

Sean has a decision to make. After thirty years of marriage to Stephanie, he is at a point where he doesn't think he can go on. As he walks down a corridor to confront her, his mind takes him through thirty years of memories. He realizes he must first confront himself; when is a marriage worth giving up on?

The Longest Walk

By Kevin J. Ward

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The Longest Walk

KEVIN J. WARD

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Chapter One

The crowd was nearly suffocating. Sean wasn't sure if he was bothered more by the gentle pushing and shoving of the people or of the dreaded task he was about to undertake. He tried to convince himself this was not his fault, and in fact he was sure that it wasn't. At the same time, he knew it wasn't her fault either. It had to be somebody's fault, didn't it? Can you lose thirty years of a marriage without somebody being at fault?

He knew this day was coming for several weeks now. There was always a reason for putting off telling her, but in the back of his mind there was no doubt the only real reason was that he was a coward. He hadn't planned on dealing with it this evening, but when he started back down the long marble hallway and saw her at the far end, looking almost like a stranger, he suddenly knew now was the time.

It was strange when he saw her in the distance. There were so many people bustling about that he could only catch periodic glimpses of her, the woman he once loved. She stood in her new black evening gown, trying to look glamorous. There was a time, he thought, when she could have pulled it off, but those days were long gone. Now, she had gained some weight and just couldn't seem to find the right thing to do with her hair. It annoyed him, even angered him, that she no longer cared for her looks the way she did when she was young. True, he had gained a little weight himself, but he kept it under control, and he felt good about the way he looked.

He thought for a moment before attempting to penetrate the human wall before him. Was he moving on with his life, or leaving a part of it behind? So much had changed, and for the most part he hadn't even realized it until much too late. Sean couldn't help thinking a relationship was like planting a tree; so exciting when you first plant it, a sense of fulfillment as you nurture it, but then one day you have this large thing in the middle of your yard that you never really planned on. Sometimes you find it beautiful. Other times you just cut it down.

Thirty years. So much had taken place. Standing in the midst of this chaotic bustle of bodies, he found himself thinking back to that first night, the night they met, the night they "planted their tree". Surprisingly, or maybe not, it was a night very much like tonight.

Sean stood alone in the crowd, feeling awkward in his rented tuxedo. He hadn't wanted to come to this "celebration" in the first place. It was New Year's Eve, 1988, and at age twenty there were many other places he would rather be than with the bunch of old stuffed shirts that filled this party. But he had promised his parents he would attend, and he knew it was important to them. His father had recently received a promotion to Vice President of Marketing, and in this new role he got invited to these somewhat extravagant parties put on by the company for the executives and their families. He suspected his

parents felt as awkward as he did, but being invited wasn't just an honor, it was an obligation, and Sean knew that obligation included him.

Clentson Pharmaceuticals was a large corporation with eleven divisions scattered across the country and two international divisions located in Europe and South America. When a major event took place – and for Robert Eldridge, the CEO of Clentson, New Year's Eve was such an event – the executives from all the domestic divisions were invited. In all there were nearly one hundred people who were considered executive status, and when you included spouses and family, it became a sizeable group.

After quick introductions to some of the “big wigs”, Sean slipped away to sample some of the expensive drinks and hors d'oeuvres that seemed to be everywhere. If he couldn't be out with his friends, he might as well take advantage of this fabulous spread. Standing by a large table filled with more exotic food than he had ever seen before, his gaze drifted out across the enormous banquet room and the many different people bobbing about. He wasn't sure why, but his eyes kept coming back to one person on the far side of the room. Possibly because she was one of the few who, like him, was simply standing there, not engaged at all with what was going on around them. She was far enough away so he couldn't get a good look at her, but he could tell she was about his age. From this distance, he couldn't be sure, but he thought she might be attractive.

Suddenly, in an embarrassing flash, she looked up and caught him staring at her. Oh crap! he thought. She's probably someone important and I just made a fool of myself. That would sure make his father proud! He looked away quickly. There was enough distance between them so that it was possible she didn't really notice him. And after all, he wasn't staring *at* her. He was just staring in her general direction.

