

LIAM'S KISMET

H.G. Wells wrote, "The past is but the beginning of a beginning." This story is the past and the beginning of my first serious attempt at writing fiction in 1991. Partly sci-fi because it deals with time travel, this story for the most part deals with relationships of two people truly in love and the consequences of loss and the hope of being reunited. This is a longer version of THE VANISHING, so if you have read the short story, you will see similarities in the two books. This is also the predecessor to my e-book KISMET available at Amazon.com. LIAM'S KISMET is a Novella by Steven L. Campbell writing as Steven Campbell. This Revised Edition was published 2003, and is copyrighted © 1991 and 2003 by Steven L. Campbell.

PROLOGUE

May 7, 1981

THE NINE-YEAR-OLD GIRL, Sara, stood behind the wheelchair and worked the woman's long red hair into braids with her small fingers.

"Don't move, Jane," she said. "I'm almost done."

Slumped in her oversized chair, Jane stared ahead through the large oriel windowpane, out at the sloping lawn that ran a short soggy distance to a large black iron fence and busy street. Cars zipped and honked and yellow buses grumbled past, while chatty kids in plastic coats scurried by on their way to school. How she wished to be among them, to share their camaraderie, and be away from this stifling house called Kowalski Mansion.

The employees brought her here every morning to watch the traffic. Nurse Rachel hoped it would help bring back the memory of her past and fill an empty mind that had become a blank slate. She was supposed to write down anything that looked familiar in the large, spiral notebook she held in her lap. But nothing about Kowalski Mansion or its busy street looked familiar. In fact, not everything here was right. Even the name they called her.

Thunder sounded and the light outdoors darkened. An early spring storm was settling over Ridgewood and the sudden flashes of lightning frightened Jane. She shivered while she tugged at the hem of her pleated gray skirt, and then pressed the notebook against her useless knees.

Pain stung the back of her head.

"Ouch," she said. "That pulls."

"All done," young Sara said. She handed Jane a small mirror.

Jane glanced at the unfamiliar image. She wondered who the person in the mirror really was and why she was trapped inside this crippled body. Every morning after Sara put in the braids and every night when Rachel undid them, she looked into those frightened green eyes and wondered whose they were.

“Tell me how I came here,” Jane said and handed Sara the mirror. “I need to know.”

Sara put the brush and rubber bands away in a small music box and snapped the lid closed before the waltz could start playing. “Ask Rachel to tell you,” the strawberry blonde-haired girl said while she hurried tidying the table.

Jane looked out at the emptying street. “The three girls come by again today,” she stated.

Sara shrugged. “Did they?”

Jane ignored her. “They have long red hair like mine.”

Every morning, she watched for the girls. They were probably sisters, on their way to school, and on the days they did come by, the youngest always stopped at the fence and made faces at Jane. The older girls were about Sara’s age, but Sara did not know them.

Then, right on schedule, a tall, stout woman bustled into the room. “Get yourself ready for your studies, Sara,” she said. “Your teacher, Miss Brennan just pulled in the drive. I’ll take Miss Jane to the day room.” A nametag pinned to her white nurses’ uniform read RACHEL.

Sara skipped from the room toward the library while Rachel pushed Jane across a grand hall to an elevator. Jane watched one of the housekeepers answer the door and allow Sara’s teacher inside.

Miss Brennan removed her coat and gave it to the housekeeper, then hurried toward the library.

When she passed Jane and Rachel waiting for the elevator, she ushered a friendly good morning to them. Jane was jolted by a strong sense of familiarity with the woman and cried out.

Disturbed, Miss Brennan recoiled.

Jane fanned her face and tried to catch her breath, but dizziness overwhelmed her. She heard Miss Brennan apologize for frightening her and Rachel saying it was okay. When her vision cleared of its smoky darkness, Rachel was lifting Jane’s eyelids and peering into her eyes.

“Time for your medicine,” the nurse said and pulled the wheelchair into the elevator. When the gate had closed and the platform began its slow ascent, Rachel asked, “Have you written in your journal today, Miss Jane?”

Jane shook her head while the floor rumbled. It sounded like thunder and it did not help ease her anxiety. “Rachel,” she said, “tell me how I came to be here.”

The nurse pondered. “Well, it was 1972 ... June as I recall when Mr. Jonathan found you, unconscious and near death in one of those awful caves on Myers Ridge. Why people climb that treacherous place, I don’t know. But there you were, and he was hiking on that hill and carried you down and got you to a hospital. You were nine years in a coma, while the authorities tried every way they knew to find out who you was. Mr. Jonathan brought you here since no kin has ever been found.” She clucked in wonder.

The gate opened and Rachel wheeled Jane into a large, fluorescent-lit room full of white plastic furniture. She parked her in front of a table stacked with magazines and boxes of jigsaw puzzles, then said, “You woke up Easter morning of this year, 1981—almost three weeks ago. Mr. Jonathan has paid for your keep all these years hoping and praying you’d come around.” She looked at Jane with kind brown eyes. “He hopes you will remember your past. That’s why I gave you the notebook to write in, and Sara gave you the pen. Don’t forget to write whatever you remember every day.”

Jane put the book on the table. “Will I ever meet Mr. Jonathan?”

Rachel nodded. “Someday. Right now he’s overseas taking care of business, but he’ll breeze through here someday soon enough to check in on Sara and us.” She opened the notebook, unclipped a pen from the book’s circular wire binding, and handed them to Jane. “Whatever you remember, no matter how small, write it down,” she said. “I’ll be back with your medicine.” She stood and left through the white metal door.

Feeling alone and small in the large sterile room, Jane drew a large question mark on the lined page, looked at it for a very long time, and then began to write.

CHAPTER 1

December 22, 2000: At the Mall

NORA SCOTT SAW HER FOR the second time that day at the Ridgewood Mall, and this time the elderly-looking woman sunken inside a wheelchair saw her too. The woman’s tiny body was practically hidden beneath a navy blue blanket, her thin face peering out from one of the edges.

“My god,” thought Nora, “she almost looks like my mother.”

A tall and thin man, hidden inside a long, black fur coat, pushed from behind. His snow-white head was turned away, looking past a throng of shoppers exiting J.C. Penney. The woman’s red-rimmed eyes followed Nora until her head could turn no more. Then she and the man were gone, swallowed by the sea of Christmas shoppers.

Nora adjusted her stylish small-framed glasses and brushed a hand over her short blonde hair. A woman’s arthritic hand touched her coat sleeve. She looked over into the dark brown eyes of her mother. Short, thick auburn hair framed a worried face.

“That was almost three years ago, Nora,” she said. “You have Liam now. It’s time to move on.”

Nora returned to smelling hamburgers, hot dogs, and popcorn. Her empty stomach grumbled but she ignored it as she drank the rest of her lemonade through the plastic straw. Her ears popped and she could once more hear the instrumental Christmas music playing from loudspeakers overhead.

“Why does divorce have to be so ugly?” she said.

“You should be happy there are no kids involved.”

