

CHAPTER ONE

Kingsgate Psychiatric Hospital,

Kingsgate, New Zealand

March, 2004

My back was turned when my patient set fire to his hands. He must have wrapped them in the tissue I keep for teary-eyed patients and then grabbed for my lighter.

He was going to be my first brilliant success “Down Under.” I, Dr. Natalie Stearn, feminist American psychologist, was going to revolutionize New Zealand’s Mental Health System.

A radiant healer of immeasurable love, my mentor, Shemura, had just won a research grant after dazzling the Viennese psychoanalyst’s convention with her miraculous results. She left Freud’s apostles howling at the moon, curing psychosis with touch, compassion and her radical discovery of the field of Emotional Intelligence! I had followed her abroad, possessed by an unnamed obsession to be her next protégé.

After Europe we traveled around the world, meeting impassioned women everywhere ready to unfasten the corsets of patriarchal restraint. Generations of bottled up wisdom were about to catapult a worldwide change. Shemura was central to it, birthing a new psychology that wedded science to soul, ushering in love as the missing link.

Because of her, the Kingsgate Psychiatric Hospital trusted me with Riley, their long-term psychotic who spoke only in gibberish. He was an awkward adolescent who ambled backwards, nervously hiding in his private world of nonsense rhymes. Once they took him off his medication, the tidal wave of his past abuse begged for expression.

For two days and nights I cradled him as he transited torture. We were raw with his psyche's labor pains, shaming the regular staff who prayed our round-the-clock vigil was not to be in their future. After seventy-two hours he spoke his first coherent words of a lifetime.

"Don't you come near me, you son of a bitch. You bastard, I'll never let you hurt me again!" he shouted, his eyes staring straight into mine. I loved every syllable of his foul-mouthed declaration of independence. Freedom's ring was sweet, even if it did chime out with profanity.

He was a different person after that, speaking quietly, his steady eyes determined to brave the riptides of terror that had held him mute. Like a newborn he lay in my arms, opening himself heroically to the sensations of his restored life.

Then, when we had unlocked this total tenderness he so deeply needed, I felt an indescribable energy rise up in my body, like a fiery beast hungry for ages. I wanted to feast on his fresh innocence, to fill myself with his purity. He saw the horrific hunger in my eyes. It was enough to make him retreat back into his vacant world.

This is not what happened when Shemura healed. She turned herself even more into a love-being. I had wanted to devour him. Never in my life had I felt something so evil. My betrayal drenched him in blood and incest, returning him to the nightmare of his father's lust. As I turned to escape the full impact of what I had done, he

lit himself on fire. His screams of anguish filled the ward.

“Oh Christ, he’s burning up!” the security guard shouted, breaking in and dousing the boy with fire retardant. The nurses injected him with a horse-strength tranquilizer, but it did nothing to quell his unimaginable pain. His departing stare bore a hole in my life of unexplored depths. In the hopes of discovering to what purpose I’d turned into this dark goddess, I shut down my practice and returned to the States. This manuscript is the chronicle of my investigation.

CHAPTER TWO

The Shambhala Lodge

Las Madrinas, Arizona

April, 2004

It took me a week of blurred arrangements to withdraw from my life as a psychologist. Las Madrinas, Arizona, wasn't my first choice. Morocco would have been more exciting, losing myself to its maze of ancient medinas, inhaling air luscious with sandalwood and musk, cloaking myself in the colorful Berber tribal women's silver and gold-woven jalababs. Overwhelmed with the desire to flee what I had to face, I dreamed of disappearing behind their veils, to bask with them in invisibility.

Las Madrinas lent me another sort of invisibility with its seductive offer of sanctuary; and if it was selling divine bliss to harried tourists for top dollar, I was — at least, in the beginning — innocent of the conspiracy.

A letter arrived at my New Zealand flat, perfectly timed to provide the way out. Inside were two tickets, pre-booked by one of my spiritually-minded colleagues. I was to attend a weekend seminar at the Shambhala Lodge, dedicated to the illumination of the human spirit. All that was left for me to do was extend my stay indefinitely.

