

## Chapter 7

### France

*Peering through the shadows, our eyes meet. Hers are fierce, yet reveal a humorous twinkle that only comes from journeying into the underworld and back again, a fearless gaze that knows the true comedy of life. I'm nervous, like a little child exploring a dark room that holds a secret I may not want to discover and knowing if I find it, my world will never be the same. I move closer, conscious of each small step not knowing if she is going to embrace me or annihilate me, an odd mixture of fear and desire. Her black form moves with the shadows, as though dancing with the unseen. This is the presence of the dark mother.*

The only flights that Helena and I can get together arrive in France a couple days before the rest of the group. I'm thrilled to have this time alone with her, and when she tells me she's going to take me to somewhere special, climbing on my belly in a cold, dark cave isn't what I have in mind.

"I can't see ANYTHING!"

Panicked, I crawl through the dark cave, arms outstretched, searching for the walls and finding only black. Only cold, empty space.

"There are more ways to see than with your eyes," Helena replies calmly.

"You've relied too much on light. Use your inner vision and sense where the opening is."

I don't know what Helena means by seeing in other ways. Frustration and fear take hold.

*I can't do this!*

My eyes start to well with tears as the darkness swallows me into its depths. A silent internal scream shatters what little sense of control remains.

*Nothing is working for me in my life. Everything I wanted has fallen apart. I don't even know what I'm doing in this fucking cave!*

An image of my ex-husband's face comes into view. A look of contempt as he sits behind his enormous mahogany desk, on his throne. A sneer followed by a pompous chuckle.

*Hate.*

I shudder, recoil and close my eyes. Again, the image preys upon me like a wild animal that's been lurking in the shadows.

"He wants your feminine power for himself," a voice in my head calmly states.

I remember him telling me once how he felt a woman should dress.

"That's not what being a woman is all about!" I screamed aloud, my face heated with rage. The memory is enough to re-fuel my fury.

My self-pity turns to sheer determination. With new-found inner strength, I pull myself out of the clutches of darkness. I refuse to live my life feeling powerless. Taking several deep breaths quiet the incessant, self-defeating chatter in my mind. I reach for the amulet of a snake that hangs around my neck and feel a calm and sure presence deep inside me.

*The Goddess' ally.*

I sense the opening I am looking for is to my right. With one arm out-stretched and a renewed sense of confidence, I continue crawling. Jagged rocks further bruise my tender knees and the open wounds on my hands sting. I find the cold, damp wall of the

cave. I run my hand across its rough surface, and feel a small opening near the bottom of the wall.

“I think I found it!” I announce, excitedly. “But it feels really narrow. Is there another opening?” I ask Helena, desperately hoping she isn’t expecting me to fit through this tiny space.

“No, there’s only one. You can slide through,” she says convincingly, suddenly right behind me.

I was never one for tiny spaces, nor for heights, but I had made it this far back into the cave, and I know Helena won’t let me retreat. I reach through the opening trying to get a sense of its depth. It feels significant, a thick wall of rock. Laying as flat as possible, with my arms, I drag my body over small, sharp stones. Eventually, my elbows no longer scrape along the sides of rock, and I slowly sit up, crouching down, unaware as to how large of a space I am in. Helena joins me, what seems to be a quick and graceful passage for her since the only groaning I heard was my own.

I spread my overly-worn sweatshirt onto the cool, dirt floor and make myself as comfortable as possible. I hear the strike of a match and am at once relieved by the soft glow of a single candle giving just enough light for me to see Helena’s face.

Her penetrating gaze pierces the illusory walls of my persona. I feel uneasy, unsure of what is going to happen next. Her face shape-shifts within the light and shadows of the flickering candle. One minute she is old with etched lines and the next, a much younger woman tossing her dark auburn hair to the side.

*She looks more like an owl than she usually does in this light.*

We sit in silence, listening to the walls of the ancient cave, waiting for their whispers. Suddenly, Helena breaks the stillness.

“Power is cultivated from the inside,” she says with her strong German accent. Her words are jolting, spoken with such conviction. I sit up taller, eagerly anticipating what she is going to say next.

“These people who wave their money around, and puff up their chests as though they are better than others do not know what true power is,” she says while waving her bony, talon-like finger.

“You, Treeesta, are on the path to finding true power.” Helena’s words land heavy in my chest. Fear clutches me and chills run up my spine. For a brief moment I want to run, but I force myself to breathe through it. It does no good to listen to fear. It never leads me to where I want to go.

