

# **FOREVER MORE**

A Love Story from the Edge of Eternity

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# PROLOGUE

As passings go, he told me his was a good one. When they found his body, there was a slight smile upon his face as if he were happily dreaming in his favorite armchair. It wasn't long after his earthly remains had been dispatched to the cemetery, that his spirit started showing up in my life. And while I know it sounds odd that anyone could fall in love with a dead man, I have to tell you that his energy was more alive than anyone I've ever known in physical form.

He often appeared to me dressed in the dapper style of the forties, which he told me was the best time of his former life. He'd wear a crisp white shirt tucked into the trim waist of his wide-leg pants, held up by a pair of suspenders. His hair was gleaming black and slicked back in unruly waves he would calm with a hand whenever he was trying to concentrate.

In the beginning, I thought he had come to me for help to heal the hearts of his daughter and granddaughter. Though that was part of it, he also saved my life and led me to finally understand what it felt like to be truly known and exquisitely loved. His presence helped to unfold in me an astounding late-life blossoming of which I couldn't have dreamt. Much later, when I was an old woman, I realized it was all of that and so much more. My name is Rebecca St. Claire, and this is my story of Sebastian.

# 1

Everything was ending the first day I saw him. It was the last day of school and the kids in my second grade class were especially unruly. I didn't blame them; I, too, was anxious to slip into the summer, set free from the relentless ticking of the big round clock that pushed me through my days, staring down from over the blackboard in the back of the room. I didn't have the resources in those final hours of the school year to deal with the chaos typically created by my high-spirited students. Ever since the chemotherapy, I tired much more easily and because of that I felt, from somewhere deep within, that I had not been lucky this round. Or perhaps it was that I didn't believe in luck anymore.

Maddy, a dark-eyed seven-year-old and a favorite of mine though I tried not to have them, had raised her hand and uttered the words every teacher dreads, "I think I'm going to be sick." And then she was, vomiting all over the picture book on her desk, which she had just taken out at my request so that I could collect them. I knew from my nearly thirty years of teaching that elementary students do not take well to the public emission of bodily fluids and mayhem erupted, cued by her cry of dismay. Some of the vomit had projected onto the back and hair of Celene, the little girl who sat in front of Maddy. Feeling the wetness, Celene started crying too and suddenly the whole class was reacting, with a few of the boys especially delighted by the unexpected diversion from our task-bound march toward summer vacation. In my post-chemo state, I was more vulnerable to smells and nearly sick myself at the acrid scent. But an elementary school teacher must remain calm during catastrophes large and small, so I began to restore order to my room.

"Maddy, it's going to be OK," I said, dabbing at her with the paper towel I always kept folded in my pocket for such events. I pointed to the little bathroom in the back of the classroom. "Go wash yourself off. I'll clean this up while you're gone." I gave the sniffing

little girl a gentle push to get her moving and then turned to Celene. I wiped the tears from her sweet face and gave her a hug before returning my attention to the smelly mess, trying to breathe through my mouth so as not to make it worse.

It was then I had the unmistakable feeling there was another adult in the room. I thought perhaps someone had walked in while I was occupied with Maddy's upheaval, but I hadn't heard the door open. When I turned to see who was there, all I saw was a soft flash of light out of the corner of my eye, like a firefly blink. For a few seconds, I had the oddest sensation, as if someone was watching over the scene with amused sympathy. Then the moment passed and I went back to work, calming everyone and cleaning vomit. Thankfully, the mess was wiped up quickly. An opened window and a couple squirts of air freshener made the room as good as new. My inclusion class, comprised of students of varying abilities, from high achievers to several special needs children with mental or physical disabilities, settled down and began gathering their things, preparing for the final moments of the last day of school. I shook my head to clear it and focused on ushering my young charges out the door. As I did so, I noticed Charlie, one of my students diagnosed with autism, sitting at his desk in the back of the room, staring at something and smiling. I was struck by how beautiful he looked, his auburn curls bobbing as he nodded his head in excitement. I hadn't seen him respond so enthusiastically to much of anything the entire year. His blue eyes were shining and engaged. Charlie never spoke. He usually had an aide at his side to help him navigate his schoolwork, and she used a special notebook full of symbols, pictures, and words to help him stay calm and focused. I'd never even heard him make a noise beyond grunting, and often he would just sit at his desk and snap the green rubber band he wore on his wrist, an action that seemed to soothe him. Typically, his aide would try to gently turn him towards whatever activity the rest of the class was pursuing, but she had left the room to bring some of his paperwork to the main office, and he was alone.

