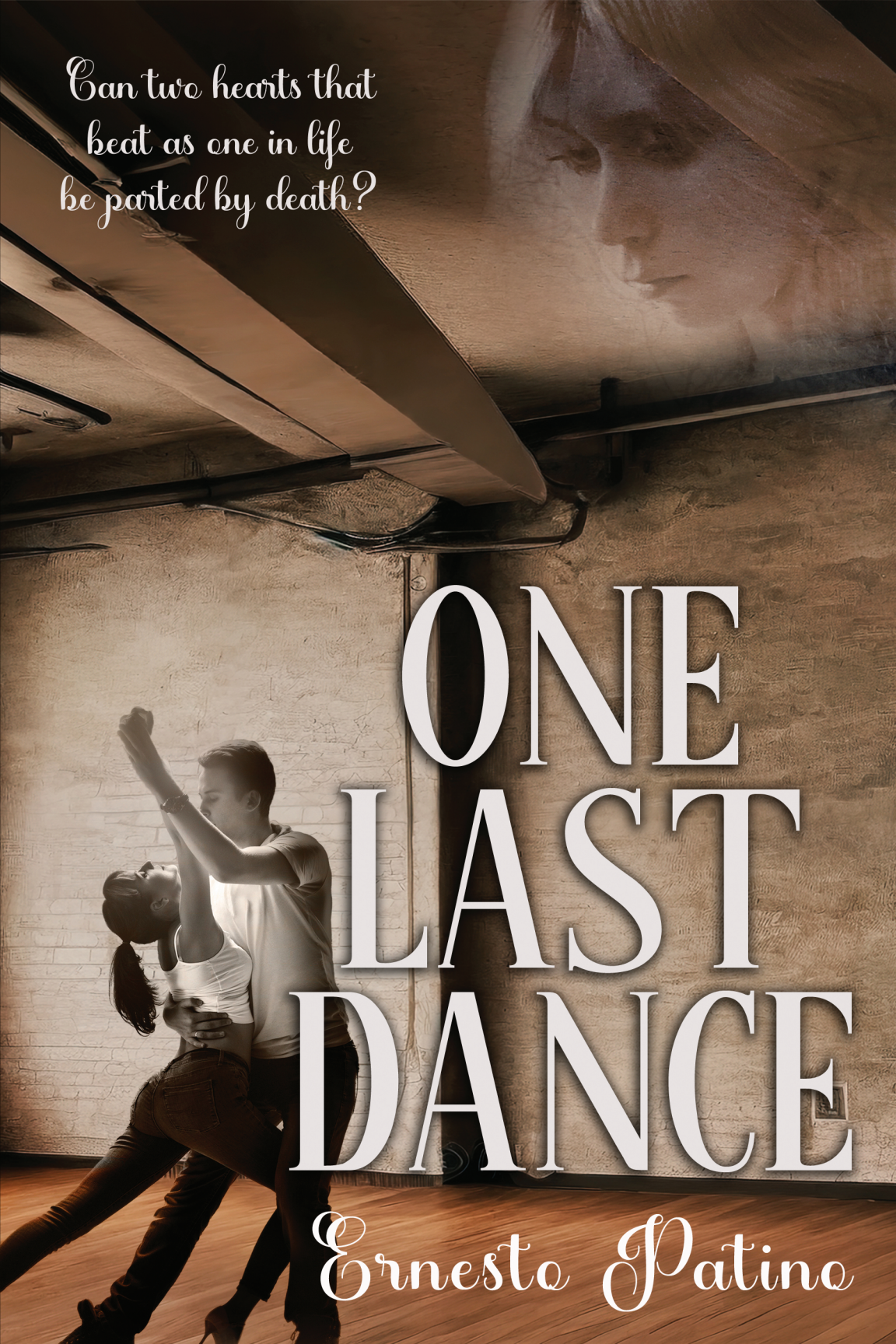


Can two hearts that
beat as one in life
be parted by death?

A man and a woman are dancing in a room with a large mural of a woman's face on the wall. The man is wearing a white t-shirt and dark pants, and the woman is wearing a white tank top and dark pants. They are in a dynamic pose, with the man's arms around the woman and her legs extended. The background is a textured wall with a large mural of a woman's face, and the floor is made of wood.