“I wish I could go back in time and change the past.”

The older woman sighed. “Stop brooding about it and devote time to your new marriage. Make this one special.”

“I plan to,” Nora said and rose from the food court table. Her sister Janet had promised to meet her and their mother in front of the Sears store at one o’clock. Her tiny gold watch read twelve fifty-five.

“I just wish our jobs didn’t keep us apart so much. That’s one of the things that split me and Richard.”

“Liam’s not Richard,” her mother said and stood to face Nora again.

Nora looked away and bit her bottom lip. Her mother took a hand and held it.

“What’s troubling you Nora?”

“The hospital wants me to increase my hours.”

Her mother shook her head. “Tell them no.”

“It’s not that simple.” Nora looked at her watch. “It’s late. Janet will be waiting.”

“Try to be happy.”

Nora gathered up their cups and hurried to the nearest garbage receptacle. She stopped and listened to the noise of people in the mall as she discarded the restaurant waste. She did not care for crowds, especially during this time of year when they became almost mob-like. She closed her eyes and took in a deep breath. She missed Liam and felt lonely and afraid.

A hand touched her hip and she jumped. Static electricity snapped and she turned and looked down into the wretched face of the woman in the wheelchair.

The woman had removed the blanket from her head, which revealed a full crop of white hair around a pasty, ridged face. She bore a thin, aquiline nose, and fixed Nora with a pair of sad,

green eyes. There was nothing old looking in the surprisingly healthy-looking sparkle behind her red-rimmed eyes, and Nora sensed the woman was not as old as she appeared.

The woman smiled a grimace of large dentures at Nora and spoke with a desolate tract of a voice that sounded like it could have been a thousand years old. "Mare-ree Chris-mass."

Nora stopped herself from shuddering and gave one of her bedside smiles learned years ago when she began working at Ridgewood Hospital. "Merry Christmas," she said. Then she looked for the man who had been pushing the wheelchair, but he was nowhere in sight.

The old woman cocked her head. "I know you."

Nora looked across at her mother waiting at the far end of the food court.

"I know you," the woman repeated, appearing to search Nora's face for a name.

Nora smiled politely. As the hospital's Director of Nursing, she saw many people. She searched her memory, but she could not place a name with the woman's face.

Suddenly, the old man stepped up behind the wheelchair. "Carla," he said, "please don't run off."

He nodded shyly at Nora and took hold of the chair's handlebars. "Sorry if she was any trouble."

"No trouble." Nora stared at the man who bore a striking similarity to her husband. She felt an urgent need to introduce herself, so she held out a hand. "Nora Scott," she said.

"Tom Church," he said.

The name sounded familiar, but Nora could not place it.

"Merry Christmas," Tom Church said. He ducked from Nora's stare and wheeled the woman away. "You promised me you'd behave," he scolded as he disconnected a wire from a black box near the right handlebar. "I'm going to have to remove your remote control if you don't stop."

"Merry Christmas," Nora called after them.

"Mare-ree Chris-mass, Nor-aah Lou-eeese."

Nora stopped breathing. *Nora Louise?* Chills gripped her back. Had the woman really called out her middle name? She searched the crowd, but the woman and her dry voice were out of sight somewhere inside a sea of excited conversationalists and the clang-clang-clang of someone ringing a bell. As she hurried to her mother, she noticed again how old she looked, as if a healthy dose of life had been sucked from her.

But Nora knew better than most what loneliness could do to a person. "Come on," she said and kissed her mother on the cheek. "We have shopping to finish."

Her mother agreed. Together, they headed toward Sears and Nora's waiting sister.

CHAPTER 2

December 22, 2000: Aunt Peggy's Gift

HOME FROM THE MALL AND feeling relaxed, Nora played again the message her husband had left on their answering machine. Liam would not be home until after nine o'clock.

Although Ridgewood College was on Christmas hiatus between semesters, he had a lot of paperwork to finish before 2001 rolled in. Furthermore, he was painting a canvas, a landscape he had started in September, and was pressed to finish it for a showing at an art gallery in nearby bigger New Cambridge.

Liam fancied himself after many of the nineteenth century American landscape painters, their living room and dining room walls adorned with framed prints of Frederick Church and Thomas Moran's paintings.

"No rest for the weary," he said when Nora called his campus office.

She heard the pain in Liam's voice, recognized the tired strain that comes from trying to meet a deadline.

"Make sure you eat," she said. "I worry about you skipping meals when you're busy."

"I will."

She listened to him shuffling through papers on his desk. She knew she was keeping him from his work, but she had to force herself to say goodbye. She placed the white telephone in its cradle, glanced up at herself in the hall mirror, and combed her fingers through her short blonde hair. She fixed the white turtleneck collar around her pink sweater, and then looked into her dispirited green eyes. Exhaustion hung from her lower lids, drooping down her cheeks across the corners of her mouth and under her chin. She practiced smiling.

"Life is good," she said and repeated it.

She was tired. The divorce from Richard had been long and bitter, and had kept her from the summer activities she did to relax and stay fit. The grind of work at the hospital seemed unbearable now, and took away the excitement and pleasure of a new marriage. She leaned her head against her wood bookcase and shivered. Winter had settled in the house and the evenings seemed to be getting colder. At thirty, Nora experienced for the first time age creeping at her.

She turned up the thermostat below the mirror and smiled at herself again. Life with Liam was wonderful, which made the house seem emptier without him at her side. She shivered again, then

stood on her toes and pulled down a large black book of mysteries from the tall bookcase next to the mirror.

Armed with her book, glasses, and a cup of hot tea, she nestled into the billowy cushions of the sofa in the front room when a small black telephone lying on the coffee table began to ring. She allowed the interruption and sat aside the book and cup.

It was Aunt Peggy calling, wanting Nora to come to her bookstore and pick up an early Christmas gift she had for her. By her watch, it was almost six-thirty and Nora did not want to dress and go out into the cold night.

“I thought we were going to exchange gifts on Christmas day at my mom’s place,” she said, hoping her aunt would change her mind.

“We are, dear,” the old woman said. “It’s just that ... well, I don’t want to ruin the surprise. I’ll be at the store until eight. I could use some help closing.”

Nora shook her head. “If you wanted help at the store, why didn’t you say so?”

“I just did. See you in a few?”

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WITH A POPULATION OF ALMOST eight thousand, downtown Ridgewood was small with two banks, a post office, a few diners and bars, and Peggy’s Good Used Books sandwiched between a hardware store and a pizzeria. The rest of the town’s merchants did business along the north highway that led to New Cambridge, many of the stores tucked neatly inside Ridgewood Mall.

Nora parked her silver Volvo below a street lamp in front of her aunt’s bookstore and shivered past chunks of plowed snow between her car and the sidewalk. The street lamp reflected off the snow and dazzled her with thousands of multicolored crystals. As she stopped to appreciate the beauty, she slipped on the ice forming along the sidewalk. Maintaining her balance, she cursed at the sheets of ice that slowed her progress.

