

*Romancing  
the  
Soul*

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# *Romancing the Soul*

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Extract



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Published 2014 by Choc Lit Limited

Penrose House, Crawley Drive, Camberley, Surrey GU15 2AB, UK

[www.choc-lit.com](http://www.choc-lit.com)

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available  
from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-78189-075-2

# Chapter One

Cassie Silbury fled down the plush-carpeted stairs, chanting over and over in her head the mantra, 'Stop freaking out. It wasn't real. *It. Was. Not. Real.*'

The sound of her heels hitting hard tiles heralded her arrival at the imposing reception hall. The relief that flooded through her at the sight of the exit was *very* real and there was nothing she could do about that; she was out of there.

Dashing through the doorway that she'd so confidently strolled through earlier, she hurtled down the stone steps fronting the Harley Street property. The normality of London's evening rush hour, with its cacophonous sights and sounds, enveloped and immediately soothed her. She cursed violently though as the biting wind sliced deep and she realised that she'd left her coat behind. Hugging herself tightly, she embraced her anger. Anger was good. For a moment there ...

'Taxi!' she screeched, on seeing a yellow light. She vigorously waved her hand in the air to attract the necessary attention.

Cassie was in the back of the black cab before it reached a full stop. 'Sixty-three Kensington Avenue!' she said, as she threw her bag and notebook onto the seat next to her. The cab manoeuvred into the right-hand lane, heading towards the sanctuary of home. And Cassie finally stilled.

But she was cold and angry and ... would absolutely not think about the rest! She focused on her anger: *How dare he put those things into my head! How dare he make me think I was ...? How dare he make me flee! And my coat! The evil little man!*

Cassie's restless eyes honed in on the open notebook next to her bag. She snatched it up triumphantly. 'Nevil L. Mann,' she'd written and underlined at the top of the page, alongside today's date, January 25th. Unsnapping the pen clipped to her notebook, she proceeded to scrub out the 'N' with a self-satisfied flourish

that quickly became a furious obliterating scribble: 'evil L. Mann' it now read. She continued to eradicate his preposterous job title, which she'd jotted underneath: 'Past Life Regressionist to the Stars'. She stopped only when the nib of her pen wore through the paper, tearing up several of the pages underneath.

'*Stupid* evil little man,' she muttered. He knew full well who she was. He'd even told her that he was a fan of her work, before he'd proceeded to 'past life regress' her. She snorted at the ridiculous description of what had just occurred ... before glaring at the taxi driver, who was observing her nervously in his rear-view mirror.

*Beyond* stupid, she further clarified to herself. Who, in their right frame of mind, gave an investigative reporter a past life *from hell*? She desperately suppressed where that thought was going and forced a healthier focus. He was clearly deranged, along with the rest of his so-called profession. This piece was always going to be an exposé, just like so many she had written before, to prove his profession a sham. But things had just got personal.

And he'd been good, she ruefully conceded. She'd expected to imagine and 'manufacture' a past life. All her research indicated they were creations of the mind, with Cleopatra in the number one slot. She'd spent last night studying Elizabeth Taylor in the role so she could look damned good in her imaginings.

But she'd found that she had no control whatsoever over proceedings. Each time that evil man had voiced another one of his malicious, manipulative prompts, she'd sunk deeper and deeper into the horror playing out in her head.

And then he'd wanted her to talk it through with him, to apply context, to use the newfound knowledge to heal ... *Heal? I had nothing to bloody well heal until I walked into that godforsaken building!*

No. Cassie needed a plan. A plan that would expose the profession for what it was. A sham. *That* and that alone would apply the necessary *context*. They had no right playing around

with people's heads, making them think ...

She grinned with self-satisfaction as it came to her. She might have been unsettled there for a moment, but Cassie Silbury was back on form. She knew what she had to do ... just *after* she found oblivion through the bottle of vodka she was sure sat in the cupboard at home.

### ***Three days later***

'No way! Noooo way!' Cassie wailed the words over and over, mantra-style, while blindly fleeing the Tunbridge Wells town house. On automatic pilot, her feet followed the path and turned left after passing through the garden gate.

It was several minutes before she became aware of her surroundings. A park. A bench. She let herself collapse onto the bench and sat. Stunned.

Several more minutes passed before she allowed herself to think. And then it was to reflect: things hadn't gone quite to plan. It had been so simple; another 'past life regressionist,' planting a different past in her mind. The second couldn't possibly come up with the same as the first. She was supposed to have them by the short and curlies.

