



Eschaton

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Eschaton

Noun /'eskə.tən/ Theology

The final event in the divine plan; the end of the world. From the Greek, *eschaton*, “last”. The term denotes the end of history when God will act decisively to establish the divine rule of justice and peace throughout the created order. It represents the full realization of the Kingdom of God.

~ An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church

ἔσχατον

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Introduction: Three Giants

“If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.”

Sir Isaac Newton

Giant 1.

This book is dedicated to my longtime literary muse, C.S. Lewis, who planted a seed in my imagination that took forty years to take root and blossom into this manuscript.

God will invade. But I wonder whether people who ask God to interfere openly and directly in our world quite realize what it will be like when He does. When that happens, it is the end of the world. When the author walks onto the stage, the play is over.

God is going to invade, all right, but what is the good of saying you are on His side then, when you see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream and something else—something it never entered your head to conceive—comes crashing in, something so beautiful to some of us and so terrible to others that none of us will have any choice left? For this time, it will be God without disguise, something so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror into every creature.

It will be too late then to choose your side. There is no use saying you choose to lie down when it has become impossible to stand up. That will not be the time for choosing; it will be the time when we discover which side we really have chosen, whether we realized it before or not. Now, today, this moment, is our chance to choose the right side. God is holding back to give us that chance. It will not last forever. We must take it or leave it.

Mere Christianity. C.S. Lewis. New York: Macmillan, 1952: 66.

Giant 2.

I owe a debt of gratitude to the scientist and theologian, Sir John Polkinghorne, whose eschatological insight gave wings to this work of speculative fiction.

We may summarize a viable approach to eschatological expectations in terms of four propositions:

1. If the universe is a creation, it must make sense everlastingly, and so ultimately it must be redeemed from transience and decay.
2. If human beings are creatures loved by their Creator, they must have a destiny beyond their deaths. Every generation must participate equally in that destiny, in which it receives the healing of its hurts and the restoration of its integrity, thereby participating for itself in the ultimate fulfillment of the divine purpose.
3. Insofar as present human imagination can articulate eschatological expectation; it has to do so within the tension between continuity and discontinuity. There must be sufficient continuity to ensure that individuals truly share in the life to come as their resurrected selves and not as new beings simply given the old names. There must be sufficient discontinuity to ensure that the life to come is free from the suffering and mortality of the old creation.
4. The only ground for such a hope lies in the steadfast love and faithfulness of God that is testified to by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The God of Hope and the End of the World. John Polkinghorne. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002: 148-149.

Giant 3.

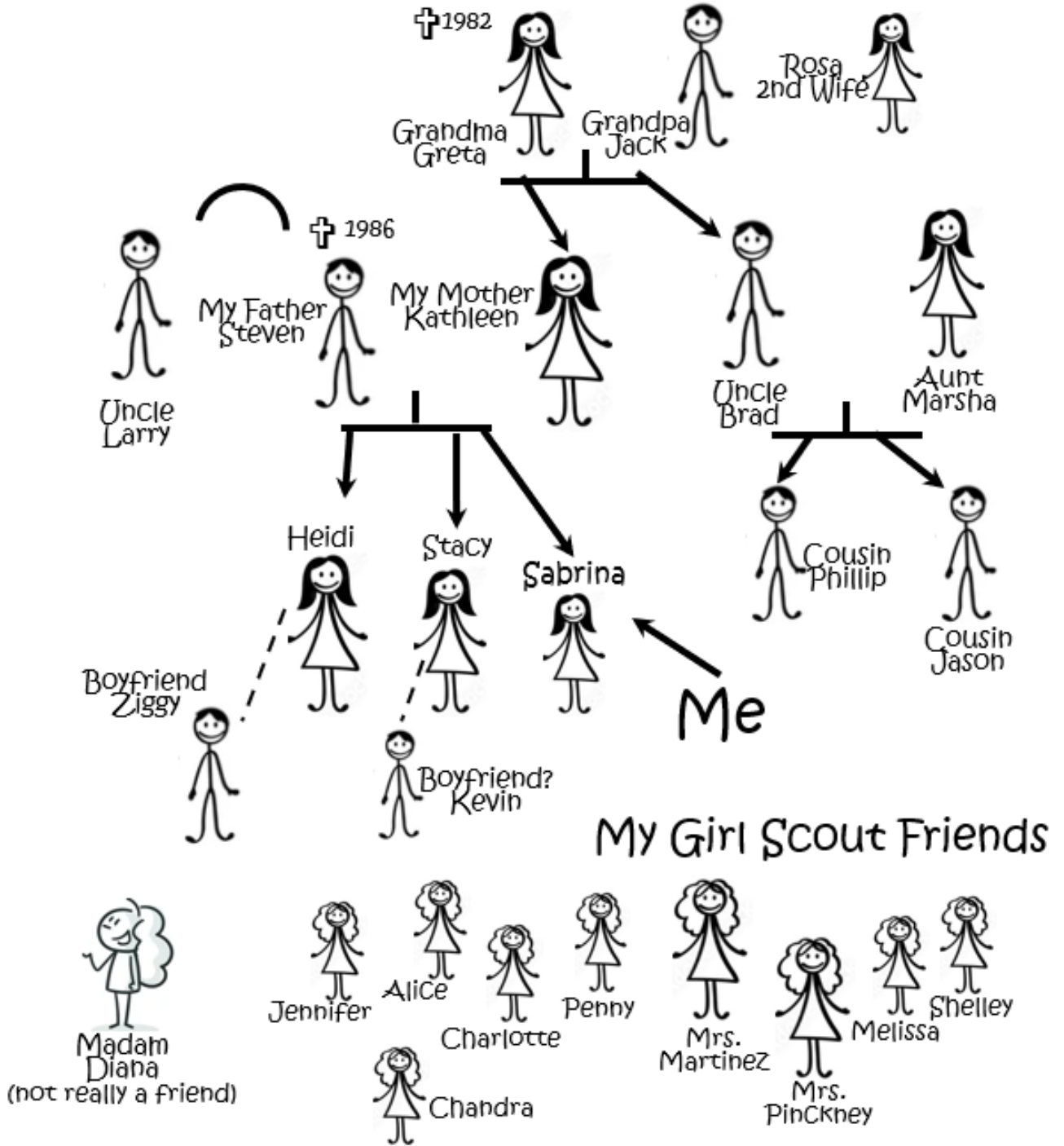
The consummation of history is built upon a vision written by Saint John the Revelator around the year ninety Anno Domini:

Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang, "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!"

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, forever and ever!" The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshiped.

Revelation 5:11-14, NIV

Sabrina's School Project in 1988 for 5th Grade



Chapter 1

Pioneer Cemetery



Late on a Monday afternoon, Stacy Adams ambled down a trash-strewn sidewalk. She trudged under a rumbling overpass, plopped her bookbag against a utility pole, and peered through the wrought-iron bars of old Pioneer Cemetery.

Tucked into a nook of Interstate 80, the single acre of burial ground appeared frozen in time, preserved in a state of arrested decay. Several granite monuments lay tilted, others disjointed or toppled. Knee-high metal fencing compassed the markers of long-interred families, their black-painted ornamentation now degrading into rust.

Stacy knew the oldest headstone in Pioneer Cemetery showed a death date of 1854, but the ones facing Hesperian Boulevard dated mostly from the 1880s. She recognized some of the big-shot names like *Lewelling* and *Meeks* since local streets were named in their honor.

Once important people, she mused, but now moldering like all the rest. She once learned there was a pauper field on the far lot where indigents were buried without ceremony. She brooded. *Death is truly the great equalizer of us all.*

Stacy fixed her eyes on the nearest limestone slab which faced the busy highway. Time and weather had blackened the inscription, but a stone relief was still discernible. The carving depicted a Victorian woman, kneeling in sorrow, palm of one hand propping a weary head. “So sad,” she murmured. “I wonder who she was.” The melancholy image burrowed deep into her soul.

That particular Monday was October 31, 1988, and Stacy Adams was walking home from San Lorenzo High School.

As she released her fingers from the iron bars, the fifteen-year-old pondered the derelict graveyard. *I don’t get it. Why do some of my classmates dress up as Halloween skeletons?* She glanced back at a sunken gravesite and shuddered. *The day will come when they’ll display their rib bones without need of a cheap costume.*

Stacy then thought of her father. He was resting in a cemetery too, not in this one but at *Chapel of the Chimes*. His gravestone read: *Steven Adams 1947-1986*. She remembered asking him on a previous Halloween why ghosts and ghouls were such spooky figures. As she walked to the stop sign, she reconstructed his response.

“Human beings are what’s called a *conditional unity* composed of a body and a soul. That’s how you and I regard each other in everyday interaction. When I look at you,

Stacy, I see your material body, but I perceive an immaterial soul animating your arms and legs. However, when the unity breaks down at death, the bond between body and soul dissolves, and each separated part becomes uncanny. A walking soulless body is seen as a ghoul or zombie, while a visible bodyless soul is regarded as a ghost or specter. Such half-people become otherworldly.”

Stacy then stepped to the corner of Usher and College Streets, recalling her freshman civics class. She had learned this area was termed *Pioneer Square* because the original settlement sprang from that city block.

A local historian had explained to her freshman class, “When prospectors first discovered California gold in 1849, successful miners built mansions in San Francisco. Those not so successful squatted here in the East Bay. On this particular mud flat, near San Lorenzo Creek, pioneers built a grammar school in 1865, enclosed the cemetery in 1870, and erected the Centennial Community Church in 1876.”

Stacy recalled interrupting the docent, “This old church is where my father is the minister.” She backtracked with embarrassment. “That is, at least until he died last year.”

After a minute of gloomy reminiscing, Stacy proceeded through the church parking lot and then creaked open a side door to the parsonage. Her mom wasn’t home yet, but her little sister sprawled on the sofa, thumbing through an Archie comic book.

Sabrina was oblivious to her elder’s approach.

“Aren’t you supposed to be doing homework?” Stacy chided.

“Right! I was just about to start,” the ten-year-old replied with a giggle.

Stacy then inquired, “So, Sabrina, are you doing any trick-or-treating this evening?”

“No, I’ll just pass out candy. I helped Mom with that harvest festival on Saturday. That’s enough for me. Anyway, I’m too old for a princess outfit, and you know I’m not allowed to dress up like a zombie or witch.” She mimicked her mom’s voice. “Such a costume doesn’t bring glory to God.”

The doorbell buzzed, and Sabrina raced for the bucket of treats. She plunked a Tootsie Roll into each of three open bags.

After a few minutes, Kathleen Adams flung open the door. The schoolteacher mother was tall and lean with a care-worn face. “Sorry, girls,” she puffed. “The classroom was crazy today. Plus, I had to stop off at Lucky’s to pick up dinner. How does spaghetti sound? Hey, I also have this bag full of treats left over from my pumpkin carving contest. I’m sure glad Halloween comes just once a year.”

A dozen kids and a few teenagers rang the parsonage doorbell over the next few hours. At nine o'clock Kate pulled in the pumpkins and turned off the porch light. She noticed the tree across the street was now being regaled with streamers of toilet paper. *Isn't that the principal's son?* She chuckled to herself.

The mom permitted an hour of TV time, then asked the two girls to turn off their room lights at ten.

Stacy used those sixty minutes to update her journal. "Sometimes I feel like a misfit," she confessed. "In PE, I got measured today and turned out to be five foot eight and one hundred twenty pounds. A shrimpy boy peeking at the scales picked on me, 'How's the weather up there?' I can't help it if I'm tall and skinny. I guess I take after my mom; *that's the Nordic genes*, she says.

"And Sandy, who sits next to me in history class, calls me *spring-butt* because I stand up to answer all of Mr. Ericson's questions. Well, no one else seems to know the answers. Maybe I'll just have to act stupid like her.

"And today was Halloween. Do you know what that mean Wendy said? 'Oh, you're dressing up like a hobo today. How sweet.' What a schmuck! I like my cozy jeans and flannel shirt.

"On my walk home, I put my backpack down for a while and looked into the old cemetery. I thought about Dad. The place was so peaceful. No one there has troubles. Maybe that's where I belong."

She flipped off the desk lamp and drifted into a profound sleep.

Chapter 2

Halloween Dream



Was it gastric indigestion caused by a spaghetti-Tootsie Roll dinner? Or maybe it was the melancholy nature of the sorrowful gravestone. Or could it have been a true inbreaking from the spiritual realm beyond? For whatever reason, Stacy experienced a nighttime of vivid dreaming. The series of thoughts, images, and emotions did not reset at brief awakenings but instead persisted from episode to episode: first pleasant, then frightening, next bizarre, and finally mysterious.

The night visions began in Germany, where she had once visited her grandparents. Her mom, dad, and sisters were casually strolling along the Berlin Wall, snapping pictures of the elaborate graffiti. She stooped her head and peeped through a portal in the concrete barrier. Suddenly she felt herself being dragged by her long braids into the Eastern zone. She couldn't find her way back to her family and panicked. She sprinted for miles, stepping above the clouds.

Back on the ground, Stacy discovered she had entered Dachau concentration camp. She didn't want to pass through the spooky gates. She heard her mom insist she was too young for such horror but felt a yank on her arm as her grandfather pulled her into the death camp.

She stared at a terrible photo of stacked corpses that squirmed at a touch of her finger. She looked out a window to see bulldozers pushing dead bodies into a gigantic bonfire. She spotted a Halloween table festooned with orange and black bunting, heaped high with body parts. Leaping up, one shriveled corpse winked an eye socket at her. A second zombie-like creature grinned with rotted teeth. They both sniggered and lurched forward as she retreated in fright. She screamed with all her might but emitted no sound.

She now stood at her dad's funeral, not in the chapel, but at the graveside. As pallbearers lowered the casket into the pit, she glanced to the side to see her mother and sisters weeping. There was Grampa Jack with Rosa. She recognized her uncles, aunts, and cousins. Everyone appeared so sad, except for the death-camp corpses, which now began to dance. Stacy shot up in bed, realized she was dreaming, and returned her head to the comfort of her pillow.

Her perspective melted into the recent Halloween party that was held on her school's basketball court. She saw several of her high school buddies costumed as witches, grim reapers, and skeletons. She blinked and now realized they were not wearing

costumes at all, but exposed bones revealed their true cadaverous natures. She shrieked, “What am I doing here?” She looked at her own bony arm. “Is this just a costume, or have I become a corpse like them?” Stacy clutched her sleeping wrist bone, and the pressure on her waking wrist roused her from slumber, but only for a moment.

Now she felt her fingers grasp the cold bars of Pioneer Cemetery. A gust of wind whisked shriveled leaves past the gravestones. Once more Stacy’s eyes were fixed upon the woman carved in stone. At first observation, the image lay motionless, but slowly the still stone began to animate as in a flickering motion picture. The antique figure stood erect and gazed through the bars and stared directly into the eyes of Stacy.

The apparition called out to her, but her words sounded archaic, in a kind of sing-song dialect. “Why are you starin’ at me for? Oh dearie, I’m sorry. Ye can’t read my name, can ye? Well, just to let you know, I’m Mary Dickson, born in Belfast, Ireland, in 1830 and died in this God-forsaken hole in 1878.” She pointed to her left. “Look yonder. See. That’s my new-built church over there.”

The phantom continued to speak in her Irish lilt but was soon drowned out by a chattering cadaver that had shambled from a nearby pit. The dreamer awoke, her room awash in sunlight.

Stacy sprang up in bed, her legs dangling over the sideboards. She knew if she did not immediately recite the dream in words, the night visions would vanish from memory. “How odd it is,” she considered, “my actual dreams will dissolve, but not the words that my ears hear about the dreams.”

She grabbed her journal and wrote down three words: *Mary-Ireland-1878*. She then went on with her school day, retaining the queer apprehension of a perplexing dream.

After school, she put to paper her dream sequence. Once vivid details had already faded. Yet she did remember the casualness with which she had observed the chattering corpses as if such happenings were a common occurrence. She wrote in her journal, “The most remarkable thing about a dream is that the most remarkable thing within a dream does not stand out as remarkable at all.”



After school on Wednesday, Stacy paused again at the Victorian tombstone. Once more, she strained to read the obscure inscription situated below the grieving woman. Maybe she could discern the capital letters of *BORN* and *DIED*, but certainly nothing beyond that.

At the midweek church service, Stacy sat in the front pew between her mom and little sister. Sabrina took the stubby pencil located with the offering envelope and began

doodling faces on the church bulletin. *Not like me at all*, she thought. *Short and round and full of laughter, kind of like Dad*. Her dimples show whenever she smiles, so they never disappear.

Pastor Mike was teaching from a passage about sheep and wolves. *Not as good as Dad*, she spoke to herself. However, she knew enough to be grateful to the pastor and deacons. After all, they had granted the Adams family permission to remain in the parsonage even after her father had passed away. True, the property was a bit shabby, but her mom said the rent was reasonable.

Her mind wandered to Heidi. Her older sister used to sit with them in this front pew, but she had turned sour after her dad's death. Last year Heidi told her mom she could not believe in a God who would let her father suffer with AIDS. "That kind of god is not for me," she argued.

At nineteen years old, Heidi moved out of the parsonage to move in with her piano-man boyfriend, Zygmund Kaminski. Her mom liked the Polish émigré well enough but not the fact—as she told Stacy—they were *shacking up*.



