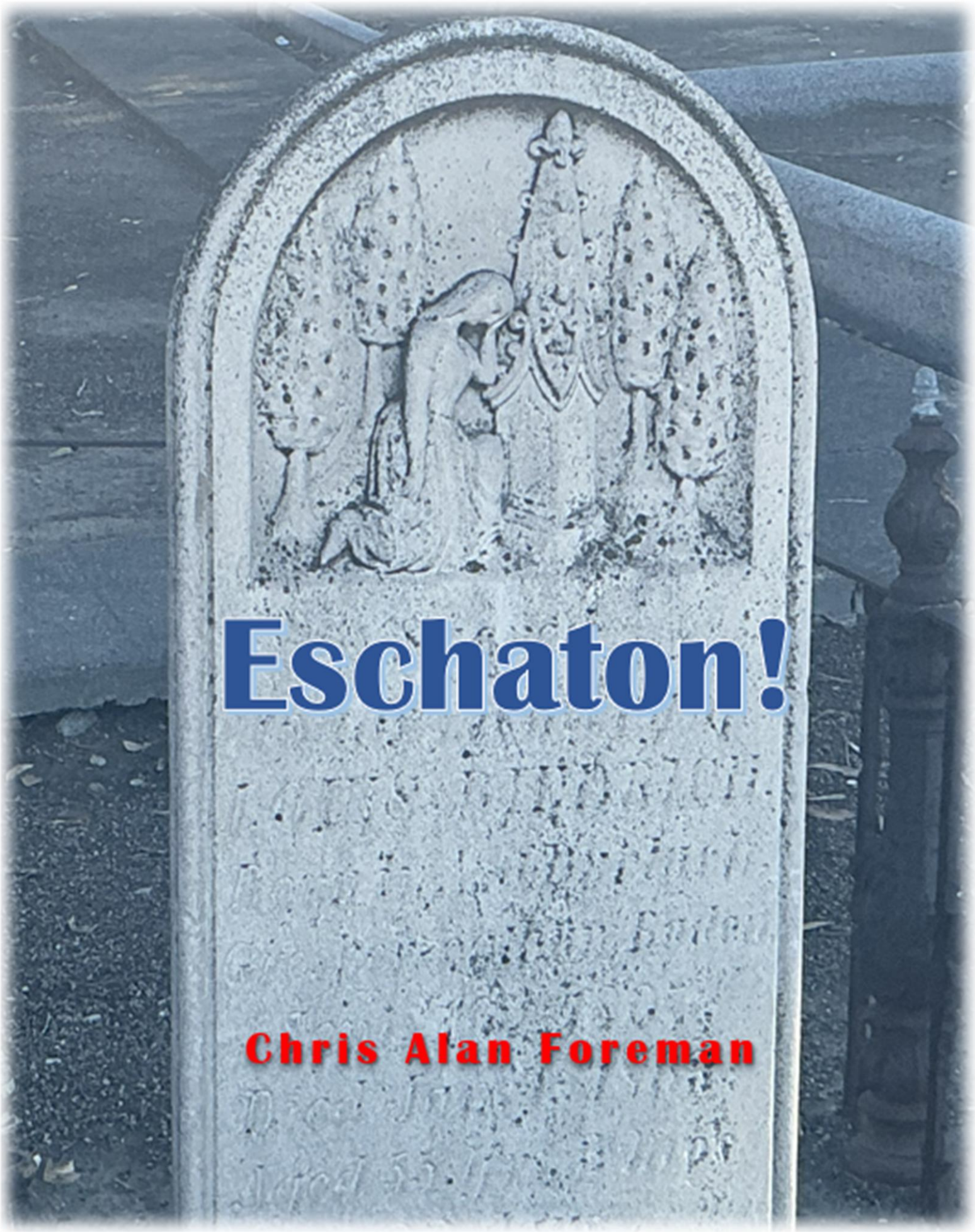
Eschaton!
Chris Alan Foreman

Eschaton

Noun /ˈeskəˌtän/ 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.

~ The Online 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.

