

Whispers
Echoes
and Wisps
of the Wind

A GATHERING
OF SEVEN TALES

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the beautiful lady that I have had the pleasure and fortune of living most of my life with. What you find on these pages has only come to fruition because of her faith and dedication to this project. The Lord has blessed me in so many ways, most of all, with the love of my life. This book is for you, my love. For my wife, Linda. I love you.

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My prayer of thanks goes to the Lord, without the gifts You have given me, none of this would be possible.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

As each new day arrives, it brings old routines that seem to never change. For some, it is a boring repeat of the days before . For others, it is a comfort that holds us safe in a place we know well. Routines serve as a foundation, keeping us from wandering from our paths, holding steady to our former days. We need them, long for them, hold to them, but these daily routines do not come to us alone. They have companions during the 24 earth-hour journey, the new events and experiences that we meet each day. Some are so subtle that we don't even notice them. Others can impact our lives in ways we could not ever have imagined. Painted in brilliant colors of joy, excitement, and total amazement, the companions come to life, while others in darker pigments of stress, fear, danger, and disaster cause us to run back to routine; anchors from past days that hold us safe. We search for security that routine always seems to have in its pocket, but what of the other companions on our daily journey, the unknowns, and the unexplained? Events that happen out of the blue that have no explanation. You *see* it, you *hear* it, you *feel* it, and yet, how can it be real? A dream, a fantasy, a magical moment that grabs you, causing you to question if you are awake or asleep, happening in reality or your mind.

As you read these stories, you may find yourself in that very place. Could these have really happened, or is it part of the unknown that is just out of the reach of our comfort zone? And now, come with me on a mystical journey that whispers and echoes through a magical valley of imagination. Allow yourself to be carried away on the wisps of the wind to a place you have never been.

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THE LEGEND OF PAINTED PONY

The 1990 light blue Ford Escort rounded the last bend on the old dirt road and slipped into one of the parking spots in the empty lot in front of the old mill. It was mid afternoon when Jessica Lewis stepped from the car with Steno pad in hand and her camera bag over her shoulder. She closed the car door, then walked down the ten steps to the double front doors of the old mill, momentarily glancing into one of the side windows before trying the front door. It was locked, but there was a dim light glowing inside the building. Jess followed the deck around the side of the old wooden structure to the back of the building that overlooked the creek below. It was mid-November and the afternoon, though sunlit, was cooler than usual. She took her 35 mm camera from its bag and began snapping shots of the creek and the surrounding forest.

Jessica Lewis was a beautiful, young shapely woman of 27 with long black hair and deep brown eyes. On this particularly cool day, she was dressed in blue jeans and a warm suede waist coat, a plaid scarf and brown boots to the knee. It wasn't the boots, however, that Bob London, the caretaker, noticed as he watched her from the windows at the back of

the mill. Even at age 67, he still had a deep appreciation for a woman in tightly fitted pants. He watched for several minutes as Jessica snapped pictures of the waterfall and the large water wheel at the rear of the building. He walked closer to the windows then gently tapped on the glass but the young woman did not turn around.

The sound of the water and the large wheel muffled his tapping. As Bob raised his hand again to tap harder, he remembered the age of the windows and decided to open the back door instead. When the bolt snapped and the rear door swung open, Jessica spun around and backed against the hand railing with a surprised, almost frightened look on her face.

For an instant, they just stared at each other then Bob spoke, "Hi, Ma'am. Sorry I spooked you. Have you been here long?"

Jess paused for a second then responded, "No, only a few minutes. Are you the caretaker?"

"Yes," he replied with a smile. "Name's Bob London," he said as he motioned for her to enter.

Jess replaced the camera and pad into the bag and stepped to the door. She shook his hand as she entered.

"I'm Jessica Lewis. How are you doing?"

"Oh fine, Ms. Lewis. How about yourself?"

"I'm fine, just a bit cold."