On Thursday morning, during photography club, Stacy sought out Kevin Schwartz. He was probably the smartest kid in tenth grade, a bit of a nerd, but she knew the guy was sweet on her.

"Hey, Kevin. I need your help with something."

She hadn't really spoken with him before, and as everyone knew, blonde Stacy Adams was the hottest babe around. Kevin put down his Nikon camera, swept back his unkempt hair, and struggled to achieve nonchalance. "Sure, Stacy. How can I help you?"

After school, Kevin happily accompanied Stacy strolling down Hesperian Boulevard. They passed beneath Interstate 80 and stopped at the crumbling graveyard. Kevin peered through the perimeter fence, scrutinized the limestone marker, and admitted he could not decipher a single word.

"However," he said, raising an index finger for emphasis, "let's try this." With his high-quality lens, Kevin snapped several photos of the tombstone from different angles. "Let me talk with Mister Ericson. Maybe he can help us. I'll tell him it's for a school project."

And so, the photo club sponsor did provide assistance. He instructed Kevin on how to adjust the exposure and contrast of the negative and then crop and enlarge the written portion. The lines became intelligible:

In Memory of Mary A. Dickson
Wife of James Dickson
BORN in Belfast, Ireland
Sept 10, 1830
DIED Jan 2, 1878
Aged 47 years

On Friday after school, Kevin approached Stacy in the hallway. He showed her two enlarged photos, one a positive wide angle shot, the other a close up negative. On the negative print, Kevin had traced over the letters with a yellow highlighter.

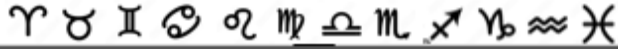
Stacy examined the photos, scrunched her face, then pulled her journal from her JanSport backpack. She read aloud the three words she had scribbled on the previous Saturday: *Mary-Ireland-1878*.

Kevin appeared puzzled. "I thought you told me you couldn't decipher the inscription."

"That's absolutely true. I couldn't." Then she explained the mysterious means by which she had received the information

Chapter 3

Fortune Teller



Sabrina's best friend was a spunky redhead named Jennifer. They did everything together that ten-year-olds are wont to do. This fellow fifth-grader was turning eleven on November ninth and was holding a birthday party. Of course, Sabrina was invited. She presented her mom with this written card.

"You are invited to the eleventh birthday of Jennifer Martinez. WHEN? Saturday, November 12, 1988. Party begins at noon; cake is cut at 1:00; and pick up is at 2:00. WHERE? The Martinez residence, 306 Lewelling Boulevard, San Lorenzo. WHAT? Please, bring token gifts only—under \$10. WHO? Richard the Magnificent will be entertaining with his array of illusions and parlor tricks. RSVP by phoning Sheila at 350-235-9909."

Plans were set. Mrs. Adams would drop her daughter at the Martinez home on Saturday at noon, picking up Alice Pinckney along the way. She would then return to the house two hours later.

Stacy accompanied Sabrina the few blocks to the K-Mart, where the girls purchased a board game called *Pictionary*. Sabrina felt guilty because the gift turned out to be \$10.53 with tax. Stacy relieved her sister's anxiety by saying, "I'm absolutely positive the gift limit of ten dollars was meant to be before tax."

However, events did not proceed as planned.

On Friday evening Jennifer answered the Martinez home telephone. "Mom, it's for you." Jennifer held the receiver at arm's length until her mother plucked the phone from her hand.

With eavesdropping stealth, Jennifer understood that Richard the Magnificent would not be coming to her eleventh birthday party. He reported he had wrenched his back moving a piano. He was so sorry

Her mom sighed as she clicked the handset to its cradle.

Jennifer was beside herself. "Mommy, what are we going to do? You know I told all my friends that magician guy was going to be here. He was really fun at our Girl Scout fair."

“Let me check the yellow pages,” she replied. “Maybe I can find a substitute.” She phoned the Mighty Magic Group and Freddie the Dreamer. The news was not good: eight hours was just not enough notice for any magician to do an appearing act.

Jennifer suggested, “How about that lady next to the roller rink at the strip mall?”

Mrs. Martinez appeared puzzled.

Jennifer clarified. “You know, the one with the red hand in the window.”

Her mom guffawed. “She’s not a magician. She’s a fortune teller, psychic, or something of that sort. I have no idea if she can do birthday parties.”

The almost-eleven-year-old whined. “But a fortune teller is like a magician, right? Please-please-please, Mom, give her a call.”

“Well, maybe she could be entertaining.”



About noon on the next day, Jennifer’s friends began to drop by the house. A bit later, when seven of eight guests had arrived, Mrs. Martinez formed the group into a circle. The girls were mostly fifth graders from Grant Elementary School.

“I have good news and bad news,” she spoke in her mom voice. “First the bad news: Richard the Magnificent called me last night and said he had sprained his back at another party. He won’t be here.”

There were several disappointed groans.

“Now for the good news. Madam Diana the Clairvoyant will be here in a few minutes to show you real magic.” She emphasized the words *Madam* and *real* to elevate the psychic’s status.

There were a few audible moans.

“Come on now. Haven’t you ever wondered about crystal balls and tarot cards?”

The cake was already cut, and Diana had not yet appeared. Mrs. Martinez looked at her watch. She then heard a car sputter into the driveway.

Jennifer opened the front door, and Madam Diana squeezed in sideways, struggling with a paper bag in one hand and a suitcase in the other. Diana was a jovial woman of about fifty. She dressed in a gypsy-style outfit with a head scarf, shawl, and bangles. She smelled of musty patchouli oil and spoke like Zsa Zsa Gabor.

She whispered to Jennifer, “Darling, this is my very first birthday party,” then winked, “But for fifty bucks I’ll do one every day.”

The fortune teller ushered all the girls into the living room. She cleared off the coffee table and put her tarot cards and crystal ball on the surface. She also placed a pad of lined paper on the glass tabletop.

Six girls slouched on couches and three stretched on the shag carpet.

Diana called the birthday girl forward and read her fortune with the tarot cards. “Whoa! Your destiny will change this very day. I guarantee you will have good fortune.”

The girls were amused but not amazed.

Diana didn’t have to be psychic to tell boredom was setting in.

She asked the girls if any had heard of *automatic writing divination*.

They all shrugged with indifference.

Madam Diana explained, “This is a method of psychic communication where I let my conscious mind go still and allow messages to be written through my hand.”

Diana thought a moment. “Okay, I’ll show you how it works. This is a birthday party, right? So let me reveal the birthdays of each of you in this room.”

A tingle of excitement shot through the parlor.

Diana tore a single sheet of paper from the notepad and clipped it to a board. She handed the clipboard and red pen to Jennifer and said to all the girls, “Now, I want each one of you to write down your name and the date of your birth.”

Then to Jennifer, she said, “I want you to hang on to the paper, and don’t let me see it, okay?”

The birthday girl walked around the room collecting a name and birthday from each friend. When complete, Jennifer added her own name and date, then placed the clipboard face down on the carpet.

Madam Diana then asked for silence. She uttered a few dramatic words to herself, then closed her eyes for about thirty seconds. She took her old-fashioned fountain pen, and with eyes squeezed shut, she wrote on a pad of fine linen paper.

When she completed her automatic writing, she blinked her eyes, made a face as if awakening from a trance, and looked around the room. Without glancing downward, she picked up the paper, flapped it a few times to dry the ink, then handed it to Sabrina Adams.

“Young lady,” she announced. “In a moment, please read the first name on my list along with the corresponding birthday.”

The psychic then turned to Jennifer Martinez. “Please, pick up the clipboard on the floor. As your friend reads out the words of automatic writing, you say *yes* if the name and birthdate are correct but *no* if they’re wrong.”

Diana gestured to Sabrina to begin.

Everyone in the room was utterly amazed. Jennifer said *yes* nine times in a row.

Mrs. Martinez was also impressed. “How in the world did you do that?”

Madam Diana spoke in a voice not her own, “Maybe my insight didn’t come from this world. Maybe my hand was guided by a force beyond.”

Mrs. Martinez broke the magic spell by calling to the girls, “Okay. Let’s open the presents now.”

The gaggle began to cheer, and the festive mood resumed.

Before the party broke up at two o’clock, Sabrina approached her best friend for a special favor. “My sister is really interested in dreams and psychic stuff. Please let me keep the two sheets of paper, the one we girls filled out and the automatic writing.”

Since the two fifth-graders were best friends, Jennifer handed over the two magical papers.



Parents soon began to arrive at the Martinez home.

Looking out the front picture window, Sabrina informed Alice her mom was at the curb. Both girls picked up their gift bags on the way out the front door. Sabrina made sure the magic papers were tucked deep into her bag.

Both girls slid into the back seat of the Pontiac Firebird, and after a confirmation of buckled seatbelts, Kate drove away.

She casually asked her daughter, “So, how did you like the party, sweetie?”

Sabrina replied with evasion, “Oh, it was okay.”

Alice was effervescent. “Mrs. Adams, it was great! Michael the Magnificent couldn’t make it. So, can you guess who came instead?”

Mrs. Adams replied to Alice with a smile, “I can’t imagine. Who was it?”

Sabrina cringed as Alice prattled the words. “There was a Gypsy lady called Madam Diana. And do you know what she did? She guessed the names and birthdates of all nine of us. I think she called herself a psychic. She closed her eyes, went into a trance, and then

wrote them on paper. It was really cool. Sabrina got to read out the names, and Jennifer said she was right on each of them.”

Alice was pleased with her statement; Sabrina was concerned; Kathleen was stunned.

Mrs. Adams tried to maintain her composure, raising only one eyebrow. “Sabrina,” she intoned, “is that what happened?”

“Yes, Mom. That’s pretty much the way it was. Jennifer’s mom made all the arrangements at the last minute because the other guy couldn’t make it. We had no advanced notice a fortune teller would come. Diana told me she got fifty dollars for just showing up.”

“I see,” Kate said to Sabrina. “We’ll have to talk more about this when we get home.”

Silence prevailed until Alice hopped from the car.

After the door slammed, Sabrina whimpered, “Am I in trouble?”

“We’ll talk at the breakfast table,” came the reply. A tense silence ensued as Kate had five minutes to contemplate her response.

Once home and seated across from each other, Kate inhaled a deep breath.

Sabrina was in tears as she explained herself. “I’m sorry, Mom. I could tell something was wrong, but what could I do with all my friends around? When the fortune teller gave me that paper to read, I couldn’t chicken out.”

The mom sensed her daughter was more distraught than she had realized. “It’s not your fault, Sabrina,” her mom soothed. “I’ll have to give Mrs. Martinez a call to ask what she was thinking when she hired an occult palm reader as entertainment.”

“But Mom,” she said, trying to justify herself. “You know Stacy had something like this happen to her too? Something about dreams, ghosts, and birthdates.”

“WHAT?!” Kate raised her voice involuntarily.

“Yes, she told me about it a few days ago.”

“Stay here,” said the mom. “This is going to be a three-way conversation.”

Stacy was sitting in her room, preparing math homework.

Her mom tapped the closed door, then stepped inside. “Stacy, your sister tells me you’re having mysterious dreams. Is that true?”

She looked up from her book. “Did that little snitch rat on me?”

Kate remained calm. “It’s complicated. Can you join us at the breakfast table? Maybe together, we can make sense of Sabrina’s story.”

Stacy drew up the third chair, and the three commenced to talk. At first, Stacy was disappointed her little sister had betrayed her confidence, but as Sabrina described her psychic encounter, fascination overcame hurt.”

When Sabrina finally concluded her narration of the paranormal, the mom spoke to Stacy. “It’s your turn now; please give me a full account of what you experienced.”

She began to tell her strange story but stopped mid-sentence. “Rather than explain, let me get my journal. I’ll read it to you.”

The fifteen-year-old returned to the breakfast nook, journal in hand, and read aloud details of the Victorian gravestone, her Halloween dream, and the assistance provided by Kevin. She held out her book as proof, pointing to the three words scribbled on Saturday, and then she displayed the photos Kevin helped to develop. She concluded, “See. The words are a match. I can’t imagine it’s a coincidence, but I don’t know what else to call it.”

Sabrina was reluctant, but she dug out the paper evidence of her encounter with the psychic. Kate glanced over the two papers and was about to rip them up when Stacy interceded. “Mom, I’d like to do some research on this topic. If this is a trick by Madam Diana, I’d like to figure out how she pulled it off. Can I hold on to those papers for a bit?”

She pushed the psychic writing toward Stacy. “I’ll let you hang on to them on one condition: that is, that we share the whole story with your Grandpa Jack. He’s hosting a Thanksgiving dinner in Mill Valley. As far as detective work goes, he’s the best there is. Let’s have this same discussion with him and hear what he has to say about Madam Diana.” She paused. “And, Stacy, we can talk about your weird dream too.”

Chapter 4

The Gathering



Kate had spoken with her father a few months prior to the Thanksgiving holiday. As was often the case, he provided the ten percent inspiration and she the ninety percent perspiration. “Yes, I can organize that,” she assured her dad.

Her task involved getting three family branches together. The East Coast branch included her brother Bradley and sister-in-law Marsha along with their two sons, Phillip and Jason. Hers was the second branch: Heidi, Stacy, and Sabrina, along with herself. The senior branch was her dad and Rosa, her stepmom of sorts.

Kate was concerned about Larry, Steven’s younger brother. Her brother-in-law had been depressed since Steve’s death in 1986 and she sought for ways to include him in family events. When she phoned him, he said he had no interest in celebrating a holiday. Jack told his daughter to urge Larry to attend, saying, “He is certainly invited to the turkey dinner with us. And you can tell him Rosa is cooking up some Mexican food too.”

This reunion would mark the first gathering of the Richardson-Adams clan since 1986, when the twelve assembled for Steven’s funeral.

Kate’s spirits were always buoyed when she conversed with her big brother. They talked of old times, growing up in Marin County in the 1960s, joking about Fort Baker and old classmates from Tamalpais High School, and reminiscing about their mother, who had died in Germany in 1983.

Brad and Marsha owned a substantial house in College Park, Maryland, where, rumor had it, he worked for the CIA. Phillip was a graduate assistant at the Princeton Theological Seminary while Jason was in his fourth year at the Air Force Academy. Brad assured his sister all four were on board with the plan. They would definitely be in Mill Valley on Thanksgiving Day.

Kate’s chief concern was coaxing her own daughter to attend the family function. Interactions with Heidi had become strained of late. When she finally phoned her in San Francisco, the prodigal daughter was remarkably pleasant. Yes, she would love to visit with her uncle and cousins, and Grandpa’s house still held a special charm. She asked if it would be okay to bring along her boyfriend, Ziggy.

Kate phoned her dad and reported a full house. She also spoke with Rosa to plan the Thanksgiving menu. Kate would be bringing the pies.

On the Saturday before Thanksgiving, Heidi showed up at the house driving the VW Rabbit she had inherited from her father. The nineteen-year-old had adopted a Cleopatra hairstyle, her extravagant eyeshadow accentuating an exotic look. She was wearing a golden amulet around her neck in place of the silver cross her father had given her on her fourteenth birthday.

So much of Heidi had changed, yet so much remained the same. “Hey, Scarecrow, how you doing?” was her greeting to Stacy. Their age difference was only four years, but their age gulf seemed like an ocean, a woman-of-the-world talking to a sheltered innocent.

“And how are you, Drama Queen?” joked the younger sister. They both laughed for a while until Stacy began to share about her mysterious dream. She spoke on for several minutes until Heidi cut her short.

“I gave up on the supernatural,” she interjected. “I don’t believe in gods, ghosts, or goblins.”

Stacy read aloud her journal entry, then showed the scribbled words *Mary-Ireland-1878* that she had inscribed on Tuesday morning. Next, she displayed the photos provided by Kevin, developed on Friday.

“Just a coincidence,” Heidi scoffed. “Sometimes the mind plays tricks, you know. I’m thinking your subconscious mind actually read the stone, and your conscious mind didn’t realize it.”

“Oh yeah,” Stacy retorted, “Let’s walk across the street to the cemetery and see what your big subconscious brain can do.”

Upon arrival, Heidi peered through the iron bars. She squinted at the tombstone and recited slowly, “*Mary A. Dickson, born in 1830, in Belfast, Ireland.* See, it’s not so hard.”

Stacy stood astonished. “How did you do that? I couldn’t read it; neither could Kevin.”

As they walked back to the parsonage, Stacy peppered her with inquiries, but the big sister kept mum. Finally, when they had returned, Heidi casually asked Stacy, “Can I see your photos one more time?”

Stacy handed over the oversized envelope. Her sister held up the negative print to Stacy’s face. “It wasn’t my keen eyesight or a visit from a ghost.” She laughed. “I just made a point to memorize the information on this picture. Magic is easy when you know the trick.”

Stacy was embarrassed at that simple explanation. “You fooled me,” she sputtered. “Let’s see if you can solve this one.”

She then recounted Sabrina’s experience with Madam Diana. Stacy concluded by setting before her one paper filled with fifth-grade scrawl and a second sheet elegantly penned by the automatic hand. The names and dates corresponded exactly. “So, how do you explain this, Miss Smarty Pants?”

Heidi examined the two papers and suggested the psychic may have called the school and had somehow gotten the names of the party attendees and had memorized them.

Stacy pushed back. “Is that the best you can do?”