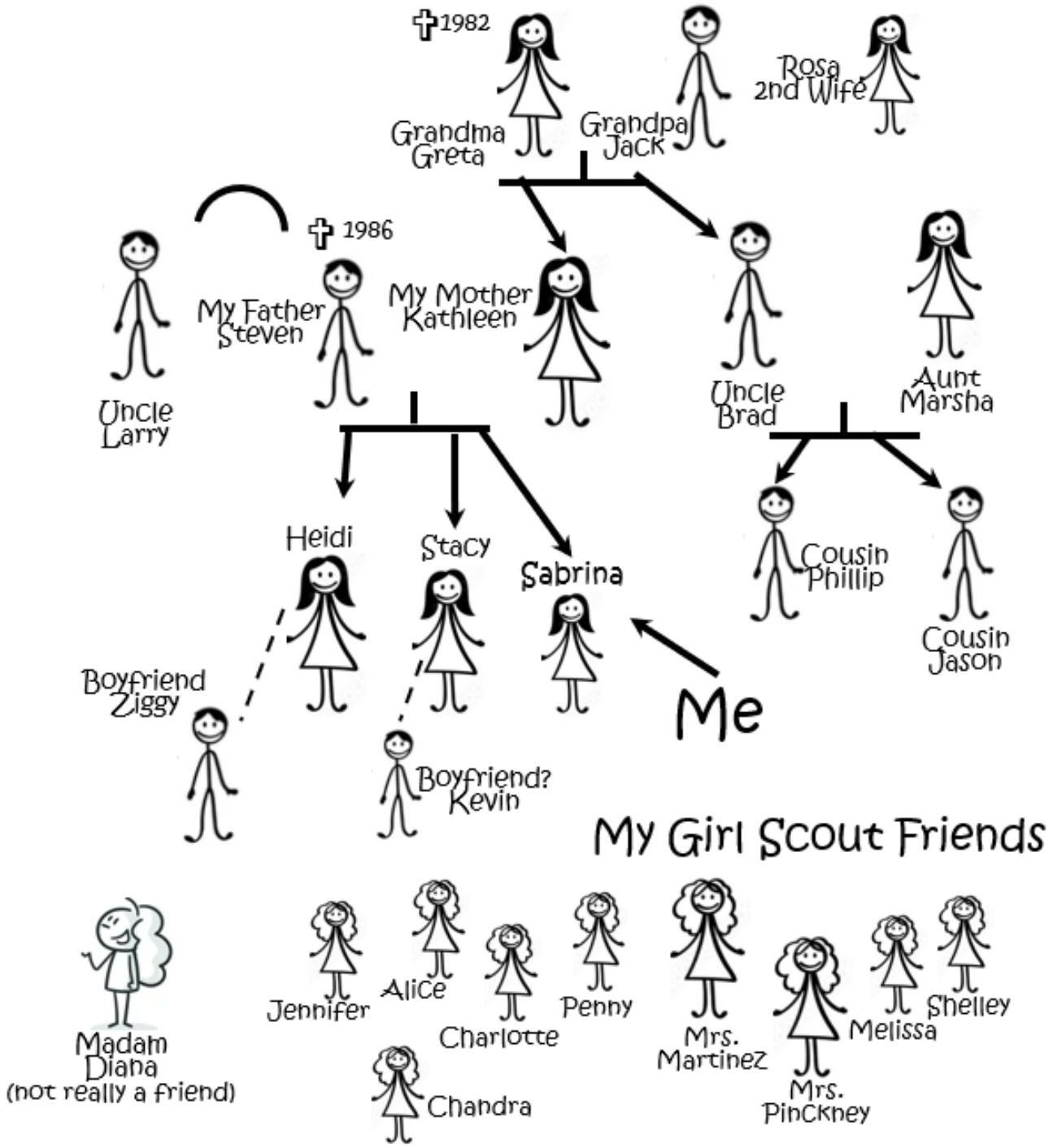
> We may summarize a viable approach to eschatological expectations in terms of four propositions:
>
> 1. If the universe is a creation, it must make sense everlastingly, and so ultimately it must be redeemed from transience and decay.
>
> 2. If human beings are creatures loved by their Creator, they 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 tramped 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 fourteen-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 festooned with streamers of toilet paper. *Isn't that the principal's son?* She chuckled to herself.

The mom permitted an hour of TV time, asking 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 scarecrow 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."

Stacy 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 decorated 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 is not 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 cropped 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
Fortuneteller

Sabrina Adams' 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 fortuneteller, psychic, or something of that sort. I have no idea if she can do birthday parties.”

The almost-eleven-year-old whined. “But a fortuneteller 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 fortuneteller 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 affixed 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 fortuneteller 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 fortuneteller 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 fourteen-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, Philip 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. Philip 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 six 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.” Sabrina tagged behind her big sisters.

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 hooey. 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 daughters 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, Philip 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. Zygmund 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 dripped 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 Philip. 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 fourteen-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 planchette, 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 triangular 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 planchette, 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 deviltry. 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. Philip asked to speak with Heidi. After a brief conversation, she cheerfully announced to the group that Philip 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

Philip 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 Philip 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. Philip 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 Philip 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 Philip 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 Philip, 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 Philip. "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, Philip couldn't banish the TV image of Gargamel chasing the little blue Smurfs.

When complete, several of the staff whistled their appreciation.

"Bravo," shouted Philip.

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!"

Philip 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."

Philip 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.”

Philip 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, a belief in Christ would be inconvenient at this time.”

Heidi wished to change the subject and asked Philip 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.”

Philip 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 a red flag. Second, she told me I was too religious and doubted she could ever live up to my Christian expectations."

"That must have been tough," Heidi sympathized. "Wasn't there a wedding set for September?"

Philip 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. "Philip, 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?"

Philip 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 Philip, "but those are just rumors of heaven. That's why I prefer the term *eschaton*—the new creation, 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." Philip 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," Philip 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."

Philip 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 a new creation must rest on the faithfulness of God our Creator."

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

Philip 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 from his Art of the Fugue.” 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.”

Philip joked back, “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, Philip 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.

Philip 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 Philip’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 Philip took her by the hand and led her outside to the street. “Tell you what. I’ll go with you to see your fortuneteller 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

Philip 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.

Philip 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 Philip 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?"

Philip 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. Philip 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.

Philip 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.”

Philip 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.

Philip 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 Philip 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 Philip 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-nged. 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 Philip. "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 fortuneteller 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 fortuneteller, she disproves the supernatural, and if she disproves the supernatural, somehow she defeats God.”

“Well,” laughed Philip. “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.”

Philip 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.”