He turned away, but then took a quick peek back to see if she was still watching. He was more than a little relieved to see she was gone. Good, now just try and avoid her for the rest of the evening. He tried to take a step toward the bar and bumped right into someone standing just a foot away.

"Oh shit!" he blurted. "Er...ah...I mean, excuse me." He looked at the person and blinked with surprise. It was the young woman from across the room!

She stood without moving, a large smile on her face. "Don't worry about me," she laughed, "but you should be more careful when you're trying to look inconspicuous."

She had a long black dress, simple in design, but elegant. It clung softly to her body, and while the dress wasn't fancy, her obvious curves made it seem like something you would see at the Academy Awards.

"I wasn't trying to look inconspicuous," he began. "I was just..."

"Of course you were," she giggled. "I thought it was kind of cute. My name is Stephanie, by the way. Stephanie Taynor."

"Sean Cleary," replied Sean.

“A good Irish boy it seems,” she said. “I’ve heard that Irish boys can’t be trusted.”

She was so incredibly comfortable with herself and her environment that Sean wasn’t sure if he was feeling at ease or slightly intimidated. But he knew he was quickly getting to like this person. Her smile was infectious, and he found himself smiling back at her, saying nothing. In the few minutes he was with her, she went from cute and interesting to outright beautiful, and suddenly being with his friends was the furthest thing from his mind.

Thirty years, where did the time go? What happened to the smiling, confident young woman he had almost immediately fallen in love with?

The place he was at now, while having vague similarities to the banquet hall where he first met Stephanie, was much larger and even more opulent. And unlike the earlier setting, this was anything but a party room. They were in the Basilica of St. Mary, the largest Catholic Church in Minneapolis. It had a high arched roof with intricate wood carvings supported on either side by magnificent marble columns. On the far end there was a dome over the altar that was a combination of stained-glass mosaics, religious paintings and marble structures that could only be described as breathtaking. This was a beautiful building, and while it could certainly be a solemn place, tonight was not such an occasion.

It was New Year's Eve, 2019, thirty years to the night that he and Stephanie were married, and thirty-one years from the night they had first met. The church was hosting a prestigious fundraiser, an enormous you're-only-invited-if-you-know-somebody kind of fundraiser. Sean and Stephanie had made the list, but Sean wasn't quite sure why. They had been successful in life, and they had been generous with their charitable contributions, but they certainly were not on the level of most of the people present. This was essentially the Who's Who of the Twin Cities. Sean was happy to support the fundraiser, but he never was able to feel comfortable being with the truly rich, especially people who wanted everyone else to know they were wealthy.

The fundraiser was to help desperate families whose lives had been destroyed by a hurricane the previous spring in the Caribbean. Good, hard working people who suddenly found themselves and their children on the streets. Modern technology was once again proven powerless against the fierceness of Mother Nature, and it was unthinkable not to do something to support these deserving people. So, here he was, on this night, but his mind was not on the good they were doing as a group, but the harm he would soon be doing as a person.

The gala was nearing the end, and people were wandering everywhere like lost sheep. The small group that had planned and conducted the event, led by Dr. Randolph Warren, was mingling under the large dome on the opposite end of the

Basilica from the doors exiting to the street. Stephanie could tell Sean was getting frustrated and a bit anxious.

“Sean, I think it’s okay to leave. I’ll go grab our coats and you can go thank our hosts and say our goodbyes. I’ll meet you at the doors out front”.

“Fine,” Sean sighed. “I’ll only be a few minutes.” He put on as convincing a smile as he could muster and squeezed his way into the well-dressed mob under the dome. After several minutes of small talk with people he barely knew, he finally found his friend Dr. Warren and gave him a small hug. “Thanks for all your hard work on this, Randy. We helped a lot of people tonight. You should be very proud of what you all were able to accomplish.”