Inside, a tiny bell above the door announced her entrance. Warm and cozy, the place smelled of lilacs and aging paper. She found a bag of rock salt sitting behind the checkout counter, and sent a large plastic cupful across the unsafe sidewalk.

Back inside, she called out and announced her arrival while she hung her coat on the tree next to the door. A distant voice responded from the back, so Nora made her way through a tunnel of shelves and entered a room full of unwanted books and magazines the town unloaded in the rear of the store at night. Plastic bags, cardboard boxes, paper sacks, and volumes of text littered the room’s tables, benches, and floor. A fluorescent light flickered and buzzed from the drop ceiling installed twenty years ago. Brown stains on the ceiling tile marked places where rain and snow had seeped inside.

In the center of the room and facing left, a small woman with white hair up in a bun sat at a tiny desk. She stared into a computer monitor and slowly clicked at the keyboard below it.

Nora was always surprised how delicate her aunt looked, like a china doll that could fall and break. How had the woman ever managed to see her eightieth birthday?

“Thanks for coming,” Aunt Peggy said while she typed. “I’m getting too old to do this myself.”

“Where’s your regular help?”

“I gave them off so they could be with family. Anyway, I plan on shutting down on Christmas Eve and opening after New Years.”

“If you have so much paperwork to do, why didn’t you close the store early?”

Aunt Peggy punched a key. “I couldn’t do that to my customers.” She looked at the screen.

“There.” She climbed from the padded chair and took a large, spiral bound notebook from a drawer.

She turned and gazed up at Nora. “Lord’s sake, child. Either you’re still growing or I’m shrinking.”

She handed Nora the notebook. “Merry Christmas, although it’s not your big present.” She smiled and winked.

Nora began to protest.

“Hush, child. Have a seat and look. I’m going to fix some tea. Want some?”

She smiled and nodded. “Thanks. With a bit of honey, please.” She found an empty chair and looked at the notebook. Its wire coil was closer to being oblong than round, and its cardboard cover was torn along the bottom and frayed at the edges. Inside the front cover, someone had scrawled the name *JANE* in large and childish blue letters across the top. On the pages, puerile writing, doodles and scribbles filled the rest of the book. As she leafed through the notebook, a square Polaroid photograph jumped from the pages and fell into her lap. The tape along the four corners of the picture was yellow from age and the picture’s colors were faded. Still, the washed-out image startled her.

A hollow-eyed woman with a too-thin, bag-of-bones body sat slumped in a wheelchair. Her cheekbones protruded from a haunted face similar to a painting Nora had seen in one of Liam’s art books, a grotesque piece of art titled *The Scream*. Unlike the painting, however, the woman’s mouth was not open, but misshapen into an odd smile—a queer bit of forced happiness on a face lined with fear. Her hair was long and straight, and despite the photograph’s filmy hues, a strawberry red. She wore an oversized white T-shirt that exposed stick-like arms, brown pants rolled halfway up bony shins, and green or blue ankle socks hanging above tiny feet twisted and

turned inward on the chair's metal foot rests. Her left brown shoe was untied, its string dangling to the blue-green grass where a gray golf bag lay against one of the chair's large wheels.

Nora turned the photograph over. On the back and at the bottom, someone had elegantly written in blue ink, *Jane—1981*. She looked again at the photograph and the disturbing resemblance Jane bore to the woman Carla at the mall.

Aunt Peggy carried in a white tea set on a silver tray, placed it on a wood stool, and took Nora her tea. Nora returned the disturbing photograph inside the book and put it in her lap.

"I don't understand," she said and carefully took the cup and saucer from Aunt Peggy's shaking hands. She balanced the cup and saucer above the book in her lap. "Why a diary?"

Aunt Peggy looked long at her niece, then removed a pile of books from another chair and sat down. She glanced at the tray sitting on the nearby stool. "Oh, I forgot my tea."

"Sit," Nora said and put the diary and her cup and saucer on the floor. "I'll get it."

"Thank you, dear," Aunt Peggy said while she fiddled with her left ear. When she removed her hand, Nora saw the familiar yellow hearing aid. The old woman smiled at her and said, "So, how are you and Liam?"

Nora carefully handed her the steaming cup. "Good," she said. "I love Liam very much." Then she added, "Unlike last year, my life couldn't be better."

Aunt Peggy laughed. "Life could always be better. But I'm just happy you've found someone who treats you well." She sipped her tea.

Nora agreed, then sat and picked up the diary. "So who is she?" she asked, holding up the notebook. "Someone important?"

Aunt Peggy shielded her eyes with her cup and said, "Someone I first met almost twenty years ago when I was teaching Sara."

"Sara?"

"The Kowalski girl." Aunt Peggy put down the cup and Nora saw a tear slide down her left cheek.

Aunt Peggy sniffed. "She's someone who is but wasn't supposed to be." She looked hard at Nora. "I was cleaning yesterday and found that diary. It was given to me by Sara's mother, Jane. Only..." She sighed. "It's important that you read it. When you do, I need to talk to you." She played with the hearing aid and asked, "So how's work?"

It was obvious the old woman had said all she was going to about the diary and its author, so Nora pushed aside her curiosity and shrugged.

“Work is work. What more can I say?”

Aunt Peggy grunted. “You’ve been at that hospital since you were sixteen. I see and hear how the new management over there treats you. The place has become a faceless, heartless corporate entity and I think it’s high time you left the place for something better.”

Nora sipped her tea and eyed her aunt at work. The woman was up to something. “Are you suggesting I quit my job? If so, I’m sorry to disappoint you but I’m planning on someday retiring from there.”

The light sputtered and Nora drank her tea in jerky movement, like an actor in an out-of-sync movie from long ago. Then it stopped and the room was almost bright again.

Aunt Peggy sipped her tea and looked at the fluorescent light, its yellowed plastic cover filled with dead insects. “Think I could get Liam to change that light for me? Maybe even clean it?”

“Are we through talking about my job?”

“Let’s talk about your new job.”

“What new job?”

Aunt Peggy leaned forward and put her cup on the floor. “It was going to be a surprise ... your big Christmas present from me.” She sat up and smiled. “I’d like to give you my store.”

Nora stared. Her brain stopped forming words into sentences. A long ago dream of someday running the store filled her mind. Once, that dream had seemed right, but now, tracking down out-of-print books and seeing joyous looks on children’s faces while she sold them new releases by their favorite authors, seemed unbecoming someone in her illustrious and well paid position.

Nora started to refuse the gift, but Aunt Peggy said, “Don’t give me an answer tonight. Go home and think about it. Sleep on it, as they say. Talk it over with Liam.”

Nora’s cup was taken away and the diary placed in her hands. Then she was guided from the chair and led to her coat. She may have kissed her aunt goodbye, but while she shuffled to her car, she was not sure. The winter chill brought her back to her senses when she opened the door and got inside.

She watched through the icy windshield the lights go off in the bookstore, knowing her aunt was headed upstairs to her apartment. Nora drove home with a mind whirling with questions and possibilities. At home, she microwaved some popcorn, stared at the TV while curled up on the sofa, and thought about her future until she fell asleep.

