

Chapter 1

The outside temperature in Las Vegas, Nevada was ninety-five degrees Fahrenheit, but in the casino where the temperature was always comfortable, Fred Davidson was sweating. The house had won the last several games, and the other two players had moved on. It was just Fred and Steve, the dealer.

Fred hunched over the blackjack table as Steve dealt the next hand. Fred's first card was a seven, and his second card a four. It was a promising combination, and the corner of Fred's mouth twitched with a hint of a smile. It was about time that his luck turned. He'd been playing for an hour, and unlike the previous day, the cards had not been in his favour. He bet his last chip and asked for another card, hoping for a face card or a ten. Damn, it was a six. Fred could only hope that seventeen would be enough.

Steve's first card was the seven of diamonds. Fred's eyes were fixed on Steve's hand as he took his next card. Shit! It was the ace of hearts. Fred exhaled, and his chin dropped to his chest.

"House pays nineteen – sorry," Steve said as he took the last of Fred's chips.



As Fred conceded defeat with a shrug, Steve remembered the woman in the black dress. He'd noticed her loitering near his table earlier that day. She'd looked uncomfortable in the casino,

and had waited until there were no players at his table before she approached. Her speech was formal, her accent English and she was direct.

"We are arranging a surprise for an elderly colleague. This is his picture," she'd said, showing Steve a five by seven inch photograph.

"Yeah, I know Fred. He's played this table a few times in the last few days. He had a good day yesterday."

"Yes, and I think that he will be back later today. When he returns, could you please give him this card?" Steve glanced at the card but didn't take it.

"I'm not sure about this, it's against the rules." A fifty-dollar bill had resolved the impasse, and she coached Steve about what to tell Fred.

As Fred started walking away, Steve said,

"Hey, Fred, you did win something." Steve handed him the card with a single word in multiple colours; "KALEIDOSCOPE,"

"What is this?" Fred said, puzzled.

"There's a machine over in the far corner. This card will give you a free play. You're guaranteed to win something, but it's only good for the next couple of hours," Steve said.

"Yeah, it's probably a stuffed animal or some other piece of crap. Just what I need." He stuck the card in his pocket, and Steve watched as he trudged away. Fred was a tall man, but age had rounded his shoulders.



Fred trudged past the ranks of gaming machines. Popular themes and colourful displays enticed hopeful players. Bells rang and lights flashed to advertise occasional winners, while scantily clad ladies plied players with drinks, keeping hopes high and wallets open.

Fred paused by the bronze statue of the couple in the middle

of the casino. They seemed eerily real, as if frozen in time, and they seemed somehow familiar, but the connection eluded him. Their faces radiated the joy of a big win. Money stuck out of every pocket, and bills even hung from under the man's hat. They inspired hope and perpetuated the myth. Fred cursed the iconic couple, the patron saints of the casino, and moved on.

The decline of Fred's fortunes had begun years earlier. He'd done well when he sold his music business, but a divorce and a separation took deep bites. Despite those setbacks, he'd managed his remaining investments well. He was on his way to financial recovery – and then the stock market crashed. He'd never forget the despair he'd felt on that day. Fred mortgaged his home to purchase revenue properties, but a few years later, the real estate market collapsed. Factories were closing and relocating to Asian counties where labour was cheap and regulations were non-existent. He left town before creditors took his car. Fred had come to Las Vegas in desperation, and now he'd lost his last few hundred dollars. He was almost oblivious to the lights, noise, and people around him. He had no idea what to do. He was broke with nowhere to go.

His wandering eventually brought him to a corner of the casino where an unusual machine caught his attention. A montage of brilliant colours formed a circular pattern that became a vortex. The colours swirled to the center, like water going down a drain, and when the last of them disappeared, the word "KALEIDOSCOPE" formed in the middle of the screen, stayed for a few seconds, and the pattern repeated. Fred watched the display for a minute or so, and then he remembered the card and pulled it out of his pocket. Steve said that it was good for a free play. Fred put the card in the slot, but he didn't have high expectations. He hadn't eaten all day. Maybe he'd win a ticket to the buffet. A flashing green button appeared in the middle of the screen. Fred touched it. There was a brief swirl of colours, and then a message appeared.

“Congratulations!

You’ve won a trip.

Please wait here. Your chauffeur will arrive shortly.”

The message remained for a few seconds, and then the words dissolved and the colour show resumed. There was something captivating about it, and Fred was still watching when a voice startled him.