“Only through people like you and Stephanie,” Dr. Warren replied. “Thanks so much for joining us tonight!”

Sean quickly slipped away and stared down the seemingly endless corridor to Stephanie and the huge, fifteen-foot high front doors.

Chapter Two

It was New Year's Eve, and it was their anniversary, but Sean was certainly not in the mood to celebrate. He had business to attend to; when and where should he talk to Stephanie about his decision? That was the only thought on his mind when he started the long walk back to his wife.

No one seemed to be moving as he tried to gently, but firmly, push his way through. Everyone seemed oblivious to the fact that some people, like Sean, actually wanted to leave. Many of the guests were laughing and singing; others just making small chit chat, but mostly people were celebrating not only a new year but a fabulously successful event.

He decided that it might be easier to slide up the outer edge of the hallway.

As he attempted to slip by along the ornate wall, there was a sudden surge of bodies and he all but tumbled into a little would-be prayer nook. On normal days, this was a semi-secluded space for private meditation, but now it served as a temporary sanctuary from the masses. For a brief moment he felt his anger flare, but the feeling passed quickly, for once he was able to collect himself, he realized he was not alone.

Just a few feet away were two women, both who appeared to be in their mid-sixties. One of the women quickly turned her head to hide her face. It seemed that she was wiping her eyes, obviously not wanting to be on display in front of this stranger. The other woman stared at Sean, almost in anger as if he had

intentionally barged in on them. Once she had made her point, she turned back to her friend. It was clear that she was consoling the her friend.

Sean felt embarrassed. Obviously he had walked in on, or rather had been thrust in on, a very personal moment. His first instinct was to just force his way back into the crowd and leave these women alone, but at the same time, it also seemed like a tacky, even rude, thing to do. The situation was certainly a bit awkward, but he felt he needed to say something, even if only to apologize for his intrusion.

“I’m sorry for barging in,” he said in a voice that wasn’t much more than a whisper. “I didn’t mean to intrude.”

It was amazing, the effect of the crowd. Merely feet away were people packed in like sardines, but in this little nook the masses of people almost seemed like the structure of the church itself. They were physically close, almost close enough to touch, but emotionally the mass was so distant that the three people felt a sense of intimacy.

The first woman, the one that had obviously been crying, looked up at Sean and managed to force a smile. “Oh, that’s okay,” she sighed with obvious sadness. “I was just recalling with Barb that this is where I was married twenty-one years ago. It has always been such a special, happy place for me.”

The other woman, Barb, looked at Sean, this time with more understanding. “Natalie lost her husband almost a year ago to cancer. This is her first holiday season alone.”

Sean was taken aback, not knowing what to say. “I’m so sorry,” he stammered. “I...I...I wish I could...”

“Oh, it’s not for you to worry about,” smiled Natalie. “I’m fine. I was just reminiscing, and my emotions caught up with me. He was a good man, though. My Harry and I had something special. I’ll never feel any regrets. I just wish we could have had more time.”

More time, Sean thought. As you age, you realize just how precious time is. He recalled very clearly an episode in his life when he thought he had been cheated out of time.

The night was cold, very cold. As Sean lay in bed next to Stephanie, he could hear the structure of the house cracking, as is common when the temperature is -20° F. It was 2004 and he was thirty-six years old. They had been married exactly one year after their encounter at the New Year’s Eve party where they met. While a bit unorthodox, it seemed fitting to both of them that the best way to celebrate their union was to marry on New Year’s Eve, so on December 31, 1989, they became husband and wife. Now, after fifteen years, he felt their marriage was as strong as ever. At least he did until today.

They said nothing. He wanted to hold her, but he felt that would be too invasive. He wanted to console her, but what could you do to console someone who had been told only hours before that there was a tumor. It may be cancer, the doctor had said. “How serious is this?” Sean had asked. The doctor simply

looked down and slowly shook his head. “I’m sorry,” he sighed. “We just don’t know yet.” The doctor calmly and compassionately explained that there was still some testing to be done. It would take several days for the results. While there was hope, it did little to alleviate their fears on this cold, horrible night.