I pull my sweatshirt out from under me and put it on. It’s soft from years of use, and smells of wood smoke. I bury my head in its hood and hug my knees close to my chest, seeking comfort.

“Not to worry, the Dark Mother is with you.” She smiles, her eyes softening.

*Dark Mother?* I can’t find words to ask her what she means by dark.

“The dark is not to be feared. Yes, there are energies that we refer to as dark because they are undesirable. But there is also the dark realm of the mother that is life giving. It’s like the fertile soil of the earth,” she says as she scoops up a handful of dirt from the floor of the cave. “She is the grail,” Helena says, letting the dry, loose soil slip between her fingers.

“It’s the womb that is void of light that nourishes the fetus. Your knowing of this will come after you are initiated into the earth mysteries.”

Though I don’t yet understand what she’s referring to, her words stir something deep in my own womb. I feel their truth.

I wake early from a restless night’s sleep. Continual dreams of being back in the cave, sometimes with Helena, other times, my snake amulet shape shifts and slowly comes alive as it begins to slither up and around my neck. I give my body a good shake and take a hot shower to wash away both dirt and my disturbing dreams.

The rest of the group is arriving later in the day, so I head out on my own to stroll through the quaint French village.

Springtime in France is a very similar climate to Upstate NY. A chill is in the air, but the beautiful wisteria flowers are just coming into bloom. Where I live, I can’t get wisteria to bloom. As hard as I try, it’s just too cold. I stop for coffee and a croissant at a little cafe and sit outdoors watching the busy towns people pass by. There are children dressed in uniform carrying their backpacks on their way to school. Store owners opening up their shops and a number of artists setting up their displays getting ready for the town’s daily market. A couple walks by, arm in arm. The man bends down, takes the slender woman’s face in his hands, and gives her a long, passionate kiss before crossing the busy street. I feel a pang of longing as I watch them.

I turn my attention to the warmth of the morning sun shinning down on my face and I admire the vines that have found their way up the sides of stone buildings, creating a canopy of pale, purple flowers draped over the doorways. I sit, enjoying my buttery, flakey croissant while listening to the chatter of the French people and trying to

understand at least one or two words. My years of French classes in high school and college give me enough of a familiarity of the language, but in the moment, I feel pretty inept.

Tired and bruised from the previous day's experience, I close my eyes soaking in all the sounds of car horns and people talking and the smell of fresh bread and strong coffee wafting from the countless cafes. I turn my palms upward and let the warm sun heal small gashes that still sting – remnants from the cave's jagged walls. Here I am, in France, a country known for both romance and mystery, and despite my tiredness, I keep thinking of the man I met over the phone, just two weeks before leaving.

A couple weeks back, I had a dream. I'm on a fancy boat, more like a cruise ship, dressed all in white. I'm with a man, who's also dressed in white. He appears to be of Spanish descent, dark hair, tan skin. He looks like Julio Iglesias, the singer from the 80's. I hear the message, "this is a sacred marriage." I wake feeling intoxicated with love. I lie in bed not wanting to abandon the feeling, surrendering and letting it infuse me, but I'm clear I do not want to meet a man. I have no interest in having a relationship. I figure the dream is more about my inner relationship with my masculine self. I've been divorced almost three years and honestly, I don't want to be bothered with a relationship. So I dismiss it.

Just a couple of days later, the kids and I pick up our monthly food order from the co-op and are carrying the boxes into the house. Matthew goes over to the blinking answering machine and hits the play button. I hear a man's voice saying that he's received my letter and would be happy to talk with me. I don't think much of it until he says his name is Ricardo Sierra. I nearly drop the box of food I'm carrying. Hearing the

Spanish name after having the dream only a couple of days previous leaves me frozen in my tracks. It rattles me to my core. I know this is no coincidence and I put off returning his call for days.

The letter is one of 25 that Kelly and I sent to people who are creating nature-based communities. We hope to reach other like-minded colleagues. The only person we hear back from is Ricardo who runs a summer camp called, Hawk Circle.

“Why don’t you want to call him back?” Kelly pries.

“I’m too scared,” I respond half chuckling and half serious.

“Why?” Kelly asks with a twinkle in her eye.

“Because...it feels like a big deal. It feels like it’s going to lead to something that I’m just not ready for. And my dream...well, yeah, I’m just not ready. I don’t want a relationship,” I answer quite emphatically. I’m just not ready to accept my fate. That’s what it feels like. My future showing up on my doorstep and me doing everything I can to hold the door shut.