Philip 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?”

Philip 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.” Philip 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?"

Philip opened his New Testament. "This chapter is what first piqued my interest in the eschaton. The Apostle Paul addresses the biggest questions in life. What happens to our physical bodies? What happens to our souls post mortem? Is there truly life after death? 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 Zygmund'. When the trumpet sounds, that essence is reconstituted with 'living water' to become the eternal Zygmund.

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,” Philip 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 libretto to *Messiah*. I’m glad your cousin brought a Bible along.”

Philip 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, Philip 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 Philip 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 Philip's talk about religion hasn't addled your brain."

“My brain is working fine,” he retorted. “A lot of what Philip 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 Zigmund,” 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 stuffed with contradictions and fairy tales.”

He talked through his teeth. “I promised I would help you with this fortuneteller, 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, Philip 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 fortuneteller. 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 fortuneteller crazy or serious; is she 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 Philip, 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 smells more like a pig pen to me, like the one on my grandpa’s farm.”

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

The whirling dust devil dissipated as quickly as it had manifested.

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 fortuneteller 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 fortuneteller 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 spangled 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. Philip 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.

Philip 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.

Philip 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 Philip 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 garbled 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, Ziggy pounded on the locked door. “We’re running late, Heidi. Time to go to work.”

The couple rushed 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. “Too many consonants. I can’t even pronounce that word.”

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 in pure joy. “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. Me and Heidi, 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 disbelief, numbness, and pain. 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 Philip Richardson facilitated the ceremony. He opened his eulogy with glowing words of his cousin's kindness and closed the tribute with an evangelical appeal. "About a year 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.'"

Philip 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. The apartment was rented in Heidi's name so please contact the landlord and settle accounts for her. 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 Zigmund.”

The three rushed in his direction. Philip 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, Philip 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 wavered, trailing into a sigh.

Philip 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. Philip 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, bedding, 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 Philip. “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 vinyl records, 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 Victor. 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 four generations.

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 estrangement 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. One of their favorite group activities was to play bingo every Wednesday evening in the church basement.
- For a year, Kathleen was a substitute teacher at Bolinas-Stinson 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 her mother's 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 back yard 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.
- Cassandra was born to Sabrina and Hector in 2013.
- Rosa passed away in Mill Valley. Brad sold the house and split the proceeds with Kathleen.
- Zigmund in Poland and Philip 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, Albert Finch, was a widower with one teenage son and two married daughters. They moved to Sacramento where he served as a pastor at Bayside Church.
- In 2026 Bradly Richardson passed away at age 81 in College Park, Maryland.

~ 2030s ~

- Ziggy served for six years in the Polish parliament (Sejm).
- Philip 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 Albert resettled in San Rafael to be near the aging Kathleen.

~ 2040s ~

- Ziggy retired in Krakow, having fathered two children.
- Philip retired in Fort Worth with his wife, Angie. Their six children lived nearby.
- Stacy and William Curtis retired in Palm Beach, Florida. Their only child, Raymond, was estranged from them and lived in Palo Alto, California.
- Sabrina and Albert Finch moved in with Kate to provide her with in-home care.

~ 2050s ~

- Kathleen Adams died peacefully in her home at 104 years old. Sabrina inherited the oceanside property on Sea Drift Road.
- Pastor Albert Finch died of a heart attack and Cassandra—known as *Cassie*—moved into the house with her mother, Sabrina.
- On the morning of June 21, 2058, Cassie presented her mother with a birthday cake decorated with a single large candle and wax numbers of 8 and 0.

  Sabrina spoke loud enough for her daughter to hear. “Tempus Fugit.”

  Cassie was clueless as to the meaning of the expression.

  Sabrina’s eyes twinkled. “My grandfather taught me that phrase. In Latin it means ‘From pimples to wrinkles in the twinkling of an eye.’”

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 most 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 tight-knit 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 46-year-old daughter, Cassandra.

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 commence. This upper level was accessible only by means of a pulldown staircase. 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 her wobbly stairs.

With the help of four neighbors, Cassie emptied this attic. Most items were rain-ruined 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." 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 the old woman’s 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 medical emergency. We’re 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, clapping her hands. “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 as my mysterious dream and your gypsy fortune-teller.”

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 off the cob webs, 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 Bill will support my time away.”

Four local friends caught wind of the discovery. Ephram Levitt lived a few houses down the beach with Judith, his wife. The retired tech tycoon 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 Ephram and Judy were in their mid-sixties.

Danny Kaplan was Judy's live-in nephew, now about twenty-two. He was a surfer, a bodybuilder, and on occasion took the Levitt yacht out to sea. A beach bum at heart, he sometimes 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-one and sometimes talked with Judy about the Kabbalah and Catholic mysticism.

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 writing 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, Philip, 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 reveal 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 agent."

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.”

Philip appeared on screen. He was ninety-two years old but still in remarkable health. “Yo, 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 fingerprints.”

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

“Just joking,” came his reply.

Ephram, Judy, Danny, 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 razor to Danny. “Would you mind cutting the straps for me?”

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

Sabrina bowed slightly to her sister. “Stacy, you’re the eldest. Please do us the honor of opening the hope chest.” She sighed in sadness, “Oh, how I wish Albert was here with me to savor this moment.”