She let out a hysterical laugh at the question that flashed into her head: 'So Cassie Silbury - what did you do in a past life to deserve this?' Oh, she so couldn't go there. She urged her mind to cooperate, while her lungs released a shaky breath.

Cassie *knew* there was a perfectly rational, non-crackpot explanation for the two past life stories matching ... exactly. She just had to find it. She groaned, hardly sparing a glance at the jogger who found an extra burst of speed to lurch past her in a widened berth.

*Concentrate* Cassie. She shuffled awkwardly in her seat for several long moments before ... enlightenment! Oh, it was a blessed, fanfare playing moment. *Of course!* She laughed delightedly, before shaking her head quickly. She'd never

believed it, not for a minute!

It was so simple: The Conspiracy Theory. She'd come across enough of them in her work to know one when she saw one. And the NAPLR (National Association of Past Life Regressionists) – she couldn't help the snort – knew she was doing the piece. And they also knew her style. They would have known she'd go to another practitioner. The stories tallying had to be their attempt at credibility.

It wouldn't have been difficult, she realised, her mind warming nicely to the theme. There had to be methodology to their madness. The evil little people had, after all, studied past life regression and had qualifications on their walls to prove it. So, logically, there had to be an established method for planting a scenario into their victim's subconscious. All they would have had to do was ensure each of them knew the scenario to be placed and when to provide the necessary prompts. *Voila!* An idiot's guide to painting Cassie Silbury as 'bitch reincarnate.'

*But I used a different name this time. How could this one have known what to plant?* Cassie thrust the highly unhelpful thought away. Conspiracy, she reminded herself. *Aaaand ...*

*Yes!* They could have her picture circulating electronically on wanted-style posters. Although many would probably recognise her anyway as she was regularly in the press, not just through her critically acclaimed, high-profile written word, but because being the sister of Hollywood actor George Silbury hardly ensured anonymity.

Cassie quickly quashed the sinking sensation she experienced on thinking of George. *'Do you recognise anyone, Cassie?'* She wasn't going there. It was nonsensical.

Cassie realised another plan was required. A foolproof plan this time that took account of the conspiracy. She'd work on it on the way home. Standing up, on traitorously shaky legs, she looked around to gauge the most likely route to the train station. She had no idea where she was ... other than a park in Tunbridge Wells.

Cassie decided, once she was back in sight of home, she'd pop into Waitrose for another bottle of vodka. Just so it was in the cupboard.

### ***Six days later***

Cassie put the phone down and jotted the time and details of the next appointment in her diary. Casting an eye over the local newspaper advertisement before her, she grinned. Her plan was finally coming together. And Rachael Jones was a godsend.

Although qualified, Rachael Jones *wasn't* a member of the NAPLR, and therefore *wouldn't* be in receipt of the conspiratorial communications no doubt doing their rounds among members. Yet she did hold their approved qualifications. Indeed, she'd passed them all with distinction and, on qualifying last year, had received their most outstanding graduate of the year award. In an incredible stroke of luck that award had been presented to her by the NAPLR's Chairman. He'd provided, for the record, several glowing words on her abilities that couldn't be interpreted as anything other than an endorsement. How was he to know she'd not join the association? And how was he to know Cassie Silbury had her in her sights?

Cassie was delighted with herself. The fact Rachael Jones's 'flamboyant' newspaper advertisement indicated that she may well be a candidate for a padded cell and complimentary lobotomy, was simply the very sweet mallow icing on her meticulously planned cake.

Next Wednesday, Cassie mused, tapping the diary page with her pen. George would be back in the country ...

She shook her head rapidly, urging herself not to even contemplate where that thought was leading. She reached for her glass and took a swift gulp of neat vodka.

But it was no good. George *would* be filming not far from where this Rachael nut practiced and ... what if he could come to the appointment with her?

Cassie was more battle-scarred than she was prepared to admit while sober and in control of her faculties. And ditto to the bricking herself about subjecting herself to the administrations of another head case. But George, despite his Hollywood heart-throb status, was sensible, grounded and her favourite and most protective older brother.

Cassie raised her glass to her lips. What was wrong with someone being there to hold her hand?

Two large gulps from her glass.

She wanted George there! He'd always been able to slay her dragons. Of course ... If she could get *him* to past life regress, he could slay the most monstrous of all dragons to ever haunt her. With no crossover in their past, all those fears that kept creeping up on her would—

*Stop!* She dropped her head into her hands. There was *No. Such. Thing. As. Past. Lives.* Cassie wished with all her heart that she'd never started this story. Why couldn't they have had her as Cleopatra?