Since my divorce, I am finally creating my life the way I want. The kids and I have a nice home, out in the country right across the road from my parents and I’m excited for the direction my life is taking. Adding another person is just going to create confusion.

As I’m getting into my car one day, I notice two hawks flying over my house. *No biggie, that’s not an unusual thing to see living out in the country.* When I return home, there are still two hawks circling overhead. I still shrug it off. The hawks are there the next morning, and the sight of them makes me really dig my heels in as if they’re solely responsible for pushing me to do something I don’t want to do.

The next day, I'm driving home from the grocery store and a hawk swoops down from a tree and heads right towards my windshield. I slam on the breaks as it glides over the top of my car just missing getting hit.

"Okay, okay, okay!" I shout, banging my hands against the steering wheel.

Because Ricardo's business is named Hawk Circle, I can no longer ignore the message from the hawks.

I call him that night. He wants to meet, but I'm heading for France in just a few days. We talk over the phone until the middle of the night, not about anything too personal, more about our work. I'm so comfortable talking with him as though I've known him all my life. We keep it more of a business call than anything else, but now and then I find myself imagining getting to know him more. We set up a time to meet when I return from France. I love his voice and he's funny too.

Now here I am, sitting in a little French village, daydreaming of a man I've never met. There's something about meeting someone over the phone before meeting them in person that allows you to really connect with their essence. He reminds me of the masculine energy I felt from the standing stone at the Ring of Brodgar in Scotland.

I wonder if my experience with the stone actually set this whole meeting in motion. I remember the passion and the familiarity that I felt when I was leaning up against the stone. I imagine it as a portal that activated an internal compass, helping me to find him.

Life often takes us in unexpected directions. Imagining being with him floods my thoughts. I try to shove them away and make excuses, but I can't deny the tug of attraction. Does my soul recognize him as someone I once knew and loved? Or maybe

it's the amorous atmosphere of France that gives me a different perspective, but whoever Ricardo Sierra is, I'm falling in love with him.

Waking from my day dream, I glance at my watch, and notice I have only two hours left before the rest of our group shows up. Swinging my backpack over my shoulder, I pull out my newly exchanged Euros, and proudly say to the waitress, "Combien?" When she understands me, I'm thrilled and pay the bill. Then I set off to explore as much as I can before meeting up with the rest of the group and heading to Chartres.

A couple hours later, I join the group and climb the steps to board the bus. I hear a familiar voice and look up. Sitting in the driver's seat is Harry, our driver from our trip to the British Isles.

"Well, well, fancy meeting you again!" Harry says, grinning from ear to ear. Despite his unsettling experience at the Brodgar stone circle, Harry later shares with us that his tour with us changed his life and he had hurried home to tell his wife all about his experience. Wanting to support Helena's work, he offered to drive our group through France.

"Harry! So good to see you. What a pleasant surprise," I said giving him a big hug before finding a seat.

The town of Chartres is only about an hour away and home to the most magnificent cathedral I've ever seen. I remember reading one of Joseph Campbell's books saying he visited Chartres every year to sit in the cathedral and contemplate his life and his work. I completely understand his reasoning the moment I set foot in Chartres.

The rest of the group and I stand in front of the main entrance of the cathedral, huddling close to Helena as she talks about its history. “The Templars were master builders. They started building in 1194 and it took them 26 years to complete,” says Helena, leaning in closer. “They knew they were building on sacred ground, so they built the whole cathedral working in complete silence.” Helena shares with us quietly as other visitors pass by.

I stare up at the grand structure. I had seen its twin spires from miles away before reaching the small town of Chartres. They’re a beacon of light exuding a formidable power. The intricate details of carvings on the stone facade is awe inspiring, and reveal its connection to mystery traditions, despite being a catholic church. Its majestic presence is humbling.

As I walk through the main entrance with heavy, carved wooden doors, I see the famous labyrinth. A hushed silence blankets the cathedral - a silence of reverence and awe. I pause, taking in the beauty and notice the soft colors of reds and blues and greens that emanate from the rose window up above.

Following in the footsteps of pilgrimages seeking to become closer to God or to ask for repentance, our group slowly and deliberately traverses the stone pathway of the labyrinth. Spending time walking back and forth, within each of the four quadrants, my mind wanders to the four directions, the four elements, the four seasons, the four suits of a tarot deck.

