spending so little time with you today, but we weren't expecting you, and I haven't prepared for our trip very well yet."

"Oh, no, no, I certainly didn't expect you all to drop everything for me. I'm just glad I got to see you and spend some time with you. It would be so wonderful if you could catch up with me for a bit more time, Garrett, and of course, I would take you home, but I understand if you must go." I giggled lightly, an irritating habit I have and obviously can't break, trying to hide my discomfort.

Garrett looked at Marietta with a smile, "Thanks, honey, I would love to catch up with Elle. Please don't do anything that I can do; I'll just do it when I get home. We have plenty of time. Besides, most everything is ready to go; we only have a few little things left to take care of." Rising, he walked over to Marietta and pulled her chair out for her, then took her hand. I thought the gesture was so sweet and loving; it made my heart

plump up with pride. He is still the wonderful man he always was.

The children and I followed them out to the car. I am feeling humbled, and the children are oblivious, probably because this was an all-the-time occurrence for them. Someday, they will know how lucky they were to grow up in a family like theirs. And that thought brought me back to the reason I am here.

My reality was about to be dropped like a rock, bearing my soul to the one person I hoped would understand. Not just to understand me, but everything I was going to lay bare.



## Chapter 3

We walked through the park on its winding path in silence, me trying to align the thoughts that tumble through my head as I single out what to say first. Garrett quietly walks beside me, seemingly enjoying the fall colors while he waits for me to start. He knew me too well to do anything but wait, understanding my silence was for a reason.

"Garrett, do you remember the summer we went to the Cherokee grounds in the mountains?" I didn't look up at him for a response, certain I didn't want to see his expression. We had agreed to forget that summer as if it had never happened. So, bringing it up now, these five years later, breaks our pact.

As I feared, he stops dead in his tracks and turns to face me, grabbing both my hands. "Raelle, why are you bringing that up? Now?"

Shaking his head, he looks at me. The only emotion I detect at this moment is pity. The one thing I didn't want to see. I hate that emotion. Feel for another person's circumstance if you will, but don't feel pity. Any other emotion is acceptable, but not that. Seeing that face and hearing that emotion through his tone, I wrench my hands away and turn from him.

"Oh, Raelle, I'm sorry, I just don't know what to say. I don't even know how your life has been, what you

feel, what you have been doing. I just don't know what to think or feel right now. I'm so sorry."

"Don't be sorry, Garrett. You have been my friend since I was five and know me better than anyone. I have a lot of emotions about this and always will. I ..I just need to talk about this.... and I.... I need your help."

"Let's start at the beginning. Is that why you came to see me, to talk about that summer?"

"Yes, and tell you something about that very summer. But I also wanted to see you and your family, of course, it has been a long time. Too long, in fact."

Garrett let go of my hands and softly grips my shoulders, looking at me, then the ground, then the sky, then the trees. It is clear to me he is trying to decide how to handle this and maybe wondering if he even can. I'm not quite sure if I can either, or if it is even real. Maybe I'm already in the loony tunes bin and just don't know it.

Suddenly, he let go of me to walk toward a bench to sit down. I followed, thinking if we don't, he might fall into a crumpled heap when I tell him what I think, and what I know to the depth of my soul.

We both cautiously and slowly sit down. I am wringing my hands in my lap, while he angles toward me and lays his hands cupping mine, I guess to still them. Leaning into me, his face close, and eyes boring into mine, he begins.

"Okay, let's talk about it. Why are you bringing this up after all this time? Has something happened? Have you seen him?"

"No... well, yes. I mean, I found him, but... I can't talk to him yet. He walked away, remember? I do need to talk to him though, this... he needs to know, or maybe I just want him to know." My voice softens to a murmur as I fight to keep my courage. After what we had been through, I should feel more confident telling

Garrett, but for some reason, I am wavering. Maybe it is due to our distance all these years or that we agreed never to talk about it again, I don't know, but I must have answers, and I need him to help me. Again, I become quiet, contemplating my next sentence, and Garrett is getting impatient, if his stumbling breathing is any indication.