No! She raised her head in horror. She promptly downed what was left of her latest glass of vodka and desperately shook the empty bottle.

Hadn't Cleopatra killed her brother too?

## Chapter Two

'Ummm ...' Susie wasn't sure what to say. She slowly shook her head and replaced the newspaper on the kitchen table.

'It's brilliant, don't you think?' Rachael asked, bringing two mugs of coffee over, and curling her tall frame into the seat next to Susie's. 'I wanted eye-catching.'

Susie was truly lost for words. Rachael, her housemate and best friend in the world, had always been ... she wasn't quite sure what adjective to put there, but *this*?

Rachael laughed at the look on her face. 'It's called marketing, Suse. Valentine's Day is coming up and I refuse to miss an opportunity.'

Picking the paper up again, Susie braved another look at the advertisement in question and silently groaned. It *was* eye-catching, but neither that or brilliant were the descriptions immediately springing to mind.

Firmly schooling her features, she attempted to form an opinion on the Casper-like ghosts shooting cupid's arrows around gravestones, surrounded by floating bulbous red love hearts. Subtly clearing her throat, she then tackled the words that were so clearly Rachael's ...

*No love or humping in this life?*

*Find out who you loved and humped in a past life! What did it for you then may do it for you now. Let the clues from the past show you the way to finding true love. Your Soul Mate is out there! Let a past life lead the way.*

*Contact Rachael, Past life Regressionist (bona fide) and This Life Guide for Love-Seeking Souls*

While attempting to dispel the notion of Casper humping, Susie

asked, 'Aren't there laws about this kind of thing?'

'Like what? The words are all mine.'

*Not humping Caspers.* 'No, I can see the words are yours love ... About advertising and what you're implying.'

'I haven't *promised* to find their Soul Mate.'

'Look,' Susie was going to take the easy way out, 'I'm really not the person to ask. It's all very ... *enterprising* of you.' She congratulated herself on both her diplomacy and for finding the perfect word for the situation, but paused as she realised that she had a responsibility here.

Groaning audibly now, she continued, 'But you know I'd rather see it come with a health warning.'

Rachael shifted awkwardly in her seat. 'That's not fair. I'm qualified now.'

'*Qualified?* I've never understood how someone as intelligent as you can have gone into something as ... as—'

'You can hardly see me teaching snotty-nosed brats like you do!'

'I never set out to teach snotty-nosed bra— They *aren't* snotty-nosed brats!' Susie gritted her teeth. 'And I love teaching and I'm good at what I do. But you've a degree in economics, Rach, and have thrown away a successful career in banking to peddle—'

'My father's bank and I did my time. This is what I was always destined to do, Suse. I love it, too, and I am flaming good at it to boot!'

Susie couldn't help the 'humph!', but immediately regretted it as Rachael's visage shifted. Her cheeks, normally so pale against her dark hair, flushed and her amber eyes flashed. Susie's stomach lurched. *She wouldn't ... surely she wouldn't.*

'You're going by something that happened before I was trained and I could make it all right if you'd simply let me regress you again!'

Susie desperately reinforced the locked box that stood in that darkened corner of her mind with heavy chains and padlocks.

'You are *never* getting into my head again. *Ever!* In fact, *nobody* is ever getting into my head again.'

How could Rachael have crossed the line? They never talked of that night.

'I accept things didn't—'

'Stop, Rachael,' Susie growled.

'No! This is the perfect opportunity to talk about it! It's time we stopped pussyfooting around your experiences that night.'

Susie snatched her hand back as Rachael reached for it and shuffled her chair several inches further along the table. She crossed both arms protectively over her chest. 'Don't do this, Rach.'

'I know things didn't go well,' Rachael said gently. 'But that was the drinks, the Ouija board, and ... well, what we were all smoking didn't help.'

*Loss. Such agonising, all-consuming loss.* It was as if the locked box in Susie's head wept its abject wretchedness. No matter how many padlocks she applied to the box containing the memories of that night, the feelings she'd experienced always found a way out. They seemed to seep, as if they could soak into its very walls and escape as vapour.

There was nothing for it Susie realised, kicking her chair back and getting up from her seat, but her escape was hampered by Rachael grabbing the frayed and hanging pocket of her dressing gown.

'It's ten years ago now,' Rachael said softly. 'You have to let me put it right. I *can* put it right.'