As we complete our walk, we disperse to corners of the cathedral for our own time of praying. I head to the back and find the statue of the Black Madonna, all decorated with shimmering, gold fabric, a vivid contrast to her dark-toned face. She

looks so regal, perched high on her throne. Candles are lit all around her and old, French women dressed in dark and unobtrusive clothes, wearing white lace scarves over their heads, are kneeling at the wooden pews, praying.

I imagine the petite, stout, French women waiting for their husbands to leave for work, tidying up the house, hanging up their aprons, and checking themselves in the mirror while carefully covering their heads with their delicate, lace scarves. Then with purse in hand, setting off down the winding, cobblestone streets, waving to long-time friends and store merchants as they make their daily visit to the Black Madonna.

This is so different from what I experienced growing up. Sundays were more of a ritual of dressing up in our best clothes to sit for a one-hour service — a dutiful obligation. We bowed our heads and prayed when told, and sang the most god-awful songs. All the while the true source of God was just outside the window. The sun shone through the stained glass windows and the tree branches danced in the wind as if the Divine was saying, “Here I am. I’m right here.”

I observe the women, with such apparent devotion and love for her. And by the looks of their furrowed brows and closed eyes, they are really praying. Not the kind of praying that becomes a habitual stream of words spoken as your mind wanders in a million different directions. Real prayer, focused prayer. Prayers that you need answered.

At this point in my life, I know nothing of the Black Madonna. I’ve been raised Protestant and the feminine principle of the Protestant religion is non-existent.

I remember when I was little, probably about 11 years old, sitting in church with my family. I didn’t usually listen to much the minister was talking about. It was boring

and I spent most of my time drawing on the Sunday program. But one day, I heard him mention Mary Magdalene, referring to her as the “whore that Jesus saved.” In that moment, something inside of me woke up, momentarily, like a sleeping lion that suddenly leaps to the sounds of a possible threat. I was jolted out of my own world of drawing and doodling, and felt rage rise up and the words inside my head silently shouting, “SHE WAS NOT A WHORE!”

I was thankful the words didn’t come blaring out of my mouth. It would have caused quite the stir amongst the congregation that seemed to sit there half listening, half dozing. And I wouldn’t have been able to explain myself at all, because even I didn’t understand where the words came from. Looking back, I see that my goddess self, my divine feminine self has been with me all along, just not really awakened, raising her head and voice in brief moments as this.

“I’d like to meet you, to know more about you. I pray that will happen on this journey,” I say, kneeling in a wooden pew in the far back of the cathedral. I rise and walk down to the front, light a candle and place it near her statue, before joining the rest of the group.

The next day we head to Vezelay, where there’s a beautiful cathedral dedicated to Mary Magdalene. I fall in love with this town the moment I see it. It’s pretty much a one-street town lined with restaurants, art galleries, a few gift shops and cafes that leads to the very top of the hill, to the perfectly poised cathedral.

We have the day to explore, so I follow the cobblestone street that leads to the cathedral overlooking the small village. It’s an immense structure denoting the sacredness and reverence for Mary Magdalene. As I walk through the double-doored

entryway, divided by an elaborately carved stone pillar, my breath quickens as I sit in the nearest pew. Its awesomeness takes some time for me to absorb. A small chorus is singing, their voices like angels, fill the cathedral with an extraordinary vibration of light. Leaving my seat, I slowly walk down the outer side of the rows of countless, wooden pews, searching for the entryway to the basilica of Mary Magdalene. Finding an old, stone staircase, I descend, the angelic voices growing more and more obscure and the air noticeably cooler. The small enclave is dimly lit except for her relics that are displayed in a glass case, brightly lit. I sit down in one of the simple, wooden chairs that are placed in front of the window of her relics, remembering my eleven-year-old self's first encounter with her in church.

"You've been so misunderstood," I say repeatedly. While I speak these words to the relics of Mary Magdalene, I'm aware that I'm also saying them to myself. Tears erupt as I feel the pain of being misunderstood, rejected and banished. I hold no memories in this lifetime of being banished, but somewhere deep inside, the church's rejection of her is also the rejection of me as a woman. It feels like a knife piercing my heart as I get a momentary glimpse into the church's burial chambers.

Hearing the ringing of the church's bells, I leave to meet everyone at a little restaurant down the street. The restaurant is a cozy, old stone house with slanted floors and hand-hewn timbers. Our group, tired from our day of travel, finds a table in the back and settles in. We are a diverse group of women, some older and a few about my age. We stuff ourselves on cheeses and breads and fresh, roasted vegetables and chicken slathered in butter and garlic. The waiter serves us wine in a hand-thrown pottery pitcher. As I pour the deep, red wine into my glass, I think of Mary Magdalene as the

carrier of the grail. The pitcher has a real earthy and primitive look to it and yet holds this elegant wine, red like blood. Seeing a stack of other like pitchers, I ask our waiter if I can buy one. I leave with a beautiful, greenish-brown speckled pitcher, sticky with red wine dripping down its sides. I am touching on the very edges of the grail and the Magdalene consciousness.