"Ruelle, talk to me. Tell me what help you need." His voice was soft and flowing with empathy. He truly felt compassion and love for me; it was evident on his face and in every movement of his body.

"Garrett, do you remember all that happened that summer? I may... we may have been young and silly and carefree, but I cared about you, and things were exciting, fun, peaceful, and wonderful until the end. It all changed then."

"It did, but none of what happened was your fault. Nothing."

"No, I know, but actually, I think something wonderful did happen. One of the things I really wrestle with is that I am being punished. Punished for being too carefree or irresponsible, or self-indulgent. I wanted to live in the here and now, not think about the future or care about it. I believed that would keep until after the summer. You know, when we had to go back to reality."

I am twirling my hair with one hand and holding Garrett's with my other while the memories play through my mind. I am looking into the distance, seeing nothing but the scenes in my head.

I sense Garrett is focused on me, wondering where all this is leading. Looking up to see his face, I continue.

"Garrett, a month ago, I went back to the mountains. Back to our summer trip. I just had to go there. It was like a piece of me never left, and I had to go see if I could find it. I don't know how else to describe

it, but I felt not just a need but an absolutely life-sustaining necessity to go. It was essential to me, and as strong as the need to breathe. I believed it would help me to feel whole again. No broken heart. No sorrow. No wondering what happened because I would find the answers I needed."

I focus on Garrett's eyes, trying to read what he senses, what his emotions are. Is it concern or curiosity, or fear? If I can figure out which one it is, I think I will then know what to say next. Searching the handsome landscape of his face and delving into his soul, I believe his emotion is concern. Not fear that I have lost it and would never recover, and not curiosity as to what I was talking about, just concern. He cared about what I went through and what I am now going through.

I feel a deep love from him still, and I know now he will be here for me. With that prominent thought, I verbally march on.

"I am so thankful I have you as a friend. I am so proud of you and happy for you, and I just want you to know that without you, I would not be where I am or who I am today."

"Yes, you would. You are much stronger than you think. I am but an arm to steady you when the winds get strong." Garrett's face casts a soft yet deep emotion that I can't be exactly sure of what it is, but his eyes show an endless devotion to me, and that is more than equally returned. Garrett is and always will be my dearest and closest friend.

"So, tell me, why did you go see him? Do you still have feelings for him?"

With that question, I have to mull the answer over before speaking. Mostly because I expect the standard reaction of 'I'm an idiot for still having feelings for him'. But I always believed the old saying, 'you can't help who you love', to be spot on. How unfortunately true those

words are for me, anyway. If we could turn off the feelings, the attraction, the thoughts, life would be so much easier. I think. Well, maybe not. How boring would life be without the love, the sky-high elation of first love, and early in love heart flutters and stampedes, and the deep, comforting love that is built over time? That treasure would be sorely missed.

With a deep sigh, I confess the facts, "Truthfully, I have never stopped loving him. I just learned to move on as best I could. I didn't fall in love with anyone else, and I probably never will." I could have said more, like he's in my thoughts every single day, and I daydream about what could have been, but I decided to just leave those thoughts submerged in my vault of things I don't want to address.

"Okay, then what are you saying? Did you talk to him? Do you want to try to rekindle the union? If you have already seen him, is he married, with children? What? Where is he living, and how did you find him, and did you find out what you wanted to know? Did you ask him why and how he could do what he did, and how can you not be angry about that? Do you really love him or just think you do, or love the memory of what you think or felt it was?"

The questions were bubbling out of Garrett's thoughts and slamming like a sledgehammer into my heart. Each word is stunning, and shaking my resolve to complete my mission, and yet I had to. It is paramount to my sanity, my emotional stability, and even my very life. I understand perfectly what he wants and needs to know; I'm just not sure if he is totally or even slightly prepared for what I have to tell him. I really worry about how he will react and if he will help me then. I desperately need him to help me... and believe me, most of all, believe me. Even if I have to do this

alone, I really need to know he has faith in me. Undeniable faith in what I believe and know to be true.