Sean knew this was not anyone’s fault. No one blamed him, certainly not Stephanie. There was no logical reason for him to feel responsible. But in his mind, he knew it was his job to protect her, to see that she lived a long and healthy life so their children would always have a mother. Technically he hadn’t failed. He didn’t cause the tumor. But he hadn’t succeeded either. Here she lay, possibly dying, and he didn’t even know if he should hold her, talk to her, or just leave her alone.

But he was wrong; someone did blame him. He blamed himself, not for the tumor, but for not knowing what to do about it. He needed to be strong, but instead he felt himself coming apart. He was not the man she needed, and on this frigidly cold night, he knew this to be true. But worse yet, he knew that she knew it also. He looked at her, tears forming in his eyes. Is this the end? Oh my God, he thought, could this be the end? I have to be strong, for Stephanie, and for the children. But there was no strength. There was only fear, and there was guilt.

Sean looked at the woman, at Natalie. Yes, she was sad, but she also seemed to have a sense of strength and peace. He found

himself admiring her, even envying her. But that was crazy. How could you envy someone who lost the love of her life? He had come close, much too close. With Stephanie, they had caught the tumor in time, and God knows Stephanie was a fighter. The tumor was successfully removed, the cancer was contained, and they continued to live their lives normally. Well, maybe not normally, for during that cold winter of 2004, Sean learned things about himself that he wished he could have kept buried.

“I wish I could say something that might help,” Sean said with complete sincerity, “but I’m not going to pretend I know what it’s like to lose someone so close. If it makes a difference, I can tell that what you had was special, and I know many people never get the chance to experience that.”

“You are quite right,” said Natalie, “and I will never take what we had for granted. Thank you for your kind words.”

Sean looked down the hallway, knowing it was time to make his exit. Far up ahead he caught another glimpse of Stephanie. She stood patiently waiting for him, pulling a strand of hair behind her ear. It was remarkable how dark her hair remained over the years. Sean never really knew what color it was. To him it was black, but she called it brunette. What was brunette anyway? Almost black? He and Stephanie used to laugh about what color her hair actually was. Whatever color, it hadn’t changed in over thirty years.

Suddenly it occurred to him that Stephanie’s hair was different; not dramatically, but the style had clearly changed

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since...since when? He was a bit embarrassed that he couldn't remember when it changed. Not that it mattered, but still he was surprised he hadn't noticed. As images of her popped in and out of view, he thought about how life would have been had things turned out differently fifteen years ago. Stephanie had been lucky, they had all been lucky. But to what end? She was different after that experience. But, if he was honest with himself, so was he.

Chapter Three

Sean slipped into the flow of people, grateful to escape the awkward situation he had found himself in. He moved with a bit more urgency, wanting to get into an open space. How would he tell Stephanie what he was going to do? He wasn't sure, but he decided he didn't want to do it here, and definitely not in the car. She would undoubtedly want to get away; lock herself in the bedroom, or go to her favorite chair, the one she used as her sanctuary from the world's problems. To give her this news in the car would be unfair. He thought he would tell her as soon as they got home, before she had time to crawl into bed. Then he would simply leave and give her some time to herself. That would be best for both of them.

The stream of people hit another congested point. Sean was becoming impatient, so once again he attempted to skirt up the edge of the wall. "What the hell!" he exclaimed, a bit louder than he intended. Just ahead he could see something that he found not only frustrating, but even offensive. While trapped in this human traffic jam he observed two people, a couple, and not all that young, in a much too passionate embrace for this setting. They were pressed together against the wall, and they were giggling at being confined by this human mass. Giggling at the same thing that was infuriating Sean. And worst of all, between giggles they would kiss and snuggle, like teenagers on prom night. And these were not teenagers; they were clearly over forty years old!