As we make our way deeper into the mysteries of the Black Madonna, and into the South of France, I become more and more curious. She obviously is powerful, I can feel that, but I still don't quite understand her. She's so revered by the French people as is Mary Magdalene, and I so badly want to understand it all. But, some things are meant to be experienced to be really understood. The layer of Christian beliefs that molded and shaped me up to this point is dropping away like an old, worn-out robe as deeper truths are revealed.

We enter into Cathar country where the teachings of Mary Magdalene and the Essenes have been preserved for many years by the Cathars. They, as Helena describes them, were called "the good men". A kind and generous group that quietly practiced their own beliefs, honoring the feminine and the teachings that Mary Magdalene brought to the south of France years earlier. This area of France is a wilderness with winding roads that lead us through small towns tucked in and around the tree-covered mountains.

As we come to Montsegur, one of the ruins of a Cathar castle that sits high on top of a mountain, I feel more and more agitated. At this time in my life, I didn't always take a moment to ask myself why I might be feeling this way, nor did I have the understanding of how the land holds consciousness of past events. But now, having

gotten off the bus and standing at the foot of Montsegur, seeing its remains resting at the very top of the mountain, I feel completely unhinged.

“Helena! I’m feeling really out of sorts, like I want to run and scream,” I tell her as I run and catch up with her.

“Here, take some of this. It will help. This is old inquisition stuff. Just let it go,” she says as she gives me her bottle of flower essence and then turns to address the group.

“This is where the Cathars were killed. Montsegur was their last stronghold before the Romans and the Royal Catholic French troops killed them, most being burned alive at the stake.” Our group huddles closer to listen to Helena describe the horrific fate of the Cathars. It’s apparent from her voice and fierce look in her eyes, that she’s not just sharing historical facts, this is personal. In fact, it’s always personal to Helena. I’d hear the disgust, sometimes sorrow, other times fury in her voice.

“Take a few drops of the flower essence that Trista has. It will help any of you who are picking up on what happened. It gets stuck in the land, these events. As we heal our own memories and offer our prayers, the land heals too,” she says. The flower essence calms my nerves and we continue up the path to explore the ancient ruins.

The ruins sit atop a mountain with a steep climb being its only access. They look over a valley and a small village below. This magnificent view feels so familiar to me. I easily imagine myself as a Cathar. Living peacefully, high atop the mountain. Making my way down to the small village below where animals grazed and people tended their flocks of sheep. Up here, I feel the peace of the Cathar people, but below, quite the opposite.

Later, we continue our way to a nearby town, where we stop in the square for lunch at an outdoor cafe. I go into the public restroom. I'm in one of the stalls when I hear the door to the bathroom squeak open and someone walk in. Without hesitation, I leap up onto the toilet seat so no one can see my feet and know I'm in here. I'm perched on top of the toilet – a response so instinctual that my mind is trying to catch up.

*What the hell am I doing?*

I leap off the seat as quickly as I had leaped on, and shake my arms and legs, trying to rid myself of the need to hide.

I wonder how many people went into hiding during the inquisition right in this area. Someone might have been hiding in this very same spot, afraid for their life as the soldiers hunted them down. Am I just picking up on what's happened here or am I remembering a past life where I was the one being hunted?

I go back to our table at the cafe and share my experience with the group.

"The human body is a powerful instrument. Our bodies can feel what's being held in the earth and through our bodies we can help heal these events both for ourselves and for the earth," says Helena.

"What's the best way to work through it?" asks Jenny, a middle-aged woman from Ohio.

"Well..." Helena carefully answers, "I feel it is about the relationship we have between our own bodies and the earth. Allowing ourselves to feel deeply what is coming up for us and then do whatever you have to, cry, yell, scream, punch a pillow. Whatever it takes to let go cleanses both our bodies and the earth."

"We've been so domesticated, as women..." I chime in.

“Absolutely! We’ve been so trained as women to be nice and kind and polite—all the bullshit that keeps us in line,” Helena agrees, passionately.

“It’s the Black Madonna, the fiery, force of transformation that helps to unleash our power,” she says. “Otherwise, it gets buried deep in our wombs, which is not good,” continues Helena.