"Well come on in where it's warm."

Once inside, Jess unzipped her jacket and loosened her scarf. She followed Bob to a small office near the front of the mill. Inside the office was a desk, two chairs and a small stand with a coffee pot.

"Have a seat," Bob said with a smile. "Want some coffee?"

"Coffee would be great, thank you!" Jess responded.

“I don’t have any sugar right now, forgot to get it at the store. Seems I do that a lot anymore.”

“That’s fine, black is okay, that’s my usual,” Jess said as she sat down in the chair facing the desk.

As Bob filled two cups, Jess scanned the office walls. They were lined with old photos of the mill and surrounding countryside. On the wall behind the desk was a large, old weathered map in a glass case, probably hand drawn. Once the cups were full, Bob passed one to Jess then sat down behind the desk. Jess placed her bag on the floor beside the chair then took a sip of the hot steaming brew.

“It may be a little strong for your taste,” Bob said.

“No, its fine. I like my coffee strong,” she said, smiling at him. “Did you get the message from the park office?” Jess asked.

“Yes, they told me last night that you would be coming. So, you are a journalist?” he asked, as he sat back in the chair sipping his coffee.

“Well, let’s say I hope to be a good one someday. I’m interested in writing and photography.”

“You work for a historical magazine, I hear.”

“Yes, I just started about a month ago. Don’t know if I’m going to stay just yet.”

“Graduated University of Miami, top of your class?”

“Yes,” Jess said with a questioning smile on her face.

“You wrote the article about the Iroquois Federation in last months Smithsonian?” “Yes, I did,” Jess said as she lowered her cup.

“Good article, read it this morning before you came.”

“Thank you,” she replied, now with a puzzled look on her face. “How do you know so much about me and I so little about you?”

“Well,” Bob said as he leaned forward in the chair while placing the cup on the desk. “The park office filled me in on most of it, but the magazine article was kind of my own curiosity.”

“So you liked the article?”

“Yes,” he replied. “It was very well presented and quite accurate. You see, I have always had a great interest in our Native Americans. I have also done a little writing on my own, kind of a self-taught historian you might say.”

Slowly, a broad smile came across Jess’s face as she sat forward in the chair and placed the cup on the desk.

“So, you’re Bob London...*the* Bob London? When you introduced yourself earlier, it didn’t ring a bell. You wrote the Indian Journals didn’t you?”

“Yes,” Bob said, as he got up to put more coffee into his cup. “Want some more?” he asked, turning to Jess.

“No thanks,” she said as she picked up her cup. “I must have read them ten times! They are my favorite historical readings.”

“Thank you,” Bob replied, as he settled back into the chair. “I wrote that a long time ago.”

“Do you still write?” she asked with an excited tone in her voice.

“Yes, a little, but for my own pleasure now. I haven’t written anything professionally for many years.”

“Why not?” she asked. “You are such a talented writer and historian.”

“Well, I guess I found out years ago that my first love was in the collection and care of artifacts, not in the writing about them. I’ve been in the museum business for a lot of years. As a matter of fact, I have been here for many more years than I would like to say. I spent some time at the History Museum in Nashville, but I guess I just don’t like big cities.

That's why I came out here years ago. I've been with the Park Service for well over twenty years now. Writing has been more of a hobby than anything over the past couple of decades."

"Would you allow me to read some of your writings sometime? I would really enjoy that," Jess said with a childlike enthusiasm.

"Well, I guess I might be able to dig some of it out for you. That's if I can find it! Enough about me though, what brings you here to these Tennessee hills and this old mill, in particular?"

"Well," Jess smiled, "I'm kind of putting together a history of this area for the magazine and maybe even a few things for myself. You see, I was born and raised not far from here, lived near this area 'til I was twelve. I spent the last fifteen years in Florida. My parents moved there in 1978 and my father works for a paper in Jacksonville."