“First, let me say I didn’t actually go looking for him; I went looking for answers. For the puzzle pieces of what happened. I mean exactly what happened five years ago. It haunts me and stays in my dreams, which seem surreal, and yet somehow with a ring of truth to them. Some dreams feel true, but what part is truth and what part is my imagination, boggles my mind, tortures my soul, and leaves me without sleep and completely void of any peace. I must have answers, and I don’t believe I will find them without your help and maybe Aidan’s too.”

Garrett sits, still holding my hands, staring at me, speechless, or so it appears. I begin to panic since I haven’t even told him the deep stuff yet. My mind is racing to find a segue to either move forward with my story or back it up to a safer place where I won’t get the look from him that he now has, one of confusion and some skepticism, and maybe even a little surprise. Maybe he’s already questioning my sanity, and this is nothing compared to what he has yet to hear. It created a fear in the pit of my stomach like I get when I sense my parents’ disappointment, and now I am wondering how worse his look can get. “This feeling I am getting right now from the look on your face, Garrett, hurts.”

“I’m sorry, Elle, I am just confused, I guess. I suppose I can understand, to some degree, why you went to find him... to resolve or even to just understand what happened, but why now? Why did you wait five years, and what can he possibly say or do, for that matter, to make any part of your life better? It would probably be smarter to let sleeping dogs lie, you know?”

“I can’t. Let sleeping dogs lie, I mean. I need to find some answers. Not just about what happened, but also where did he go, why did he disappear for all these years

after that, and would probably stay gone until death if he had his way. Also, what exactly happened? Does he know something, or is he also questioning things? Do you question what happened five years ago, Garrett? Are you satisfied with what we surmised happened, and have you had no doubts, dreams, or even questions about it?" I look in his eyes but don't wait for an answer. "Well, I do, and especially now."

"Why, why now, what happened that makes it now that you want answers? Why didn't you seek answers until now? It's been five years."

Garrett looked at his hands clasp mine and is now squeezing both hands almost painfully, like he is trying to force my voice out like a tube of toothpaste.

"Okay, look, I can tell you again because I have already told you why. I have no peace. My dreams don't stop, and nothing comes together, good or bad, so that I can understand anything. Nothing. I need, and I mean I really, truly need to understand what all happened, and what is going on now."

Garrett dropped my hands and stood up, looking down at me like the leaning tower of Pisa, a look of deep thought and trepidation on his magnetic face. "What do you mean now? What has happened that there is a now in this story?"

I reached up and grabbed his arms, pulling him back down to sit. I fortuitously believe he will need to be seated for this next deluge of truths. Lowering my eyes to study my hands, afraid to see the reaction to my tale on his face, I started.





## Chapter 4

“It all began with the dreams. I couldn’t find something, I don’t know what, in my dreams. Over and over, the same dreams, the same feelings, the same ending. I always feel like I missed or lost something. In each dream, I felt that something had happened that I couldn’t remember, or something happened differently than what I did remember or thought I remembered anyway. I just knew it didn’t fit together like a puzzle would, no matter what dream or memory I had; nothing looked or felt right. Something was missing, and it was driving me mad. The thoughts run through my head every waking moment, day or night.”

With a nervous flip of my hair, I sneak a glance at Garrett’s face. I see the soft set jawline and the soft radiance of his eyes, all indicating his rapt attention to my voice, and a keen love and concern for my turmoil. He is pouring out an energy of strength to me as if he will fix this as fast as possible if he can. It gives me the courage I need because right now, I have no doubt he will not mock me for what I am about to say next.

“What I recall transpiring that summer was as if it happened to someone else. I remember the long days on the hiking trails, the bonfires, and cooking over the fire, and laughing endlessly at our antics,

conversations, and jokes. It was all normal and easy fun.”