The Shambhala Lodge hung precariously off sand cliffs that lined the region's red rock canyon. It reminded me of a reclining phallus of domed glass on top of an adobe fortress. Inside its enormous hall I felt intimidated, eyed

by Archangel Michael whose portrait rode the filigreed cathedral ceiling. Two steps inside and I was blinded by the light-show of a hundred tilt-a-whirl crystal prisms. But after my sixteen-hour flight from Auckland, I wanted darkness. I barked at the turbaned concierge to “Hurry for God’s sake!” with my caravan of trunks bursting with volumes of old journals and my unfinished novel. He reminded me that everything in the Shambhala hundred-acre reserve was “for the sake of God” and asked me if I hadn’t been informed that I was entering a sacred vortex. Before I could answer, a scurrying cluster of yoga students assaulted me, their smiles reflecting those crystals’ unbearable glare.

After they ran my Visa, I was shown into the Grand Solarium where potted palms drooped over pyramids of vegetarian burritos laying in a sickly sauce. I didn’t want lunch. I wanted to hide in my room, afraid my head would burst like a cracked watermelon spitting soggy seeds of castigation onto their spotless Persian carpets.

I cursed, bumping into a mob of blissed-out revelers while the program director pitched the upcoming Festival of Light to be hosted by their latest western heir apparent of eastern mysticism, Guru Yogicar.

Giant candles were being lit next to the gargantuan fireplace. Paper boats signifying the sojourn to Nirvana were bobbing up against those blinding crystals whose exuberant spinning was making me nauseous. Tipping the concierge, I backed into my room unable to shake off the sensation that I had landed in the Super Bowl for Enlightenment. How would I survive ensconced in this mob of pie-eyed mystics?

I looked at the room that was to be my home until I birthed myself free from these feelings of evil. I snubbed the décor with its prefabricated glass coffee table, the

futon divan, the two basket armchairs, the macramé hung plants and imitation Indian carpet — all coordinated in non-committal pastels. The thought of living alone suffocated by their generic tone sent me into a panic. But where else could I go? There was nothing but desert from here to the airport. Staring into the mirrored bathroom wall, I barely recognized the shifty aging Jewess that glared back at me.

Sinking into the king-sized waterbed, I had just closed my eyes to slow the assault of memory when the phone rang.

“Natalie?” I heard my name called from the other side of the world. “The clinic has burned.”

“But the fire was completely out when I left. How could that be?”

“I don’t know. It couldn’t have been Riley. He’s in real bad shape. They have him sedated and cuffed to his burn bed, in solitary. There’s nothing left, Natalie. Hal and Terry are accusing you of witchcraft. It is odd that it happened the very night you expressed such regret, insisting you had to terminate your career for this bizarre calling, this spiritual purification or whatever. But no one seriously holds you responsible for Riley. It happens to all of us at least once in our illustrious careers. You didn’t need to leave over one relapse, even if you did see ‘whirlwinds of dark energy spiraling up from your interior.’ I don’t believe in any of your woo-woo stuff, not for a minute. You’re way too hard on yourself, Natalie. We all feel guilty when one of our patients doesn’t make it. It happens to the best of us.”

“Nigel, the clinic... there’s nothing left? Was anyone else hurt?” I asked dumbfounded by his news.

“No, they were all back in the dorm. It’s all our records, the files, and your research project, Natalie —

your documentation of Shemura's work, it's all gone."

I could barely listen as he told me to stay as long as I needed, that they were all moving into portables. Hanging up, I felt the devastation I had created explode in my blood, carrying emptiness through my jet-lagged bones. I had destroyed Riley's chance for a decent life, and with it Shemura's reputation. Breaking into a sweat, I pulled back the patio doors insisting the night air fan me with its coolness. Sitting up all night, I dissolved, shaking with fear as owls screeched and bats fluttered across the red rock canyon. By morning my lips were blue with frost, as the orange and purple dawn paled into a bleached sun of self-condemnation.