*Desolation.* Susie closed her eyes, letting the sensation take its course. Ten years, ten days, ten seconds. Time was irrelevant here. It could never be put right. The moment she'd let Rachael into her intoxicated brain, for what had promised to be an *amusing* attempt at discovering a past life, the damage had been done. It was irreparable. She was irreparable. She stared at Rachael, incredulous at her naivety.

‘Come on,’ Rachael coaxed, before grinning and attempting to lighten the mood. ‘I could be your “this life guide” and lead you to this Soul Mate of yours.’

‘Rach,’ Susie groaned, depositing herself back in her seat and holding her head in her hands. ‘I didn’t like you when I first met you and should have gone with my gut!’

Rachael actually chuckled. ‘Despite your words though, you love me now. Once you got to know me you couldn’t but.’

‘More fool me. I should have followed my instincts. They told me you were dangerous.’ Susie crossed her arms on the table. ‘I will say this once again, in case you have any doubts in that warped mind of yours: *nobody* is ever getting into my head again. And you can times that exponentially when it comes to you!’

‘Suse ... What you experienced was—’

‘Was *crap*, Rach! I know what you think it was, but it was *crap*. Playing with hypnosis or whatever the hell it was you did to me, in the state that we were in, was asking for trouble. No wonder my brain did what it did. You have chucked in your career to peddle *crap*. And the worst of it is that you don’t see it for what it is. You genuinely believe in past lives, Soul Mates – in fact *any* spooky dumb-arse thing. Oh, and did I forget to mention Fate, there? It’s nuts. Completely nuts. You’re nuts!’

‘Kooky perhaps, but not—’

‘*Nuts!* And I seriously worry about you! I mean the latest is so far beyond ridiculous it’s ...Who, sound of mind, could possibly think that their neighbour’s cat was their Soul Mate!’

There was a sharp intake of breath from Rachael. Susie knew that had been a cheap shot.

‘Look, I’m sorry. I know you believe it and consider yourself to be in a difficult situation, but it’s just, it’s just ... nuts! I can’t think of a kinder word to use!’

‘You’ve already made your views on Matey perfectly clear, thank you. So how about you stop trying to distract me here, because I know that’s what you’re up to, and we get back to

talking of—'

'He's a cat, Rach! A cat! Rob's cat at that!'

'Susie! I don't expect you to understand!' Pain flashed in Rachael's eyes. She continued quietly, 'I'm not sure I even understand it myself. It must be a blip. A definite blip in the system.' With resolve she went on, 'But I *can* help you, Suse. If only you'd let me!'

Not a chance.

'Why Rob didn't leg it out of the building as fast as he could that day, I'll never know,' Susie said. 'I'm pleased he didn't though because I like him. I did instantly. He's fun, even if he does humour you too much. But you wouldn't have seen me for dust. You gave the impression he was moving in to a building occupied by loons. I'll never forget that look on his face as his cat jumped into your arms and you started spouting total crap at it! Talk about first impressions. We hadn't even spoken to Rob at that stage!'

'You're so in denial.' Rachael shook her head sadly, refusing to be baited. 'How you can possibly not believe in past lives and Soul Mates after what you remembered that night, I don't know. Let me regress you again, help reduce your negativity towards it – at least recognise him for who he was. He was your Soul Mate, Suse. You lost him in 1826. He couldn't have been anyone else. And he could be out there right now, needing to be found.'

*Betrayal. Complete betrayal.* Damn it! 'For God's sake! I don't believe in past lives. I don't believe in Soul Mates. And I absolutely don't bloody-well want one! Especially if he's got four legs and fur!'

'I just knew you'd use Matey this way. I told you, he's a blip!'

'That changes nothing! Peter is—'

'As boring as shite! As I've told you on countless occasions. And totally not the one for you. *He's* not your Soul Mate. The one you remembered that night was. The one you lost when you were Hannah.'

*Hannah.* Too many feelings seeped out now. Susie was awash. And ... She was *not* going to remember him! *Loss. Desolation. Betrayal.*

'It *wasn't* real!' Susie cried, desperately shaking her head. 'Only you could ever think it was! We were all out of our heads. Nothing more, nothing less.'

'I *know* it was real. And I can help. *Please* let me put it right.'

Nobody could ever put it right, least of all Rachael. Why couldn't she understand that? Susie's life must now be viewed in two distinct phases: pre and post that January day a decade ago.