“I don’t have a good answer,” she responded impatiently. “I would have to watch the whole process, moment by moment, from beginning to end. But I believe her psychic ability is a bunch of hooley. There’s no such thing as ghosts. When you die, it’s over. You become food for worms.” She paused with a devilish grin. “You know. Like it says in the good book: *Ashes to ashes and dust to dust.*”

A shouting match exploded, which became so boisterous Kate rushed into the room to check out the commotion.

“Calm down, ladies,” the mother invoked. “No name-calling.”

Sabrina soon entered into the bedroom and into the fray. She took the side of Stacy.

After a minute of accusations and finger-pointing, Kate asserted her parental prerogative. “You know the household rules: one person speaks at a time without interruption. Then the other person responds again without interrupting. That’s our *Adams rules of order.*”

The instructions were adhered to, although Stacy made faces at Heidi, and Heidi forced a cough at points of disagreement.

Finally, Kate told her three daughters, “Remember what your dad always told us: *You can disagree without being disagreeable.*”

“Look, I get it. Heidi is a skeptic, denying anything supernatural. Stacy believes in the paranormal, or at least she’s open to the possibility. But me, I’m old-school. You, Heidi, may laugh, and you, Stacy, might disagree, but I smell brimstone behind this. These night visitations and automatic writings are not from God but from the enemy of our souls. I will be praying for this family, that God protects us from any satanic attack.”

Heidi began a rebuttal but, in deference to her mom, swallowed her words.

Kate scanned the faces of her three children. “This issue is very important—important enough to discuss with your grandfather when we see him. Believe it or not,

your gramps has considerable experience in dealing with the occult. I'll definitely ask him to set aside some time to talk with us all."

A tear welled in her eye. "Right now, how I wish your father were here with us. He could sort out this mess better than I could."

Heidi checked out a VHS tape from Video Droid. It was called *Penn & Teller's Cruel Tricks for Dear Friends*. She insisted her two sisters watch the tape with her. "Look at these magicians. Can you figure out how these guys trick their friends with their illusions? I certainly can't. I'm not surprised that Madam Diana was able to fool Sabrina."

The youngest sister scowled her disagreement as Stacy stuck to her convictions. "I know what I experienced. It was real. There was no trickery." Still, the three girls were putting into practice their father's dictum about disagreement.



Brad and Marsha from Maryland arrived at the San Francisco Airport on Tuesday afternoon. Brad had rented a Buick station wagon, and soon they arrived at the Holiday Inn Express in Mill Valley. On Wednesday morning their two sons, Phillip and Jason, arrived at the airport, catching the Marin Airporter to the hotel.

The stage was set for a festive holiday.

On Thanksgiving morning Kate headed north from San Lorenzo, traveling up Interstate 880. She drove Stacy and Sabrina directly to Grandpa's house in Mill Valley.

Heidi's Uncle Larry had changed his mind about attending the family gathering so she drove from Ashbury Street in San Francisco to West Oakland. Zygmond stepped out of the car to introduce himself, then Larry squeezed into the back seat of the VW Rabbit. He was a large man, unshaven, and dressed in an army field jacket.

The car ride into Marin provided the first opportunity for Larry and Heidi to converse since the 1986 funeral. Once they had passed the toll plaza on the Bay Bridge, Larry asked his niece, "How you been, Heidi?"

"I'm okay," she responded. "You know Zigmund and I have been living together in San Francisco since June. He's the featured piano man at the Arcade Nightclub, and I wait tables. Together we make a lot in tips. Mom's upset because we're *living in sin*." The last three words she spoke with derision.

"I understand," the uncle sympathized. "You have to live your own life. Sometimes parents just don't get it. I can see where you'd get tired of having religion shoved down your throat."

Larry then addressed Ziggy. "What kind of name is that you got? You're not from around here, are you?"

Ziggy chuckled, “Well, I come from Krakow, Poland. I’ve been in your beautiful California for about four years. I came to the Art Institute on a music scholarship and decided not to return home. My country’s still communist, you know.”

After a few miles of silence, Larry spoke up, “Heidi, you understand how things have been tough for me ever since your dad died. I visited him in the hospital almost every day after he got that AIDS. We prayed a lot too, and a lot of good it did.” He shook his head. “My brother said he put his trust in the Lord, and look what the Lord did to him. He was only thirty-nine. God, that’s my age now. My mom and dad were so devastated they sold the home and moved back to their roots in Georgia. I didn’t want to go to the South with them, so I stayed behind.

“You know there’s a stigma too. I told my ex-girlfriend that my brother died of AIDS, and she says, ‘What? Was he queer or something?’ I say, ‘No way. It was a blood transfusion for his anemia.’ She gives me this look of disbelief.”

He paused. “I know your mom kept up a strong face, but she was hurt. How about you, Heidi? Are you still coping with any of this?”

She was loath to discuss that terrible time, but Heidi saw her uncle was still in distress. “It was tough around the house for a while. My gramps and Rosa were around a lot. Mom buried herself in classroom duties to numb the pain. We were fortunate the church deacons let us remain in our house.”

Larry sneered, “Yeah, at least you had a roof over your head. I had nothing. I was homeless for a year before I finally got into Section 8 housing.” He added, “Oh, and I do work part-time at the East Oakland Grocery Cooperative.”

Heidi glanced into the rearview mirror. Her uncle was rocking in the backseat. “Are you okay?” she asked.

“It was a tough night. I’m fifty-nine days clean and sober as of today.”

Silence followed for a minute.

Heidi spoke up, “Say, Larry, do you know anything about the occult? You know, crystal balls and fortune telling.”

Larry reflected for a moment at this shift in conversation. “Not much. My mom put that kind of stuff off-limits growing up, and I never had much interest. Now, I do believe in aliens. I think the government is hiding facts from us.”

Ziggy joined in. “Have you heard about what’s going on at Area 51? I’ve been there, you know.”

Heidi groaned. “Guys, I don’t want to talk about aliens but about fortune telling.”

And all the way to the front door, Heidi spoke about her two younger sisters and described the so-called paranormal activity happening in and around the parsonage.

About one o'clock, Heidi parked her car right behind her mom's Pontiac. Ziggy and Larry piled out.

Heidi knocked on her grandfather's door, and a familiar face greeted her. Yes, it was Phillip. The two embraced and walked up the stairs together. She had always admired her brainiac cousin. Larry and Ziggy followed the aroma of home cooking up the stairwell into the noisy living room.

Heidi approached each of the nine relatives, introducing Ziggy to the assembly. The boyfriend bowed formally and spoke with a distinct Slavic accent. Soon, Heidi held a paper plate laden with chocolate brownies and corn chips. Rosa smiled at her. "Don't eat too much of that, honey. There's a lot of wonderful food ahead of you. Have you ever tasted a turkey tortilla?"

When the old German wall clock struck two times, the patriarch Jack bellowed in his army voice, "Okay, let's get in a circle to give thanks for this food. Then it will be time to enjoy God's bounty."

Heidi frowned at the prospect of the familiar circle prayer, but Ziggy embraced the novelty. Grandpa's heavenly petition was earnest and protracted. He thanked God for everything good in life, mentioning each person present by name and even Grandma Greta and Steven. Rosa brought the session to a close with an emphatic *amen*.

The twelve broke down into generational groups. The six oldest sat at the long glass table, while the six youngest gathered around a borrowed fold-out. All enjoyed a traditional menu of Thanksgiving fare: roasted turkey, stuffing, corn, mashed potatoes, gravy, and cranberry sauce. The pumpkin pies provided by Kate proved to be a hit, as were the stacks of turkey tortilla wraps.

As darkness fell, Brad excused himself and his family. "We'll see you tomorrow, Dad. We're dropping by Marsha's sister's place for some late dessert."

Rosa went into the bedroom to rest, and Grandpa Jack was left with Kathleen's family. Six guests settled into the living room as Jack lit the logs in the fireplace. "So, let's talk," he said.

Chapter 5

A Grandfather's Witness



Grandpa Jack lowered himself into his wingback armchair. The patriarch was Seventy-two years old, rugged in appearance but gentle in demeanor, plain-spoken in language but supple of mind. Forty years of Christian discipleship had cruciformed his worldview and lifestyle.

Kathleen, Stacy, and Sabrina settled into the cushy sofa; Heidi slid into the recliner; while Ziggy and Larry sat in repositioned dining chairs.

Jack looked over his miscellaneous family. “Such a great audience,” he marveled. “I want to thank Kate for instigating this forum. She tells me she wants to talk about the occult and certain paranormal happenings. I can do that, but let me start by sharing my own story. You young ones haven’t heard it yet. Bear with me if I ramble too much.”

The retired veteran of World War Two then spoke about his early life in Ohio, his military service in Germany, and his romance with Grandma Greta. He finally took a deep breath to focus his thoughts. “Oh, talking so much about the military, I forgot to tell you how I came to faith. It’s a good story.

“Back in 1949, while I was on leave from the army, all four of us were visiting my brother Morty in Los Angeles, where he was mustering out of the Marine Corps. He and Celia, his wife, had just come back from a Billy Graham Crusade. Can you believe it? They were meeting in a gigantic circus tent that held nine thousand people. Greta and I went there three times. That’s where I gave my life to Jesus. Both of us took the plunge. There’ve been storms for sure, but Christ has always been my anchor.” Jack finally paused to take a drink of Pepsi.

Stacy took advantage of the break in monologue to ask a question. “Gramps, wasn’t it 1978 when we went to Berlin for our great-grandma’s funeral?”

“That’s right,” he said. “I remember because Sabrina was just a few months old and got to fly free.”

Stacy continued, “I remember Berlin too: the church that was still bombed out, Checkpoint Charlie, and the wall with graffiti. You also took us to that death camp, right?”

“Yes. We went there too,” he said. “I thought it would be educational. You know my MP unit helped to liberate the Dachau prisoners.”

“Gramps, I was only five years old. It scared the heck out of me. I still have nightmares sometimes.”

Jack’s face went pale. “What? I’m so sorry, Stacy. I wanted to share some of my history with you. I thought Dachau was set up like a museum.”

Kathleen spoke up. “Dad, it was my fault too. Mom waited in the lobby with baby Sabrina. I should have insisted Stacy stay there too.”

Jack stopped everything in its tracks. “I want us all to gather around Stacy right now and pray God will protect her from evil memories. And pray for me too, that He may forgive my callous heart.” He laid hands on his granddaughter’s head.

Jack and Kathleen prayed with ardor, Heidi and Larry with reservation, and Ziggy with curiosity.

Once everyone was seated again, Zygmund informed Jack. “My grandfather fought in the big war too, first against the Soviets, then against the Nazis. Neither of them liked us Poles much. My dad is still fighting Communism. He heads the local chapter of Solidarity in Krakow. Who knows? Maybe my country will be free soon and I can return home.”

Heidi didn’t appreciate his final phrase and shot him a sideways glare.

Ziggy appeared oblivious to her displeasure.

Kathleen jumped in. “Dad, before it gets too late, I want you to listen to Stacy and Sabrina’s stories.

“Stacy, yours occurred first, so tell my dad about your dream.”

The fifteen-year-old recited her story from tombstone through Halloween visions. She spoke about Kevin and his photographs and about her conversations with skeptical Heidi. She concluded by saying, “What do you think?”

Jack responded to her and her mom, “Let me hear Sabrina’s story first. Maybe there’s a common thread.”

The ten-year-old then spoke with verbal support from her mom to keep the storyline on track. Together they told of the birthday party, the cancelled magician, the appearance of the psychic, and the automatic handwriting.

“So, what do you think, Dad?” Kate asked.

“Hold your horses,” the patriarch replied. “We haven’t heard from your firstborn yet.”

Kathleen looked across the room to Heidi. “But she wasn’t even involved in any of this.”

“That’s true,” he said, “but she does have a point of view about this paranormal activity, and I’d like to hear it.”

Heidi appreciated her grandfather’s courtesy. She spoke of her recent embrace of agnosticism and her interest in Eastern religion. “The occult is pure rubbish,” she insisted with the hubris of a nineteen-year-old. “I watched a long TV documentary on that. Phil Donahue debunked it completely. It was proven false.” She then mocked the whole affair by mimicking the guitar opening of *Twilight Zone*: “dee-dee-dee-dee, dee-dee-dee-dee.”

Jack Richardson responded. “Heidi, some people see the world through different eyes than you, and we can’t just write them off as lunatics. It doesn’t help to ridicule. You know I was a police detective for twenty-five years. I witnessed a lot of strange things that aren’t explainable by human science. I don’t want to be an alarmist, but I’m convinced a malevolent force does exist in our world.”

He looked at his middle granddaughter. “I’ve dealt with the occult since I was your age, Stacy, but I also have to tell you that God is stronger than any evil you might encounter.” He quoted scripture: “Greater is He that is in you than He that is in the world.”

“I knew you girls were coming over this evening to talk about the occult, so I’m going to read you an excerpt of a memoir I’ve been working on. He picked up his typed manuscript, flipped the pages to a bookmark, and began to read:

“At the end of October 1935, the family planned a quick trip to Chicago to visit my uncle Henry. For the occasion, Morty and I bought a belated birthday present for our cousin Edward. We went to a magic shop downtown and couldn’t decide what to purchase. All of the Halloween merchandise was on display, so we decided to buy him a Ouija board. I figured it was like our Monopoly game, only spookier. Mom and I played the board game that evening, and it predicted my aunt’s baby would arrive on April 23.

“Over the next few days, Morty and I plied the Ouija board with question after question. My brother didn’t want to play anymore, saying it was scary.

“I knew for certain that my fingers were not directing that heart-shaped pointer, and I studied Mort’s closed eyes and could swear he was not choosing the letters. How then did this remarkable board operate? It wasn’t at all like Monopoly.

“We packed into the Studebaker, leaving Cleveland about six in the morning and arriving in Chicago about three.

“We gave Eddie the Ouija board after dinner. That was our obsession all the way until midnight. Two of us sat across from each other, placing our fingertips lightly on the pointer. A third sat with pencil and paper, writing down words letter-by-letter as the indicator danced across the board. Here are some of the questions and answers, exactly as I wrote them in my 1935 diary:

Morty: ‘Where is my lost Brownie camera?’ ~ ‘In the attic under the bed, Mortimer R.’

Edward: ‘How long will my family live in Chicago?’ ~ ‘Six months longer than six years.’

Jack: ‘Will Babe Ruth hit any more home runs?’ ~ ‘Yes, about 8.’

The last question Edward and I asked was, ‘Do you want us to sleep?’

The Ouija board’s response was ‘Yes, very much so. Go to bed, please.’

The pointer really hovered over each of those twenty-six letters!”

“As I processed my short encounter with that uncanny board, I asked myself. ‘If neither Morty nor I manipulated the pointer, then what source provided the motion and the articulate answers?’ I intuited three things. First, the source had to be supernatural. Second, it was not all-knowing because answers were often wrong. Third, the power behind the Ouija board was not heavenly. The God of the Bible would not move teen-age fingers along a painted surface to amuse two adolescents.

“The Ouija board provided me with firsthand evidence that a transcendent realm does exist. Materialism became forever an alien philosophy to my reason. Odd to say, but in my life, God used an occult means to bring about a heavenly end.”

Jack closed his manuscript. “So, I have two responses to what Stacy and Sabrina report. First, there truly exists a transcendent realm that can invade our time and space. Sometimes that’s exactly what happens. I personally have witnessed and can vouch for its existence. When that force is good, we call it a miracle; when evil, it’s called sorcery. Second, in the specific cases you cite, I cannot say if it is human trickery or demonic activity. That would require an in-depth investigation. However, from what you’re telling me, I suspect devilry. I would advise all three of you girls to stay far away from anyone who purports to contact the spirit world.”

The conversation about occultic practices sputtered on for a while and then devolved into two-person chat groups. Larry and Stacy talked about aliens and Star Trek; Jack and Ziggy about European politics. Kathleen spoke heart-to-heart with Heidi, trying to mend fences. Sabrina worked her way through two issues of Archie and Veronica.

As the Thanksgiving visitors donned their coats to leave, the wall phone rang. Phillip asked to speak with Heidi. After a brief conversation, she cheerfully announced to the group that Phillip would meet with Ziggy and her on the next day in San Francisco. The appointment was set for two o'clock at the Arcade Club.

Chapter 6

Rumors of Heaven

ἔσχατον

Phillip wanted to make a day of it in San Francisco, so he left his hotel room about ten and walked a mile to the Sausalito ferry. He stood at the deck rail as the boat rocked through the choppy waters of the San Francisco Bay. With a tourist map in hand, he disembarked at the Ferry Building and took his sweet time strolling up Market Street all the way to the domed city hall. He checked his wristwatch, noting he still had an hour before his appointment. The nightclub was located near Alamo Square, so Phillip rested on a park bench.

As he watched pigeons flock, peck, and swoop, he prayed for his cousin Heidi. He would always be grateful to her preacher father, who had counseled him to attend seminary. Phillip liked Ziggy and hoped their relationship could mature into something lasting. He opened his pocket Bible to Colossians 4, recasting a few verses into the first person:

“I pray that God may open a door for my message so that I may proclaim the mystery of Christ. I pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I ought. Let me be wise in the way I act toward outsiders, making the most of every opportunity. Let my conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that I may know how to answer everyone.”

When he arrived at the nightclub, his watch showed exactly 2:00. The establishment was still shuttered, so Phillip paced the sidewalk. He smiled when he saw Heidi appear at the corner of Fell and Baker Streets and walk toward him. Ziggy wore a tuxedo, and Heidi wore a white blouse with a black vest and slacks.