“Until that one day. The day we were all lost. Where did we go? What did we all see, hear, and experience? Not one of us can say for certain anything that occurred. We all say, I think I did this or went there or saw that. We sound like chattering chickadees spewing out thoughts, hoping they will connect to make sense. Probing for assurance they are real facts, not conjectures, but gaining no ground in either direction.”

“I don’t know about you, but the fog of that day is maddening, and since then, I have had a very strong sense that I need to know what happened. It’s a need so strong it cripples me, not knowing. It invades my thoughts every minute of every day. Do you?”

Garrett looks at me, perplexed, like he is trying to figure out how to answer that so it can put me at ease. I don’t want to be put at ease, though; I truly wanted the absolute truth. Anything and everything he knew to be a fact is as necessary to me as my heartbeat. It feels like I cannot go on living without this knowledge.

Pivoting, Garrett looked out at the horizon. I think he is seeing something quite different, maybe trying to remember that day so long ago.

“Raelle, I have such a clouded brain for that day that I chose not to dwell on it. It was upsetting and, as you say, maddening, not knowing what had happened, and how we were all separated and lost, I guess. Then suddenly there we were back together, and you both were fine, so I just chalked it up to a mental lapse and closed the thoughts down. I was afraid to dwell on them. The unknown can be scary and debilitating to the psyche. I thought that was what we all agreed on since our ability to define exactly what had happened was nonexistent. Is it not?”

“Yes, yes, you’re right, that is what we agreed on, but now it is different. Now, I simply must know what happened, especially since what I saw and what I know, in the core of my heart, know to be exactly what I believe it is. We have a whole story that needs to be discovered and discussed, and new life paths sought. Yes, there are things that seem incomprehensible and impossible, but believe me, it is not. If we believe in God, a higher power, thinking things are impossible is believing our God is limited in abilities. That our God is not omnipotent and even the power of love has a hard stop.”

Garrett appears to be getting lost in my speech to persuade him that the need to know and why is anything but a frivolous adventure. A trivial backtracking route to relive my greatest summer fun with nothing to gain is not what I want him to understand. Now I fight through my thoughts to seek a way to assuage his understanding.

Looking Garrett in the eyes and searching for his soul, with my hands now on both his shoulders, I continued. “Please let me reiterate my last day at our lost summer haunt. Then I would be grateful for your stark honesty. No holding back on what you think, and a truthful answer on whether you will help me. Please don’t help me without full conviction of your belief in what I tell you, and don’t do it out of a feeling of obligation to our friendship. I promise I will understand and honor your decision should you not want to waste any more time with me.”

I ease back from Garrett, removing my hands from his shoulders, folding them in my lap, and now watch his face, waiting for a nod, word, or gesture that he was willing to, at the very least, listen to what I so fervently needed to say, and hopefully be rewarded with his agreement to help me.

Garrett looks me in the eyes, maybe searching for the depth of my soul, possibly hoping to find my sanity still intact. Reaching out, he wraps his arms around me, holding me tight to his chest and whispers, "Elle, I will do anything for you. I have reservations about visiting those memories, but if they help you, then I will walk alongside you to the very end."

Relief came flooding into my senses, and then came concern. Will this hurt Garrett in some way that I cannot foresee? Will it be a nightmare of unfathomable trauma? These and many more questions now came to the forefront of my mind, and none of them could be answered. Yet.

Releasing his hug, Garrett is now in his steamboat full ahead mode, waiting for my story so he can then start to plan the sequence of events that we will need to pursue, to get a start on the path to some answers. Knowing Garrett as I do, this demeanor of his is music to my ears, and the melody is not only soothing to my soul, but it is also ecstatic to my senses. I now know he will help me no matter what story I tell him. He is the truest friend anyone could ever have. I am profoundly blessed.