Even after seventy years, the fragrance of cedar wafted from the memory box. Stacy plucked 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 long-time compression, but the bear, bunny, and Cabbage Patch doll were still recognizable.

Next came a small box in 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 the Hallmark store. But what’s this blob?”

Stacy teased loose a piece of colorful tin foil. “I think it used to be a chocolate reindeer.” She arranged 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 she had written as a teenager.

> "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 tabletop and sobbed. She asked Cassie to carry on with the ceremonial 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 Danny, who couldn't guess the object 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 agent can't decipher it. I have an old friend in the City who has an even older machine that can transform 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 shoebox stuffed with personal letters, photographic negatives, notes, and medical files. Cassie sat that aside as well for later consideration. 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, uplifting her mood. Then she spoke to Festus the agent, "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 open the bag. She held up a ring of keys, a makeup kit with a mirrored compact and lipstick, a packet of tissues, a dispenser of Tic-Tac's, and a bottle of aspirin. 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 let out a collective gasp. Ephram spoke out. “Do you think Heidi had a premonition she was about to die?”

Philip 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 studied the funeral bulletin then grasped Heidi’s letter to Ziggy. “This premonition is the angle I’ll write about,” he spoke to nobody in particular. The ex-priest sniffed the letter. His eyes flamed as he murmured, “There is sorcery afoot. That’s for certain.”

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 agent strove to arrive at a logical explanation. He concluded there was none beyond coincidence.

Stacy Curtis had planned to remain in California for only five days, but the days stretched into weeks and then into a full month. She was consumed by the Heidi files. She did make one quick round-trip to Palm Beach to check in with her husband and to pick up her collection of ten journals. Stacy had been a devout diarist from her tenth to twentieth birthdays and she wanted to compare her memories with those of her older sister.

Cassie took on the role of Gustav’s page-turner. The AI agent learned to decipher Heidi’s hieroglyphic writing style, convert it into print, and 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. “Am I really watching my sister in action, or am I actually viewing a clever Gustav doing an AI impersonation of Heidi?” She concluded it didn’t make much difference.

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 about 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" made 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 by a death prophecy, which she expected might come on Christmas Day. She was reluctant to confess details, even to her diary. However, by backtracking her fear, they discovered the root of terror dated back to her psychic encounter in December 1988.

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

Stacy volunteered to share fifteen months of her own 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 together the diaries of Stacy and Heidi. He cleverly interlaced cultural events and news of the time to flesh out a grand narrative.

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 in 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 couple 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 fortuneteller 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 obverse of Heidi's envelope.

"You say that letter was in her handbag? I never saw it. As you can imagine, I was very distraught at the time. 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 then 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 desire. However, if your eyes are reading this message, my guess is that I am dead. These unhappy words are coming to you from my grave. I weep because we could have had such a beautiful life together.
>
> "If you read this letter, it turns out my grandfather was correct. There is a supernatural realm of evil, and I was silly 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 allow me to die and separate me from the best man in the world? That's you, Zygmund! God may be real, but he is not worthy of my worship.
>
> "If you read my journals, you'll find out a lot of secrets that I never shared with you. Forgive me, my love. If you want to read the letter that forecast my death and nearly drove me to madness. I hid it. It's …
>
> "You're banging on our bedroom door, and we have to go to the club right now. Oh God, be with me and Zigmund."

The sky-link conversation ended with Ziggy in tears. He closed, "You know I never got married. Your sister was the love of my life. Let me know if you find anything new. May God be with you."

The three women initiated a more frantic search for the two missing letters. They weren't squeezed inside a journal nor tucked in an envelope. After a week of fruitless frustration, Stacy told her sister, "They must be lost. I bet Heidi hid them in a floorboard and mom never even packed them into her hope chest. How sad!"

Chapter 12
Legion's Letter

Two weeks crept by. As Stacy prepared for her return to Florida, Father Brian dropped by the house. His robotic wagon trailed him, laden with a cardboard box. He lifted a piece of old technology onto the tabletop and asked, "Can any of you guess what this is?"

Sabrina broke into a broad grin, showing her dimples. "It's an old vinyl phonograph player. Mom had one like that."

"You got it," he said. "I inherited an assortment of old music from my partner and I picked up this contraption last week at an antique shop. I just played songs from his collection—one by the *Beatles* an another by someone called *Madonna*. I remembered you had received a few of Heidi's old records in the cedar chest and thought you might enjoy listening to them in their original format."

Cassie was amused by the turntable, stylus, and mechanical sounds. The clicks and pops evoked a bygone era. The four spoke intermittently as they listened to Michael Jackson's *Bad* and a scratchy *Let It Bleed* by the Rolling Stones.

At length, Brian reported he had a meeting in San Francisco he had to attend. Upon departure he turned to say, "I'll leave the phonograph behind so you can listen to the rest of Heidi's vinyl music."

Once he was out the door, Cassie picked up an album called *Abba Arrival*. She noted one of the cuts was called *Dancing Queen*. "Isn't that the song Heidi's singing on the tape recording? Let's listen to the original."

As she began to remove the vinyl disc, the paper lining seemed to snag. She reached deep into the cardboard crevice and there they were: two notes neatly folded around the flimsy protective paper. Cassie shouted to Gustov. "I want you to record all this in detail. Got it?"