ONE LAST DANCE

Ernesto Patino

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

1

Miami, Florida

“WHAT ... WHAT AM I DOING HERE?” Marco Anissi said the moment he opened his eyes.

An attending nurse stood by his bedside. “You were in a car accident. Do you have any memory of it?”

He brought his hand up to his head. “I remember a dog and then ... and then I hit something.”

“You hit a light pole and you’re lucky to be alive. The doctor will be here to check on you later.” She adjusted his pillow to make him more comfortable. “By the way, your sister was here an hour ago. She said she’d be back.”

Marco lifted his head when Angela finally appeared. “Hi, Sis. Glad you dropped by.”

“You sure had us worried, little brother.” She walked up to the bed and kissed him on the cheek.

“I know what you’re going to say, but I wasn’t speeding and it wasn’t my fault. If that dog hadn’t run in front of me ...”

She smiled. "I know all about it. It even came out in the paper. The lady who owned the dog saw the whole thing. She said she felt partly to blame because the dog got away from her when she took him out for a walk. I brought the section so you could read about it." She handed it to him. "Don't be surprised if she shows up unexpectedly. She said she wanted to meet you."

Marco took a moment to read the article. His jaw dropped. "Did you notice the address?"

"What are you talking about?"

"It's the same pole I hit when Susan was killed."

"Are you sure?"

"See for yourself." He moved the paper toward her. "That's not all. Take a look at the date. What are the odds of my hitting the same pole on the same month, exactly ten years later?"

She re-read the article. "It's just a freakish coincidence. Besides, what difference does it make?"

Marco sat up straighter. "I don't believe in coincidences. Maybe ... I don't know ... maybe someone or something is trying to—"

"Stop right there. I know you were into these weird concepts a long time ago, but ..." Angela shook her head. "I really thought you had put them out of your mind after you dropped out of college."

"I did, but this is different. What if ... I know you may think I'm crazy. But what if she's trying to send me a message?"

"She? You're not talking about Susan, are you?" She rolled her eyes. "The injury to your head was worse than I thought."

"Okay, so it sounds far-fetched. But listen to me. A few weeks before I dropped out of school, I heard a lecture by this professor from India who had an unusual theory about how an organ like the heart, can possess part of a person's soul. Later, when we met in his office I told him about Susan. I asked if her soul could still be inside her heart that beat in someone else's body. He said yes. Unfortunately, at the time, well, I was too bummed out to follow up on it and I eventually put it out of my mind."

"Look, Marco, why don't you give it a rest? It was an accident—the late hour, the dog. It could have happened to anyone driving on the same road."

“But it didn’t. It happened to me.” He tapped his chest. “Don’t you see? Susan was trying to reach out to me in a way I would understand. If it had happened at a different place, on a different date, I would have missed it entirely.”

Angela let out a sigh. “I can see I’m wasting my time. You’ve decided to make this into some kind of strange phenomenon and there’s nothing I can do about it. But promise me something. Don’t do anything rash before talking to someone whose opinion you value more than mine.”

“I’ll think about it.” He smiled. “Hey, don’t take it so seriously. You’re my big sister. Don’t I always follow your advice?”

“Yeah, right.” She laughed. “I wish I could stay longer, but I’ve got a chiropractor’s appointment in less than twenty minutes. I’ll come back to see you first thing in the morning.” She gave him a quick hug and hurried out of the room.

2

Two weeks later

AT FIRST, PROFESSOR RANGAN didn't seem to recognize him. "Marco ... Marco Anissi," he finally said. "Yes, of course. It's been a long time."

"Ten years." Marco sat across from him. He glanced around the room. Everything looked the same. The picture of Mohandas Gandhi next to a shuttered window, the sagging bookcase, the multi-colored candles atop his cluttered desk. Even the slow-moving ceiling fan that had since developed a wobble. It was as though time never passed.

"What a wonderful surprise. I often thought of you after our last meeting. When I heard you had dropped out of school for no apparent reason, well, it made me wonder. I hope it wasn't because of what we talked about."

"I'm glad you remembered." Marco ran his fingers through his hair. He had a lot to say and didn't want to come across as this crazy, mixed-up person who had nothing better to do than to hang on to old memories and unproven theories.