With this path now lit, I fold my hands in my lap, and try to center and ground my soul as if to balance my dizzy mind of torrential thoughts, and begin the heart-stopping tale of my visit to our last summer together, as it transpired for me.

"So, the week I last spent at our summer haunt started slow, easy going, and noticeably quiet. I lived in a cabin like we did, in the same area we did, and mimicked all that we did, day by day. I enjoyed the quiet, even though I missed the fun banTERS we had those long days ago. I read books, hiked a bunch of trails, and cooked over the fire as much as possible. I even tried to fish, if you can imagine that. I was scared

by noises at night and tried to relive as many of the same things we did, except I was all alone, and I felt that. Deeply. I'm sure you remember how I don't like to be alone unless I am in the bathtub, in a house, with locked doors and a phone nearby."

I looked at him with a slight half grin and tried to laugh at myself a little to alleviate the tense mood my story seemed to be projecting, but the laugh sounded more like a tremor or nervous vocal twitch. Feeling vulnerable to this exposure of my raw emotions and thoughts, I bit back the fear that was creeping up my spine, tried to cover my face by cupping my hands around my eyes, and continued with the hard facts as I knew them.

"The trails I hiked were the same ones we did, but some I did not hike as far as we had. I felt afraid, like there was danger ahead, and when I turned to go back down, I kept looking over my shoulder, like someone was behind me. I always felt like someone was watching me, calculating my next move, examining my thoughts, if that is even possible. I don't know, it was eerie and frightening, yet I didn't feel threatened at the cabin. It was only on the trails that I felt unsafe. Maybe it was because I was out in the open. Exposed. I was afraid of something I knew was there but couldn't see, like I was unprotected and out in the open, vulnerable."

"When I hung in the cabin, on the porch or in the yard reading, cooking, working on my business items, even cleaning, I always felt like someone was watching me, but I wasn't in fear. I felt there was a... curiosity, like whoever was watching me was wondering what I was doing or maybe going to do, you know, what my plan was. Where and what would I do next? I don't know how or exactly why I had these feelings, just that I did. And they were strong feelings, not just glimpses of time or actions. It almost felt like someone was examining

me, trying to determine just who I was inside and out. Wondering if I am kind, odd, funny, exuberant, sad, happy, just everything that I am or could be. It was exhausting, what thoughts tumbled into my mind all day, every day. If it were my mind creating these thoughts and feelings, why? If I weren't creating these thoughts, then where did they come from? It didn't make sense to me, and the words and images kept tumbling in my brain all day, every day."

"I struggled with the constant barrage of thoughts, trying to understand what was going on and why. Did it have to do with what happened to us so many years ago, and would something like that happen to me again, now? I wanted the answers, but searching my mind and surroundings was not yielding any further revelations or easing my tense and even fearful spirit.

"Sometimes I thought, this is madness, and I need to go home and forget about this. Try as I might, though, I could not leave or stop searching for answers. My heart had me on a steady course of discovery even though my common sense said to leave and not search for anything because more than likely, I would not discover anything, or I would not be comfortable with what I did discover."

Garrett sat quietly, gently clasping my hands in his and searching my face as if to determine what emotions were present, which were prominent, and therefore, how he could help me even now. Now, before the truly hard facts I had discovered were even revealed, and I loved him for that. I have loved him for that and much more, for years. He is a rock of support and endless passion. Never have I felt abandoned by him, and his continued support now is almost overwhelming to my senses and brimming my heart. But this, his understanding, without even knowing but a small portion of what I need to tell him, helps me to continue,

unafraid of his judgment, which is something I realize he will never do. He has never judged me, only loved me and accepted all that I am. How lucky am I?

Looking out at the park and seeing only the scenes of my trip to the mountains, I close my hands tighter together, displaying the anxiety and nervousness I feel while talking about this. I feel like I have to explain not only what I saw, but what I felt, and I'm not sure it will be done well enough for Garrett to feel as if he were there. That is what I wanted most, for him to feel what I did, so he could understand it as well as I need him to. Shaking my head, trying to settle the many thoughts, I continue.

