

## Prologue

Another beautiful spring day welcomed with it an array of nature's gifts. The peeking of newborn flowers through the now softened ground was one of many things Catherine appreciated this time of the year. But, the best was yet to come. In her seventy-five years of life, this evening was the night she had hoped she'd still be around to see. She remembered her mother telling the stories passed down to her from her mother, and so on. The Showering of the Souls happened only once every fifty years or so. Those who had lost a loved one would be sitting out on their porches, standing in fields or in their yards, awaiting their return. Catherine anxiously awaited the show on her back porch with a cup of tea.

As she sat in her chair, looking to the sky with the sun's light fading as if it were on a dimmer switch, she remembered back to the night her life had changed. She thought about how anxious she was on her twenty-first birthday and how she wasn't sure how Sean would take the news of her being pregnant. Looking back, she wished she had told him before the

accident. Maybe he would have fought harder to recover. She spoke to him every day, never missing a visit in hope of seeing some sort of change. But nothing ever changed, especially her being alone. Tonight would be different, though. Tonight, she was hoping he would finally find his way back to her.

As the light faded, the display of stars made their appearance. First, ever so softly, but as the last bit of daylight was doused by the velvet blackness that had overtaken the night sky, the stars shown more brightly. Then out of nowhere, the first shooting star, said to be holding onto the first soul, made its way across the sky. Catherine's heart fluttered in hopes it was her love making his way back to her. Then another shot across the sky, and another, and another. Catherine sat up half the night watching the display of different colored lights make their way across the black canvas, then disappearing into nothing. She fought to remain awake, but by three a.m., her eyes grew weary and she dipped into a deep slumber, only to be awakened by an early morning phone call.

*“Hello, Catherine?” said a familiar voice on the other end.*

*Catherine’s heart began to beat fast and her hands began to shake.*

*With a quivering voice, Catherine responded hopefully, “Yes, good morning, Ms. Grady.”*

*After a moment of silence on the other end, Catherine had thought they lost their connection. “Ms. Grady, are you there?”*

*“Oh, yes, yes, sorry, Catherine. Catherine, I’m calling about Sean. Are you sitting down?”*

*Trying to steady her hands as she held the receiver, Catherine’s grip tightened as if it were the lifeline she’d been holding onto for the past fifty years. “How is he?” She responded with a glimmer of hope in her voice.*

*Ms. Grady spoke in a quiet, calm manner. “There’s been a change.”*

## Chapter One

### *The Awakening*

The sun shone so brightly, that on any other morning Sean would have welcomed its warmth on his face. But, as he attempted to open his eyes, he found it difficult to take in the light. Blinking, in hopes to help his eyes adjust, he began to focus on his surroundings. With the blinds pulled all the way up, he saw the very large window to the right of him and he immediately knew he was not in his bedroom.

Sean thought back to the night before, trying to remember what he'd done. He remembered getting off of work early, going home to shower, and getting ready to meet Catherine. A smile drew across his face just at the thought of her.

Remembering the ring he placed in his front pocket, he reached down to retrieve it. His hand was met with an unfamiliar fabric. He drew back the blankets and found himself dressed in blue, old man pajamas. As he thought back to his plans the night before, he recalled going out with Catherine for her birthday. Being that they both shared

the same birthday of January first, he felt destiny had played its part and brought them together. The whole night was planned to make his proposal perfect; dinner, a few drinks, a walk down by the lake, then he was going to pop the question. Apparently he had one drink too many, because he couldn't recall ever actually proposing.

He couldn't wait to hear how Catherine snuck him into her bedroom without her father knowing. Then it suddenly occurred to him that if she undressed him, she may have come across the ring in his pocket. Sean needed to find his clothes as soon as possible to check for the ring. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up. The aches and pains in his back were foreign. He even had difficulty sitting straight up, finding his back wanting to stay in a permanent hunched over position. As he stood, he felt a bit off balance, having to reach for the bed.

As he looked around the room, it was not what he expected a twenty-one year old girl's room to look like. It was very plainly decorated with just a bedside table and a lamp on top. A picture of a garden hung on the wall. He slowly made his way to the door, praying the door's

hinges were oiled well enough not to creak. As he opened the door, he slowly stuck his head outside to listen for Catherine, or any sort of movement in the house. He was confronted with a long hallway with doors running along either side.