All morning the lines to New Zealand were busy. When I finally got through to Shemura, her voice was soft and comforting as I made my confession.

"We're all hurting with Riley," she said.

I was sure she was going to chide me for assaulting her research, but she was too upset about the boy whose life I had threatened.

"I've seen this in you from the beginning, Natalie," she responded to my confession. "I thought your pursuit of the work would have brought you through the door by now, but it hasn't. Riley was so special, so brave. I am hoping we can reverse some of the damage." She paused, as though she were taking a silent moment to lend strength to his wounded spirit. Then her voice changed with a strange determination. "You're about to become a voyager into the forbidden world of the female unconscious mind. You are going to stay within yourself until you resolve this, aren't you?" she asked.

I whispered "Yes" as her concern filled me with gratitude and loss.

She advised me to keep a safe distance from herself

and her extended family of real and adopted children. “I don’t know if I would have recommended Las Madrinas,” Shemura went on. “It’s a formidable Earth energy vortex. The acceleration of light there will draw out of you rapid-fire paranormal phenomena.” I could tell she was still watching out for me, even as her career lay in ruins.

“Will it be dangerous?” I asked, frightened by the sudden alarm in her usually relaxed voice.

“If this is what I think it is, there may be real danger. I’d send one of us to be with you, but I can’t take the risk, even though I know we are what you will miss the most.”

She was right. She had helped her children carve themselves from the fabric of complacency with knives of dedication. They were all hard working harbingers of care, unacknowledged modern day saints. Their joyous and giving natures and courageous poetic souls were living proof Shemura’s breakthrough in Emotional Intelligence could create a different genre of *homo sapiens* worthy of the name “human.”

“Maybe it is for the best you are there,” she went on, evaluating every angle of my circumstance. “The Vortex will help you find the roots of this and pull it up to the surface, if you’re willing to face yourself head on and stop the denial.”

“How do you mean?” I asked.

“The Vortex will dredge it from your depths. The triggers of women like yourself, who chose distortion, live in your cellular memory. The vortex will act like a time tunnel because of the Earth’s immense healing force there. Pray, meditate, and listen. Give everything to this if it is truly what you want.” She paused, and I could feel her sensing deep into the vortex as though there were no distance between us. “At times it’s going to be like you’re on a mind-expanding drug there. People interact on

vortexes as though they have known each other forever. As you journey, weeks can span lifetimes.”

“Journey? Into what?” I asked, pushing back the panic. “How can I believe anything if it’s going to be like a drug?”

“Because it’s not a drug. It is life pulling out of you what keeps you from being a person whose presence others can trust. Whatever is against a harmony with nature will no longer be able to exist. Vortexes are do-or-die places. You’re upping the ante just being there.”

“I’ve always had you by my side. You’ve always been my cover. Now I’ve damaged your name, your work. How can I ever make this up to you?” I asked, my throat tightening against my loss.

“Work until you are satisfied your female spirit is beginning to direct your life, not your contracts with power.”

“What are my contracts with power, Shemura? Do you know?”

“Yes, I think so, but it won’t do you any good for me to hold your hand this time. You need to excavate your own strength. It’s the only way. Many are impacted by the actions of a few. Learn what piece of the story is yours and tell it.”

“Tell it?” I asked, grabbing for her words like a rope to pull me from quicksand.

“You are going to be writing aren’t you? Life and your creativity will find a way. Let me know how it’s going.”

When she hung up I realized how addicted I had become to having her near. But why? Why would a grown woman need another woman with so much desperation? I didn’t have the answer. I only knew I had never been more alone.

Unable to move, I lay for hours in my bed drifting

backwards, to sixteen, to madness, to the mental hospital where I had abandoned myself to suicide long before Shemura lit my life with hope. The sad child I had been was calling me back. How could I comfort her now when I did not know the origin of this distortion that lived within us both? I tried to rest but couldn't dislodge the vision of Riley's burning hands. I was out of excuses. I had to make the effort to track this internal violence to its source.