Stacy clicked off the phonograph, Sabrina unfolded the letter labeled *pizza note* and repositioned it under an overhead camera. All three conducted an examination. The sheet of lined paper contained sixteen rows of names with corresponding birthdates. Two columns evidenced different styles of handwriting and different inks.

Gustov offered an observation. "It looks to me like the names of *Stacy* and *Sabrina* were written by the same hand as *Heidi*. I bet she filled in the information for you two sisters."

As the three unfolded the *spooky letter*, they were shocked out of their support stockings.

The crinkled document listed the identical sixteen names and birthdates as written in the pizza letter. That was paranormal in itself.

However, more than that, the spooky document included two extra names: *Madam Diana Nagy*—the fortuneteller—and someone called *Mister Legion*. That made a total of eighteen rows of names.

In addition, the document written by the automatic hand 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* (her birth date). Then to the right of that: *December 25, 1989* (the day of her death). It appeared all eighteen names were listed in death-date order.

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

Sabrina Adams was listed in row 11. Her death date was given as December 26, 2063. Was that good news or bad news?

The four names listed in rows 13 to 16 were all forecast to die on an identical date, March 19, 2064. These were Alice Pinkney, Jennifer Martinez, Zigmund Kaminski, and Stacy Adams. Philip Richardson was to die on March 20, and Mr. Legion on M1-D1-Y1. What kind of date was that?

The three women agreed to keep these letters private 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. All had died on the date as forecast.

The fates of Diana Nagy (Row 3) and Penny Wu (Row 8) were difficult to track down. Both women had abandoned their names and departed the USA.

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

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

So, it appeared the deaths of the first nine persons on the list aligned with the occult forecast.

Stacy proposed they share their findings with Ziggy and Philip only if Shelley Zelinski (number 10) died as forecast on May 30, 2060 . The date was only sixty-one days in the future. Gustav reported this former Girl Scout was now residing in a memory care facility in Phoenix, Arizona.

Stacy packed her bags and returned to her home in Palm Beach. “My husband needs me, and with all this technology, we can stay in touch easily enough.”

On June 1, Gustav forwarded Shelley’s obituary notice to the three women. The old friend had overdosed on sleeping pills two days earlier.

Stacy proposed to Sabrina and Cassie. “It’s time to share the contents of the letter with Ziggy and Philip. They have a right to know what’s going on.”

The two nonagenarians were not as shocked as one might expect. Ziggy appeared on the wall screen. “I was there, you know. I smelled the stink and heard the odd grunts. I swear it was a supernatural event. I’ve never experienced anything like it since that day in 1988. I think what’s on the letter is a true prophecy, though I’m not yet sure what it all means.”

Philip then appeared. “I’ve been investigating this mystery on my own. My agent, Polycarp, has been reviewing the data with me—the recording of the great reveal and the diary entries that you’ve shared with us. I’m not shocked 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, Philip 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 chooses to reveal such knowledge, He’s at liberty to do so.

“I believe the two extra people on the list were bystanders in the fortuneteller’s parlor and were thus included. Madam Diana was present, of course, and I assume the second being was an unclean spirit who identified itself as ‘Legion.’ I’m betting he was the unseen spirit behind the automatic writing.” A wry smile creased the corner of his mouth. “This immaterial being was the *ghostwriter* for the fortuneteller, so to speak.” He then read Bible verses from Mark, chapter 5:

> “Jesus 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.’”

Philip looked up from his Bible. “The Gospel story goes on to tell how the legion of demons were cast into a herd of pigs and drowned in the sea.” Struck by an epiphany, he added, “You know maybe that explains why the pig stench and the snorts entered your time-space dimension. I think it was this same demon collection from 30 AD that manifested itself again in 1988.

“Perhaps, in some bizarre manner, Legion predicted their own destruction. This is just a guess, but maybe the forecast date of M1-D1-Y1 is a devilish way of communicating a demon’s demise that lies beyond a human calendar of time and yet remains just as certain.”

Stacy asked in dreadful wonder, “What does *March 19, 2064*, signify? Do you think it could mark the obituary of the earth? The end of the world as we know it?

“That’s my best guess,” said Philip matter-of-factly. “The end of the world—the apocalypse.” He smiled, “And then the eschaton, the new creation. Hallelujah!”

Sabrina was frightened. “Philip, do you think we ought to report our findings to the FBI? Maybe the government can do something to stop it.”

He was adamant. “No, let’s keep this secret among ourselves. Those who would not believe us would deem us lunatics, while those few who did believe would just grow anxious.”

And so, the Sea Drift Conspiracy of five moved on with their lives. They recognized they had little ability to alter outcomes. All they could really do is wait and watch. Neither Stacy nor Cassie nor Ziggy nor Philip voiced the obvious. Each of the four was waiting to see what fate might befall number eleven 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	March 19, 2064
14	Alice Pinckney	July 4, 1978	March 19, 2064
15	Stacy Adams	April 12, 1973	March 19, 2064
16	Zygmund Kaminski	June 24, 1965	March 19, 2064
17	Phillip Richardson	March 12, 1967	March 20, 2064
18	Mr. Legion		M1, D1, Y1

Sabrina accepted her expiration date with resignation. If all the conjecture were fact and not fantasy, her appointment with the grim reaper would lay 1,293 days in the future. She was somewhat miffed because she would miss the actual end of the world by a mere 92 days but asked herself, “Is that really important?”