“As I said, I tried to take the same steps, repeating what we had done that last summer, all day every day until the day we were lost. I thought if I could repeat our actions, then, just maybe, I could see what had happened that we couldn't remember. I know that is a leap, at least for some, but what other option did I have? I could not think of any other way. My friends didn't want to talk about it, so I had to try and find the answers on my own. I know it is awkward for all of us in one way or another, but I felt that if I could find the answers I needed without disturbing you both, then it would be a win-win. Sadly, and yet wildly, it became a much bigger story than I had ever envisioned.”

“Sad and wild, together? Now I am especially curious. How could that be? Interesting.”

Garrett was standing now, scrunching his eyebrows and pinching the bridge of his nose. I can't tell if he is contemplating what I just said or if he feels the whole story so far stinks or, at the very least, reeks of a ridiculous, far-fetched imagination. I watch him, wondering if he is going to walk off, not wanting to hear any more, or if he is simply perplexed, and trying to sort it all out to the degree of what is true in his reality as

logical thoughts. The two questions I have are, does he believe I'm telling the truth, or does he think I'm making this all up for some unfathomable reason? Or, even worse, am I just insane now?

I am waiting for him to say something else or sit down, indicating he wants me to continue. It just didn't seem like I should continue without his acquiescence. I stare at him, willing him to respond in some way, watching his body language and feeling the nervous tension in the air. I don't know if that tension is from me or him, or both of us.

Finally, which seemed like an eternity later, Garrett sits down and holds my hands once again, letting me breathe a sigh of relief. I look him in the eyes and see that he seems to be searching mine. For confirmation or affirmation? I'm not sure.

"Elle, I don't know exactly what you are now experiencing or have experienced, but I do know you wouldn't have come to me for help if you didn't know in the depth of your soul that what happened and what you believe you know and understand to have happened are as real as the sun burns bright. I am ready, and thankful you have asked me to help you. Anything you tell me, I will believe, and help you find what you are looking for, so please continue and don't be afraid to tell me anything and everything. I am listening with my heart and mind wide open."

With tears now threatening to roll down my cheeks from confirmation of his solidarity with me, I clear my throat, dab at my eyes, and continue the story.

"Thank you for that, Garrett. I feel relieved and grateful for your support. So, as I said, the week was going by day after day with nothing new happening except for the eerie sense of not being alone, as I truly was, because I felt certain I was being watched. It was unnerving, and I had a strong curiosity about why I had

that feeling. At the cabin, I wasn't really scared, mind you, just on the trails. Well, that's not exactly true. I felt watched all the time, and that scared me, but the trails had me feeling an eerie fear, too. That may have been due to the fact that I am out in the open on the trails. Anyway, the day came, the same day five years later, when we got lost.

"I hiked up the same trail, and even though things were not exactly the same since those many years ago, it felt the same. Like this day truly was a repeat. The atmosphere or ambiance was comfortable and easy, and the electricity in the air was just as palpable. My emotions, though they were on edge, radiated a calm energy because I knew what had happened the first time, meaning I didn't think anything really bad had happened. I was expecting and fearful of what could happen now, keeping me alert and, as I said, on edge, but not feeling I needed to run for my life. I was weirdly ... cool."

"I swear to you, Garrett, as I walked up the trail now, ahead of me, the landscape appeared to get denser like the forest was undisturbed for hundreds of years, and the trees, vines, and bushes were much closer together and bigger. The moss and wildflowers grew everywhere, making the scene very beautiful and serene. I could hear water rushing in the distance like a river or waterfalls, but other than that, it was silent. I didn't hear birds or scampering animals or insects. Just the water and my footsteps when they crunched some leaves or twigs."