"Sounds to me like the writing bug is well engrained in your family," Bob said as he got up from the desk.

"Guess I've been around writing all my life," Jess said as she got up and placed the cup on the desk.

"Well, what can I help you with today, Ms. Lewis?"

"Jess, please Mr. London, you can call me Jess."

"Okay, it's a deal, but only if you call me Bob."

They shook hands again and smiled at each other then both said, "Deal," in unison, then both laughed.

"First, I'd kind of like to look around this place on my own, read some of the information and the handouts and if you don't mind take a few pictures. We'll get to the details a bit later, if that suits you."

"Make yourself at home, look all you want and if you have any questions, please do ask. I'll be working around here. I need to move some articles to make room for a new acquisition."

With that, they both left the office and Bob started removing some plaques and photos from one wall. Jess retrieved her camera and her pad and pen from the bag and began to slowly wonder around the old mill. She snapped photos of the old machinery and antiques and read the pamphlets that were placed on a large table near one wall. As she jotted down notes, she found herself looking back at Bob as he unpacked a large crate near his office. She wondered why such a talented writer was so content to spend his time here, mostly alone, in these Tennessee hills. She also thought to herself about the Indian Journals and how, as a young college student, they had so impressed her. As she watched him work she realized he looked almost as she had pictured him: medium height and build, graying hair and blue eyes; a personal hero come to life.

Jess spent most of the next hour taking notes and photos and just leisurely wondering around the old mill. She was beginning to understand why Bob loved this place so much. It had a quiet and cozy feel about it that made her almost purr inside like a contented cat.

After a time, she returned to the office area near the front doors. Bob was trying to hang a huge painting on the wall facing the front entrance. She realized he was having some difficulty and walked quickly to the foot of the step ladder he was on to assist him. With her help, they finally got the large frame centered and hung securely on the plank wall. Bob stepped down from the ladder.

“Guess it was a bit too large for me, thank you. It will save me from having to call one of the Rangers up here to help.”

“Anytime, Mr. London er... ah... I mean... Bob,” she said as she looked up at the covered painting. “What is it?” Jess asked.

Bob removed the tape from the corners of the frame and began to lift the covering.

“It’s something I’ve been trying to acquire for a long time. A painting by a local artist, now deceased. Took a lot of talking, some state cash, and a favor or two to get this.”

He pulled on the final tape and the paper cover fell to the floor.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” he said staring up at it with an admiring smile.

What Jess saw stopped her in the middle of a breath. Before her was a beautiful oil painting of an Indian astride a Pinto pony. The pony was in a rearing stance on its hind legs and the Indian had one arm raised above his head with a large lance in his hand.

The scenery behind the figure was of a beautiful forest valley of pine, hemlock and hardwoods. Before the rider and the horse was a small stream with a mirror-like shine to the surface that reflected their image. Partially melted patches of snow lay all around. The horse was painted with Indian signs and each sinewy muscle stood out, as if it was poised to leap off of the canvas at any instant. It was not the horse, or the beautiful scenery, that took Jess’s breath from her; it was the handsome Indian warrior dressed in buckskin pants and a bear skin cape with paint on his face and chest that fascinated her so. His long black hair flowed about his neck and to the dark, tan skin of his chest. He grasped the rope bridle in his opposite hand as his leather moccasins dug into the pony’s ribs. She knew that Bob was saying something but she did not understand. It was as if she had been lifted into the painting and stood there in the lush forest before this warrior from the past. His eyes, deep and dark, kept her stare fixed on his face, as if by some unseen magnet drawing her closer. His eyes penetrated her mind and



IV



CRYSTAL LAKE BED AND BREAKFAST

It was close to 6 p.m., Friday, May 20th and Brad McConnell was on a two-lane blacktop, Route 66 in north western Pennsylvania, headed north. It was an evening that was somewhat warmer than usual for that time in May. Brad was thirty-five years old, brown hair, blue eyes, handsome man of medium height and weight. He was an outside sales manager for an advertising agency based in Pittsburgh, PA.. This was his first trip away from the Pittsburgh area in over a year. He had been in his present position for the best part of five years, but had not done outside sales on the road for some-time. Because he had been so meticulous about his work, even going as far as touring an area around a new client days before the meeting, he had been the companies top sales person for nearly two years, until the tragedy that hit him head-on six months ago.