Her dreams were a wash of senseless images. Then a hand touched her shoulder and reality washed over her like a cold wave, chilling her for a moment until the sight of Liam next to her

filled her with warmth. She pulled him into her arms and let the memories of a bad marriage fade away.

CHAPTER 3

December 22, 2000: Nora's Decision

“I THINK YOU SHOULD DO it,” Liam said while he climbed into bed next to Nora.

“But her store makes very little money.”

“We don't need it. I make enough for both of us.” He pulled the blankets to his chest. “Besides, the direction the hospital is going, it'll be a Band-Aid station in a few years, and you'll be out of a job.”

“The hospital's future isn't as grim as people make out.”

Liam put an arm around her. “It's in a perpetual recession. You've been laying off nurses since the day we met.”

“Things will get better.”

Liam shook his head. “When's the last time you got a raise?”

“We have a salary cap right now.”

“Exactly.”

Nora frowned at him until he cuddled her. She ran her fingers over his naked back, down his hips, then stopped her friskiness and said, “I used to work there while going to college, pretending I owned the store on days Aunt Peggy left me alone. I imagined turning the upstairs apartment into a tea and coffee room and a place for shoppers to sit and read.”

“Sounds to me like kismet—something that was meant to be.”

“The place needs a lot of work.”

Liam shrugged. “We can use money from my savings.”

“Richard would never have allowed me—”

Liam placed a finger against her lips. “I'm not Richard Matthews. What's in the past is over and done with—never to be again. It's just you and me and the future.”

Nora still looked worried. “But what about time?” she asked. “It’s Christmas. The store’s wiring needs updated and the lights replaced, not to mention the walls need repainted and the floors carpeted. And those old curtains —”

Liam chuckled. “Not so fast. It’ll get done in due time.”

Nora sighed. “I don’t know. My heart says yes, but my head says no.”

“Go with your heart.” Liam felt her heart beat rhythmically against his chest. His fingers stroked the back of her neck. He felt her body relax. She closed her eyes and appeared asleep until he reached to turn off the lamp. He picked up the notebook diary.

“Another Christmas present from Aunt Peggy. Wants me to read it,” Nora said. She peeked with one eye while he leafed through the notebook. When he came to the photograph inside, he turned to her and studied her careworn face, then looked again at the picture. He turned it over and read the back.

“So, is this Jane person a relative?” he asked.

“No,” Nora mumbled from her spot against his right shoulder and most of his chest. “Someone Aunt Peggy knew when she taught at the Kowalski mansion across town.”

Liam stared again at the photograph, taking in the facial similarities of the crippled woman and his wife. He heard Nora snoring softly when he returned to the beginning of the notebook diary and started to read.

CHAPTER 4

December 25, 2000: A Christmas Surprise

NORA STOOD AT THE FAR end of her mother’s Victorian-styled dining room and rubbed her eyes. They watered from the ever-present scent of potpourri. She glanced around at the blushing wall-coverings with floral borders and the three cabinets of Waterford crystal, china, and porcelain along the long wall. It was the only room that held no Christmas decorations, a room that had become a timeless point of view of something that never was, created after Nora’s father had died, and it was gradually spreading throughout the old and creaking house. Her childhood home, like the childhood spent here, was a thing of the past, ever changing.

She felt a hint of claustrophobia squeeze at her chest while sweat broke out across her forehead. She waited for the feeling to pass, then looked at the wall filled with framed photographs—the only spot in the house where collected memories comforted. She smiled at the family portrait while she stepped closer to see a young and proud Daniel and Catherine Brennan surrounded by three adolescent daughters.

“You were seven when that picture was taken,” she said to her sister Janet who had walked up and stood next to her. “Remember? Rhonda was nine and I was eleven.”

“Seems like yesterday,” Janet said. She brushed away the bangs of her long auburn hair and tugged at her dress clinging at her shoulders. “Lousy bra’s digging me to death. I don’t know why mom insists we dress up every time we have holiday get-togethers over here.”

Nora looked at her sister’s brand-new wine-colored dress—an expensive Paris copy—then glanced at her own attire of green blouse and red skirt from J.C. Penney. She put an arm around Janet’s shoulder and said, “The secret is to go an extra dress size larger so you can go braless.”

They heard the crunch of snow outside as a vehicle drove into the driveway.

Janet went to a window to investigate while Nora held up a glass of cranberry juice in her right hand and whispered, “Merry Christmas, daddy.”

She went to the window and saw Liam’s white Taurus pull into the snowplowed driveway. Aunt Peggy sat in the front passenger seat. Behind her sat a woman.

“Who’s that?” Janet asked.

Their mother stepped from the kitchen. “Get away from the window, both of you. Your aunt is bringing a guest.”

Nora and Janet stared at their changed mother dressed in teal velvet with opulent white lace.

Pearls hung from her ears and around her neck. A delicate glow surrounded her. She was a woman unknown to them.

“Holy cow, Mom,” Janet said. “You’re really going all out this time.”

Catherine Brennan ignored the remark and clapped her hands. “Come on you two and get the table set. We need six settings of the good china.” She left and headed toward the front door.

Nora left the window and hurried to the center china cabinet. She put her drink down, pulled open the top drawer, and began pulling out silverware. She heard Janet behind her grumbling: “Why do these dinners have to be so formal? Daddy would never have allowed mom turn our Christmas into something stiff, so prim and proper.” Her voice lowered. “Ever since Rhonda became too important with her acting and modeling career, now mom acts like she has some holiday dress code to meet.”

Nora finished counting silverware and napkins. “Ronnie’s doing well,” she said and stepped aside so Janet could get to the plates and glasses.

Janet hissed through her teeth while she removed some crystal goblets. “Never home for the holidays. Never calls.”

“She calls,” Nora said.

“Not me,” Janet snapped.

They heard their mother at the front door greeting Aunt Peggy and her guest, so they hurried setting the table.

Nora heard Liam say, “Lead me to the tree,” and knew he had his arms full of presents from Aunt Peggy. She finished the last setting and hurried to the front room. She stopped under the hanging mistletoe and pointed to it when he had finished placing the gifts next to the richly decorated tree. He went to her waiting arms and kissed her.

“I need to bring in the rest of Aunt Peggy’s gifts,” Liam said after the kiss, and he left her to wander to her mother’s old love seat. Here, there was a hint of the past in the old record cabinet at the far end of the room where Daniel Brennan used to play country and western music. Nora looked at the stereo and lost herself in memories. Then she smiled when Aunt Peggy entered wearing her usual white Christmas sweater and red slacks.

“Merry Christmas everyone,” Aunt Peggy said. She seemed unsteady on her feet and Nora saw how pale she looked. Aunt Peggy caught Nora staring at her and smiled. Nora returned the smile from a worried face as she hurried to the woman’s side, embraced her, and kissed her cheek.

Aunt Peggy whispered, “Did you read the diary?”