Charlie laughed in delight, watching the spot where I'd seen the flash. I squinted at a barely perceptible shape of rippling energy. Though I was intimately familiar with people who believed that spirits and ghosts appeared out of nowhere, I was startled by what seemed to be an opaque human form standing near the boy's desk and even more shocked by Charlie's response. My young student was speaking quietly, his lips moving quickly while the human-like form seemed to listen and nod. Then, it lifted a hand and tenderly patted Charlie's

shoulder before disappearing. Charlie blinked several times and then began to cry softly, as if begging the apparition to return. I was about to comfort him when his aide hurried back into the room, eyes wide at the sight of his anguish. She quickly got out his notebook and flipped to images she knew would calm him. She pointed to a photo of children on the playground, which he especially liked, and talked to him quietly, saying the same soothing words over and over. “The playground is fun, Charlie. We’re going to the playground today.” Her words slowly lured his attention away from the unexpected visitor she hadn’t seen.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Charlie was special in the purest sense of the word, and I felt very connected to him, so his pain hurt my heart. As I saw him snapping the rubber band on his wrist, I knew he had begun the process of self-comfort. I turned my attention to the rest of the class and our last goodbye. I would miss them all, especially Charlie, but in the past decades of my career, I had always been comforted knowing I would be able to watch them grow as they moved through the grades of my elementary school. They would be other teachers’ students, but I felt a part of them would always belong to me, even the most challenging among them. The end-of-the-year had been easier when I knew I would be there for them if they needed me, but these last months had proved to me that no one is promised tomorrow. As I said goodbye to each of my students, hugging them one by one and whispering words of encouragement into their ears, I knew I might never see any of them again. When Charlie’s aide walked him to the door, I thanked her for her care and hard work helping him adapt in my class. Then I knelt down to eye level with Charlie. He looked away, but I spoke as if he were looking right at me. “It was a pleasure to have you in my class this year, Charlie. You are a wonderful young man, and you helped me teach the children that while our differences make us unique, we share much in common. I just wanted to thank you for that. I hope you have a wonderful life.”

He looked over my shoulder at the spot where the apparition had appeared. A corner of his mouth turned up in a shadow of a smile. Our eyes met for an instant, and I saw a moment of clarity within his before they went blank once more. I was staring at him in surprise when his aide leaned over and said, “Come on, Charlie. Your mom is waiting.”

They were the last to leave my room. I watched them walk away, suddenly aware that the

preceding moments might have been my last as a teacher. I closed the door and leaned upon it to survey my empty classroom.

I could still feel the noisy imprint of each child's energy as silence seeped into my room. I shut my eyes and let it wash over me as I did every year. "I wish them happiness and peace," I whispered in a sort of prayer, in case there was some great and powerful being out there in the stratosphere watching over all children, but I wasn't hopeful. They were urban kids from poor neighborhoods, some challenged with physical, mental, and emotional difficulties. If there was a God, he apparently didn't think being poor was hardship enough. I was certain that prayers alone couldn't keep my students safe, but there was never anything more that I could do than teach them as best I could and then send them on their way in the hope that somebody out there was watching over them.

As I looked around the empty room, I wondered about Charlie's visitor. I hadn't thought about spirits since I was a kid, when my mother and grandmother made their living talking to dead people. I had certainly never seen a spirit before.

I began to pick up the books the children had left on their desks. Last year, my cancer had brought me closer to the precipice of eternity than I had ever been before, and I'd spent the months since wondering about life and death. The two most important people in my life had believed that there was so much more to come when we die, but I'd never had any proof that their beliefs were anything more than wishful thinking. If anyone could have made their way back from the dead, my mother and my grandmother would surely have found a way to get back to me. If they, who were certain such things were possible, could so completely disappear, then how could the work to which they had devoted their lives be anything more than deluded fantasy?