Two years earlier, Brad had met a young, very attractive woman by the name of Sue Adams at the agency. He was smitten by her beauty and warm, loving personality from their first meeting. At first, she was shy and turned down his first invitation for a date. But she too had felt the magic between them at those first few meetings and eventually she

agreed to go out with him. For both of them it was love in all its majesty. After the first few weeks, it was very rare to see them outside of work and not together. They dated for about ten months before Brad got up the nerve to ask her to be his wife. They were like two children as they planned the wedding. They bought an older home in the suburbs and spent hours of their spare time renovating it. Just two months before the wedding, Brad's world shattered before his eyes.

It was a Saturday afternoon. As usual, they were working on the house. Sue decided to go to a local pizza shop to get lunch and a few beers to take back to the house. She was on her return trip when she was hit by a speeding car at an intersection. Her car was pushed across the road and into a creek along the road that had been swollen by two days of rain. According to the police and coroner's report, she was probably knocked unconscious and the car ended up in the deep water. The cause of death was presumed to be drowning. Brad's world collapsed around him and, at one point, he had even considered suicide. His company realized how devastating this had been and gave him as much time off as he needed, but several weeks after the accident Brad was back at work. He needed to do *something*. He requested that he work out of the office for a time and the company agreed. He spent the remainder of his time in the house they had bought and worked on together. He eventually continued the work they had begun as if it were an obsession. Brad needed to finish what they had started, even if Sue wasn't there to share it with him. He never left town; there was just his work and that house. He was asked if he wanted to travel again but he declined. He just couldn't seem to leave the house for more than the work day. He wasn't sure what he would do when the work was finished, but when he was there working it was as if she was there with him. Eventually, he

finished the house and moved in by himself. He wasn't sure why, but he needed to feel he was close to her.

One day, the branch President from his company paid him a visit. They talked for sometime and Brad finally agreed to start traveling again. This was his first trip away from the house and the city in a very long time. It had been all he could do to muster up the strength to pull his car away from the front of the house late that afternoon. As he drove, he would try to enjoy some of the scenery away from the city but his mind seemed to constantly wander back to the house and the memories of Sue. He had his windows rolled down and the music playing loudly on the car radio as he drove in and out of parts of the Allegheny National Forest. It was truly a beautiful part of the state and it seemed to somehow relax him. He was changing the channel on the radio to bring in a stronger station when he passed a sign that said, "The Village of Crystal Lake." A few hundred feet up the road, the speed limit changed to thirty-five and he slowed as he entered the Village limits. He saw several houses on both sides of the road all neatly painted and clean. Brad pulled into a gas station near the other end of the Village and filled the tank. As he pumped the gas, he looked across the two-lane to a small country store that said, "Post Office of Crystal Lake." He wondered what the people in a small town like this did for a living and most of all, what did they do for entertainment?

As he was pumping the gas, a red-headed man came out of the station and nodded and said, "Howdy, and how might you be this fine evening sir?"

Brad looked at him and smiled and said, "Okay. I guess fine, I'm getting tired. Is there a motel or hotel somewhere close that I can spend the night?"



GEM

It was around 5:30 a.m. Saturday, April 16th, when Alex Corbin poured his first cup of coffee and sat down at the kitchen table to check his maps. Alex, a twenty-nine year old C.P.A. from Albany, was alone in a cabin in Spring Lake Park in upstate New York. He had been an avid hiker and rock climber since his days in college. Getting away on weekends to hike with friends (or in some cases as today, alone) was his favorite pastime. Being confined to an office was a good living but the numbers Alex liked concerned elevation and miles point-to-point on a map.