Nora shook her head. “Not yet.”

“We’ll talk later,” Aunt Peggy said as she released their embrace. Nora held her by an arm and kept her steady.

Catherine led a pretty woman with long reddish blonde hair into the room. She appeared to be Nora’s age and had on a white turtleneck sweater and white jeans. Her name was Sara Kowalski, the girl from a time long ago when Aunt Peggy had taught music and art at the Kowalski estate.

Liam entered with the last of the presents and Catherine announced it was time to eat.

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AT A LONG DINING ROOM table surging with a silver platter filled with golden baked turkey and china bowls heaving with mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, stuffing, gravy, squash, green bean casserole, and cranberry sauce, Aunt Peggy sat opposite of Catherine at the head of the table. Sara sat right of Aunt Peggy, and the proud student and her old teacher shared with the others detailed descriptions of trips to New York City’s theaters, art galleries, and music and opera concerts.

“Your aunt was the finest teacher ever to tutor me,” Sara said to Nora seated across from her. “I learned so much the year she taught me.”

Nora thought of the diary. “Then you knew Jane, the woman’s notebook diary Aunt Peggy gave me.”

Sara looked down at her plate, and then glanced over at Aunt Peggy as she reached nervously for her glass of Beaujolais Nouveau and sent the purple wine spilling onto Catherine’s white tablecloth.

The crystal shattered against a china bowl of mashed potatoes.

Horror stricken, Sara picked up the goblet by its stem and apologized. She seemed on the edge of tears.

Feeling responsible for the accident, Nora stood, reached across the table, and began picking up pieces of broken glass. Next to her, Liam held out his cloth napkin for Nora to place the fragments in.

“It’s okay,” Catherine said over Sara’s regret for staining the tablecloth. “It’s Christmas. Eat. Enjoy.”

To Catherine’s immediate left, Janet stared wide-eyed at her mother as the woman went to the china cabinet, returned with a new goblet, and poured Sara a fresh glass of wine.

Liam went to the kitchen to throw away the broken glass, and when he and Catherine were seated once more, Aunt Peggy said to Nora, “After you and Liam take me home, we must talk ... at my place.”

Nora looked puzzled.

“Later,” Aunt Peggy said. She clinked a spoon against her glass and addressed the five people before her. “I’d like to thank my sister-in-law for this beautiful holiday dinner.”

An undivided agreement from the others ensued.

Aunt Peggy smiled at Nora before she continued. “As you may already know, I’ve offered my store to Nora and she has graciously accepted.” Her voice wavered and forced her to pause. Then she said, “Without going into specifics, this will probably be my last Christmas with all of you. I’ll be moving in January to Florida to live with my cousin Ruth.”

Nora paled and took Liam’s hand next to her and squeezed it.

“I love you all,” Aunt Peggy said. She held out her glass. “Merry Christmas.”

A subdued response of Merry Christmas followed while glasses were raised. After the toast, the dinner table was quiet, and the quietness almost consumed the remaining mealtime until Nora hurried to her aunt and kissed her on the cheek. “I love you,” she said and hugged Aunt Peggy.

Catherine announced she would be serving coffee and apple pie, and she and Janet began clearing the table. Nora released her embrace and dutifully followed her mother and sister by taking Aunt Peggy's plate. When she came to Sara's place and leaned close to receive the woman's dishes, their shoulders brushed and a large spark of static electricity snapped between them. Sara jumped and yelped while Nora staggered from the table and dropped the plates to the carpet.

Liam was quick to get to her as Nora stumbled and pitched into his arms. She coughed and sucked in tight breaths of air while he rubbed her back and asked if she was okay. She shook her head and he excused the two of them and took Nora into the front room.

"B-bathroom," she said, so he hurried her to the staircase and upstairs.

"Are you okay?" he asked at the bathroom door.

She looked at him with large, frightened eyes, clutched her hands over her mouth, and ran inside.

He heard her vomit into the toilet, so he went inside.

On her knees and hugging the bowl, her body shook violently. He hurried to her side and she said, "I-I'm ... f-freezing." He held her in his arms and waited for the shaking to stop. When it tamed to shivers and spasms every thirty seconds, he led her to the bedroom that once was hers.

CHAPTER 5

December 25, 2000: A Promise to Keep

THE ROOM WAS NOW A sewing room, but there was a sofa in front of the far window. He helped her lie down and unfolded an afghan draped over the back. While he tucked her in, Catherine and Janet entered the room.

"Is she okay?" Catherine asked.

Liam stood and straightened his jacket and tie. "I don't know," he said. "Could be a touch of the flu."

Catherine knelt and brushed away Nora's bangs. Nora eyes were closed and tears marked her cheeks. Catherine stood, crossed the room, and returned with a pink floral throw pillow.

"I'll take care of the bathroom," Liam said after Catherine placed the pillow beneath Nora's head.

When she left, Janet said, "Wow. That scared the crap out of me." She laughed nervously. "I'm surprised the Kowalski woman didn't get zapped as bad as Nora." She took a cigarette from her purse, looked at Nora, and put it back. "When I was really young and my sisters and I went to the

elementary school over on Frederick Street, we used to go by their mansion on our way to school and I would make faces at Sara's crippled mother at the window." She breathed deep and chuckled at the memory. "Nora would scold me for it, but I didn't do it to be mean. I did it because I liked her. And I felt sorry for her, because they kept her locked up in that house, like some criminal or zoo animal."

Liam looked at her. "What was wrong with her?"

Janet shrugged. "I heard she had some sort of accident on Myers Ridge that messed her up pretty bad. Then she had some sort of mental breakdown while Aunt Peggy taught at the house. She disappeared not long afterwards."

"Disappeared how?"

"Some say she ended up at the psycho ward in New Cambridge, although her husband Jonathan Kowalski denies that rumor. He claims she was abducted by some unknown person or persons, but I find that hard to believe."

"Why's that?"

"His place is a fortress." Janet looked at Nora one more time. "I'd better go check on mother," she said and left.

Liam knelt and kissed Nora's wet cheek. Then he went to clean up the bathroom. When he returned, Aunt Peggy had pulled up a chair and was sitting, holding Nora's hand and humming.

"She's sleeping," she said while Liam approached. He stopped and noticed someone from the corner of his eye. He turned and saw Sara Kowalski sitting at one of Catherine's sewing machines. She looked at him and smiled.

"I hope you don't mind," Aunt Peggy said. Then, "Sara, be a dear and bring Liam a chair."

Liam held up a hand to decline the offer, then rethought his actions and thanked the woman when Sara brought him a padded stool. She gave him a sympathetic nod and returned to her seat.

"I'm glad we're away from the others," Aunt Peggy said while Liam straddled the stool and looked upon his sleeping wife. Her forehead was lined with a frown. Aunt Peggy looked and said, "Even in her sleep she seems troubled."

Liam agreed.

Aunt Peggy took his hands and looked him in the eyes. "I don't have long on this world and there's much I need to tell you," she said. "When Nora's better, I want you to tell her everything I'm about to tell you. Promise me."