But what had just happened in my classroom? I decided that it must have been a combination of my fuzzy post-chemo brain and the last-day-of-school commotion. I must have imagined the exchange between Charlie and the invisible presence. Perhaps our extraordinary connection as my student left was his extreme response to our parting. After all, we'd just spent the last nine months together. Either way, I had my hands full clearing out my classroom for what could be the last time.

I dropped the books on my desk and saw my cell phone blinking. It was a text from my husband, Michael. I frowned, and pressed a button on the phone so I could see his message. "We have to talk," it read. Talk. That was almost funny. What the hell was there left to say?

# 2

My marriage was over, but Michael was a clever and successful defense attorney and believed he could argue his way out of anything. I knew he was planning, one more time, to try to change my mind. The text message he'd sent me that afternoon was the finale of a long and emotional series of conversations that had taken place over the past few weeks. I hadn't yet told him I suspected that the cancer that was once in my uterus had returned, despite the surgery and wearying round of chemotherapy and radiation I'd endured last summer. As we sat together that night in our living room, Michael rehashed the whole dreadful story, which had begun last year between him and a younger co-worker.

Apparently, she was his soul mate. Too. He loved us both he said. His face was pinched with regret as he brushed away tears with the back of his hand. "I would never deliberately try to hurt you," he said. "I want you to stay. We can deal with this together." I stared at him, resisting the impulse to grab my paper towel square and hand it to him as if he were one of my students.

As he continued his crazy argument for my staying in our home while he lived between two households, my eyes wandered over to our wedding photo on the desk. We had made such a lovely couple back then, him a lanky blonde in a white tuxedo, his sun streaked hair making him look like a cross between surfer dude and high school prom king; me standing next to him, the top of my head coming to just beneath his chin. My dark hair hung in waves around my shoulders, and I wore a simple white dress and a veil of Spanish lace. We were hippie children, full of hope and out to change the world. We worked together in the poorest neighborhoods of Cleveland. While I taught the children, he provided legal assistance to their families. It was not easy work, but the rewards satisfied him as much as they did me, and I was proud of both of us. Until now.



I pulled my attention back to the one-sided argument that was taking place in my living room where we were surrounded by the neatly arranged possessions from our life together: books, paintings and recycled furniture collected from thirty years of strolling hand-in-hand through flea markets and bartering at garage sales. Between the exhausting effects of the chemo on my body and my resolve to leave our marriage, it was hard to concentrate on Michael's carefully presented pitch to allow himself the best of both worlds, his mistress and his wife. I couldn't imagine a universe where my husband slept with another woman while I waited for him in our bed. Still, he persisted, delivering a passionate closing argument to explain why he was not willing to give up either of us. I tried to listen, sitting in my favorite overstuffed chair with the soft, green blanket we'd bought in Dublin wrapped around my shoulders, but his words were pinpricks in my heart.

Then, I saw it again. A spark of light at the edge of my line of sight seemed to briefly illuminate the darkest corner of the room. When I fixed my eyes upon it, it disappeared. I blinked and tried to return my attention to Michael. It might have been that my eyesight was faltering from the chemical residue in my system, but somehow I knew that spark was the same presence that had appeared in my classroom that day. The change in the energy of the room and the quickening of my heart felt exactly the same. Except this time, the movement was more distinct, the flicker more deliberate. When it disappeared, it was as if a light switched off. The corner of the room went dark.

The presence had been so bright that I looked to see if Michael had seen it too. But he was intent on making his case. "I was simply trying to give her some guidance, tell her how to get her life back together, when she reached out for me..." He put his head down, ashamed. "She wanted more. And I wanted more, too. Before I knew it, we were lovers."

We'd had this conversation so many times lately that I had grown tired of the words. While a part of me would always feel love for him, it was not enough to consider the life he wanted to live. The emotional ties that had once bound us tightly had loosened over the years, and I wondered about the role I'd played in sending him into the arms of another woman. I didn't speak because I continued to feel the presence of another person in the room. It made me uncomfortable, as if we were discussing our most intimate secrets in front of a stranger. I

stood up, hoping to end Michael's oratory, when my husband delivered the final blow. "She's pregnant," he said, rising from his chair and standing in front of me to make sure he had my complete attention. He stared me down until I raised my head and looked him in the eyes. He reached for my hands and squeezed them hard. I was already wincing when he said, "I want you to help us raise the child."