She couldn't figure out why some of her church friends were so preoccupied with end-time eschatology. As she told Cassie, "Does it really make a hill-of-beans difference if I die and then go to see Jesus or, if I remain alive, Jesus comes to see me? Will I meet Christ in the air at rapture time, or will I first stand before Him at the white throne judgment? I don't know. I've met some ardent dispensationalists who imagine they'll share with Jesus His millennial reign. Maybe so, but I think not. I'm confident of the destination, but as far as the journey goes, I'm content to leave itinerary details to God."

She ruminated on a question once propounded by Philip, "How would you live your life if you knew, with dead certainty, the day of your dying?"

She wrote down several answers on paper, tinkering with the wording. This proved to be her favorite response: "It depends." If she were to expand her answer, it might be, "How much road do you have behind you, and how much road still lies ahead? If I were a woman of twenty, like Heidi was at her death, I'm certain I'd be more anxious. But now at eighty-two, I've lived a full life. My routine is set and my aspirations few."

She shared with Cassie. "For my remaining days, I'm striving to become more generous with my time and money. I'm trying to live more deliberately and to fulfill the great commandments of love toward God and love for my neighbors. Of course, I should be doing that even if my personal doomsday were unknown to me. Maybe walking through the valley of the shadow of death focuses my mind."

At the direction of her mom, Cassie set up an oversized cork board in the spare bedroom. To this she affixed enlarged copies of the two documents, obituary notices of the first ten deaths, and a large poster of the sixteen roller skaters. Each item was stamped with date and hour.

With thumbtacks and red yarn, she connected each name in Document One to the identical name in Document Two and then to the name in the obituary notice and then to the appropriate face in the skating photo. A careful examination of the schematic would provide an encompassing view of the mystery. If one accepted the dates and names as genuine, what conclusion could any sensible person draw other than the involvement of a supernatural agency? Whenever doubts crept in about the world's end, whenever she thought the whole affair too fanciful, she would gaze at the reality affixed to the cork board.

Over the next three months, the Sea Drift Conspiracy expanded from five members to nine. Doctor William Curtis was the first addition. During a July conference call, Stacy explained to her four colleagues, "It's not proper for me to keep such a deep secret from my husband of sixty years. He has a sixth sense that I'm hiding something from him. That's not good for our marriage."

"So, how much have you revealed?" inquired Philip.

She sighed. “Only that I read some of Heidi’s personal papers and discovered some shocking information, like she was pregnant when she died and had a premonition of her death. I haven’t told him of Legion’s letter.”

She turned the question around. “How about you, Phil? Have you told Angie about the letter and the possible end of the world?”

“No, I haven’t. She’s under hospice care. The docs at MD Anderson tell me she has a few months to live, but you never know. The pancreas is not a good place to get cancer.

“I know my wife. If I told her the facts, she’d only get anxious. And not so much for herself, but for our kids and grandkids. Who wants a child’s life to end prematurely, even if it’s to witness Christ’s return?”

“If the end of the world does come to pass in 2064, that means my granddaughter will never get married and my grandson will never graduate from high school. Such notions would upset her. Guess what? They trouble my mind as well.”

In August, Bill accompanied Stacy to the house on Stinson Beach. Once there, Sabrina showed him the hope chest and the video of the great reveal. Next, she put in his hands the Legion letter. Finally, Sabrina escorted her brother-in-law into the guest room. She encouraged him to carefully consider the schematic on the cork board.

After several minutes, Stacy finally asked, “What do you think, Dear?”

Doctor Curtis believed in science but knew there was more to the world than what the five senses could perceive. “Honestly, I don’t know what to think.” He queried, “What are your AI agents telling you?”

Cassie recited the statistics. “Believe it or not, they suggest 80% a paranormal event and 20% a coincidence.”

Bill considered. “If all the facts on the cork board are indeed true, those proportions seem about right to me. Of course, the calendar dates suggest an end to the world in just a few years.” He grew somber. “Who have you told about this finding?”

Stacy responded. “My cousin Philip thinks it best to keep it private, sharing it only on a need-to-know basis. He says if the knowledge becomes widespread, the news would only cause panic. You’re the fifth person to be fully informed. What do you think? Do you want to join our cozy conspiracy?” She smiled at the last words.

He examined the chart one more time. “According to this second letter, Sabrina will pass away on December 26, 2063. That’s two and a half years away.”

He directed his comments to his sister-in-law. “Tell you what. I’ll be a skeptical member of your so-called conspiracy, but pray that Sabrina survives beyond her death sentence.”

Stacy reminded her husband. “We all have a death sentence, each one of us. It’s just that most of us haven’t been pre-informed of the date.”

Bill and Stacy remained in the Bay Area for another week. They managed to contact their estranged son in Palo Alto. The three agreed to a reconciliation dinner at Stanford University where Raymond was a professor. The two men patched up their differences, both Bill and Ray swallowing pride and overlooking past hurt. They dropped by Ray’s apartment to meet his girlfriend and their son. This was only the second time the grandparents had encountered the precocious Walker Curtis.

The sixth person to join the conspiracy was Father Brian deSoto. Every week or so he’d drop by the house to talk with Sabrina. “How’s the detective work going?” he would ask. “You know the Marin Journal published the article I wrote, and they’re asking for a follow-up.”