Liam saw the seriousness on her face. "Of course. What is it?"

Aunt Peggy nodded at Sara who crossed the room and closed the door.

“What I tell you must remain between you and Nora. You must tell no one else.”

Liam frowned. “What’s this about?”

“It’s about kismet,” she said and squeezed his hands.

“Kismet?” Liam’s frown deepened.

“Crazy destiny,” Sara said. She gave him a sad nod while Aunt Peggy took both sides of his face in her palms and turned it to face her again.

“What I’m about to say will sound incredible ... unbelievable. But you and Nora and Sara ... and Jane ... deserve better.”

“Jane? You mean the woman whose diary is on my nightstand?”

“You’ve read it?”

“Most of it.” He turned to face Sara again. “She was your mother?”

Sara looked shocked. “You know?”

“I didn’t until Janet told me your mother was crippled.”

Aunt Peggy said, “Janet doesn’t know.” She took his face in her palms again. “No one knows the truth but Sara and me, and in a few minutes you will too, so it’s up to you to see that history doesn’t repeat itself.” She stared into his eyes. “Promise me you won’t let it happen.”

Liam shifted. The heat in the room had become unbearable and his hands felt swollen and prickly. He took Aunt Peggy’s cool and wrinkled hands in his and looked at Sara looking sadly at Nora. Outside, wind whipped against the house and Liam heard the windows rattle. He watched snow swirl past the window behind the sofa. Then he asked, “What do Sara and her crippled mother have to do with Nora?”

“And you,” Aunt Peggy said. “You play an important role in what has happened and what could happen again. That’s why it’s up to you to change the future to change the past.”

“The past? How does one change the past?”

“By changing the future.”

Liam listened but the words made little sense. He shook his head and Aunt Peggy said, “I told you it would sound incredible. But if you listen with an open mind, then I think you’ll understand.” She rubbed her forehead. “Lord help me, even I couldn’t believe it the day I saw

Jane. And then you—you from the future—came along and the craziness became even crazier.” She gestured at the sofa and the window beyond it. “Now she and you live out there somewhere, pretending to be somebody else, trapped by a cruel twist of fate.”

“I’m sorry,” Liam said, “but I don’t understand any of this. Whatever you’re trying to tell me, perhaps you should start at the beginning.”

Aunt Peggy nodded and looked at Nora asleep on the sofa. “I want Nora to know this too. The diary, Jane and Sara, and the two of you, I want her to know about all of it. Tell her everything I tell you and promise you’ll do that.”

Liam swallowed and then nodded.

Aunt Peggy cleared her throat and began.

CHAPTER 6

Four Months Later, April 14, 2001: Myers Ridge

“UGH. I THINK I SWALLOWED a spider.”

Liam sputtered. Nora stopped and looked back. Liam pulled a small, brown leaf from his mouth and pushed the hanging branches away from his face. Drops of water sprinkled down on him and he shivered. “Wait up a second, honey. I need to readjust my pack.”

Nora combed a hand through her short blonde hair. “We’re almost out of the woods,” she said and took out her canteen. “We should reach the hill’s summit in a couple hours. Then we can set up our tent and...” She let her voice fall away while she removed the cap and drank.

“God willing,” Liam moaned while he adjusted the straps around his shoulders. “I’m getting too old for this.”

Nora breathed in the cool woodsy smell, then went to him and handed him her canteen. “You shouldn’t have worn so much, especially on a day like today,” she said.

Liam glanced down at his long khaki shirt and pants. “I can’t help it we’re having unseasonable weather today.” He took a mouthful of cool water, swallowed, and looked around. The hill’s terrain was rough and steep in many places, and challenging to climb. Thorny underbrush lay about in thickets, surrounding dying trees. Acid rain had made its way into the soil and was killing the deciduous plant life. He pointed at patches of snow and ice lingering in the valley. “It’ll be cold tonight, though. It’s still April.”

“That’s okay,” Nora purred at him. “I have you to keep me warm.” She turned and pulled at the pant legs of her black spandex shorts that had crept up her thighs. When she turned back, she blinked away the little pools of tears that had welled in her eyes.

“Are you okay?” Liam asked.

“Yeah. Just thinking about Aunt Peggy.”

“You miss her.”

“She was so good to me—my best friend. And now she’s gone. She knew she was dying, but she didn’t—” Nora blinked away more tears and looked suddenly shy.

Liam tried to embrace her, but her pack got in the way. He leaned into her and said, “It was a nice eulogy.”

She nodded.

Liam recalled Christmas and the fantastic things Aunt Peggy had told him. He still could not believe it. Things like that were not possible. But Aunt Peggy and Sara had been convinced, and Liam had promised to tell his wife. But so far, he had broken that promise. What’s more, he had hidden the diary in his office desk until now. He looked at his pack and the wide pocket the notebook was in.

“It’s up to you to stop it from happening,” Aunt Peggy had warned him, along with warnings to stay away from Myers Ridge during Easter. But he had planned almost a year ago to climb this part of the hill and sketch its treacherous yet beautiful rock formations along its craggy peak. Besides, he was determined to prove Aunt Peggy wrong. After all, traveling through time was impossible. Once the day was over and they were still together, he would show her the diary tomorrow, Easter Sunday, and tell Nora about Aunt Peggy’s fantastic tale. Then again, perhaps not. Best to leave that bit of private craziness in the past.

Nora took back her canteen and took a drink.

“Good stuff on a day like this, isn’t it?” Liam said, stepping out of the sun and leaning against a tree. He checked the bright sky above them.

A storm and a cave will separate you.

Aunt Peggy’s warning sounded in his mind. He looked again at the clear sky and then at his wife.

Craziness. It isn’t possible.

Water trickled down Nora’s chin, down her neck and onto her T-shirt. The liquid revealed her skin beneath the thin fabric.

She’ll be pregnant when Jonathan Kowalski finds her. He will name your child Sara.

Liam pushed away Aunt Peggy’s voice. He put a hand against Nora’s small stomach. Was she really pregnant?

Nora put away the canteen, put her arms around his neck and kissed him deeply, and then pushed herself away. He let her go.

“Come on,” she said, pointing to the top of the rise, “our destiny awaits us.”

Liam watched her start through the woods, her trim, muscular legs carrying her off. A woodpecker drilled at a nearby tree and a sudden feeling of sadness overwhelmed him.

“Come on, slow poke,” Nora called. “What are you waiting for?”

Liam pushed the branches and his emotions aside and hurried to catch up.

CHAPTER 7

April 14, 2001: A Buzzing of Bees and a Slipping Away

THE LOOSE STONE AND GRAVEL slowed their climb, making Liam eager to rest again. He looked forward to reaching the top and setting up their tent.

They rested next to their packs on the face of the hillside. Looking down at the widespread valleys and Nora’s little hometown of Ridgewood, Liam noted how years of wind, rain and snow had stripped away trees and other large plant life on some areas of the hill, creating patches of bare rock.