I love listening to Helena talk. She’s so ardent when she’s teaching.

Our next stop is at a small, modest cathedral that sits by itself at the end of a country road lined with large oak trees. The trees had been planted intentionally as a resource for wood when the church needed restoration perhaps a couple hundred years in the future. By then the trees would have grown to just the right size to mill into strong and sturdy beams, replacing any inside the church that had weakened over time. *Incredibly wise planning.*

Before going inside the church, Helena leads us into a garden, still covered with its winter layer of mulch. In the back of the garden, stands a six foot white statue of Mother Mary. I listen to Helena describe a ley line that connects this statue with the Black Madonna statue inside the church, a line of energy in the earth that both statues anchor.

Our group follows Helena inside the small stone cathedral to the back where the Black Madonna statue stands. We settle into the folding chairs that are lined in rows, taking time to gather our own thoughts and to pray. One by one, we make our way up to stand in front of Her. Helena stands nearby. When it’s my turn, I slowly approach her. She’s wearing an ivory, satin robe and is encased in a gold rimmed, glass case. Aside from my visit to Chartres, I’ve never stood in front of a statue asking for guidance or a

blessing. My Protestant religion is void of revering any statue or saint, but I stand there anyways. Having observed the French women's reverence for the Black Madonna, I trust she has something to teach me. A few minutes pass, I turn to go back to my seat, but Helena quickly puts her hand on my back, stopping me.

"Look into her eyes," she says. I look at her confused, wondering why she's holding me there. I turn back to stare into the Madonna's eyes that seem to be laughing as she's looking slightly off to the side.

*What is Helena wanting me to see?*

Continuing to search the eyes of the Black Madonna, I ask, "What do you have to show me?" A few awkward moments pass with Helena standing right next to me, while I stare at the statue, other members of our group waiting patiently.

I'm just about to give up, when I feel an energy pierce my heart like someone shooting an arrow of light into my chest, shattering it open into a million pieces.

Her message, very clearly transferred is, "Don't be afraid to love again."

Tears trickle down my face and my heart opens, like a spacious cavern. I didn't realize that my heart was even closed, especially after "meeting" Ricardo over the phone before leaving for France, so assume it has to do with my divorce. But I soon realize, this isn't about healing my broken heart. This is a healing of my soul's heart, my divine feminine self that's preparing to emerge, to awaken, to come out of the dark cave of my inner most sanctuary where she's been hiding for, I don't know, maybe a couple thousand years?

Helena gives me a big hug and whispers in my ear, "She wants you to have one of her flowers." Holding my hand, she pulls me over to a large, flowering violet plant

where I pick a deep purple flower. I hold it to my heart feeling so blessed, but not really knowing the extent of what just happened.

I follow Helena over to a small, interesting statue of Mary Magdalene. The statue reveals her age that's more true to reality than the images of a young, beautiful, long-haired woman that we most often see.

"Pay attention to the positioning of her hands," Helena whispers.

I notice she holds her hands in the typical fashion of *as above, so below*, however, I also notice her hand positioning is reversed with her left hand pointing up instead of down. This is just one of many subtle messages the artists and sculptors from long ago leave for us future seekers of truth. A trail of symbols and clues that reveal a more accurate history of Christianity. I can feel that Mary Magdalene is revealing a deeper truth hidden beneath layers of wrongful myths and stories.

"Is she trying to tell us that the truth is the reverse of what we've been told?" I ask Helena.

"Hmmm, I believe so Treeesta. Interesting, right?" says Helena.

We continue our journey through Cathar country to our next destination, Rennes le Chateau. I read a book on Helena's recommended reading list, Holy Blood, Holy Grail by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln. The authors go into great detail about the mysterious happenings at Rennes le Chateau with the abbe Berenger Saunier and the treasure supposedly found on its premises. According to their findings, it is believed that what had remained hidden here at this small cathedral in the mountains of southern France contained information that would rewrite Christianity's religious history.

I'm excited to visit this place so steeped in mystery. As we drive up the narrow road to the small, hillside village, I see a cluster of old stone houses and the Magdalene tower perched at the top of the hill. An older woman rushes out to meet us, frantically waving her arms at our bus to stop. The little village is pretty much deserted except for her. She's the caretaker that lives near the small church and tends to its upkeep.

"Stop! Stop!" She yells as she rushes towards us.

"You can not visit here today," she says in her broken English, panting.

"Why not?" Helena asks, brow furrowed as she stands on the steps to our bus.