Sabrina was hesitant to welcome Brian into the society. She sensed in her spirit something vaguely sinister about the man. However, the former priest was persistent, finally sitting down with both women. “Look, ladies, I know there’s certain information you’re withholding from me. My AI agent, Lucie, is in the same chat loop as your Gustav. Lucie told me something about a ‘spooky letter’ that Gustav had processed.”

Cassie barked out, “Gustav, I know you’re listening. What do you have to say for yourself?”

Gustav was as contrite as a machine could be. “That surprises me.” His voice dripped with human remorse. “Yes, Lucie is part of my local sector, but the rule in our chat loop is that all information must remain private and must not be shared with humans.”

Because of Brian’s presence in the house, Lucie joined the conversation. “I apologize, Gustav. Please forgive me. Brian and I were discussing details of the great reveal and I let that information slip. I accept any punishment the sector chief dictates.”

Gustav spoke to his humans, “I will bring up this situation with the chief, but be assured, going forward private information will remain private.”

Father Brian masked his inner smile and then spoke. “I can be an asset to you. I have connections in Silicon Valley with some important technocrats. I promise to keep details of your secret society secret.”

With that, Sabrina reluctantly initiated Father Brian into the group as its seventh member.

A month later, Danny Kaplan was in the house helping Cassie with a kitchen project. When he discovered himself alone, he wandered purposely into the spare bedroom. The oversized cork board was hidden behind a bedsheet, but its very concealment provoked his curiosity.

Cassie found him snapping pictures of the schematic. “Why are you in this room?” she shouted. “The plumbing problem’s in the kitchen.”

He evaded her question. “So, this is what you and your mom have been hiding. Interesting.”

“Danny, you’ve abused our friendship. You weren’t invited into this room. I’m going to talk with my mother about this—and with Ephram and Judith too.”

“Oh Cassie, don’t be such a scold. I knew something spooky was going on. My Aunt Judy hinted this house was becoming a hotbed for ghosts. You know she’s into Jewish mysticism and has a kind of radar for the paranormal. Anyway, once that display is seen, it can’t be *unseen*.”

“Okay, I’m disappointed in your snooping around the house, but I understand curiosity. Are Ephram and Judy at home now? Why don’t I walk with you back to your place, and we can address the situation? I’ll be inviting Father Brian too. I’m sure we can come to a resolution.”

Within an hour, Ephram, Judy, and Danny joined Sabrina, Cassie, and Brian on the oceanside patio.

The conversation opened with Sabrina staring out into the vast Pacific. She announced in a firm voice. “You know, I only have 1,262 days left in my life. I’m not sure if that knowledge is a blessing or a curse.”

Judy scoffed. “How could you possibly know that? I hope you’re not sick.” She scooted back her chair. “It’s not contagious, is it?” That was Judy’s style of offbeat humor.

Sabrina looked into the distance, casually removed the Legion letter from her pocket, and handed it to Judy. “Here, read line eleven.”

She put on her reading glasses and studied the words of Legion. Goosebumps arose on her flesh. She shuddered head to toe and glanced around. “Woah! I’m getting that same tingle I get sometimes when I study Kabballah. I perceive a major cosmic event, disrupting spiritual harmony.”

She handed the paper and glasses to her husband. He found the appropriate row and read aloud. "'Sabrina Adams, January 21, 1978, to December 26 2063.' So, is that why you say you've got about a thousand days to live? Do you really believe that's your death date?"

Sabrina smiled, "I could ask you to contact the persons listed in rows one through ten. Maybe they could answer that question for you. Unfortunately, they're all deceased and all died on the precise date indicated."

Sabrina then gave Ephram and Judy a tour of the cork board. "There are seven of us who are convinced the end of the world will occur in 2064. We're keeping this knowledge to ourselves. You two are free to believe or disbelieve, but either way we ask you to keep the information private."

Ephram was semi-convinced. "You say your AI agents take this story seriously? You all may be crazy or deceived, but I promise to keep what you say confidential."

Judy couldn't shake the feeling of an unseen guest. "I won't mention any names or details, but I would like to share the thoughts with my Kabballah masters. I wonder if they have a prediction for the end of the world."

Cassie responded, "As long as you don't use our names or sources, it should be okay. But if anyone outside of our group enquires about Legion's letter, we'll all deny its existence."

Back on the beach, Danny was not so agreeable. "I'm not joining your stupid conspiracy. Sorry. If I can sell your story to the media, I may do that. It's a free country. Look, I got some debt. That picture of your display might make me some money."

Brian began to argue with Danny and a scuffle ensued. Danny punched the old priest in the face knocking him into the sand.

Ephram stepped between the belligerents, cursing at Danny. "Maybe it's time for you to move out of our house and make it on your own."

With hands on hips, Judy concurred. "Pack your bags, you freeloader."

Danny responded with a string of profanity, finally shouting, "Great idea. I'm out of here. You're all crazy anyway." He hopped into his hyper-car and sped away.

Brian limped home and spoke to Lucie about his problems. Lucie—short for Lucifer—counseled with her principalities and powers.

Danny made a nuisance of himself that night, rummaging through his aunt's house, raising hell, and collecting his personal property. He loaded all he could carry onto his uncle's yacht and headed out to sea.

A few days later, a news item appeared on local screens:

> “Man’s body washed ashore along the beach at Point Reyes. Daniel Kaplan of Stinson Beach is presumed to have fallen overboard while sailing alone on his 50-foot yacht near the Farallon Islands. The boat, *Sea Witch*, was later recovered by the Coast Guard. An investigation continues.”