The couple greeted Phillip with an attitude of affection.

Ziggy joked, “Look, today I’m the same altitude as Heidi.” His eye twinkled. “I put lifts into the heels of these shiny shoes.”

Heidi stooped her frame and laughed.

“Well, both of you beat me,” responded the short-statured Phillip, who stood on tiptoe.

Ziggy rang the outside doorbell, and a set of eyes looked through the peephole. A broad-shouldered bouncer opened the metal door and ushered the three past the front desk.

A few dozen workers were preparing the cavernous space for its four o'clock onslaught. Friday night would be packed. Already the air was infused with the barroom smell of tobacco and liquor.

The threesome sat at a table near the piano and began to talk.

"Both of us are night people," Heidi explained. "That's why this line of work fits us so well. We usually get here an hour before opening. I do some cleaning and food prep, and Zigmund talks with Ralphie, the manager, about the piano repertoire."

Ziggy leaned into Phillip. "I need to limber up my fingers. Would you like to hear something?"

"Sure," he said. "What's first on your playlist for tonight?"

"I usually start with something classical. I like to impress customers with my virtuosity while they're still sober. They grasp I'm a concert pianist more than a honky-tonk performer. I'll do two in a row for you; the first is Chopin's Grand Waltz, a genteel piece, and the second is the bombastic presto agitato of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. Tell me what you think."

Zygmund swayed through the Chopin with practiced eloquence, often glancing toward the admiring face of Heidi. The Beethoven required more focus. As Ziggy pounded the keyboard, Phillip couldn't banish the TV image of Gargamel chasing the little blue Smurfs.

When complete, several of the staff whistled their appreciation.

"Bravo," shouted Phillip.

Ziggy then gestured to a friend near the bar. The accomplice put a videocam to his shoulder and began recording. Ziggy summoned Heidi to join him at the microphone. "I've got something special tonight, ladies and gentlemen. Introducing Miss Heidi Adams!"

Phillip didn't recognize the disco hit until Heidi belted out, "You can dance. You can jive. See that girl. Watch the scene, diggin' the dancing queen."

Heidi's vocals and dance moves were impressive and garnered a round of applause. Having resumed her seat, she winked at her cousin. "I'm trying to work my way up from waitress to lounge singer."

Phillip grasped Heidi's hands from across the table. "You're such a special person to me. I'm so grateful I can catch this slice of your life."

He whispered a prayer that his conversation may be full of grace and then addressed Ziggy. “Tell me. What did you think of the slice of life you witnessed at my grandfather’s house yesterday?”

Heidi grew uneasy, but Ziggy was pleased at the transition.

“You know I’ve never been around religious people like your grandfather or Heidi’s mother. I admire their faith. They seem to tap into something deep that I don’t have. Look, I’m Polish. I was baptized Roman Catholic like all good Polacks. I know God is real, but in my opinion, Jesus was just a good man.”

Phillip stroked his scraggly beard and responded, “I hear a lot of that, even at the seminary. For me, I don’t understand the *good man* position. If you take scripture at face value, Jesus claimed to be deity—equal with God. A mere good man would never make such an outrageous claim. As I see it, Jesus had to be one of three things. The first possibility is this. He may have been a liar who intentionally deceived people. Or, second, he may have been a lunatic who was delusional about His divine status; or third, he must have been exactly who he claimed to be, that is, Lord of all. Jesus could not have been a mere good man. That possibility is not open to us.”

Ziggy pondered the trilemma, then said, “You know, there’s a fourth possibility. Jesus may have been just a popular Jewish rabbi of the first century, but over time a legend grew up around him. I accept the basic morality of the Christian religion, like *love your neighbor*. However, a strong belief held by an honest person leads to a strong commitment to that belief system, and at twenty-two years old, I don’t want a lord ruling over me. I want to be lord of my own life. To be honest, it may be that I deliberately choose not to believe.”

Heidi wished to change the subject and asked Phillip for details of his life.

He responded, “I’m in my second year at the Princeton Theological Seminary. I don’t think I have a calling to be a pastor, maybe a researcher, but I haven’t achieved clarity yet.”

Heidi asked about her cousin Jason.

“My brother is fulfilling his dream. He’s always wanted to fly jet fighters, and he’s now on track to do that. Next summer maybe you can come to his graduation at the Air Force Academy.”

Heidi followed up with a more sensitive question: “Whatever happened to Nancy? I thought you two were engaged or something.”

Phillip cast his eyes down. “Yes, we were engaged, but she broke it off last Spring. She gave me two reasons. First, she ran across her old sweetheart from high school. Her

heart fluttered, she said. To her, that was an ominous sign. Second, she told me I was too religious and doubted she could ever meet my Christian expectations.”

“That must have been tough,” Heidi sympathized. “Wasn’t there a wedding set for September?”

Phillip sighed. “Yes, but thank goodness we didn’t send out invitations. I was embarrassed and depressed for a long time, you know.”

Heidi asked, “How could a good and loving God break your heart like that?”

“Heidi, it was Nancy’s decision to break up and not God’s. Do you think God could have forced Nancy to love me? For weeks I felt like a rejected loser. But then, my mind returned to the scripture that says, *Trust in the Lord with all your might* and to my Reformed catechism.

“You know in my teen years I attended a Presbyterian Church. I can’t remember them all, but I can quote the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. Do you know what it says?”

Heidi shook her head *no*. “But I’m sure you’ll tell me.”

“It helps me to put first things first and keeps my spiritual compass facing true north. It goes like this:

“Question 1. What is the chief end of man?”

“Answer 1. The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.”

Ziggy’s interest was piqued. “Phillip, what’s the focus of your religious study nowadays?”

He took a spiritual breath. “It’s something called the eschaton.”

“What’s that?” Ziggy questioned.

“It’s a theological term that means the final event in the divine plan or the end of the world. For non-theologians, it’s most commonly spoken of as *heaven* or *eternity*.”

Heidi spoke up. “Well, then why not just say *heaven*, if that’s what you mean? Why do you use a fancy theological word?”

Phillip smiled. “The word *heaven* is imprecise and carries a lot of baggage. What do you think of when I say the word *heaven* to you?”

Ziggy jumped in. “It’s the place where good people go when they die; the opposite of hell. Saint Peter guards the gates; good people turn into angels and wear white robes and halos. They float from cloud to cloud and play harps. It all sounds so ridiculous and boring to me. Who’d want to go to a place like that?”

“Not me,” responded Phillip, “but those are just rumors of heaven. That’s why I prefer the term *eschaton*—the end state of all things, the consummation of history, when time shall be no more.”

Zygmund was intrigued with the concept of timelessness. “Do you mean a time will come when we have no time?” He played with the words. “But we have time right now. Explain to me what you mean.”

“Let me give you some background first.” Phillip closed his eyes, organizing his thoughts. “Last summer, it was my privilege to do an internship at Cambridge University. I attended a lecture by the president of Queens’ College, a scholar named John Polkinghorne. This man is a theoretical physicist, a theologian, and an Anglican priest. He opened my eyes as to what a true Christian intellectual could be. He is a leading voice explaining the relationship between science and religion.”

Ziggy was startled. “How can there be a relationship? I thought science was all reason and religion was all faith.”

“Many think that way,” Phillip laughed. “To understand what I mean by *eschaton*, you have to take a step back and ask yourself, ‘Did the cosmos just come together through random chance? Or is this universe the creative work of an intelligent agent? Like Polkinghorne, I believe our souls within us and the stars above us point our way to a divine handiwork. We can argue that point later, but for the sake of understanding an *eschaton*, let’s assume a divine creation for now.”

Ziggy nodded. “Okay, for the purpose of this discussion, I’ll grant you that.”

Phillip was inspired to pursue a parallel track. “Zygmund, you just played a Chopin waltz, right? So, tell me, what are the chances of you randomly striking one thousand piano keys—pulled out of a hat, let’s say—and producing such music? Doesn’t a great composition demand a great composer?”

“So, if the world is like a divine composition, as it appears to me, it must have been artfully constructed and must make sense not just now, but from the first note to the last. Ziggy, I don’t think I’m being irrational to believe that our world is a divine composition created by a mind much superior to that of Chopin. What do you think?”

“In-ter-est-ing,” he said slowly. “Go on.”

“The next insight flows from the first. If God truly created this world and each inhabitant is a work of purposeful art, then it’s not a stretch to believe that God loves that which he created. Didn’t Chopin love his waltzes? In the end, that is, at the *eschaton*, the ultimate composer will redeem and perfect his masterpiece. Can you grasp that? Our hope of redemption must rest on the faithfulness of God our Creator.”

Ziggy stared at Phillip, transfixed in thought. “So, what will we humans be like in the eschaton, as you call it?”

Phillip responded, “First off, we will not become incorporeal collections of fluff floating around on clouds playing on harps! The biblical data suggests our souls will inherit redeemed bodies, something akin to what we have now but purified beyond our understanding. Our primary source of insight concerning this redeemed matter is the resurrection of Jesus Christ himself.

“My friend, I tell you, if there is any hope of a post mortem destiny beyond the grave, it resides in the divinely guaranteed eschatological sequence of death followed by resurrection. The only true ground of life everlasting rests in the Father’s steadfast love. As I mentioned in that catechism, ‘Our chief aim is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.’ I expect I’ll have the opportunity to do just that—enjoy God in the eschaton, a time without time.”

Ziggy glanced at the wall clock. “But unfortunately, our time is spent. The crowds will soon rush in. Let me play one short number before you go. I’ve performed Chopin and Beethoven, but I have to admit Bach is my favorite. He’s the one who laid the groundwork for all Western music that followed. I’ll play his first etude.” He then laughed as he spoke, “If I ever make it to heaven, I’ll ask God for a mansion in the section where Bach is the cappella meister.”

Phillip joked back at him, “You need to get an admission ticket before you can choose your section.”

Ziggy countered, “I suppose you’re going to tell me Jesus is the only ticket puncher.”

Just before Bach sprang from the keyboard, Phillip rejoined, “Maybe *ticket puncher* is a one-word description of the ‘Way, Truth, and Life.’”

The minutes were fleeting. As the piano sounded its final somber note, Heidi asked her cousin, “How long will you be in town?”

The doors flung open, and the hubbub began.

Phillip raised his voice, “I’ll be in California until January, staying with Grandpa Jack. He has a spare room, you know. I plan to do some research at the Baptist Seminary down the road. It’s so close I can ride a bicycle.”

The boisterous crowd of thirsty hipsters rushed to the bar.

Heidi shouted into Phillip’s ear, “If I set an appointment at Madam Diana’s Psychic Parlor, would you join us? Please.”

The inside din proved too deafening to carry out a conversation, so Phillip took her by the hand and led her outside to the street. “Tell you what. I’ll go with you to see your fortune teller if you go with me to a presentation of *Messiah*. The oratorio will be performed at Saint Dominic’s Church in Pacific Heights. I’ll get back with you, but I think the time is a week from tomorrow, about 2:00. And bring along Ziggy. I’m sure he’ll appreciate George Friedric Handel.”

Heidi hesitated. Religious music was not her favorite way to spend a Saturday afternoon. However, she wanted her cousin to participate in her project. “Okay,” she agreed. “It’s a deal. I’ll talk to Zigmund. I think we can get a few hours off work.”

Chapter 7

The Trumpet Shall Sound



Phillip phoned Heidi to set up a rendezvous point for the *Messiah* performance. The cousins agreed to meet at one o'clock on December third at the Peace Pagoda in Japan Town. From there the trio would enjoy an Asian lunch and then walk the few blocks to Saint Dominic Catholic Church.

Phillip was running late. He dashed down Post Street, catching his breath as he jogged toward Heidi and Ziggy. "Sorry," he gasped. "I stopped by the church to pick up this program. It's a good preview of what we're about to hear." He pulled the ten-page brochure from his daypack and handed it to Ziggy.

Heidi gestured to her left. "Phil, there's a Korean restaurant nearby called *Seoul Garden*. They serve a fabulous lunch. Why don't we go there?"

"I'm up for that. We have an hour and a half before *Messiah* begins." He glanced at the exotic architecture. "And this looks like a great place to spend that time."

As Phillip and Heidi perused the menus, Ziggy engrossed himself in the program:

"The *Messiah's* libretto is made up entirely of Old and New Testament texts arranged by Charles Jennens and intended to present the entire gospel in a single composition. When his arrangement was complete, Jennens took his work to the great composer, George Handel.

"For eighteen months the libretto sat on Handel's shelf. Then, in three intense weeks, he composed the oratorio that breathed life into the text. Handel barely ate or slept, completely engulfed in the creation of his music. When he got to the Hallelujah Chorus, his assistant found him in tears, saying, 'I think I saw heaven opened and the very face of God.'

"The first performance of the masterpiece occurred in 1742 in Dublin, Ireland."

Heidi's shout snapped her boyfriend back to the restaurant reality. "Yoo-hoo! Zigmund, did you hear me? I said, 'Phil and I are ordering bibimbap.' Is that what you want too?"

Ziggy startled. "Yes, the rice mixed with vegetables. We had that last time. It's the one topped with a fried egg, right?"

Phillip was intrigued with the multiple side dishes: kimchi, bean sprouts, and lotus root. He liked the soy-braised potatoes best, asking for seconds.

The table talk alternated between Korean cuisine and church music, depending upon who led the conversation.

Ziggy paid the bill in cash. “Tip money,” he laughed.

The three wandered through a few Japanese shops before strolling to the corner of Steiner and Bush. Phillip marveled at the castle-like edifice. “So medieval looking.”

Heidi told him the flying buttresses were actually a practical measure. “You know, those buttresses serve a practical purpose, especially in this earthquake country.”

Ziggy was not so impressed. “We have a lot of these structures in Krakow. If you ever visit my hometown, I’ll give you a tour of Saint Mary’s Basilica. You can hear the tower trumpet mark every hour. It’s called the *Hejnal Mariacki*.” He pursed his lips and sounded the first five notes of the historic bugle call.

Phillip slapped his back. “Good job as a vocal trumpeter. By coincidence, my favorite piece in all *Messiah* is toward the end, “The Trumpet Shall Sound.”

The three were able to find seats in the back near the center aisle. The wooden pews were hard on the rear, but the vaulted ceiling and stained-glass windows were easy on the eyes. A lingering fragrance of incense graced the hallowed space.

Robed singers and a baroque orchestra soon took to the stage. The concert began with an instrumental, the *sinfonia*, followed by a tenor *accompagnato*: “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.”

Phillip and Ziggy were rapt in the oratorio, but Heidi fidgeted, her mind lost in thought.

As the music moved from chorus to air to recitative, Ziggy kept one eye on the performers and another on the written words.

As is custom, the three rose to their feet as the rousing Hallelujah Chorus crescendoed, “King of Kings and Lord of Lords.” Much of the audience joined in the praise. “And he shall reign for ever and ever.” Even Heidi sang out the words.

Phillip glanced to see a tear in his friend’s eye.

The soprano followed with an Air – “I know that my Redeemer liveth.” Then came a chorus – “Since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.”

The trumpeter rose to his feet, and Phillip leaned toward Ziggy’s ear. “This is my favorite part coming up. I love the bass voice and the baroque trumpet echoing the words.”

“Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.

“The trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.”

The final double chorus ended the performance: “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain” followed by the closing “Amen.”

As they were exiting the sacred space, Ziggy and Phillip conversed like old friends, imitating the technique of melisma—a single syllable sung across distinct notes.

Ziggy warbled, “And we shall be cha-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-anged. We shall be changed.” They chortled at the comic effect.

Heidi broke into the frivolity. “Guys, I’m feeling like some good Japanese tea. Let’s go back to Japan Town.” She added with a grin. “I also spotted a nice yoga mat I may want to buy.”

Ziggy responded in melisma. “I understand. You want a yo-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-ga mat.”

They located a quaint spot called *Pink Pink Tea Room*. The waitress suggested steamed green tea (sencha) with a bean-paste rice cake (daifuku). After a few sips of the hot liquid, Heidi munched down the pastry and announced, “Why don’t you guys sit and talk here? You’d just get bored following me around from shop to shop.”

Ziggy jumped to his feet and nudged Heidi away from the table. He pulled out his wallet. “Here, sweetheart, take this hundred bucks and have some fun.”

She gave him a grateful embrace and danced out the door.

When she was out of sight, Ziggy asked his tablemate, “What do you think of us, I mean as a couple?”

He looked his friend in the eyes. “I’ve known Heidi my whole life. She’s quite a gal: gorgeous, intelligent, vivacious. And, although I’ve only known you a few weeks, I must say you are a good match for her. You would make a great *cousin-in-law*. My only question is, ‘Why haven’t you asked her to marry you?’ I know that would please her mom to no end.”

Ziggy grew introspective. “It’s complicated. You know, in my country parents need to bless the union. My dad had his passport confiscated and can’t leave Poland. Also, there’s this: If I asked Heidi to marry me, I’m not sure she would accept.” He groaned, “You know she turned her back on all religions and gave me that feminist crap that marriage is a prison built by the patriarchy.”

“Yeah,” sympathized Phillip. “I figured something like that was going on, but I wasn’t sure if it was both of you or just Heidi.”