Sean stepped out into the hallway, feeling even more confused than when he awoke. This definitely was not Catherine's home. Wherever he was, someone had to know where his clothes were. He made his way down the hallway, noticing all the rooms were assigned a number; one-twelve, one-fourteen, one-sixteen, and so on. The place appeared to be deserted. When he came to the end of the hallway, it turned to the right and he could make out some sort of sitting area at the far end. He turned down the empty corridor; his bare feet coming in contact with the very clean, very cold floor gave him an uneasy feeling. As he approached the opening, he saw several couches and chairs in conversational groupings with a table in the middle of their circles. It was a lobby of sorts.

An older woman was standing at a desk to the right. She appeared to be preoccupied with some sort of machine. Looking out the floor to

ceiling windows that lined the opposite wall, he noticed something. The foot of snow dumped on them the day before had melted. Sean entered the lobby, walking closer to the windows to get a better look. He caught the attention of the woman at the desk.

“Oh dear. Mr. Shanahan?” said the woman as she came out from behind the desk at a fairly brisk pace.

“Do you know where my clothes are? Catherine McNulty and I arrived last night, and I was wondering if you happened to have seen her this morning?” Sean replied, in a voice so rough he barely recognized it as his own.

The woman had a concerned look on her face as she took him by his arm and began to lead him back the way he had come. “I’m sure you have a lot of questions and we’ll answer them as best we can. But for right now, you’d best be getting back to your room. You need your rest.”

Sean had a bad feeling creeping up inside him. He stopped dead in his tracks. “Where’s Catherine? Where am I?” he asked, not allowing the woman to take him any further.

*“All in good time, Mr. Shanahan.” The woman’s grip got a bit tighter on his arm as she attempted once again to lead him back towards the hallway.*

*As Sean pulled away from the woman, he caught the reflection of an old man in the window. He thought if she wouldn’t tell him where he was, maybe this older gentleman would. As he turned to speak with the man, there was no one to be found. Sean turned back to the window. As he raised his hand, so did the old man. It was then he remembered what had happened the night before and everything came back to him in a whirlwind of memories.*

*“No, I couldn’t have ... that long?” Sean whispered as he stared at his reflection in the window.*

*He began to make his way for the door as the woman continued to reach for his arm, trying to pull him back.*

*“You have to come back, Mr. Shanahan. It’s just a matter of time before he finds you now that you’ve returned. Please, come back in and we’ll try to figure something out.”*



But Sean didn't listen. He went through the revolving door to the outside world he last stood in fifty years before. The soft blue sky with its gentle spring breeze carried the essence of lilies, lilacs, and other assortments of spring flowers. Tears began streaming down his face. He wiped them away with a liver-spotted, wrinkled hand.

"All this time! I've lost a lifetime because of you!" yelled Sean, cursing the sky.

With a sudden burst of determination, he began running down the gravel road towards the hills. He needed to get to the small town nestled there; the place he once lived.

A sudden rush of icy cold air hit his back. When Sean turned around, he noticed the once blue sky was now dark gray with swirling clouds. Behind him, streaks of lightning connecting the earth below with the thunderous veil above, were tracking him like a hound dog tracks its prize. Sean could feel the electricity in the ground.

Suddenly, a sharp pain caused him to clutch his chest with both hands. He thought for sure he had been struck by lightning. The pain

radiated from his chest, down his left arm and up his neck. Sean dropped to his knees, gasping for air. Falling over onto the gravel, face up towards the sky, the irregular beat of his heart penetrated his eardrums. In the far distance, from behind the dark, swirling clouds, a ball of light emerged. It was coming straight towards him. He knew he'd been beat. The one he'd stayed hidden from all these years finally caught up with him. Lying on the cold ground, helpless, Sean was prepared to accept the fate he had tried to escape years before. Then a familiar voice entered his head.

*“Sean, come, we haven't much time.”*

“Laila?” Sean said, struggling to find the breath to push her name past his lips.

It was at that moment Sean knew he *hadn't* lost. He felt his soul being pulled from him. Leaving the lifeless shell behind, the light that now carried Sean's soul shot across the sky like a shooting star. Thunder and lightning filled the sky, and a large, talon-like hand materialized,

*attempting to grab the ball of light. Just barely evading its grasp, the light disappeared into the atmosphere.*

*Knowing he had failed to retrieve the gift Sean's soul carried, a thunderous howl emerged from the sky, and then all fell silent.*