Somewhere along the way, he wasn't sure exactly when, Sean developed a strong distaste for this kind of public display of affection, especially for "mature" people. This was yet another point that had added to the rift between him and Stephanie.

On that first night, the night Sean and Stephanie met, and the night they fell in love, they continued to exchange flirtatious bantering throughout the evening. Sean was cautious, slightly intimidated, and Stephanie loved knowing that she made Sean a bit nervous. Her playful nature and confident smile made her seem bigger than life. Sean soon felt their flirtations were becoming more than just bantering.

"Let's step outside for some air," he suggested to Stephanie.

"Are you crazy? It's freezing out there!"

He blushed, knowing she was right, and knowing why he really wanted to go out. There was no one else outside, and he was wanting just a few moments alone with her. She naturally saw through his awkward attempt at being more intimate.

"Well, I was just feeling a little stuffy," he stammered.

"I'm not," Stephanie said, almost laughing.

What was she thinking, Sean thought? Was she laughing at him, making fun of him, or was she just enjoying herself? She had a mischievous look on her face that caused him to feel unsettled. They were standing off to the side of the party, near one of the many food tables. No one was paying any attention to

them, but still, they were in plain sight of anyone who was looking.

Sean was startled as Stephanie coolly reached over and grabbed his hand. She stepped in front of him, close enough so their bodies were touching. She looked up at him with a sweet but tantalizing smile, and said, “You can kiss me right now if you would like”.

Sean’s eyes popped wide open. “Uh, well, I didn’t want to...”

“Or you don’t have to,” she said, an over-animated pout expression on her face.

“Stephanie,” he whispered, looking around as if he were doing something illegal and didn’t want to get caught, “I wasn’t going to...” Her pout turned into a smile. Not her big infectious smile, but just a small hint of her mouth turning up. Oh, he wanted to kiss her alright. But here? Everyone could see them. His parents were probably watching.

His instincts were to back away, to be safe. But something was happening that was new for him. Everything beyond her began to blur until there was only one thing, her face, that seemed to be in focus. She was beautiful. More than her looks, it was her eyes, her dark, soft but piercing eyes, and what he could see in her through them. He had always heard that the eyes were the window to the soul, but he never really knew what that meant. Now, for the first time in his life, he knew exactly what it meant. Her beauty emanated from somewhere

within her, and it captivated him. It was magical, and he couldn't help but be swept away by this intoxicating woman.

He leaned into her and gave her a small, awkward peck on her lips. She stood close, obviously wanting another. The emotional barriers finally broke, and Sean pulled her body tight to his and kissed her firmly. Then again. She didn't seem to have any inhibitions at all about where they were. Then they separated. She opened her eyes, looked at Sean, smiled again, and said, "Well, speaking for myself, I thought that was worth a little risk."

Sean smiled too, amazed by his own lack of inhibition. "Yes," he said, "I fully agree."

Youth seems to have privileges that are not bestowed upon the older generation, even if that "older generation" is only slightly more aged. The exhilaration Sean felt with his and Stephanie's first kiss never left his memory, but he never fully accepted that such public display of affection was appropriate for "adults".

The year was 1998, they had been married for nine years, and Sean was thirty-one years old. Sean and Stephanie had not seen each other for two weeks. She had attended the wedding of an old college friend who now lived in New York City, and she decided to take some additional time to visit. It was the longest time they had been apart since they were married. Stephanie would have liked Sean to accompany her, and Sean had

seriously considered going, but it was a busy time at work (when wasn't it?) and he didn't want to ask his parents to take the kids for two whole weeks, so he decided to remain home.

David was five and Shannon was two, and they could be a handful. On this day in early June, the day Stephanie returned from her trip, Sean had the kids in the park near their home. Stephanie would be picked up at the airport by her mother and brought to the park to meet them. The kids were ecstatic, as was Sean.

Sean saw the familiar car round the corner, Stephanie's mother Ruth at the wheel, and come to a stop alongside the curb.