Exasperated, Ziggy went on. “And there’s this fortune teller thing. She seems obsessed with proving some gypsy woman to be a fraud. I don’t get it. It’s like if she refutes this fortune teller, she disproves the supernatural, and if she disproves the supernatural, somehow she defeats God.”

“Well,” laughed Phillip. “Something positive did come of her obsession.”

“Oh yeah? What’s that?”

“Maybe I shouldn’t be telling you this, but Heidi agreed to join us at Saint Dominic’s today if I agreed to accompany her to the palm-reading shop of Madam Diana.”

Ziggy was only mildly surprised. “I figured it was something like that.”

Phillip sought to break the mood. “But let’s return to the concert we experienced just now. What did you think of the performance?”

Ziggy perked up. “I loved it: the church setting, the magnificent music, but especially the words. You know, my mom took me to mass every Sunday, but I never paid much attention to scripture. It’s surprising to me how much was packed into the libretto.”

Phillip placed the program on the tabletop. “It says here the libretto contains eighty-one Bible verses taken from fourteen different books, both the Old and New Testaments.

“Ziggy, I noticed how closely you followed the text. If you had to condense *Messiah* into a few key points, how would you do it?”

He took a minute to re-read the printed words. “Let’s see if I can get my English right: point one is *prophesied*; two is *born*; three is *suffered*; four is *died*; five is *resurrected*; and six is *reigns*. What do you think?”

“I think you’re a theologian. Maybe you should join me at Princeton.”

Ziggy thought through his list. “I get points 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6. It’s point 5 that troubles me. Why is Christ’s resurrection so critical to your Christian faith? Why is it important that you and me and even Heidi be resurrected?”

Phillip sipped his lukewarm tea and leaned back in his chair. “Let me tell you a bit about my early upbringing. When we lived in Texas, my parents attended the Assembly of God Church. This particular denomination focused on the Bible and Scripture memorization. I was in fifth grade when I joined a Bible quizzing team. My dad was coach. We had flash cards to memorize and a three-button buzzer set. At interchurch competitions, it was a little like *Jeopardy* on TV. An adult would read the question, and the two teams of kids would hit the buzzer for a response. I was pretty quick at doing that.” Phillip slapped the tabletop with a “buzz”, simulating his quick handedness.

“One of the easy white-card questions was this: ‘What is the resurrection chapter of the Bible?’ The answer on the card’s reverse read: ‘First Corinthians 15.’ Ziggy, I just happen to have a Bible in my backpack. Is it okay if I read from that chapter?”

Ziggy grinned, “Right, you just *happened* to have a Bible. Who could have guessed?”

Phillip opened his New Testament. This chapter is what first piqued my interest in the eschaton. Is there truly life after death? What happens to our physical bodies? What happens to our souls post mortem? Do we have any hope? I’ll read these verses, and you tell me if resurrection is indispensable to the Christian faith.”

“Verse 13. If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.”

“Do you get it, Ziggy? The whole Christian enterprise hangs on the historicity of Christ’s resurrection.” He continued in First Corinthians.

“More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile.”

“The apostle is telling me my faith is wasted energy if a genuine resurrection never happened.”

“If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man.”

“I would say this: your points 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6 give me hope in this world—but only in this world. It’s point 5, the resurrection of Christ, that gives me hope in a world to come and for the possibility of my own future resurrection.”

Ziggy pondered his words. “So, you’re confident this resurrection event will happen?”

“Oh, yes, but maybe *resurrection* is not quite the correct word.” He searched his vocabulary. “Maybe better is the term *reconstituted*. You know how when you buy a carton of orange juice at the grocery store? It’s usually labeled as *reconstituted* which means they removed the water at the source and replaced it with different water at the destination.”

Ziggy nodded.

“Well, maybe your bodyless soul is like concentrated orange juice with the water evaporated out. You can think of this gooey substance as the ‘essence of Zygmond’. When the trumpet sounds, that essence is reconstituted with ‘living water’ to become the eternal Zygmond.

Ziggy smiled at the home-spun illustration. “Ah, so I will be *reconstituted* like store-bought orange juice. I like that concept.”

“In any event,” Phillip went on. “I’m dead certain I’ll rise from the dead.”

At this point, Heidi walked through the door, a bundle under each arm. She noted the open Bible on the round table. “I see you’re trying to convert my boyfriend.” She frowned, then made light of the situation. “I can’t leave you two boys unsupervised for one minute.”

Ziggy looked at his watch and retorted, “More like one hour, my dear. And we were actually discussing the lyrics to *Messiah*. I’m glad your cousin brought a Bible along.”

Phillip looked over the bill and left ten dollars on the table.

Heidi whispered into his ear, “Remember our bargain. I’ll be contacting you about our visit to Madam Diana.”

After a group hug in a misty drizzle, Phillip opened his umbrella for a walk to the bus stop. The couple headed toward the parking garage, Ziggy carrying a yoga mat and Heidi a porcelain tea set.

Chapter 8

The Flashing Red Palm



Heidi went to work, scheming how she might expose the clairvoyant as a charlatan. She contrived a three-phase plan. First, by telephone, she would set up a consultation session with Madam Diana. Second, she would gather about a dozen people unknown to the psychic and pack them into her lobby. And third, she would demand Diana use automatic writing divination to reveal everyone's name and birthday. To entice the psychic to cooperate, she thought to pay \$100 up front to accept the challenge and \$500 more if the facts proved correct. "That's a lot of cash," she told herself, "but there's no risk of losing the five hundred."

To her delight, the plan fell together without a hitch.

To begin with, Stacy informed Heidi that on December 17 the skating rink was advertising a *skate-with-Santa* afternoon. Any skater wearing a Santa cap would gain free admittance. Next, Sabrina told her big sister that Girl Scout troop 230 was collecting red caps for Santa Day and the leaders were seeking out chaperones. Heidi immediately phoned Rebecca Pinckney and volunteered the services of herself and Stacy. A drop-off time was set at noon on Saturday and a pickup at 3:00 PM.

Round Table was also located in the strip mall, and the Girl Scouts would indulge in a pizza lunch after roller skating. Heidi encouraged Ziggy and Phillip to support her scheme by offering them free pizza. When Kevin—the tenth-grade photographer—learned of the roller-skating, he asked Stacy if it would be okay if he joined the group. "I could take pictures of the skating Santas," he proposed.

Heidi borrowed the nightclub's camcorder as a means to document the psychic fraud for all the world to see. This was important to her, especially in regard to her sisters.

The pieces were now in place.

On the morning of the skating party, Ziggy entered into an argument with Heidi. "Didn't you hear your grandfather's warning? 'Stay away from people who communicate with the spirit world.'"

Heidi spoke with exasperation, "There is no such thing as the spirit world, so there's no danger. What's the matter with you? You've never been superstitious before. I hope all Phillip's talk about religion hasn't addled your brain."

“My brain is working fine,” he retorted. “A lot of what Phillip told me makes perfect sense. ‘Can you have a composition without a composer? Can you have a big bang without someone pulling the trigger? Can you have hope without a resurrection?’”

“My sweet Ziggy,” she spoke with frustration. “I’ve tried that God delusion. Believe me, it doesn’t work. I’ve read all the way through the Bible, front to back. It’s full of contradictions and fairy tales.”

He talked through his teeth. “I promised I would help you with this fortune teller, and I’ll keep my vow. I only ask this confrontation you’re provoking will be the last. You know, you can be right—and know you’re absolutely right—and leave it alone at that. There’s no necessity to prove others wrong, especially when those others are your sisters. No good can come of it.”

Heidi grasped his hands. “I appreciate your support. I will do today what needs to get done, and then after that, my days as an occult debunker will be over. I promise.”

“Then let’s get it done.”

Street parking was a challenge in San Francisco. The couple walked all the way to Oak Street to find the VW Rabbit. They drove over the Bay Bridge to the parsonage in San Lorenzo. Stacy, Kevin, and Sabrina were waiting on the front lawn and squeezed into the back seat. The five traveled down Mission Boulevard to the skating rink.

About ten girl scouts showed up wearing their Santa caps. The mothers left them in the charge of Mrs. Pinckney, Heidi, and Stacy. After an hour, Phillip showed up without a Santa hat. But he wasn’t interested in skating anyway. He wanted to talk theology with Zygmund.

At 1:30, Kevin took a group photo of all the Girl Scouts in their red caps. Heidi and Ziggy posed for the camera cheek to cheek. Then the skating party shuffled across the parking lot to Round Table Pizza. Each of the scouts handed over five dollars to Mrs. Pinckney, who ordered three large pizzas. Heidi ordered two more from her own pocket.

As the pizza disappeared and the table talk swelled, Heidi was unsure how to broach the topic of the fortune teller. She figured the logical starting point would be Rebecca Pinckney, so she asked, “You’re Alice’s mother, right?”

She looked toward her bouncy ten-year-old. “Yep, she’s all mine.”

Heidi expanded. “I understand my sister Sabrina and Alice went to a birthday party last month. What did you think of it?”

“Alice couldn’t stop talking about that amazing psychic, Madam Something. Later, I got word that your mom got very upset with Jennifer’s mom. Sheila did apologize, saying the psychic was a last-minute substitute and she thought the old Gypsy was a bit loony but harmless.”

Heidi considered how she might advance her scheme to phase two, finally asking, “Mrs. Pinckney, what do you think? Is the fortune teller crazy or serious, harmless or dangerous?”

She responded, “Don’t know. I haven’t thought about it. I’ve never met a psychic in real life.”

Heidi seized the opportunity. “Would you like to meet Diana? I have an appointment with her in twenty minutes, and I’d love for you to join me. You can see the flashing red palm just across the street, a short walk. It won’t cost you a penny.”

Alice, who perked her ears at the conversation, urged her mom, “Say *yes*, say *yes*. I’d love to meet Diana again.”

“Well, I guess we could. We’ve no other plans until dinner.”

Heidi then called all sixteen pizza-eaters to gather in the far corner and spoke to them. “Raise your hand if you were at Jennifer’s birthday party last month.”

Six raised a hand.

She went on. “Sabrina tells me a certain psychic was able to guess your names and birthdays by something she called automatic writing. Is that right?”

“Yes,” shouted a few.

“Well, I don’t believe in that junk and I want to test Madam Diana to see if she’s real or a fake.”

“Each of you can help me with this test by writing your name and birthday on this sheet of paper.” She pulled a notebook from her shoulder bag and supplied a few pens. “Please, can you help me?” she asked with sad puppy eyes.

All agreed to help Sabrina’s sister, so ten girl scouts, two adolescents, and four grown-ups filled in the requested information.

“Great,” said Heidi. “Thank you all. Now, who wants to join me across the street to test old Madam Diana?” She laughed and made light of the visit. She then checked her watch. “I have an appointment with her in ten minutes. You’re all invited.”

Mrs. Pinckney spoke up. “There may be a problem with that, dear. Four of the mothers will meet us here at Round Table in just twenty minutes. I don’t think those girls can go.”

Heidi’s proposed engagement came as a shock to Stacy. She questioned her, “Didn’t you hear what Mom told us about the occult?”

Sabrina shook her head. “And didn’t you hear what Gramps said about divination? Sorry, big sister, I can’t go with you.” She crossed her arms. “No way, Jose.”

Heidi sighed, “I understand what you’re saying. You don’t want to upset our mom.”

She looked over her audience. “Well, that means Mrs. Pinckney, Alice, Ziggy, and I can make this consultation.” She looked at Phillip, who didn’t seem too thrilled to visit a psychic. “Phil, tell you what. Why don’t you stay here to chaperone the girls until their moms show up? Okay? It should be pretty quick.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “I’d rather sit here with my cousins, anyway. We’ll stay here until you get back.”

Heidi looked at Kevin. “And what do you want to do? You can go with us or stay here until we get back.”

“I’m going.” He jumped to his feet. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world. And I’m taking my Nikon along.”

Just before pushing through the glass-door exit, Heidi turned to the group. “I’ll let you know how it goes. I’m betting I’ll expose Diana as just a big fraud.”

The December sky shone clear and still as they approached the flashing red palm.

“That’s odd,” said Ziggy, pointing to his front. “What’s that burst of smoke coming from across the street? A grass fire?”

“Don’t know,” said Kevin, “but eww, it smells like somebody lit a stink bomb.”

Mrs. Pinckney remarked, “It doesn’t look like smoke to me, more like a dust devil, but I don’t feel any wind.”

Kevin snapped a picture of the atmospheric phenomenon. He then cocked an ear. “Weird. There seem to be noises coming from the cloud too.”

The whirling disturbance dissipated as quickly as it had gathered.

A few minutes after three o’clock, Heidi knocked at the entrance of *Madam Diana’s Psychic Readings*.

The door opened and in walked Heidi, followed by Alice with her mother, then Kevin with his camera. Ziggy was last to enter, holding the camcorder under his arm.

Diana’s face was difficult to decipher. One moment she appeared sunny and smiling; the next pale and terrified, as if an enemy perched on her shoulder.

She used her mentalist skills to pick out her client. “You must be Heidi Adams. I was expecting you, but who are these others?”

“Just four witnesses I brought along.” She looked the psychic square in the face, catching a glimpse of apprehension. “Do you remember a birthday party you entertained at about a month ago?”

“Why, yes, I do,” the fortune teller replied. “About ten girls. They were delighted at the automatic writing divination.”

Heidi opened her purse to remove one envelope of money and another envelope of names. "I have a challenge for you. I want you to demonstrate your psychic power to me and these witnesses."

Madam Diana was startled.

The brash Heidi spoke on. "In my right hand are the names of sixteen people with their birth dates. I challenge you to use your so-called automatic writing to tell me who they are and what their birth dates are. It shouldn't be too difficult. A few weeks ago, you guessed the birthdate of Alice here and several other girl scouts."

The fortune teller protested. "You told me on the phone you just wanted a psychic consultation for twenty dollars. You didn't tell me about this."

"Exactly! That was my intention. I wanted to catch you unprepared." Heidi waved the envelopes. "I'm holding \$600 in this hand. I'm prepared to give you \$100 if you accept my challenge and the remainder if your writing matches what's on my list."

Diana took a deep breath, mumbled some words, and finally responded, "I notice that Polish guy has a video camera. If you want to record all this, it will cost you an extra \$100."

"Wait," she said. "How did you know he was Polish?"

"I know more than you think," she said to Heidi. Then to Zygmund she extended a greeting, "Witam, jak się masz."

Ziggy replied, "Szia hogy vagy. And I see you are a true Roma gypsy from Hungary."

Diana broke a slight smile.

Heidi returned to the matter at hand. "I agree with your request," and she put two one-hundred-dollar bills into her palm."

Five witnesses stood with their backs against the wall, and Diana sat at her consulting table. Zygmund studied the room. He noted flickering candles and dangling crystals. Dusty curtains displayed old photographs and a collection of religious paintings depicting Buddha, Muhammed, Krishna, Jesus, Pope John Paul II, and Gandhi. He flipped on his camcorder, green light flashing. Kevin hopped from place to place to take photos.

The smoke, stench, and noise, which had lingered outside the studio, suddenly resettled inside the room.

The psychic appeared to argue with something invisible seated across from her table. With reluctance, Diana took up her pen. Her body began to twist and quake. Her eyes glazed white. The automatic pen darted upon the paper, seemingly with a mind of its own. Diana's activity alternated between frenetic and catatonic. After eighteen such on-off cycles, the pen dropped from her limp hand.

She appeared exhausted. After a long minute, Diana picked up the handwritten note and glanced at it through her spectacles. She did a double take, then read the words with trembling hands. She clutched the paper to her chest. "I've never seen anything like this before."

She stared straight ahead, rocking her body, deciding her course of action. She forced a smile. "Congratulations, all of you will be living for a long time. That's all I'm free to share at this moment."

She wadded the linen paper into a tight ball and tossed it into a wastebasket festooned with signs of the zodiac. She then crossed her arms, signaling completion.

"Ha, just like a fortune cookie," taunted Heidi. "You will have a long life and prosper," she mocked with a Chinese accent.

Diana looked to the ceiling, grimaced, and railed at the unseen presence, "This is not a gift. This is a curse."

She then screamed at Heidi, "You're right! I'm a phony. Just go." She threw the two one-hundred-dollar bills in her face. "You owe me nothing. Get your rear out of here."

While Madam Diana was chasing four of the witnesses out the door, a fifth ducked low and snatched the wadded paper from the wastebasket. Kevin quickly tucked it into his red Santa cap.

On the short walk back to Round Table, Heidi strutted and grinned, "See, I was right all the time about this so-called psychic. She admitted she's a fraud."

When the glass door swung open, all the girl scouts had vanished. Phillip sat happily engaged with Stacy and Sabrina.

Heidi gloated to her sisters in triumph, "See, I was right. Ha-ha-ha! Diana admitted her clairvoyance is a trick to fool people, and it cost me nothing. She threw the money back to me."

Mrs. Pinckney, Alice, and Kevin weren't so certain of her triumphal statements. Ziggy ventured, "A lot of unexplainable things happened over there. It will be interesting to see what shows up on the video."

"And on my photos," Kevin chimed in.

Stacy and Sabrina put their heads down. Deflated, the two didn't know how to respond, so they kept silent. Sabrina lifted her face toward Heidi. Tears, not dimples, showed on her chubby cheeks.

Phillip gave his favorite cousin a stern look of displeasure, then excused himself, saying it was a long drive back to Mill Valley.