He had started planning this particular weekend excursion with the idea of having a hiking partner, Jack Miller, a fellow employee. Unfortunately, Jack was unable to make this trip due to a backlog of paperwork at his office and several appointments with clients. When Jack called to cancel on Wednesday evening, Alex had fully intended not to go. However, while at work on Friday morning, he changed his mind and notified Jack that he was going to take the hike alone. It was a twenty mile journey over some of the most beautiful, and somewhat rugged, terrain in the Adirondacks. He reassured Jack that he would eliminate the rock climb

midway through the hike and stick to the footpath. He and Jack both knew that taking on such a climb alone was dangerous.

Alex had packed his gear in his Chevy, S-10 pickup and headed north on the hundred mile drive at about 3:30 p.m. on Friday. He arrived at the State Park and checked into the cabin at around 6:00 p.m. after dinner at a quiet, roadside restaurant. Planning on an early wake up at 5:00 a.m., he settled into the cozy cabin and was asleep by 10:00 pm. It was about 6:00 a.m. the next morning when Alex finished checking his maps and backpack, and stepped out onto the porch in the dim morning light. His plans were to hike the ten miles up the Johnson Trail, along one side of Shadow Ridge, to a campsite and spend the night. He would return the following day, down the opposite side of the ridge on the Spring Lakes Path, then back to the cabin in time to pack and leave on the ride home Sunday. In his pack was a sleeping bag and enough provisions for the two-day hike. He also included a sweater and some long underwear. The mid-April nights could still be rather chilly in the mountains this time of year. He covered the backpack with a small canvas tarp he could use to erect a lean-to in the event of rain. With that, his camera and sheath knife he was ready. He locked the cabin door, backpack in tow, and stepped to the porch rail. Taking in a deep breath of the cool, crisp air, Alex raised his arms above his head and stretched, letting out a groan.

Alex was a tall man, about 6 foot 2, 190 pounds, blonde hair and blue eyes. He was in excellent physical condition, which he attributed to his hiking and jogging in the park near his home. The only physical problem he complained about was having to wear glasses since childhood. Up close, Alex could see quite well, but at a distance, without the aid of his glasses, life was somewhat of a blur.

He picked up his pack and slid both arms through the straps, buckled the waist belt and stepped off the porch. He was dressed in blue jeans, a plaid flannel shirt and a good pair of hiking boots. He pulled a faded old New York Yankees ball cap from his back pocket and slapped it on his head, then started up the path just above the cabin. He checked the time, then the pedometer strapped to his belt. The path led up the steep hill, and soon, the cabin and the blacktop park road were out of sight.

It was still very cool at that time of the morning but the steep incline soon stopped the chills he had been experiencing when he first stepped out onto the cabin porch. At the pace he had intended to keep, the light layer of clothing would be adequate. The three foot wide path was well worn by previous hikers. During the first hour of his trek, it was rocky and fairly steep at times. Around 7:30 a.m., the path seemed to level off before it continued as a winding hallway through a thick pine forest. At the other end of the pine and hemlock area, the path headed around and down a slight grade before revealing a shallow valley filled with wild cherry, crabapple and hickory.

Alex stopped at a small stream, just barely a trickle, that crossed the path then sat down on a boulder and removed his pack. It was not even 8:00 a.m., and he had hiked about three miles. He took a plastic squeeze bottle of water, one of three from his pack, and took a drink. He decided to remove his camera from its bag and snapped a few pictures while taking the break. The trees around him had just started to bud, unlike the trees at home that were now sporting a new, fresh crop of small leaves. The sun was above the horizon and the gentle breeze moving through the trees was beginning to feel a bit warmer. The heavy dew from the previous night had begun to drop from the surrounding branches, sounding almost like a gentle rain was falling about him. The

Believe

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