"Hey kids!" he shouted, "look who's here!"

"Mommy, mommy," they screamed in unison, and ran to meet her. The door opened and Stephanie rushed out to meet them. She knelt down and pulled both of them into her arms, hugging them closely. It was a wonderful sight.

Sean walked up slowly after them, enjoying what he was observing. Stephanie put the kids down and looked at Sean. "Come here, you!" she called out, and rushed to Sean. She threw her arms around his neck and attempted to give him a kiss. Somewhat startled, Sean quickly pulled his head back, his eyes scanning the surrounding area. He was a young professional, and while he certainly did not consider himself to be prudish, he was keenly aware of the perceptions he created when in public. You never knew who would be watching, so it was important to always conduct yourself appropriately.

“Slow down, honey,” he said, feeling a bit embarrassed.

“Hey, didn’t you miss me?” she laughed, becoming just a bit confused.

“You know I did. I missed you terribly. But we’re in the park.”

“Oh, don’t be so stuffy,” she giggled, and tried to kiss him again.

“Stephanie, don’t,” he persisted, feeling almost panicked.

“Come on, this is just a park,” she said, and made one more attempt.

“I said no!” he shouted. “For God’s sake, we’ll be home in a few minutes!”

Stephanie’s face went sullen. She was angry, but more than that, she was hurt. “Never mind,” she said, and turned away. David and Shannon stood by silently, looking more confused than she felt. She didn’t want to ruin this for them.

“Come on, kids,” she said with a smile that could only fool a young child. “Let’s go home and get some ice cream!”

The kids cheered as they went with Stephanie and her mother to the car, leaving Sean alone in the park. What’s wrong with her, he thought to himself. No matter. He would meet them at home and things would be fine.

Sean watched the couple continue their giggling and kissing in the middle of the large crowd. It seemed wrong to him, but at the same time he envied the look in both of their eyes. He

moved passed them, for a moment being pushed into them. They didn't seem to care at all, which only infuriated Sean more. He was annoyed by this behavior, but...he was also feeling something else. Could it be envy? Did part of him admire this happy couple? Absolutely not! They were being completely irresponsible!

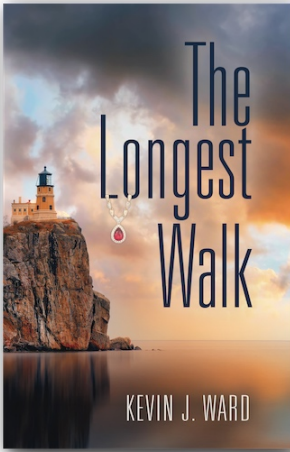
Up ahead, not as far as before, he saw Stephanie. She was laughing now, apparently talking to someone he couldn't quite make out. He hadn't seen a genuine laugh from her for a long time. Why could she laugh with someone else but not with him? He was annoyed, maybe even a bit angry. Maybe, just maybe, even a bit jealous. He had been able to make her laugh once. Or had he? She had certainly laughed more when they were younger; it was her laugh and her smile that first attracted him to her. But that laugh was not something he gave her; it was a part of her that she shared with him. No, he had not really made her laugh; she did that on her own.

Sean quickly put this stupid line of reasoning out of his head, but not before one disturbing thought forced its way to the surface. Maybe he had not been the one to make her laugh, but could it be possible that he was the one who made her stop laughing?

I hope you enjoyed this story and, for those of you who have been in a relationship for many years, felt at least a little romance rejuvenated. For new writers such as myself, feedback and visibility are critical to my work. If you are so inclined, please visit my website at **kevin-j-ward.com**. Maybe even choose to “Follow Me”. I would greatly appreciate it!

Also by Kevin J. Ward:

The Seduction of Paradise



Sean has a decision to make. After thirty years of marriage to Stephanie, he is at a point where he doesn't think he can go on. As he walks down a corridor to confront her, his mind takes him through thirty years of memories. He realizes he must first confront himself; when is a marriage worth giving up on?

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