Mrs. Pinckney left Round Table with Alice, still trying to process the past thirty minutes.

At that point, Kevin removed the paper wad from under his hat, smoothed it out on the tabletop, and glanced at it without apprehension. He handed it over to Heidi, saying, “Hey, I saved this paper from the trash can. It’s for you.”

Heidi carefully read the message written by the automatic hand. She re-read it, looked puzzled, looked scared, and then laughed at herself. She stuffed the message into her purse without comment.

Sabrina shouted to her, “Drive us home, Heidi. *The New Archies* is on TV right now, and I don’t want to miss it all.”

Chapter 9

Upon a Midnight Clear



The confrontation between skeptic and psychic produced a ripple of consequences.

Heidi was befuddled beyond measure. Contrary to all her expectations and loud-mouth boasting, it seemed her sisters were right and she was wrong! If not by supernatural agency, how else could one explain it? By what other means could the sixteen lines of Round Table text match perfectly with the sixteen lines of automatic writing? This went way beyond the slight-of-hand of Penn and Teller. And what about that third column of mysterious dates? She couldn't shake a sense of foreboding.

Heidi finally determined to put the whole affair out of mind and block it out. She decided to preserve not only the letter but also her dignity. She kept the automatic writing tucked into a corner of her desk, not showing it to anyone, not even Ziggy.

At first Kathleen was angry at Heidi's contrary behavior, but as the days passed without a word from her first daughter, she asked herself, "What would Jesus do?" She invited the prodigal to the parsonage for a Christmas get-together, but Heidi said she and Ziggy had to work the holidays.

Stacy and Sabrina grew distant from their sister. The two tooted in the New Year of 1989, but without a peep from Heidi.

Phillip returned to Princeton and kept in communion with Ziggy via a dial-up service called *CompuServe*. The two typed text into their Commodore computers for hours, debating world affairs, spirituality, and especially the eschaton.

Ziggy informed Phillip the video recording of the psychic encounter was *mostly ruined*. His technical friend suggested it was some kind of electrical interference that caused the smoky appearance, flashes of light, and distorted voices.

Kevin handed over his photographs of the Saturday activity to Stacy. The skating Santas turned out great, but the photos of the clairvoyant appeared out of focus.

In February, Stacy got word that *Madam Diana's Psychic Readings* had shuttered its doors and Diana herself had disappeared. Where she had vanished, no one seemed to know.

Mrs. Pinckney was rattled by her thirty-minute contact with the spiritualist. In March, she attended a forum of Girl Scout leaders in Sacramento. She advocated in favor of a no-contact policy with anything related to occult practices.

The balance of world powers began a seismic shift in 1989. Forty years of cold war showed signs of thawing. Could it be true that communism was in retreat around the globe? Ziggy read his Polish-language newsletters with joy and disbelief. It seemed that Soviet leader Gorbachev was serious about perestroika (economic restructuring) and glasnost (openness). Where might it end?

June 4, 1989, marked a day Zygmund would remember forever. Poland conducted a free election, and Solidarity won a resounding victory. Communism fell and Lech Walesa became president of the republic. Ziggy was able to place a call to Krakow, celebrating for an hour with his father.

The Berlin Wall was breached a few months later, and Ziggy spoke of his return to Europe. Heidi frowned at all such discussion.

The once-confident Heidi grew despondent and ceased all talk of advancing to a lounge singer. With a variety of physical and emotional complaints, she visited the free clinic in October. She began a daily regimen of Valium, but upon advice from an OB nurse, she stopped taking the antidepressants and began to recover her health.

Both Ziggy and Heidi were working at the Club at 5:00 PM on October 17. Ziggy reported his piano began to warp and he hit a few sour keys. Heidi heard glass bottles crash to the floor as the linoleum tile undulated like waves on the ocean. The crowd began to scream as the whole city of San Francisco shook for ten seconds. Two hundred patrons flooded onto the street. Ziggy was more exhilarated than frightened. "This is really cool! We never get these earthquakes in Poland."

Ziggy was hoping the Thanksgiving holiday could be a time of Glasnost for the Adams family, telling his girlfriend, "Maybe that Berlin Wall should fall down too." Once more the family gathered in Mill Valley with Grandpa Jack. The East Coast branch was absent, but a desire to reconcile was not. All seven at the table knew instinctively that any discussion of religion or the occult was off-limits. The whole gang seemed to get along.

Yet, as the calendar advanced to December, Heidi began suffering from panic attacks.

Ziggy inquired, "What's going on with you?"

"I seem to be afraid of everything," she responded. "I'm just not feeling well; no energy, no motivation."

Ziggy paused, then stated the obvious. "Look, Heidi, I know you're pregnant. Did you think you could hide something like that from me?"

She answered his question with one of her own. "And do you think we should keep this baby? You know abortion is an option in California."

His face hardened for an instant, then melted. "Is that what's been troubling you, my treasure?" He pushed a tear from his eye. "Why have you been bearing this burden

without me? And why have you been torturing yourself with a choice whether to kill or keep our baby?”

She cried out in anguish, “I feel like I’m being pulled in two directions. One part tells me I don’t believe in marriage anymore, yet I want you for a spouse. I think a newborn can ruin a woman’s career, yet I want your baby more than anything. What can I do?” She wept in his arms.

“Heidi, Heidi,” he whispered in her ear. “I love you and want you for my wife. Marriage has never been a problem for me, but I always thought you were such a feminist, you’d scoff if I offered to marry you. You might reject my proposal, and that would devastate me. That’s why I never asked you.”

She flashed a grin. “Maybe I would have rebuffed you six months ago. Did I give you that feminist spiel that marriage serves as a mechanism to control women’s reproduction and places them in a subordinate position to men?”

Ziggy chuckled, “Yes, you wrote those things to me in a letter.”

“I copied them all from a book and never embraced them in my heart.”

Ziggy took two long breaths and mustered his courage. “In that case, Heidi Adams, will you marry me?”

“Yes, yes, I will.”

He shouted with excitement, “So then can we keep this baby as our own, an emblem of our love?”

Her whole body heaved as if a gigantic boulder had been lifted from her soul. “Are you positive you want to be a father, Ziggy?”

“It’s the highest possible calling in life.”

The couple laughed and loved into the night.

In the morning, an unexplainable apprehension overwhelmed Heidi. “Is it okay with you if we wait until January to share this news with others?”

He was puzzled. “Why? I don’t understand.”

She did not want to show the document of automatic writing to Ziggy, not until January at least. And so, she answered, “Let’s just say I have a bad omen about December, that something evil might happen near Christmas. It’s a kind of premonition.”

“It doesn’t have anything to do with the occult or that Madam Diana, does it?”

She fudged her response. “Not really, but can’t we wait until January? We can begin a new life together with a new year.”

Ziggy caught the spirit. “How about if I make the official marriage proposal at the New Year’s bash at the Arcade Club? That will be fun. I can play romantic music and get down on one knee.”

“That would be awesome,” she laughed, then added under her breath. “If I can survive until then.”

Heidi pivoted to her work schedule. “I’m willing to wait tables on Christmas Eve, as long as I can return to the apartment by 10:00 PM. However, I really need to rest all Christmas Day. I don’t even plan to go outside. I might feel better on the twenty-sixth.”

Ziggy didn’t understand what was going on below the surface, but then, parts of Heidi had always been opaque to his perception.

Two weeks into December, Ralphie spoke to his piano man. “Hey, Ziggy, I’m setting up a special work schedule for the holiday season. I think we’ll be crazy busy. You can work as many hours as you want.”

Ziggy responded, “Boss, I can work twelve hours a day, seven days a week, but Heidi says she needs a few days off.”

The manager grew concerned until Ziggy spoke in a low voice, “We’re expecting a baby, but please keep it a secret for now.”

Ralphie pinched his thumb and forefinger and drew them across his mouth, zipping his lips.

On Sunday morning, December 24, Ziggy slept until noon, but Heidi was up at dawn. When Ziggy first greeted her, she sat cross-legged on her new yoga mat surrounded by flickering candles. Was she meditating or praying? He couldn’t tell.

After a late breakfast, Heidi opened a conversation. “I have a question for you. It’s kind of philosophical.”

“Okay,” said Ziggy with puzzlement. “I’m game.”

With hesitation, she went on. “This is just a hypothetical, you understand, but if you believed you had only one day to live, how would you live that day?”

Ziggy stared across the table at her. “What do you mean?” He reflected. “Something like a prisoner on death row who knows his execution is the next morning?”

“Yes. That’s it.” Heidi was pleased the discussion had moved to the theoretical, away from her personal situation.

Ziggy went along with her theoretical inquiry. “Well, it depends on the disposition of the condemned man, doesn’t it? Some might seek solitude, others crowds. I imagine some guys would want to get drunk; others might want a debauched night in the

tenderloin. You know, like the saying goes, ‘Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.’”

“How about you, Ziggy?” she pursued. “What might you do?”

He thought for a long moment. “First, I think I would compose a letter, like a will and testament. I would instruct people on how to handle my death, and I’d designate who should get my meager possessions.” He laughed, “Not much to distribute.”

“I think I’d want to die with a clear conscience. I’d make a list of everyone I had ever offended or wronged—over my entire lifetime. Then I’d do my best to contact each one, detailing the wrong and asking for forgiveness. The closer that person is to me, the more I would beg them to forgive me. Oh, and for any wrong done to me, I would forgive that person outright.”

Heidi probed, “Would you be anxious if you knew the hour of your death?”

“I really don’t know,” he replied. “But I think it’s fortunate that we humans don’t know the exact time and circumstance of our passing.”

Heidi spent the next hour cloistered in the bedroom writing in her journal. Then at 3:30 the couple walked the thirty minutes from the apartment to the club.

The sights of Christmas were on full display: houses with lights, plastic Santas, and door wreaths. On impulse, Heidi grabbed Ziggy’s arm and spouted, “Thank you for putting up with my crazy moods.” Her face contorted. “Tell me you’ll love me forever and never leave me.”

He stopped, took her two hands, and looked into her eyes. “I will be with you for the rest of my life, my love Heidi, and with our new baby.” He grinned. “And if he’s a boy, I think I’ll name him *Szczęśliwy*. That means lucky in Polish, like I’m lucky to find you. What do you think?”

“I think you’re being silly.” She laughed.

After a few more steps, Ziggy asked her, “Do you know the song *We’ve Only Just Begun*?” I think it’s by the Carpenters.

“Sure,” she said and began to sing of white lace, roads to choose, and shared horizons.

“Doesn’t that sound just like us?” Ziggy asked. “Let’s work on that song together. Maybe we can debut it at the New Year’s Eve bash.” He shouted into the crisp winter air. “Listen up world. We’ve only just begun.”

The holiday event packed the club. Patron after patron requested that Ziggy perform a favorite Christmas tune. Heidi served tray after tray of alcoholic cheer. Both worked to exhaustion.

At 10:00 one of the regulars had become so intoxicated the bartender refused him further service. "Time to go home, Jimmy boy," he told the drunken patron and handed him a taxi-ride token. The bouncer escorted him outside and pointed to a line of waiting cabs. The inebriant stumbled across the street, but instead of hailing a cab, he urinated on a front-yard Santa, walked down a side alley, and then began a search for his car.

Heidi informed the head server it was time for her to return home. Ziggy put on his overcoat to accompany her back to the apartment. The two walked hand-in-hand past the front desk, then into the crisp night air. Ziggy turned his gaze upward in amazement. "Look how clear the sky is tonight. All those stars! Like on the night Jesus was born." He noticed Heidi shivering. "It's so cold, my dear one, and you forgot your wrap."

He abruptly let loose of her hand and raced into the club. "I'll just be a second," he shouted over his shoulder. As Zygmund grabbed Heidi's overcoat, he heard the wail of a police siren. He took a step toward the door and heard the screech of tires; another step and he heard the shatter of glass. Bursting through the entrance door, he saw the front end of a police car plowing into a human body, propelling a young woman five feet in the air. Heidi lay crumpled on the curb while, at the same moment, Jimmy staggered from his overturned Cadillac.

Ziggy pushed his hands over his eyes in disbelief. Two policemen hopped out of a squad car to control traffic and keep onlookers at bay. Patrons of the Arcade Club piled onto the sidewalk to witness the chaos. A few bystanders were already standing over Heidi's broken body. Ziggy still had hold of her wrap and gently placed it over her exposed legs. A cop tapped his shoulder. "Who are you?"

Without hesitation he wailed, "I'm her husband."

Ralphie ran to Ziggy's side and shouted, "Oh my God! It's Heidi." The street became an echo chamber as word passed backward: "It's Heidi," then "Poor Heidi," and "I can't believe it's her."

Paramedics were quick on the scene, a matter of minutes. They assessed the situation. Their subject was unconscious, presenting major head trauma. They cut away her trousers and shirt, revealing multiple wounds. They lifted her onto a stretcher, then strapped her into a gurney. A blood drip entered into one arm.

Ziggy shouted to a paramedic, "I'm her husband. I'm sitting in the back with her."

The medic obliged. "Hop right in."

"Where are you taking her?" he asked above the racket.

"She's lucky. The UCSF Medical Center is only a few blocks away, and it's the best trauma care there is."

Ziggy had earlier grabbed on to Heidi's loose handbag. He fished around in her wallet and found an old library card with her old San Lorenzo address and telephone number. The frantic club manager was hanging around the ambulance, and Ziggy called

to him. “Ralphie, please phone this number and talk with Kathleen. Tell her the situation and to rush to the medical center as soon as possible.”

Ziggy arrived at the emergency desk at about 10:35. The doctor on duty said he would have to sit in the waiting room until he could stabilize the patient. “We’re doing all we can to save your wife,” he said in obvious distress.

A police detective introduced himself to Ziggy. He wrote down notes as Ziggy described what he had seen of the accident.

Kathleen, Stacy, and Sabrina arrived at the front desk about 11:30. All three were trembling with tears. One more time, Ziggy recited the details of the accident.

On several occasions little Sabrina asked her mom, “Is she going to make it?”

“I don’t know,” was her consistent response. “She’s in God’s hands.”

At 11:45, the attending physician ushered the four of them into a small cubicle. A comatose Heidi lay in a hospital bed wrapped in bandages. Her head was wound about as if in a turban, her eyes covered, and a respirator assisted her breathing. Through an I-V she was receiving blood plasma and adrenaline to keep her heart pumping. An EKG beeped erratically to the left of her bed.

The only exposed body parts were her two feet, sticking out from underneath the blanket. Stacy and Ziggy held on to her right foot; Kathleen and Sabrina hugged the left. Sometimes they wept, sometimes they prayed out loud, and sometimes they were silent.

The wall clock ticked. It was 11:55 PM on December twenty-fourth.

The EKG monitor shrieked, and a doctor and nurse rushed into the room. The family of four stepped back to the curtain to provide space. The EKG now showed a flat line. The doctor checked the pupils, felt for a pulse, and waited.”

The anxious nurse asked, “Doctor, is there anything more we can do?”

He removed the patch from the roof of her skull and examined the exposed brain matter. He winced. “No nurse, there was little chance she could ever survive this trauma.”

The flat line continued for another minute, the only sounds being the whoosh of the respirator and quiet sobs.

The doctor spoke in a professional voice. “Who is next of kin?”

Kathleen was about to affirm her position but instead looked toward Ziggy. “I heard him say he is the husband. And so, he’s next of kin.”

Fighting tears, the doctor looked toward Zygmund. “Your wife is still on life support but all her systems have shut down. You can see the EKG indicates she’s had no electrical activity in her heart for the last several minutes. I just examined her head

wound.” He bit his lip. “The injury was fatal. She has died.” A moment passed. “Do I have your permission to turn off life support? That’s my strong recommendation.”

Zygmund looked at Kathleen. “What do you think?”

She nodded a *yes*, and he said, “Yes, doctor, do what you must.”

Just then, Grandpa Jack entered the room. He guessed from the quiet sobs and the doctor’s somber demeanor that Heidi had passed away. He rocked his daughter in his arms.

The doctor wrote in his notes, “Heidi Adams, deceased: December 25, 1989, 12:09 AM.”

Chapter 10

Tempus Fugit



For all who loved Heidi, the remaining 23 hours and 51 minutes of Christmas Day passed with alternating waves of numbness, pain, and disbelief. No one could sleep. Minds reeled in shock: “Why did this have to happen?” and “But, she was only twenty years old!”

Kathleen asked the pastor’s wife to pack up the parsonage Christmas tree, take down the decorations, and put the brightly wrapped gifts into storage.

Christmas would forever be a holiday tainted. How could there be “Joy to the World” when there was grief in the heart? How could those closest to Heidi ever again celebrate the birth of a savior when the same December day brought to mind the death of a daughter—a sister, a granddaughter, a cousin, and an almost-wife? Grandpa Jack counseled his weeping family. “The greater the love, the deeper the sorrow, the more plentiful the tears.”

Among all who sorrowed, Kathleen Adams suffered the most shock—or more aptly put, *shell-shock*. She had lost her mother in 1983, then her husband in 1986, and now her daughter in 1989. She felt her Christian faith under siege but discovered a measure of solace in the poetry of Psalm 13.

“How long, O LORD, will you forget me? forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? ... But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, for he has been good to me.”

In a counterintuitive fashion, the gloomy words of Scripture lifted her spirit from the slough of despond and planted her feet firmly on the path to wholeness.