"The truth is, I was a very confused young man back then. That's why I dropped out of school. I bummed around for a couple of months and then I joined the Army—spent a year in Afghanistan and another in Germany. It seemed like a good way to escape from ..." He cleared his throat. "Well, let's just say it turned out to be a good thing for me at the time."

"So, what are you doing now? Did you ever complete your studies?"

"When I got out of the Army, I lost my enthusiasm for it, though I have to admit, coming back here today makes me wish I was a student again. Until recently, I drove a cab. It's not the greatest job in the world but the hours were flexible, and it gave me time to work on my writing, mostly short stories and essays."

Professor Rangan leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. "I always knew you'd come back to see me someday. Though I'm surprised you waited this long. What's this all about, Marco?"

Marco shifted uncomfortably. "I wanted to talk to you about something strange that happened to me. My sister thinks I'm making too much of it and maybe I am. I'll let you be the judge." He took a moment to collect his thoughts.

"A few days ago, I was driving my cab on Old Cutler Road when a dog ran in front of me. I hit the brakes and skidded into a light pole, which knocked me unconscious. I spent a few days in the hospital. Later, when I read about it in the newspaper, I realized the pole I hit was the same pole I struck when Susan—my fiancée—was killed exactly ten years ago." He paused. "I saw it as a sign. Don't you agree?"

Professor Rangan stroked his chin. "Let's just say anything is possible. I'll even go as far as to say the two events could be connected."

Marco stared at him for a moment. "You really think so?"

"Keep in mind we're talking about theories that have yet to be proven. Let me show you something." He got up, stepped over to a file cabinet, and retrieved a thick manila folder filled with old newspaper and magazine articles. "Have a look. You might find it interesting." He handed it to Marco.

Marco glanced through some of the articles. "It's incredible. A man who had eaten meat all his life suddenly loses his taste for it after receiving a heart from a donor who happened to be a vegetarian. Here's another. A young woman who'd lived with a transplanted heart for nearly five years inexplicably commits suicide in the same manner as the person from whom the heart was taken. They didn't even know each other." He put down the article. "It's as if the young woman suffered from the same depression that had driven the donor to suicide."

"Right. There are other stories, though not quite as startling as the ones you just read. If you want, you can take them. Just bring them back or put them in the mail when you're done."

"Thank you. I can't wait to read them all." He closed the folder and set it aside.

"So, what are your plans?" Professor Rangan asked.

"Well, I'd like to follow up on this, maybe work it into a piece—metaphysical things are hot right now. But mostly I want to do it for myself. Get it out of my system once and for all. I only hope the person who got Susan's heart lives in Miami or at least somewhere in Florida."

Professor Rangan nodded. "I must caution you that whoever it turns out to be, may not be receptive, at least in the beginning. So, I would suggest you take it slow and easy. If my theory is correct, Susan's spirit will detect your presence."

"What ... if nothing happens?"

"You must think positive, Marco." Professor Rangan waved his finger at him. "Everything depends on it. Without faith, and I'm talking about absolute faith that such things are possible, you will absolutely fail. Trust me on this, and do not for a single moment, doubt you can do it."

Marco rose to his feet. "I took a chance coming here, you know. But I'm glad I did. No matter what happens, I want to thank you for your advice ... and for taking me seriously."

Professor Rangan walked him to the door. "I hope everything works out well for you, Marco. And I hope you'll stay in touch."

"I will." Marco smiled. "You can count on it."

• • •

“We need to talk, Sis,” Marco said from across her kitchen table. “This morning, I met with Professor Rangan from the university. When I told him about Susan, he—”

The stove timer went off. “I have a roast in the oven that needs to cook for at least another five to ten minutes. So, what did he have to say?”

He filled her in on his meeting with Professor Rangan, and when he was through, he said, “I know you don’t agree with me, but I’ve made up my mind. I’ve got to find out what’s going on here. If I don’t, I’ll probably regret it for the rest of my life.”

Angela sighed. “When I said you should talk to someone whose opinion you valued more than mine I didn’t think you’d talk to Professor Rangan. I’ve seen him interviewed on TV a couple of times and he sounds like a total flake. Some of the things he says are so ridiculous I can’t understand how the university allows him to teach.”