But Susie comforted herself with the realisation that she *had* learnt some important lessons from the experience: no alcohol, no recreational drugs, no letting anyone into her head. And absolutely no falling in love.

The latter was key to her ever achieving peace of mind. She could never risk experiencing for real the sensations her abused brain had thrown at her. Even that night, when their intensity had been excruciating, she innately knew they had been mere echoes, and what she experienced now, mere tasters of what such loss and betrayal would feel like for real.

She couldn't risk it. Peter was safe. He could never stir that depth of emotion within her. For that reason he was ... perfect. *Why hadn't she seen that before?* He was perfect. She'd been procrastinating, held back by ... she didn't know what. But he had to be the way forward.

She was brought out of her thoughts by Rachael giving her a hug. 'Okay. I give up. I'm sorry. I just got it into my head that now might be the time to try and broach things again, to offer my help. But you're never going to accept it, no matter how much you need it. Forgive me?'

Susie raised her arms to limply return Rachael's hug and gave a small nod. She knew Rachael was only trying to make things right. But she didn't know the half of it. But perhaps now *had* been the right time to talk about things? If they hadn't, she'd not

have seen how perfect Peter was. 'I'm sorry too, especially about Matey. But not for calling you nuts. I have no choice but to stand by that.'

'You've called me worse.' Rachael grinned, releasing Susie to cross to the other side of the open-plan room. She now focused on the overflowing bookcase next to the television. 'No more talk of that night. No more hurting each other. It's Saturday morning and it's about time we enjoyed it. You aren't seeing the bore until—'

'Peter.'

'That's what I said,' Rachael flung a bright smile over her shoulder. 'You're not seeing him until tonight. It's peeing it down outside. We can leave the supermarket until mid-week, *sooo ...*'

She swung around with a huge beam on her face, waving around what she'd retrieved from the shelf. 'We can have a George Silbury day! Back to back films. I hold here, in my very hands, his latest DVD! I didn't think it came out for a few weeks, but there it was and I felt inspired. How good a friend am I?'

Susie felt like laughing hysterically and couldn't prevent the out-of-control, demented giggle. All the talk of that night ... and now a *George Silbury* day! Why was this happening? Ten years ... and now *this*. She already felt so battered and bruised. She didn't want any more reminders of how much of a mess she was, of just how close she was to ... She'd called Rachael nuts. Rachael was nuts in a nutty way. Always had been, although Matey did take the biscuit. But she ... She was nuts in the lock you up and throw away the key way.

Rachael fiddled with the DVD player, obliviously wittering away. Susie hardly heard a word.

They'd gone to see a film. The night after the night before. All the housemates: her, Rachael, Jen, Pip and Clare. It was the 11.00 p.m. showing. They'd still been hung-over. She'd been that *and* post-traumatic, the events of the preceding night still a gaping wound.

It had, appropriately, been a horror film. They'd screamed for England. She'd just stared. Stared at his eyes. George Silbury's eyes, she'd subsequently discovered. It was an early, minor role. Make-up, scars down his face. But his *eyes* ... She'd become fixated. He was two-dimensional, acting a part. He was ripping people's throats out. But his eyes were beautiful. His eyes were trying to tell her something.

Her brain had been so screwed.

And the really desperately insane thing about it all was that his eyes still had that effect on her. His intense, hypnotic eyes had the power to transfix her. She'd spent years watching his films. Knowing it wasn't remotely healthy, but somehow not able to stop. It was the most ridiculous, yet compelling sensation.

She'd never told Rachael why she watched his films. She'd played along when it was put down to the way he looked. Rachael would have applied some ridiculous mumbo-jumbo reasoning to the sensation. Anyone else would have had her committed.

But Susie knew it was simply down to his being caught up in the fallout of the most awful night of her life. If they'd watched another film ...? In the state she'd been in, she'd have had the same reaction to Donald Duck!

Susie inhaled deeply. She was going to resist the pull. 'I'm going to pass.' She felt horrid at the hurt look in Rachael's eyes, but said, 'You go ahead, love. I'm going to pop over to Peter's. He was keen we do something and I've not been seeing enough of him. I'll catch up with you later.'

'Peter? You are going to see *Peter Boyles* rather than drool over *George Silbury*?'

Susie simply nodded, heading to her bedroom to get dressed. She tried to picture Donald Duck's eyes. But all she saw was Donald Duck with someone else's eyes ... still trying to tell her something.

*To be continued...*

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7<sup>th</sup> January 2014.*