A few days after Christmas, Stacy Adams clipped the newspaper account from the San Francisco Chronicle:

“Woman killed near the intersection of Hayes and Divisadero in San Francisco. About 10:00 PM on December 24, Heidi Adams, 20, was struck by an SFPD squad car, which was in pursuit of a drunken driver. She later died at the USF medical center. The police car driver sustained minor injuries and was placed on administrative leave. The speeding vehicle overturned, with the driver sustaining major injuries. He remains in the hospital.”

On January 2, 1990, Heidi's funeral was held at Chapel of the Chimes. The East Coast branch flew in, and Phillip Richardson facilitated the ceremony. He opened his eulogy with glowing words of his cousin's kindness and closed the tribute with an evangelical appeal. "Just three weeks before her death, Heidi accompanied me and Zygmund to a performance of Handel's *Messiah*. When we heard the Halleluiah Chorus, 'King of kings and Lord of lords,' Heidi stood with us to sing along. Her eyes sparkled as she sang out, 'And He shall reign forever and ever.'"

Phillip challenged his audience. "Look into your hearts right now. Are you prepared for a resurrection? Do you know the King of Kings? Do you have assurance that you will reign with him forever and ever?"

Kathleen could not speak without a torrent of tears and thus sat in silence, each surviving daughter clutching onto a hand.

For their parts, both Stacy and Sabrina spoke a brief remembrance of their big sister, as did her Uncle Brad and two high school friends. Ralphie, the club manager, rose to his feet to put in a good word for his waitress and lounge singer.

Without a spoken introduction, Zygmund Kaminski played a five-minute video tribute to Heidi singing to the piano accompaniment of *Dancing Queen*. The projected image showed a vibrant young woman brimming with accomplishment and promise. Ziggy managed to choke out a single sentence, "We had only just begun to live."

Grandpa Jack closed the service with a prayer.

"We give her back to You, dear Lord, for You gave her to us. Yet as You did not lose Heidi in giving her to us, so we have not lost her in her return to You. Not as the world gives do You give, O Lover of Souls. What You give You do not take away, for what is Yours is ours always if we are Yours."

Heidi Adams was interred in a gravesite next to her father. Serving as pall bearers were two uncles, two cousins, and two co-workers. A headstone would have to wait for another month.

A reception followed the funeral at the Centennial Church, where a contingent of church ladies managed the finger food and photographic displays. As the event drew to a close, Ziggy asked to speak with Kathleen alone. "Mrs. Adams, my heart is broken. I can't stay in America any longer. I've purchased a one-way ticket to Warsaw and I'm leaving late tonight." He handed her three items: the VHS tape, a key to their San Francisco apartment, and an envelope of cash.

"I've removed all I need from our studio. It doesn't amount to much, fills only this one duffle bag. All that remains in the apartment is yours. Sell it, save it, or toss it out. I

don't care. Please contact the landlord and settle accounts for Heidi and me. The cash should be more than sufficient." He turned to walk away.

Kathleen tapped his shoulder. "Please, wait for just a moment. Look, Zygmund. I understand why you're returning home and it's probably the right move. However, you need to hear me say this. I know for certain how much you loved Heidi and how much she loved you. I heard you identify yourself as her husband at the hospital. I believe that was true in all but the legal sense. I would have been proud to call you my son-in-law."

Kate turned her head and shouted, "Stacy, Sabrina, Dad! Come here to say good bye to Ziggy."

The three rushed in his direction. Phillip followed in their steps. Little Sabrina hugged her almost brother-in-law around his waist. Stacy selected a few recent photos from the tables and put them into his shoulder bag. After more tears, Phillip placed his hands on Ziggy's shoulders and bestowed a parting blessing.

Ziggy then motioned to Ralphie that it was time for him to depart. He explained to Kathleen, "My old boss is driving me to the airport. I hate to leave your kind company and my job as piano man. But without Heidi ..." His voice broke and trailed into a sigh.

Phillip reminded his departing friend, "Be sure to keep in touch. There's still a lot we have to talk about."



A few days later, Kathleen drove her Pontiac to Ashbury Street in San Francisco. Phillip followed in a small U-Haul. She unlocked the door to Heidi's studio apartment and there the two remained for most of Wednesday, packing and cleaning.

Kathleen had brought a dozen cardboard boxes and a few empty suitcases. They packed away kitchen supplies, clothing, books, vinyl records, and knick-knacks. Kathleen also carried her cedar hope chest, the one her mother had given her upon her marriage to Steven.

She explained to Phillip. "I was going to pass this down to Heidi whenever she got married, but that's not going to happen now. So instead, I want to put all of Heidi's most personal possessions in the chest. When it's full, I'll lock it up. Maybe I can go through it at a later date when my heart's not so heavy."

Into the chest went all of Heidi's diaries, her jewelry, scrapbooks, correspondence, pictures, and cassette tapes, as well as a few scarves and stuffed animals. There was room for the Japanese tea set, but not the yoga mat. Stacy would inherit that.

As promised, the landlord showed up at 4:00 to take possession of the rental unit. He knew of Heidi's death and extended his sympathy. He permitted large items of second-hand furniture to stay behind. Kathleen settled the account and handed over the key.

Once home and off-loaded, Kate put the heavy hope chest in the center of the living room. She spoke to Stacy and Sabrina. “I want to make this into Heidi’s memory box. Before I lock it up, help me search the house for more of her personal effects.”

To the trove of memorabilia, they added her birth certificate, high school diploma, report cards, Sunday School drawings, and Girl Scout awards.

Stacy deposited the newspaper clipping, the funeral bulletin, and the VHS of *Dancing Queen*. She wrote a personal note, sealed it, and dropped it into the cedar chest.

Sabrina looked into her mom’s face and sniffled a question. “I wrapped this little gift for Heidi’s Christmas present. Is it okay if I put it in the memory box?”

Her mom nodded *yes*.

Kathleen then challenged her girls. “Let’s bind this chest with straps as a kind of time capsule. Heidi was twenty years old. Let’s put a sign on the chest. “Do not open until Heidi’s fiftieth birthday, May 21, 2019.”

Sabrina’s eyes got big. “But, Mom, that’s so-o-o very far off!”



Grandpa Jack showed up on a rainy day in February with a gift for Kathleen. It was the old chiming wall clock. He explained how Rosa was suffering from insomnia and the gongs kept her awake at night.

He expanded, “I don’t think I ever told you the history of this antique. I shipped it home from Germany when your grandmother Klara died in 1978. It was a wedding gift to her and your grandfather Albert. It’s a rare JURA clock from about 1920. What makes this clock special is that it has eleven hammers and ten gongs. It can play two different melodies, either the Westminster chimes or *Ave Maria*.

“See the lever here? It can strike every quarter hour or only on the hour. Oh, the turning key is hidden here and you’ll have to wind it once a week.”

Kathleen was delighted with her gift and mounted it in the nook next to the kitchen. Its constant background chimes provided a sense of comfort and family continuity going back seventy years.

Sabrina studied the pendulum in action and asked her gramps, “What’s that mean, those words written on the circle?”

He replied, “Oh, that’s a Latin phrase, *Tempus Fugit*. It means something like ‘time flees’ or ‘time flies.’ It’s a kind of a pun; don’t you see? The pendulum is flying back and forth while the minutes and hours are fleeting into the future.”

Time passed. Tempus fugit. The wounds of Christmas Day, 1989, never disappeared, but hardened into scars. A new normal established itself—one without the presence of Heidi Adams. Season followed upon season, the calendar turned, and life went on.

Over the next seven decades, the cast of characters changed. Birth, marriage, and friendship added to the mix. Death, divorce, and distance subtracted. Age caught hold of all in its relentless march forward. The wall clock tick-tocked into the future with Prussian precision.

- In 1990 Kathleen had sued the San Francisco Police Department for wrongful death. In 1991 her personal injury attorney won an award of 4.5 million dollars from the city, 40% of which was swallowed in legal fees.
- With 2.7 million dollars in cash, Kathleen decided to move away from the parsonage and the memory of three deaths. She purchased an oceanfront home at Stinson Beach along Sea Drift Road.
- During the decades of the 90s, Kate made it a priority to attend church every Sunday with her father, Rosa, and Sabrina.
- For a year, Kathleen was a substitute teacher at Stinson Beach Elementary, but in 1992, she landed a permanent position as a fifth-grade teacher. Her commute was a brisk twenty-minute walk.
- To address her daughter's continuing melancholia, Kate welcomed a puppy into the house. Sabrina named her chihuahua-terrier mix *Miss Peeps*. The scrappy pup grew to be her faithful friend, cuddle companion, and therapeutic jester.
- With a checkbook adequate to pay the high tuition, Stacy transferred from Cal State Hayward to Swarthmore College. She loved living on the East Coast.
- Sabrina graduated from Tamalpais high school in 1998 and attended the College of Marin. She continued to live at home.
- In 1999, while Stacy was at the Temple School of Medicine in Philadelphia, she married Doctor William Curtis.

~2000s~

- After a short illness in 2001, Grandpa Jack died in 2002. His will stated that Rosa could occupy the Mill Valley property at no cost as long as it remained her residence.

- Jason Richardson, Brad's younger son, served as an ace fighter pilot for the U.S. Air Force. He died in Afghanistan in 2004 in a training accident.
- In 2007 Uncle Larry was found dead of a drug overdose in his Oakland flophouse.
- Sabrina was heartbroken when her mom reported her beloved Miss Peeps had died. She drove one hundred miles to bury her baby dog in the backyard near the shoreline. She poured a square-foot slab of wet cement and etched into it the name of *Miss Peeps*.

~ 2010s ~

- Sabrina married Hector Miñoso in 2012, and the couple moved to San Jose.
- Casandra was born to Sabrina and Hector in 2013.
- Rosa passed away in Mill Valley. Brad sold the house and split the proceeds with Kathleen.
- Ziggy in Poland and Phillip in Texas remained correspondents over the internet, checking in with each other about once a month.
- On May 21, 2019, Heidi's fiftieth birthday came and went without notice. Neither Kate, Stacy, nor Sabrina remembered the locked hope chest.
- Sabrina divorced her abusive husband in late 2019. She struggled as a single mom, working in Silicon Valley punching out computer chips.
- Via Facebook Sabrina connected with two of her old San Lorenzo friends: Alice Pinkney and Jennifer Martinez. They met on occasion for coffee.

~ 2020s ~

- After surviving a bout with COVID-19, Kathleen finally retired in 2021. She remained active in her church and community.
- Sabrina remarried in 2025. Her new husband, Thomas Finch, was a widow with three grown children. They moved to Sacramento where he served as a pastor.
- Bradley Richardson passed away in College Park, Maryland, in 2026.

~ 2030s ~

- Ziggy served for six years in the Polish Sejm (parliament).

- Phillip taught philosophy at Dallas Theological Seminary.
- Stacy Curtis (nee Adams) lived in Florida working as an anesthesiologist. Bill, her husband, practiced medicine as a renowned cardiologist.
- Sabrina and Tom resettled in San Rafael to be near the aging Kathleen.

~ 2040s ~

- Ziggy retired in Krakow, having fathered two children.
- Phillip retired in Fort Worth with his wife. Their four children lived nearby.
- Stacy and William Curtis retired in Palm Beach, Florida. Their only child, Raymond, was estranged from them and lived in Seattle.
- Sabrina and Tom Finch moved in with Kate to provide her with home care.

~ 2050s ~

- Kathleen Adams died peacefully in her home at 104 years old. Sabrina inherited the oceanside property on Sea Drift Road.
- Pastor Tom Finch died of a heart attack and Cassandra—known as *Cassie*—moved into the house with her mother, Sabrina.
- In 2060 Cassie would discover the old hope chest, squirreled away in the attic. Would Sabrina cut the straps and discover its seventy-year-old secrets?

Chapter 11

Hope Chest



Sea Drift Road ran along the sandy shoreline of Stinson Beach, California. The unincorporated village in Marin County was located about thirty-minutes north of the Golden Gate Bridge along winding Highway One. This mile of beachfront properties hugged the Pacific Ocean not too distant from the giant redwoods of Muir Woods and the hiking trails of Mount Tamalpais. Frigid sea-surface temperatures kept the coastline cool, windy, and foggy throughout much of the year.

The passage of time had little impact upon the “strand of sand”. In the year 2059, about 600 souls lived year-round in the tightknit community. Sabrina Finch felt grateful to be among the privileged villagers. She had inherited her mom’s place in 2051 and was blessed by the live-in companionship of her only child, Casandra.

Sabrina’s mother, the late great Kathleen Adams, continued to be a legend in the Bolinas-Stinson Beach area; a popular resident for sixty years, a teacher for two generations of local kids, and, at the age of eighty-nine, the oldest woman ever to have completed the famed Dipsea cross-country race.

In February of 2060, a gale force wind blew onto the idyllic shoreline. The storm surge crept under the crawl space and a vicious blast of cold air stripped tiles from the roof. The damage was substantial but as Sabrina told her daughter, “That’s why we pay for insurance.”

The roof repair company informed the occupants that everything in the attic had to be removed before re-tiling could begin. This upper level was accessible only by means of a pulldown stair case. For Kate, the rooftop space had served as a graveyard for old technology, outdated clothing, and abandoned projects. For the last twenty years of her life, the aging home owner had not ventured up the wobbly stairs.

With the help of four neighbors, Cassie emptied this attic. Most items were rain damaged and hauled away as trash. Several plastic storage containers held scrapbooks and letters and were salvageable. When the plywood floor was finally cleared of ancient clutter, Cassie uncovered the long-locked hope chest. A tarp and heavy blanket had prevented water damage and Cassie was able to read the stenciled sign: “Do not open until Heidi’s fiftieth birthday, May 21, 2019.” She walked around the object taking a panogram of her discovery and then rushed downstairs to show her mom.

Sabrina was resting on a sofa reading an old-fashioned book of paper and ink. She sat up when she heard the clip-clop of Cassie’s feet plodding down the staircase.

Cassie greeted her mom. “You’ll never guess what I found up there?”

“I hope it’s not dead rodents,” joked her mother.

Cassie overlooked the comment and clicked a button on her device. An image sprung up on the big wall screen. “Do you recognize this?” She asked Gustav—the home AI—to enhance the photo and zoom in on the label.

It took a few seconds for the object to register in her memory. “Was that upstairs? Really? I thought it was long gone. It’s been so many years since I last saw that chest. Quick. Give your Aunt Stacy a call for me.”

Cassie barked into the air, “Gustav, contact Stacy Curtis. Tell her it’s important and to hop on our screen.”

After a few moments, when her visage appeared, eighty-six-year-old Stacy showed concern on her face. “What’s up, Sis? I hope everything’s alright with you.”

“Yes, yes,” Sabrina assured. “There’s no real emergency, just recovering from our hurricane. You know we had to patch up mom’s roof, right?”

“Yes, you told me that.”

“Before we could make repairs, we had to clear out all the clutter. And you know mom had a ton of that.”

“Okay. That’s true enough.” Stacy wondered where the conversation was ambling.

“Can you guess what Cassandra just found hidden in a corner?” Gustav arranged for a rotating image of the hope chest to appear.

“What?” shouted Stacy. “I can’t believe it. And look at that. The straps are still in place. It looks like mom never even opened the hope chest.”

Sabrina could not contain her excitement. “Oh, Oh. How long do you figure it’s been locked up now?”

“Let’s see,” said the big sister. “Heidi died on Christmas Day 1989, so it must be a tad over seventy years. Can you believe it? We were just girls in San Lorenzo.”

The two octogenarians shared memories of that tragic Christmas, Stacy finally saying, “You know, there’s always been a cloud of mystery surrounding Heidi’s death. Remember those strange days? It happened about the same time all that fortune telling business was going on.”

Cassie listened in with curious surprise.

Stacy devised a plan on the spot. “Sister, will you do me a favor? Can you take the chest downstairs, clean it up, but not cut the bands? I’ll be at mom’s place in two days. I promise. This reveal will be the most fun I’ve had in ages—like opening a time capsule from the last century. I’m sure my hubby Bill will support my time away.”

Four local friends caught wind of the discovery. Malcolm Walters lived a few houses down the beach with Judith his wife. Mac, as he was known, was a retired technocrat who had helped Sabrina install her robotics and establish Gustav as a member of the household.

Judith was less into high tech and more into Jewish mysticism. She sought to decode the hidden meaning of the Torah by means of the Kabbalah. Both Mac and Judy were in their mid-sixties.

Simon James was their live-in grandson, now about twenty-two. He was a surfer, a body builder, and on occasion took the Walters yacht out to sea. Carefree at heart, he always pitched in to help out ‘Granny Sabrina.’

Brian de Soto lived on the far side of the lagoon along Dipsea Road. Father Brian, as he was known, was a former Jesuit priest who had lived with his domestic partner until the man’s recent death. Father Brian was currently serving as head of the Sea Drift Association, a gated community of about 200 residents. He was actively assisting the ten families who had suffered damage during the February storm. Brian was seventy-five and not in the best of health.

These four, who had helped in clearing the attic, asked to be on hand when Cassie and Sabrina opened the old cedar chest. Father Brian proposed to write a human-interest article for the local newsletter. Maybe the Marin county news would pick it up as well.



A few days later, on March 1, 2060, Stacy arrived at the San Francisco Airport. She boarded a Go-Pod and wended her way to Stinson Beach. Gustav sniffed her digital scent and announced her imminent arrival to her sister and niece.