“He’s got some strange ideas, that’s for sure. And if it’ll make you feel better, I don’t buy into half of them. But what if he’s right, at least about the possibility—”

“Has it occurred to you all of this is happening at a time when you’re most vulnerable? It’s been three months since you broke up with Samantha and until now, that’s all you’ve talked about.”

“You’re right. But the fact is, the accident made me see things more clearly. Now I see our break up was probably a blessing in disguise. Sure I loved Samantha, but not the way I loved Susan.”

“What about your job? Are you just going to give it up so you can try to find some mystical love that may or may not exist?”

He laughed. “Some job. Driving cranky passengers from one end of town to the other. I guess I didn’t tell you—my boss called right after I got out of the hospital. He told me not to bother coming back to work. Their insurance wouldn’t cover me unless they were sure I hadn’t suffered any permanent brain damage. He said to check in with him in a month or two, but I could tell he really didn’t want me.” He shrugged. “No big loss.

I've saved a few bucks which should carry me for the next few months and after that, well ..."

Angela raised her hands in the air. "I give up, Marco. If going out to look for this person with Susan's heart is what you want to do, then fine. Go ahead and do it. And when you come back all messed up inside, you'll have no one to blame but yourself."

"Relax, Sis," he said, trying to lighten the mood. "Everything will turn out for the best. You'll see."

"Well, it's your life. I just hope you know what you're doing." She got up to check on the roast. "So where will you start? You know it's not going to be easy finding out who got Susan's heart. Doctors and hospitals have very strict policies about releasing that kind of information."

"To tell you the truth, I hadn't really thought about it. But you're right. It won't be easy. Of course, there's always Susan's parents ..."

"Is that really such a good idea?"

"No, but they're the only ones who know the person's name. I'll think about it." He stood up. "Boy that sure smells good."

"You want to stay and join us for dinner?"

He smiled. "I thought you'd never ask."

• • •

That same day, Marco started a journal—to record his thoughts and feelings as he began his search for the person who had received Susan's heart. If nothing else, it would be good source material for his memoir that he hoped to write someday.

First entry:

This morning, I met with professor Rangan whom I hadn't seen since I dropped out of school. He thought it possible Susan's spirit was still with us, and the accident was her way of reaching out to me. Perhaps Professor Rangan simply told me what I wanted to hear. No matter. I've decided to find the person who received Susan's heart. It won't be easy, and I may even fail. But if I don't do it now, I may not do it at all. My sister is dead set against it, not that I blame

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her. So, I'll probably not tell her anything until I've found the recipient. Tomorrow I'll call Susan's parents. They may hang up on me, but it's a risk I'm willing to take.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ernesto Patino is a multi-genre author whose books range from Mysteries and Thrillers to Romance and Children's books. His published works include *Enough to Make the Angels Weep*, *In the Shadow of a Stranger*, *Web of Secrets*, and *The Last of the Good Guys*. He lives in Southern Arizona with his wife Pamela with whom he shares a passion for ethnic cuisines, classical music and foreign films. He is a member of International Thriller Writers. For more information about Ernesto Patino, visit his website at ernestopatino.com.

*Devastated by the tragic death of his fiancée,
Marco Anissi sets out to find the woman who
received his beloved Susan's heart.*

Marco Anissi comes out of a coma, days after his car slams into a light pole-the same pole he had crashed into exactly ten years ago, killing his fiancée, Susan.

Convinced that her spirit has reached out to him in a way he would understand, Marco embarks on a search to find the woman who had received Susan's heart. He finds her in Tucson where she works as a dance teacher. Her name is Julia. He signs up for lessons, hoping to develop a relationship. Now, Marco must make a decision: tell the truth about himself and risk losing Julia with whom he's falling in love, or remain silent and enjoy his new life with her.

Can two hearts that beat as one in life be parted by death?

Ernesto Patino grew up in El Paso, Texas. He is a multi-genre author whose books range from mysteries and thrillers to romance and children's books. He lives in Southern Arizona with his wife, Pamela, with whom he shares a passion for ballroom dancing, classical music and ethnic cuisines.