Nora pointed down the slope. “I used to climb those rocks when I was a kid.”

“You were a hill climber too?”

“Hills and trees.”

“Me too,” he said.

She took a pair of wire-frame glasses from her pack, slid on the glasses, and took out a small digital camera. She photographed the landscape below them while Liam sketched the surrounding landscape in a drawing pad with pencils from his pack. Part of his mind became preoccupied again with the bizarre tale Aunt Peggy had told him. It was too unbelievable and would be difficult to tell without making Aunt Peggy sound insane. Even if Sara Kowalski was here to back him up, he could never besmirch the old woman’s memory.

But she and Sara had been so convincing. And Sara had vanished days after Christmas while searching for her parents.

Parents lost in time.

Liam stopped drawing.

What if it's true?

He watched a pair of Blue Jays dart from tree to tree below the hillside overlooking the valley where Myers Creek snaked through. The brilliant sunshine turned hazy and the air became enormously still and quiet. A sudden drop in temperature made Nora put on her jacket. She put away her camera and sat down next to Liam. He looked through the lenses of her glasses, into her gorgeous green eyes, and then at her lovely blonde hair. It stood straight up.

“Ouch.” Nora yanked her glasses away and swatted at her temple. “Something just stung me.”

Liam looked but saw nothing. He heard a faint humming sound and wondered if a mosquito had bitten her. Then he felt something crawling on the back of his neck. He swatted at it and felt more bugs crawling on his neck. He scratched at the back of his shirt.

Nora’s glasses began to vibrate and hum in her hand. She threw them to the ground. She sounded panicked when she said, “We’ve got to get out of here.” There was fear in her voice. “Get rid of everything metal and start climbing back down.”

Confused and scared, Liam jumped to his feet. He felt more bugs crawling down his back. Buzzing sounds came from somewhere nearby.

Nora had removed her earrings. She tossed them next to her glasses. “Liam, take off your belt and head back down. Hurry!” she yelled.

Liam tripped over his pack. He reached to pick it up.

“Leave it alone and hurry!” Nora cried. “We’re inside an electric charge building up around us. We could be struck by lightning any second.”

Liam saw the fear in her eyes before she pushed him along. He stepped quickly down from the rocky ledge and ran for the trench that would lead them down to the next level. He stripped off his shirt. Rain suddenly fell in torrents from the sky. It fell fast and stung his skin. He stopped at the next level and waited for Nora.

“There’s a cave to the right,” she said and grabbed his arm to steady herself from the sudden wind whipping at them.

Liam stopped when she began to run. “We can’t,” he said and let go. Suddenly, Aunt Peggy’s tale did not sound so incredible.

The fearful look in Nora’s eyes changed to panic. “Liam, hurry,” she cried. “Our lives depend on it!”

He looked into her pleading eyes and felt the hair on the back of his neck begin to rise again. He took her outstretched hand and ran across the small valley toward the cave. The ground became soft and spongy and he slipped on some loose gravel and fell from Nora’s grasp, landing face

first across some rocks. Nora slid across the gravel and fell into a bowl-like depression where the ground at the bottom fell away and took her with it. The darkening sky banged to life and a bolt of lightning struck the place where she had been. The air became scorched and Liam felt an explosion in his head. He screamed. The air around him cooled and the rain pelted him, pushing him down when he tried to stand. He scrambled to the place he last saw his wife and looked at the gaping ground where a sinkhole had swallowed her.

He fell on his belly, shouted Nora's name, and listened. The splattering of rain made it difficult to hear. He fumbled with the button on his shirt pocket and tore it open to remove a long, thin halogen flashlight. The bright beam of light revealed a wide, long, and deep hole. Around thirty feet down and to the left where the light faded, he saw a cave floor piled with rock from its crumbling ceiling. The chamber seemed to emit a light of its own and he scanned the area for Nora. There was no sign of her.

"Nora," he cried. "Answer me."

Daylight disappeared while storm clouds collided and unleashed a wall of water upon the grief-stricken man. Shaking and cold, he crawled to safety. The cave's entrance was small but big enough to allow him to push himself inside it. Liam turned on the flashlight and looked around. The cave was tall and narrow, no bigger than a broom closet. He wiped rain and tears from his eyes and drew his legs up to his chest. He wrapped his arms around them and wept.

CHAPTER 8

April 15, 2001: Into the Deep

THERE WAS ONLY ONE THING to do: follow Nora inside the hill.

The enormous, Cyclops-like eye darted across damp, stony walls of the cave's large chamber. Then it blinked twice and left. Liam cursed and struck the lantern-size flashlight with an open palm.

The giant eye returned, weaker than before. Liam mumbled and shrugged; he was grateful for its dim light. He stumbled on some rocks, regained his balance, and stumbled again. His knees weakened, bent, and plunked him on his butt on the hard shale. The bottle in his jacket pocket clanked against the stone, so he pulled it out to make sure it was all right. It felt almost full and he was glad; he had a long way to go.

He knew he should return the wine to his backpack—the pack he had either foolishly or bravely rescued when he had decided to look for Nora inside the caves. He had retrieved their packs and Nora's camera and glasses from the hill's ledge, and then had gone and worked in the storm marking the spot where she had fallen. The electrical charge had left hours ago, leaving him alone on the hill with the rain and his thoughts.

Inside the cold Myers Ridge, he brushed his whiskered chin with the back of his hand, and then held the bottle to the yellow light. He inspected the glass and saw no cracks, so he undid the cork

cap, took a long, hard swig of the scarlet drink, and welcomed the fruity burn in his throat. He smacked his lips together, replaced the cap, and returned the bottle to his pocket. Then he wrapped his leather jacket around his slim chest and pulled a sleeve away from his watch. It was almost midnight. The sun would not be up for another seven hours outside the dampened hilltop.

Despite the drink, a bitter cold pushed its way inside Liam's clothes and across his skin making him catch his breath. He pulled at the bottle, and then let it go. He had to get up, to keep looking.

The flashlight dimmed, so he turned it off and sat in the dark. Water trickled into a pool from somewhere up ahead, its drizzling voice taunting him: *Nora's gone, gone for good.*

The cold, damp air continued its bite. He cursed his awkward pack, his thin jacket, his lousy flashlight, his ... his loss of Nora.

Could she really be gone? Is what Aunt Peggy had warned him about come true?

Thunder rumbled outside.

"There's probably a hundred miles of passageways inside of here," he mumbled. "But I'll find you Nora. People don't really vanish in time." He spat, turned on the flashlight and stood, then stumbled in the darkness when the light failed. He turned the lens' cap with numb fingers and the light came on—brighter this time. His spirits lifted when he passed the pool and headed deeper into the cave.

Turning a corner, he came to a fork and paused to determine which way was best. "One's as good as any other," he thought, but then corrected himself. One might take him away from Nora.

He shouted her name and listened while it echoed long and far. Then he waited.

Fingers of fog lifted around him—a chilly gray mist that slid around him and brushed against the hair on his neck. He tried to wave it away with his right arm, but it stuck to him like smoky cobwebs.