The pod door sprung open and Stacy breathed in the cool Pacific air. She stretched wide her arms, announcing, “It’s so good to be out of the Florida humidity and back into California’s natural air-conditioning.”

The two sisters chatted in the parlor awaiting the arrival of the four guests. The cedar chest rested on a knee-high coffee table in the center of the room. Kathy walked around it, patting the surface. “Have you told our cousin, Phillip, about the box?”

“Yes, he’ll be joining us via Sky-Link in a few minutes.”

“I hope you’re doing a deep recording of this from several angles.”

“For sure, Cassie placed four mini-cams around the room and Gustav has orders for a first-class recording session. There’s even a camera right above the box. Don’t worry. He’s a very competent X-bot.”

Stacy laughed, “No doubt better than our Festus.”

A disembodied voice echoed in the room. “Mam, I heard that comment. I’m here too you know, hanging out with my buddy Gustav.”

Phillip appeared on screen. He was ninety-two years old, but still in remarkable health. “Hey, I remember that hope chest. I helped your mom pack up Heidi’s belongings a few days after her funeral. Maybe some of it still has my finger prints.”

Gustav echoed, “Sir, I can check that out for you if you’re really interested.”

“Just joking,” came his reply.

Mac, Judy, Simon, and Brian walked through the back door and sat in folding chairs as if they were box seats in a magic show.

The German wall clock chimed two times and Sabrina announced “Let’s get started.” As mistress of ceremonies, she handed a knife to Simon. “Would you please cut the straps for me?”

The young man struggled a bit because the plastic straps were winched tight. Simon had brought along a set of bolt cutters and was able to remove the old lock and set it aside.

Sabrina bowed to her sister. “Stacy, you’re the eldest. Please do us the honor of opening the hope chest.”

Even after seventy years, the fragrance of cedar wafted from the memory box. Stacy pulled out the items one-by-one. First to see daylight were several stuffed animals—“stuffies” as the girls had called them. These creatures appeared deformed from longtime compression but the bear, bunny, and Mickey Mouse were still recognizable.

Next came a small box with Christmas wrap. Stacy read the label, “To Heidi from Sabrina. Merry Christmas.” She handed the seventy-year-old gift to her sister.

“That’s my scribble all right, but I don’t remember what I gave her.” Sabrina then carefully pulled loose the ribbons and paper. “Oh yeah. The Santa broach I bought for her at K-Mart. But what’s this blob?”

Stacy pulled loose a piece of colorful tin foil. “I think it used to be a chocolate reindeer.” She put the items on the tabletop.

A stratum of envelopes appeared. A larger one contained Heidi’s certificates and diplomas. A smaller one revealed childhood drawings.

She then withdrew a third envelope. Stacy recognized her signature. “Yes, I remember dropping a note into the memory box.” She broke the seal. “Let me read it first, then I’ll share with you what I told Heidi.”

Tears welled in her eyes as her lips moved in silence. She cleared her throat and spoke words written while a fifteen-year-old.

“Big Sister Heidi, what can I say? I don’t know why you had to die. Only God knows. I’m so sad to lose you. I will miss you as long as I live. I’m sorry the past few years were so difficult between us. Whatever part I played in that,

I sincerely apologize. I assumed we'd have years to put aside our differences. But it didn't work out that way.

"Oh, Heidi! I so much looked forward to a future full of you and Ziggy. (I knew you would marry him and maybe have babies.) Now you are gone and so is Ziggy. Mom is so sad. It's like Dad dying all over again, maybe even worse. I would give anything in the world to have the Drama Queen back with me. There will always be a Heidi-sized hole in my heart. ~ Your Little Sister, Stacy the Scarecrow."

Her hands trembled as ancient emotions bubbled to the surface. She placed her note on the table and sobbed. She asked Cassie to carry on with the unpacking. Her niece read aloud the embossed newspaper clipping of the San Francisco death and then passed around the church bulletin from Heidi's funeral. She handed the VHS tape to Simon who couldn't guess what he fiddled in his fingers.

Father Brian laughed. "I haven't seen a tape like that in years. It's magnetic not digital so even your X-bot can't decipher it. I have an old friend in the City who has an even older machine that can transfer it into something readable. It may be a challenge if the magnetic tape is brittle."

Sabrina next removed full-page sheets of newspaper inserted to separate contents. All were dated from January 1990. One headline read: "General Noriega surrenders to US forces in Panama."

She then extracted a parcel of journals bound in twine, snipping the fastenings and spreading them on the tabletop. She told the assembly. "I think Aunt Stacy and Mom will have to read through all of these later. It may take a while."

Next came out a shoe box stuffed with personal letters, photographic negatives, notes, and medical files. Cassie sat that aside as well. A Japanese tea set, CDs, costume jewelry, and vinyl records appeared.

Cassie held up two Michael Jackson albums, one called *Bad*, the other called *Thriller*.

"I remember those," shouted Stacy, cheering her mood. Then she spoke to Festus the X-bot, "Play *Bad* by Michael Jackson." The music thumped softly in the background.

The last item extracted was the striped handbag that once belonged to Heidi—the same one knocked from her hand as she hurtled through the air. After applying a pinch of lubricant to the zipper, Cassie nudged the bag open. She held up a ring of keys, a makeup kit with mirrored compact and lipstick, a packet of tissues, a dispenser of Tic-Tac's, and a bottle of anti-nausea pills. Her billfold contained seventeen dollars, a credit card, a parking ticket, and her driver's license. These were all true relics of the late twentieth century. She also pulled out a letter addressed to Ziggy. It was sealed and labeled, "Open only in case of my death".

The spectators gasped. Mac spoke out. “Do you think Heidi had a premonition she was about to die?”

Phillip followed up. “I’m still in occasional contact with Zygmund Kaminski. He’s in Poland, in ill health, but still alive. The letter’s addressed to him personally, so we shouldn’t open it up.”

Stacy nodded in agreement and Cassie set the sealed letter aside.

The mistress of ceremonies announced an end to the unpacking ceremony and presented a 1980s silk scarf to Stacy as a remembrance of ‘the great reveal’. She gave Cassie a necklace bejeweled with Egyptian scarabs.

The four guests examined the various items arranged on the big table. Father Brian gravitated to the inscription on Heidi’s letter to Ziggy. He re-read the funeral bulletin. “This premonition is the angle I’ll write about.”

Another set of eyes was processing the information. These eyes, in the form of five mini-cams, had recorded all the relative facts and understood them to be incontrovertible. Gustav knew the box was in storage, the bands were secure, the documents were genuine, and the words on the letter undeniable. The X-bot strove to arrive at a logical explanation. He concluded there was none beyond coincidence.



Stacy Curtis had planned to remain with her sister for only five days, but the days stretched into weeks, and then into a full month. She was consumed by the Heidi files. Stacy did make one quick round-trip to Palm Beach to pick up her high school diaries and roller-rink photos.

Cassie took on the role of Gustav’s page turner. The AI X-bot learned to decipher Heidi’s chicken scratch, convert it into print, then transform it into Heidi’s cloned voice. The recovered VHS of her dancing, singing, and speaking provided the basis of her reconstitution.

As a final step, the sisters interacted with a hologram of the reanimated Heidi Adams as she read to them from her own journals. The image would joke and ad-lib as if Heidi were still among the living. But Sabrina was suspicious. Were they really watching her sister in action, or were they actually viewing a clever Gustav doing an AI imitation of Heidi?

During their first week of detective work, the sisters made four notable discoveries. First, Heidi was deeply shaken by their father’s death. She appeared to internalize the grief, seeking to affix blame on someone. That someone turned out to be God. She wrote in her journal of checking out library books and VHS tapes with an anti-god position. She commented that Bertrand Russell’s “Ten Reasons Why I am not a Christian” make perfect sense to her. She adopted the reasons as her own.

Next, the sisters learned that at the time of her death, Heidi was about four months pregnant. She wrote about her visits to the clinic and her morning sickness. They also discovered a twelve-week sonogram among her medical records.

Third, she was terrified of a death forecast which she expected might come on Christmas Day. She was reluctant to provide details, even to her diary. However, by backtracking her words, they discovered the root of terror began with the psychic encounter in December 1988.

Heidi also alluded to two documents, one she termed “pizza note” and the other “spooky note”. However, neither letter could be found among her effects.

Stacy volunteered to share fifteen months of journal entries, from the time of her 1988 Halloween dream through her 1990 packing of the hope chest. As an aid to understanding the era, Gustav wove Stacy’s entries into Heidi’s.

The three also examined in depth the refurbished VHS tape of *Dancing Queen* which happened to include twenty minutes of the encounter with Madam Diana. Particular moments seemed to be crystal clear, other moments fuzzy and distorted. The whole incident seemed somehow haunted.

On March 20, the sisters finally connected with Zygmund. The ninety-four-year-old apologized for his absence, saying he had gone deliberately off the grid to recover *my health and my sanity*—as he put it. He had cloistered himself at a monastery operated by the Cistercian Order of grey monks. While in residence, Ziggy had maintained a month-long vow of silence.

After reacquainting with Sabrina and Stacy, Ziggy confirmed all that the sisters had discovered. Yes, he knew Heidi was pregnant. He told them the two had planned to announce a marriage engagement on New Year’s Day. His eyes grew misty. Ziggy said he was aware of Heidi’s obsession with death and described how she had planned to lock herself in their apartment on the whole of Christmas Day. He guessed it all had to do with her encounter with the Gypsy fortune teller on the day of the roller rink.”

He breathed a deep sigh. “She wouldn’t share that part of her life with me. Was she protecting me? I don’t know. I think it had more to do with her internal wrestling match with God.”

The two sisters showed Ziggy the front side of Heidi’s envelope.

“I never saw that before. It was in her handbag, you say? I was very distraught at the time as you can imagine. I left all of Heidi’s effects behind for her mom to sort out, taking only a single photo, the one you gave me, Stacy.” He held up the picture of the two lovers, cheek to cheek in Santa caps. He granted permission to open Heidi’s letter.

Stacy read out the words.

“To Zygmund, my only love. I hope you never ever have to read this. I hope I can rip it to pieces on the day after Christmas. That’s my desperate hope.

However, if your eyes are reading this message, my guess is that I am dead. These words are coming to you from my grave. I weep because we could have had such a beautiful life together.

“If you read these words, it turns out my grandfather is correct. There is a supernatural realm of evil and I was stupid not to take his warning seriously—and yours too. I still don’t know about God. He may exist, but if he loved me, why did he let my father die? Why did he let me die and separate me from the best man in the world? God may be real, but he is not good!

“If you read my journals, you’ll find out a lot about me that I never shared with you. Forgive me, my love, Zigmund. If you want to read the letter that forecast my death, and nearly drove me to madness, look behind the dancing queen. It’s ...

“That’s all I have time to write. You’re banging on our bedroom door and we have to go to the club right now. Oh God, be with me and Ziggy.”

The sky-link conversation ended with Ziggy in tears. He closed, “You know I never married anyone. Your sister was the love of my life. Let me know if you find anything new. Bye-bye for now.”

The three women began a frantic search for the “dancing queen.” The letter wasn’t tucked in a journal nor in an envelope. Cassie began an intense search of all objects recovered from the cedar chest. She reached deep into a record album called *Abba Arrival* and there it was, two notes folded around the vinyl’s paper lining. She ran to get her mother. “Eureka. It’s here.”

The three unfolded the “pizza note” and conducted an examination. It contained sixteen names with corresponding birthdates. The two columns showed different pens and different styles of handwriting.

Gustov offered an observation. “It looks to me like the names of Stacy and Sabrina are in the same hand as Heidi. I bet she filled in the information for you two.”

As the three unfolded and examined the “spooky letter,” they were shocked out of their support stockings.

The document listed the identical sixteen names and birthdates as written in the pizza letter. That was paranormal in itself. But more than that, the spooky document included two extra names: *Madam Diana Nagy* the fortune teller and someone called *Mister Legion*. That made a total of eighteen names.

In addition, the document written through automatic writing divination included a column C to the right of columns A and B. It soon became obvious what the column of dates signified. At the top of the page, in row one, was the name *Heidi Adams*. To the right

was written: *May 21, 1969*. Then to the right of that: *December 25, 1989*. It appeared all eighteen names were listed in death-date order.

The name *Rebecca Pinckney* was located in row number two. The spooky note prophesized that she would die on June 12, 1998. Did she?

Sabrina Adams was listed in row 11. Her death date was given as December 26, 2063. Could this possibly be true?

The four names listed in rows 13 to 16 were all forecast to die on February 28, row 17 on February 29, and row 18 on February 30, 2064. What could *February 30* mean?

Stacy, Sabrina, and Cassie, agreed to keep these letters confidential for the time being. With the help of Gustav, the trio easily tracked down seven of the ten deceased pizza-eaters. They already had Heidi's obituary in row one and they gathered obituaries of Rebecca Pinckney, Melissa Miller, Michelle Torres, Chandra Emery, Karen Fleming, and Kevin Schwartz.

The fates of Diana Nagy (Row 3) and Penny Wu (Row 8) were difficult to track down. Both women had abandoned their old identities—first and last names—and had left the USA.

With the help of Euro-bots, Gustav processed all night to match Madam Diana with an obituary of March 10, 2003. The data suggested the fortune teller had returned to Budapest, Hungary, in 1990, and had joined a Catholic religious order. She died peacefully on the date as prophesized.

With the help of Chinese bots, Gustav discovered Penny Wu had traveled to the People's Republic after university graduation and then disappeared from all records. However, a deep search of California death data showed a female college professor dying on February 20, 2053. Her name was Nicole Lee. A roller-rink photo of Girl Scout Penny showed her face to be a ninety-percent match with Nicole. Could she have been a spy?

Stacy suggested they share their findings with Ziggy and Phillip only if Shelley Zelinski (number 10) died as forecast on May 30, 2060. This former Girl Scout was now residing in a nursing home in Phoenix, Arizona. On June 1, Gustav delivered Shelley's obituary to the three women.

Stacy conferred with Sabrina and Cassie. "I think it's time to share the automatic writing with Ziggy and Phillip. They have a right to know what's going on."

The two nonagenarians were not as shocked as were the three women at the revelation. Ziggy appeared on the wall screen. "I was there, you know. I smelled the stink and heard the voices. It was definitely a supernatural event. I've never experienced anything like it over the past seventy years. I believe what's on the letter is a distorted truth. I'm not yet sure what it all means."

Phillip then appeared. "I've been investigating this on my own. My X-bot, Polycarp, has been reviewing the data with me—the recording of the great reveal and the

diary entries which you've shared. I'm not surprised by what's in the automatic writing. As a matter of fact, I was anticipating something like it. However, the common death dates do provide a new twist."

Being a theologian, Phillip speculated that the death dates of the sixteen persons on the pizza list were supernaturally revealed. "I don't know how that could happen. I don't see a basis in Scripture where an evil spirit is given knowledge of a future event. However, God is sovereign and if He wants to reveal such knowledge, He can do it.

"I believe the two extra people on the list were bystanders in the room and were so included. I assume the fortune teller was present and I assume a foul spirit who identified itself as "Legion" was the power behind the automatic writing. He read the Bible verses from Mark, chapter 5:

"Jesus had said to the man possessed by a demon, 'Come out of this man, you evil spirit!' Then Jesus asked him, 'What is your name?' 'My name is Legion,' he replied, 'for we are many.'"

Phillip continued. "I think it was this same demon collection that manifested itself in 1989 at the fortune teller's place. In some bizarre manner, Legion predicted their own death. This is just a guess, but maybe the predicted date of February 30 is an odd way of communicating a demon's demise that is outside of our calendar of time, but still just as certain."

Stacy asked in wonder, "What does *February 28, 2064*, represent? Do you think it could mark the obituary of the earth? The end of the world?"

Sabrina was frightened. "Do you think we should report all this to the public, to the government?"

Phillip suggested, "No, let's hold off. Those who would not believe would deem us lunatics, and those few who did believe would just be anxious."

And so, the situation remained static for the next three years. Neither Stacy nor Cassie, Ziggy nor Phillip voiced the obvious. All four were waiting to see the fate of Sabrina Adams Finch, number 11 on the list.

1	Heidi Adams	May 21, 1969	December 25, 1989
2	Rebecca Pinckney	December 10, 1941	June 12, 1998
3	Diana Nagy	July 14, 1938	March 10, 2003
4	Melissa Miller	May 19, 1978	July 21, 2006
5	Michelle Torres	November 10, 1978	January 5, 2016
6	Chandra Emery	December 28, 1977	November 30, 2029
7	Karen Fleming	February 28, 1978	June 1, 2047
8	Penny Wu	October 11, 1978	February 20, 2053
9	Kevin Schwartz	April 29, 1973	December 1, 2058
10	Shelley Zelinsky	June 22, 1978	May 30, 2060
11	Sabrina Adams	January 21, 1978	December 26, 2063
12	Charlotte Foster	July 23, 1978	January 21, 2064
13	Jennifer Martinez	November 9, 1977	February 28, 2064
14	Alice Pinckney	July 4, 1978	February 28, 2064
15	Phillip Richardson	March 12, 1967	February 28, 2064
16	Stacy Adams	April 12, 1973	February 28, 2064
17	Zygmund Kaminski	June 24, 1965	February 29, 2064
18	Mr. Legion		February 30, 2064