"Last night someone came and broke into the cathedral and beheaded Asmodeus," she says with apparent sadness and despair. Asmodeus is the demon statue that guards the entryway to the small cathedral.

"They slashed my tires too! It's not safe for you to be here," she adds.

*What the hell? What time period have I just entered?*

This situation seems so archaic to me. It wakes me up to the reality of how desperate some people are to maintain the church's teachings. Now I'm even more interested than before regarding the mysteries of Rennes le Chateau.

Helena hugs the poor woman goodbye and returns to the bus. We are all shocked and saddened.

"These people are *crazy!*" says Helena throwing her arms up in the air.

"Can you imagine someone coming here and beheading the statue? They'll stop at nothing to hide the truth!" "And the poor woman who looks after the cathedral..." she shakes her head in dismay.

I'm disappointed we can't visit Rennes le Chateau, and find it hard to believe that this type of ill-intended act of vandalism is still going on. I'm shocked by the extreme measures that people are taking to keep the teachings of Mary Magdalene hidden – teachings, I'm just beginning to understand. I'm inspired now more than ever to dive deep into her teachings to find out what others are so intent on suppressing. But as Helena has told me many times, I'm not going to find what I'm looking for in a book. This is going to be a deep dive into my sacred womb, my own grail and Divine feminine. This is the only way for me to truly understand her.

Traveling deeper into Southern France, from Cathar country to Provence, coincides with traveling deeper into my femininity. We stay in the quiet, little seaside town of Saints Maries de la Mer, right on the shore of the Mediterranean. The beautiful little town, where Mary Magdalene landed after fleeing from Jerusalem, pregnant with her daughter, is brimming with gypsies. They're setting up their tents in preparation for the annual *Festival of St. Sarah*, which is only days away. Thousands of people will be gathering and parading down the streets, carrying the beautiful Saint Sarah statue, patron saint to the gypsies. She'll be elegantly adorned with lace and satin and carried to the shores of the sea before being returned to her crypt. We are told the whole event has a primal atmosphere with days of music, drinking and flamenco dancing in the streets. Unfortunately, by the time the festivities start, we'll already be back in Paris.

As I stroll through the charming town, I wander into the gypsies' market. Bright, colorful garments hang from their tents, white peasant-style tops, hand-embroidered with colorful threads and full-flowing skirts of every color imaginable. The gypsies come primarily from the rural areas of France and Catalonia often speaking their own

unique dialect. Most have dark, weathered faces with long, unkept hair that hang wildly past their shoulders. They appear to wear all the clothes they own at once with layers of bright colorful skirts and blouses and old, worn out shoes. The smell of pungent herbs hang in bunches from the ceilings of their tents, and burning incense of patchouli waft through the market. Their eyes remind me of a feral cat, alive and untamable. It all stirs my own longing for a creative, primal life.

I felt detached and dispassionate before coming on this trip. I remember when I visited Kelly at her house one day as she was baking. I sat and watched her sifting the flour and sprinkling in spices and pouring a cup of melted butter into the bowl. As I watched her stir the ingredients together, I felt something stir inside of me. I missed this feeling of passion in my life. It was an alchemical moment. And now, I'm feeling my passion stir awake.

Growing up, my family was pretty conservative. Experiencing pleasure in my body or expressing my emotions, whether sadness, anger or joy wasn't part of the experience. My parents were loving and nurturing, but in a white bread sort of way. My mother didn't ever cook with spices and herbs and I grew up craving a more savory life. I think this is what compelled me to teach myself to bake and to cook when I was 14 years old. I was hungry for a different way of life. I craved deep feeling and passionate living. The Black Madonna herself. Fresh vegetables, aromatic herbs from Provence, spices from the Middle East, dark chocolate, nakedness and curvy hips is what I longed for then, but with little understanding. A delectable sensuality. And now, years later, it's the very path I'm pursuing.

The past few years, being a single mom has taken its toll. Being both mother and father to my children leaves little time for me to step out of the role of the responsible parent. My maiden self craves expression, connection and love making. My thoughts return to Ricardo. I inhale his essence that I had a glimpse of during our phone call, and rouse my sensual self.

As I stand on the shores of the cool, sparkling waters of the Mediterranean, saying goodbye, my body softens with each gentle wave upon the sandy beach. I feel relief from holding things together, maintaining a sense of strength and perseverance that has helped me to make the changes in my life. The hardness ebbs away and a warm, juicy flow of passion begins to forge new pathways in my life.