“Hello, Fred. I’m Eddie, your chauffeur. Are you ready to go on your trip?” Fred looked up to see a handsome man in a uniform. He had a friendly smile on his deeply tanned face, and he was in his early thirties. He looked the part, but Fred was suspicious. Steve had given him a free card, he’d won a free trip, and now a chauffeur shows up? – it was too easy. Fred suspected a scam and said,

“You’re wasting your time with me. I’m broke – don’t even have bus fare.”

“No problem, Fred. This trip won’t cost you a cent,” Eddie replied, his voice reassuring.

“Can I take cash instead of the trip?”

“I am sorry, Fred, but the trip is the only prize.” Eddie sounded sympathetic, but Fred still wasn’t convinced.

“If this one of those time-share deals where they take you out and try and sell you a piece of desert a hundred miles from the nearest water tap, I’m not interested.” Eddie laughed and shook his head,

“It’s not a time-share, Fred. We’re not selling anything and the trip won’t cost you a cent. It’s an all-inclusive deal. If you’ll just come to the limousine with me, Lisa will explain everything. After that, if you choose not to take the trip, you can leave.” *If this is a scam, Eddie is playing it very well*, Fred thought.

“I’m going in a limousine?” Fred questioned.

“That’s right – a special white limousine. What do you have to lose?” Fred watched Eddie closely. He seemed sincere, and he was right. He had nothing to lose, and the thought of riding in

a limousine was enticing. Maybe it would have a bar and snacks. He could use a good single malt scotch. *This is getting better all the time, Fred thought.*

“Sure, why not?”

Eddie led him out of the casino to a white limousine parked a short distance away. Fred had never seen anything like it. The finish was flawless, and so highly polished that it looked like milk glass. Eddie opened the rear door and Fred stepped into a luxurious private domain. He sank back into the exquisite comfort of the soft white leather seat. The partition separating the passenger and driver compartments was a screen radiating the same colour patterns as the machine in the casino. He couldn't help relaxing, as he watched the swirling vortex, and his troubles seemed far away. A voice interrupted his peaceful interlude.

“Hello, Fred.”

“Uh... hello?” He looked around in surprise. It sounded like she was sitting next to him, but he was alone.

“My name is Lisa. Your prize is that you can travel back in time to three dates and places in your past.” Fred was silent for several seconds, and then said,

“Did I hear you right? Did you just tell me that I can travel back in time?”

“That's right, Fred, but it's a one-time offer.” She sounded serious.

“Who are you – where are you?” Fred said.

“I just make the offer, Fred. If you choose to accept, Eddie will take you back.”

“No offence to Eddie, but I'd rather go back in time with you, Lisa.” Her voice had a sensual quality, enhanced by her accent.

“I am sorry Fred, but that is not possible,” she said, attempting to curtail further discussion. “You must decide now. Do you want to visit your past, or shall we part company here?”

Fred was enjoying the comfort of the seat and was in no rush to leave.

“Could we just drive around so I can think about it? This is a big decision – and I could use a drink.”

“I am sorry, but you need to decide now.” Fred was silent. After several seconds, Lisa said, “All right then, Fred. Eddie will come around and open the door for you.” Eddie opened his door to step out, and Fred saw that he couldn’t stall any longer. He could easily think of three choices he’d made in life that he’d like to have back. Why not play along and see what would happen? He had nothing to lose.

“Okay, okay, I’ll accept the prize – I’ll take the trip.”

“Good luck then, Fred,” Lisa said.

Fred sat back and chuckled. He couldn’t afford a coffee, and here he was in a luxury limousine, but he didn’t believe that he was about to re-visit his past. *Time-travel was just science fiction. “Back to the Future” was a favorite movie, but this limo was no DeLorean converted to a time machine by an oddball professor. Whatever this scheme was, someone had gone to a lot of trouble to set it up, and he was going somewhere. He had no pressing business so he might as well enjoy the ride, but it must be some kind of scam. Las Vegas was a factory designed to separate people from their money, but the joke would be on them when they finally realized that he was broke.*

“Where do you want to go first, Fred?” Eddie said.

“The date is May 23, 1950, 10:00 pm.” The address was Fred’s university house and it was the night of their graduation party.

This will be interesting, Fred thought. He would soon learn what their game was. He relaxed in the exquisite comfort of the limo, waiting to see what would happen. The colour show came on the screen. He tried not to look at it, but the vortex drew him in.