I felt the final piece of myself break away from our marriage. We had decided long ago not to have children of our own. Between his courtroom and my classroom, we didn't need any more humans to take care of, little or big. But at his words, I felt a rise of bitter jealousy that he would now have a child of his own and I would not, ever.

Without saying a word, for I could think of none to say, I turned and went into our bedroom, closing the door and pulling back the blankets of our bed so I could curl up beneath them. Every fiber of my body felt frozen, shocked into stillness by the latest revelation of my husband's betrayal. I lay there for hours, trying to imagine what to do next. I needed some time to determine what to do with the remainder of my life, which was starting to feel like an old purse, its contents strewn all over the floor.

As always, when I was sad or afraid, I longed to speak to my mother. She had died just after I graduated from college I had been so busy with my very first class, I hadn't properly grieved. My sadness was buried beneath piles of paper that comprised my life, from the reams of my master's thesis to the thick folders that contained my daily lesson plans. Distracted by the details of a busy life, I tried not to dwell on her absence. But in my darkest moments, I was tossed back in time like a rag doll, and the empty space in my heart felt raw and painful, like a part of me had been ripped away.

I missed the days when I was her child, safe and adored. I wanted to return to the summers of my youth, when my biggest challenge was lying on the grass and finding images in puffs of clouds as they passed over the lake.

The idea seeped into my awareness, spreading into the darkest corners of my mind like bright colors rinsed from a painter's palette, and the decision came to me fully formed, before I was even aware I was considering it. It was the only thing I could do. I had to go home.

# 3

The next day, I packed some things into the back of my silver Prius and drove two hours to Lily Dale, the little lakeside community in Western New York where I was raised. It was a place where people talk to the dead.

I wanted to see Maeve O'Toole, my mother's best friend. She was the only person left in my life who had loved me since I was born. Although I had been appallingly bad at responding to her faithful stream of cards and emails, her communications always made me feel as if I were still connected to the people and places of my childhood. And though she knew I'd never had much interest in the spiritualist religion that inspired the birth of Lily Dale more than a hundred and thirty years ago, she made it clear the little town would always be my home.

"Darling girl," Maeve said when she saw me through her screen door, standing forlornly on her porch. I tried to smile at her words because I have always felt like Maeve's darling girl, but silent tears spilled from my eyes. We embraced, and I inhaled the familiar scent of the incense she burned before doing a reading. Her white hair was wrapped in a bun at the nape of her neck, her bangs trimmed neatly over sharp blue eyes, which surveyed me thoughtfully when we pulled out of our hug. "What's happened to you?" "I need to talk to my mom," I said, wiping away my tears.

Maeve looked into my eyes for a moment and then nodded. "Yes, you do. But not right now. You look tired, my girl. You need to rest."

She pulled me into her comfortable living room, which was unchanged since I had last seen it years before. I sat down across from her and told her of the challenges I'd been facing: my worry that the cancer had returned and my husband's betrayal. Bless her heart; she didn't look the least bit horrified, perhaps because she'd heard so many sad stories in her work as a

medium, where she communicated with the spirit world for grieving humans who longed to speak to their dead. She reached for my hand and held it tight. “Why don’t you stay here with me for a few weeks, and we’ll figure the rest out later, “ she said in a tone that made me feel ten years old again, transporting me back to the days when she and my mother were raising their children together. Maeve’s own two daughters were my dearest friends from childhood, but I’d kept in little better contact with them than I had with her. And yet, being back in Lily Dale, it felt like nothing had changed.

Maeve put me up in the small guest apartment over her garage. From the tiny porch, I could see the entire community with its walkways, courtyards, and cottages surrounded by thick woods of ancient trees. I felt comforted by the immersion into my childhood memories. For the first time in a long while, I was able to breathe. I spent the following days cocooned by the gentle energy of the place. While my neighbors communed with the dead, I poked and prodded the deaths in my own life, grieving not just the destruction of my marriage and the loss of my vitality and wellness, but also finally turning my attention to the deaths of my mother and grandmother. I could feel their presence in this place they both loved. My grandmother was a tiny woman with dark hair and piercing eyes. She was one of the most beloved mediums ever to reside at Lily Dale, and many said I resembled her. Then there was my mother who, with her slender frame and long legs, would amble through the community in her cropped pants and baby doll flats looking more like a displaced starlet than a psychic medium.