"The sensations, though, were something else. My heart was pounding in my chest with the jumpiness I felt. I had an unexplainable fear and yet excitement for what would be revealed. I was positive something would be uncovered with my naked eyes or at least understood, today of all days. It was... the whole day

was an overwhelmingly exciting and yet frightening endeavor.

“So, as I slowly walked into this dense and beautiful area, I believed that I was still on the same hiking path, and yet I knew in my soul that I wasn’t. The path became something else entirely. Yes, I was on a path, but not in the same way the original path was. It became something new and different. I don’t know how to describe it, but there was something very different about where I was now. The scenery seemed to be the same, although much denser, and yet the mood, the atmosphere, was different. The best way I can describe it is the density of the old trail was now much thinner, like less oxygen or a higher oxygen level in the air or ... I really don’t know.”

“I had a powerfully instinctive need to follow this path, and I did not worry about harm to my body or mind, just me allowing a real experience or education, maybe.”

“I didn’t know where I was going; I was just following the path that appeared as if often traveled through this dense foliage. It was beautiful, and as I walked, it became quiet, cool, and then eerie. I became frightened, but not enough to turn back or stop. I was experiencing a gut-wrenching need to keep going. It wasn’t a desire as if I desperately wanted to find answers; it was a ‘I won’t be able to breathe unless I go forward’ response. I didn’t even wonder why, because I had a sense that answers were now within reach, and I knew that I was being pulled to get the answers.”

Garrett is looking at me as if he is on pins and needles waiting for the gong of the bell indicating the pinnacle revelation.

“Unfortunately, I didn’t get answers, only more questions, but I innately know some things even though right now I can’t prove it.”

“Garrett, I kept looking at all my surroundings every step of the way, trying to memorize countless pictures in my mind showing what everything looked like and then tying those pictures to emotions so hopefully I could replay them like a movie in my head later.”

“As I moved my head from side to side, up, down, and looking behind me, I caught a glimpse of movement out of the corner of my eye. I did not see the movement when I looked straight on at the place where I had noticed it. So, my first thought was that my mind was playing tricks on me. But then I noticed movement again, and as I walked forward, I kept noticing movement, but never straight on. Each time, movement was only detected peripherally.”

“The only thing I could do was keep moving forward. Something was happening to me or with me as the instigator, but I didn’t have a clue what or which it was, to me or with me. I thought that if I kept walking, something would be revealed. Good or bad, I didn’t know, and where exactly I was, I didn’t know either. I was supposedly still on the trail I started on, but it didn’t appear to be how I had expected it to. The woods where I now found myself seemed and felt different, as I said earlier.”

“Just as I thought I was okay and safe because the eerie feeling had abated, I saw three wolves up on boulders in front and two of them to the left of me. I stared at them, afraid to move as they stood still, staring back at me. They weren’t growling at me and didn’t appear to have their hackles up or ears pinned back like dogs can do to make you afraid; they just stood there. I was very close to the bottom one and knew it could kill me in seconds, but I sensed that they were under the command or control of someone and would not attack unless I did something to warrant it. So, I

just stood still, slowly moving only my head and my eyes to see if there were any more wolves ahead or on my right. Even though I was taking my eyes off the ones already there, I needed to know if I had more to worry about. Not seeing any others, I now wondered what to do. How long do I stand still, or should I back up slowly and cautiously? I was in a quandary. Examining my situation, I realized that I was not terrified, and that was very surprising to me. The emotion just did not come through. How could I not be petrified in the position I was in? It boggled my mind. I was now thinking this cannot be real if I didn't have the right reaction to it. I must be dreaming or in Loonytunneville. Contemplating my situation, I again kept sensing movement as I returned to cautiously scanning my surroundings. I sensed where to look, feeling it was up ahead and slightly to my right, but again, nothing showed itself as the wolves did. I had no illusions about the fact that they were indeed here and able to attack me.”

“And then, I saw her. Everything else faded to the back of my mind. I was no longer scared or even thinking of anything but her. My mind and eyes were trained on her. Only her.”