He felt like he was sinking into a quagmire and he knew he had to get away before the feeling covered him and made him want to rest again.

The passage to his right looked clearest, so he ducked inside. A foul smell of death overwhelmed him. He stopped to turn around, then changed his mind, put his head down and charged through the rocky corridor away from the stench. He ran for what seemed like minutes. When he came to a larger hall, he stopped.

What if that smell had been Nora?

"No," he reasoned aloud, "Nora's alive. Besides, bodies don't decay that fast."

Nevertheless, he turned around and looked. The flashlight revealed nothing while its light extended to the curve of the passageway. He debated whether to go back.

“It’s ... It’s just some ... dead vermin,” he said and leaned against the wall to catch his breath.

But he had to be certain, so he backtracked. The stench grew stronger until he finally spotted the body. A dead rat lay decomposing and filled with maggots. He grabbed at his pocket, his numb fingers clutching the bottle they could no longer feel. He fumbled with the cap and could not grasp it, so he put the cap in his mouth and twisted with his teeth. The cap came out and fell to the ground. He brought the bottle up to take a swig, and then felt it slip from his hand. He grabbed for it but it stayed ahead of him while he watched it fall. The explosion of glass and wine echoed through the tunnel and the sound hurt his head.

“No,” he cried. He breathed in the alcohol’s strong fruity smell and wept.

What am I doing?

He lifted his head and looked around. He turned in circles. Somehow, he had come to another fork he had not seen before. All paths seemed to lead in the same direction: darkness and cold.

The fog was back, creeping up his legs. He smelled the stink of wine and rat and it dulled his mind. He had to escape.

Which way?

He could not decide. He would have to wait until his mind cleared up a bit.

Dull rumbling echoed around him. He raised his light to a cavern a few feet away and saw the marker of rope and Nora’s backpack he had lowered into the shaft Nora had fallen through. Then, in the distance, he heard a sound. He was sure it was human. He stumbled from the wall and hurried into the cavernous chamber. In his excitement, he tripped and stumbled. The flashlight clattered to the ground and its light went dim. He picked it up and struck it against his leg until the beam intensified.

Lightning darted and danced in the night sky above the chimney-like hole and rain fell through and down to where he was certain Nora had landed. He hurried, calling her name over the rumble of thunder.

The damp cave walls began to glow a faint blue, then became bright, and Liam saw jewel-like bars of crystals cluttering the floor and embedded in the walls. Bright light flashed around him, and after a tremendous roar sounded at the hole’s entrance, a hot vacuum sucked him into the air. Pain shot through his legs while he fell to the jagged floor. He staggered to stand when cold air slammed into his back and pushed him across the stone and gravel. He put out his hands to stop himself, and was vaguely aware that nothing was there and that he was falling, long and far.

CHAPTER 9

April 15, 1988: Making Kismet

LIAM REMEMBERED FALLING INSIDE THE cave and the lightning following him down the deep abyss.

Somehow, he had survived the fall and managed to escape from the dark depths of Myers Ridge. His clothes were ripped and he wore cuts and bruises on various areas of his body, but he was alive. Now he stood along a downtown street corner and recognized a few of the dead brought back to life. Among the living, the old had become younger. Except him.

One of the young in particular walked in the pinkish light across the street. She crossed the intersection, coming his way. He looked again at the date of the newspaper he had bought a few minutes ago and felt as though his brain had been dropped like an anchor into the middle of an ocean of madness. He repeated the year aloud. "1988." Aunt Peggy's prophecy had come true.

He watched nineteen-year-old Nora Brennan approach, her long red hair blowing in the April wind. She wore a white nurse's aide uniform and was probably going to work. The hospital was a block away and in the direction she headed. He wanted to talk to her, to know more about the girl his younger self still in Minnesota would someday marry after moving here upon tiring of city life. But would that Liam also end up losing her and chasing her through time?

"Not if I can help it," he thought. Then he said, "Excuse me, young lady. Is there a book store around here?"

Nora smiled. "My Aunt Peggy has a nice store a half-block down from here. She has a wonderful selection. I spend all my free time there."

Liam smiled back at her. "Thanks."

"It's on the way if you'd like to walk with me," she said. She studied him with beautiful green eyes while she waited for a reply.

"If you don't mind being seen in the company of a haggard-looking geezer," Liam said. He hitched the two backpacks higher up his left shoulder and walked with Nora in a fantastic place distorted somehow into reality. The packs he carried emitted a static sound and tiny sparks flowed around the fabric. He figured his clothes would do the same soon.

"Where are you from?" she asked, seeming unaware of the strangeness on his back.

"I was born in Minnesota, a long time ago," he said.

She smiled. "How long ago was that?"

He shrugged. "Enough to make me feel very old."

“I don’t think you’re old.”

“Usually to someone your age, I’m considered ancient.”

“I’m different than others my age. I believe a person is only as old as they feel inside, not what they look like on the outside.”

Liam agreed. Then he said, “Do me a favor. No matter what, don’t ever dye your hair. Okay?”

Nora shrugged and nodded. “I don’t plan to. I like being a redhead.”

They stopped at a red brick storefront on their left. Someone had hand-lettered *Peggy’s Good Used Books* in white paint on the front door, a feature missing from his time.

“Tell my aunt to give you the *friend of family* discount,” Nora said before leaving Liam at the door.

When she was out of sight, he took his wallet from his backpack and chose the newest bills he could find, the ones Nora—his Nora—referred to as “big-head dollars.” He tucked them with his driver’s license, keeping them together for later when he would need proof to back up his fantastic tale.

He returned the wallet along with the newspaper to his pack, then took out Jane’s notebook diary and began rereading his script. In an hour, Aunt Peggy would close the store and attend a birthday party for one of the staff members at the Kowalski place. Jane—his Nora—would be there. Then, according to the diary, Aunt Peggy would bring him to see Jane on Monday. And that would be her last entry.

“They disappeared that night while Jonathan was overseas and Sara was at a private school in England,” Aunt Peggy had told him that Christmas day in Catherine’s sewing room. “It was the nurse there, Rachel, who knew Sara was really Jane’s daughter, miraculously born while Nora lay in a coma. It was she who brought me Jane’s diary all these years later, and it was she who convinced Sara to contact me and search for her biological parents.”

Liam drew in the cool air of the last days of winter, and buttoned his jacket. He had promised Aunt Peggy he would tell Nora the strange story. Together, he and Nora could keep history from repeating. But his disbelief had sealed his and Nora’s fate, burned into his mind as a constant regret, and branded there by his guilt. Now, while he put away the diary, he thought about his and Nora’s future as Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Church. The script had already been written and all he had to do was act the part. Would Sara ever find them? Would they be happy together?

As he entered Peggy Brennan’s store, he knew there was no turning back, and little likelihood of ever returning to his proper time. This was his kismet, after all. But fate could be changed. All he had to do was keep the future from repeating the past.

~ THE END ~