Our trip is coming to an end. Our last night is spent in an elegant, stone villa where we share a delicious meal of Chicken Basquaise and Bouride, a fish stew laden with aioli sauce and our last creme brûlée.

“Here’s to an amazing journey with you beautiful women! The Black Madonna has carried us well. May she be with you when you return to your homes where she’ll inevitably work her magic into your lives!”, Helena says as she raises her glass of wine. We all raise our glasses and there are tears, and hoots and hollers and so much love shared before we sleepily, head off for bed.

*I catch my reflection in a nearby mirror and it stops me in my tracks. I take a second look. I’m dressed all in white wearing an elegant wedding gown. Am I getting married? I see before me the entry way to the cathedral and the turned heads with the eyes of a hundred guests eagerly anticipating my arrival with what appears to be my own wedding.*

*At the far end of the church, I see my groom, my husband to be, dressed in his royal regale, all befitting of a king. Waistcoat adorned with shiny, gold buttons, white pants, shiny, black leather boots and a bejeweled crown upon his head.*

*I begin to take slow, hesitant steps down the red carpeted aisle while all the time holding the gaze of my King. His eyes are a pool of blue and green that hold the gateway to my future. But rather than feeling love and joy, I see the shackles of responsibility that come with taking my place next to him. Faces of pompous royalty flash before my eyes with a constant flow of obligatory wifely duties, my queen's forced smile adhered to my face. A life of societal expectations and propriety, a continual masquerade unfolds as I make my way down the aisle.*

*The shackles tighten, my breath dwindles as I near the end of the red carpet. With my eyes still fixed upon the loving gaze of my king, I hear a door creak and without turning, can feel a familiar presence standing in the back of the cathedral.*

*My heart beats faster and I slowly turn. Dressed in a pair of black jeans and a slightly worn black t-shirt, I see him – it's the magician. His dark brown eyes mirror to me a different life. His presence alone ignites something deep inside me, a fire that wants to burn hot with an untamable wildness. He reaches his hand out, with pleading eyes, to rescue me from a fate that would surely leave me emaciated of spirit.*

*The conflict in this moment is like an ice pick gouging at my heart. The eyes of a hundred guests, once joyful change to a palette of question, disgust, and for some rage as they see me wavering. Do I obey the expectations of the King and the people? Do I abandon the wild part of me that is stirred to life by the magician's outreached hand? Do I give myself over for the wants of others?*

*I am torn, not wanting to hurt my king, abandon him at the altar. Nor do I want to subscribe to the forsaken landscape of my soul. But I know if I continue down the red-carpeted aisle, the mounting rage and fear of the guests will return to a place of joy and pleasantness and order. It is all in my hands.*

*I turn once again, meeting the dark pool of the magician's eyes and he beckons me with an undeniable truth. "You are more than this. Don't give in. Don't surrender your power to a life of expectations. The safety of this life is all but an illusion."*

*I quickly turn to meet the gaze of my king, mouthing the words, 'I'm sorry' as I turn away and begin to sprint, catching the hand of the magician as we leap into the air and take off flying, my beautiful gown falling below onto the raging and appalled guests. I am free.*

As soon as I realize I'm flying, I plummet through the air with what feels like a hard landing back in my body and I'm startled awake. I lay in bed, catching my breath, taking notice of all the details of this incredibly symbolic dream. I smile to myself. I'm letting go of the life of a queen, marrying the king where no doubt there would be further domestication, dutifulness, and a cultivated life. I'm choosing the magician, a life of mystical pursuit, uncovering my wildness, seeking freedom and unearthing life's hidden mysteries.

After showering and packing my belongings, I bound down the stairs and join the others for our final breakfast together. Helena comes into the room all a flurry as she often does. I've actually never seen her saunter into a room. Her petite body comes with a large aura that acts as a gust of wind that would send a table full of papers flying.

She's especially this way this morning as she's handling all the details of our final day and making sure we're at the airport in time for our return flights.

Our eyes meet and I give her a smile. She comes over and standing behind me grabs my shoulders, bends down and says, "Well, well, well, what did you do last night?"

"I went flying," I whisper to her. "I'll tell you all about it on the flight home."

She lets out a hearty belly laugh and scurries off to tend to her business.

As I leave the mystical land of France, my thoughts return to home, the kids, and to Ricardo. My heart feels so open, my body so alive. While I have yet to understand the Black Madonna and her power, I feel awake in my body more than I ever have.

"Goodbye beautiful France! I'll be back."