My grandmother often told me that my mother was even better at talking to the dead than she was. The information my mom obtained from spirit was so much more precise than my grandmother’s, and my mother had a large and loyal following among those who returned to the community each summer. But she didn’t love the work like my grandmother did. The sadness and neediness of her clients seemed to seep into her soul and steal away her graceful good humor. And then the cancer came, invading her body with a vengeance, just as it was likely doing to me now. Shortly after I left Lily Dale for college, my mom crossed over. My grandmother, brokenhearted and unafraid of death, passed shortly after. I was left without any family until I married Michael. And now he was gone, too. So, I grieved, quietly at first and then angrily. I would walk the little beach late at night after most of the tourists had left, flinging rocks into the lake and swearing softly to myself. I cursed my husband for

abandoning me and was angry with my mother and grandmother as well, for leaving me far too soon. With nothing to occupy my time but reflection, and with the recurrence of the cancer looming over me like a swinging sword, I felt hopeless, as if my life were already over.

I wondered how I could be fifty-four years old, yet so uncertain. What had happened to the part of me that always knew exactly what to do? I went over those questions in my mind but found no answers. My hopelessness grew. What was I going to do with the rest of my life, I asked myself over and over. I had a sonogram scheduled at the end of the month. What if the cancer had returned? If I were dying, should I go back to Michael? Maybe I could find a way to live with his infidelity. What about my job? Should I warn my principal I might not be returning? After endless rounds of questions with no answers, I grew frustrated by my own speculations and sadness. Maeve was busy tending the flocks of visitors who came to Lily Dale during the summer months. Her promise to help me connect with my mother seemed forgotten, but I understood. As a leader of the community, she didn't have much time between private readings and organizing the daily events, which included the services each morning at the assembly hall and the afternoon gatherings at "Inspiration Stump" in the woods.

Out of sheer desperation and with nothing more interesting to fill my days, I decided to enroll in one of the many classes offered at Lily Dale during the season for those who wanted to learn more about such topics as mediumship, energy healing, or past-life regression. Maeve was starting her annual "Introduction to Mediumship" course, and I began attending the twice-a-week classes. It wasn't that I felt a need to talk to random dead people. I felt a need to talk to my dead people. Contrary to every logical, hard-won belief I'd ever held, I'd crumbled when facing the worst emotional disaster of my life. I'd turned my attention to the afterlife in the desperate hope that somebody was there.

I shouldn't have been surprised to find myself back at Lily Dale looking for answers, but I was. Growing up, my mother and grandmother's mediumship abilities paid the bills and allowed us to live in the little community. I had never considered mediumship to be a skill I would practice. Like many adult children who turn away from the religion in which they were raised, I'd had no emotional connection to spiritualism. I simply did not believe.

Skepticism was my birthright, inherent in my genes. My conception had been the result of a brief relationship between my mother and a scientist who'd come looking to communicate with the spirits of dead inventors. She'd always told me I got my thirst for learning from him. Apparently, my father had won her over with his good looks and magnificent brain, but he was a humorless man with wide, unblinking eyes, and he'd had no interest in raising a child. That was fine, because after he'd signed away all rights to me, I never had much interest in him, either.

My childhood was filled with the love of my mother and grandmother and all the strange and wonderful neighbors who lived with us in Lily Dale. But my father's skepticism flowed through my veins like a liquid legacy. I had no use for the secrets of the afterlife that my mother and grandmother spent their lives exploring. Living required all my energy. I didn't much care what came after. And I certainly didn't care much for the God of my childhood. A person can't work in a gritty, urban neighborhood and believe in a fair and loving deity. If there was a God, he was surely not doing the job that we all gave him so much credit for. If there was a God, he was a partial God, and I didn't have any desire to know him. Yet, especially in this place, I missed my mom, and the need to connect with her, just one more time, filled me with a consuming desire. I was like the little match girl in the children's fable, a freezing, orphaned child lighting matches in the icy darkness, hoping for the warmth that a glimpse of her could provide. I was suddenly quite willing in my frozen despair, to consider it possible to find her in spirit and talk with her once more.