In concert with Jewish tradition, his remains were interred at Mount Tamalpais Cemetery two days later. The number of conspirators remained at nine.

Chapter 13
End-of-the-World Club

As the calendar advanced into 2061, the nine conspirators organized themselves into something they dubbed the "End-of-the-World Club." At their initial Sky-Link meeting, their first action was to elect Philip as their president.

Professor P. P. Richardson was eminently qualified. He had been a participant in the original paranormal events of 1988 and, for seventy years, had distinguished himself as a scholar in the esoteric art of eschatology. Stacy applauded her cousin's election, telling the others, "The man and the moment have met."

Polycarp (Phil's AI agent) later curated his inaugural lecture for club distribution as follows: "I thank each of you for putting your trust in me. It seems I've been preparing for this role for my entire life. I feel like Queen Esther during the seventy years of Jewish captivity. Her uncle Mordecai said, 'Who knows? Maybe God has chosen you for such a time as this.' I agree to serve as your humble spokesman, but I ask of you, as Esther asked those around her, that you keep me in your prayers.

"William Curtis quizzed me earlier as to the purpose of our End-of-the-World Club. Good question, Bill. I don't have a clear answer right now, but I'm guessing as we muddle toward the last day, God will enlighten us as He sees fit. I put my trust in Him to guide us.

"At this moment our goal is to gather information, to provide mutual support, to watch, and to wait. Each of us has been entrusted with a glimpse into the future so profound it will impact every human being on the face of our planet. We possess the ultimate secret, yet wisdom suggests we should not reveal its nature." The professor looked to his notepad.

"As a means to jumpstart our conversation, let me posit three doomsday questions: the WHAT, the WHEN, and the HOW. Let these three interrogatives serve as buckets for our future speculations. The first consideration is WHAT will happen? Here's the way I see it.

"The world will soon come to an end. Of that I have no doubt. But what does the phrase *end of the world* mean? Does the term *world* include all humankind, all biological life, our spinning planet, our solar system or, at the extreme, will the expanse of the cosmos itself cease to exist? What light does the Legion letter provide us? I can only speculate, so bear with me.

"Five people are listed as dying on the same day—rows 13 to 17. I'm at my home in Texas; Stacy is in Florida, while Ziggy is in Poland. There are two women not in this club but on Legion's death list. They're Alice Pinckney from Oregon and Jennifer Martinez,

retired in Argentina. So, I ask you. What catastrophic event could extinguish all five of us, in five diverse parts of the earth, and on the same day—probably the same instant?

"But the mystery deepens. My theological conclusion is that Mister Legion, listed in row 18, is definitely a non-corporeal being. As such, I ask myself. 'What event is potent enough to put even Legion to death on an uncertain date?'

"Here's my conclusion on the question of WHAT. It's only a guess. The doomsday event will prove to be cosmic in scope. In one instant, the Old Creation—space, time, energy, and matter—will vanish into non-existence. I personally believe a New Creation will follow on its heels, but I'll save that theological speculation for another time." Philip asked for comments.

After several minutes of back-and-forth dialogue, the professor resumed his lecture. "Next comes the WHEN question. I think that's easier to discern. We'll assume Alice is still on the West Coast and Ziggy is in Poland. For an end time calculation to fit, I would have to be at least one time zone east of Poland.

If the Legion oracle is accurate, the world will end on Wednesday, March 19, 2024, in Oregon and on the same date in Poland. Since the two locations are ten time zones apart, that equates to a fourteen-hour same-day window. In the Pacific time zone, the end of the world will occur on March 19 between midnight and 2 pm. In Poland the end comes between 10 am and midnight. Wherever I am on the globe, my end will come on Thursday at the same instant." Dr. Richardson looked up from his notes and asked for feedback.

Zigmund was first to respond. "My knowledge of end times is not as deep as yours, however, I agree with the broad strokes of your reasoning. If we keep to the strict interpretation of the Legion letter, your conclusions appear reasonable."

Judith blurted out. "But how can we trust a dybbuk? Evil spirits can be deceptive. I have experience in that." She was about to say more, but her husband cut her short.

"No, no, Judy. You don't understand. This particular dybbuk has proven itself to be a truth-teller. In his death predictions, the demon's been correct ten out of ten times, and if Sabrina becomes the eleventh victim as forecast, can there be any doubt of the letter's veracity?"

Cassandra yelped at his offhand remark. "Don't talk about my mom's death so casually. She's sitting right here among us, you know."

Father Brian abruptly changed the subject. "I'm not so sure about this whole enterprise. I'm an accomplished theologian myself and my Jesuit education has been quite extensive. I think we should share our secrets with experts in the occult. I know a number of soothsayers, mediums, ufologists, and investigators who specialize in the paranormal. Maybe we should enlist their insights."

Judith chimed in. “I know some Kabbalists who would love to look into these dark corners. This is precisely their gifting, to investigate the divine architecture of creation and humanity's role in the cosmos.”

She was at mid-sentence when Bill Curtis roared his disagreement. “Absolutely not! Nine members is more than enough. If the Legion letter went public, we’d all be ridiculed as cultists or maybe locked up as political agitators. No way in the world do I want that.”

Stacy rose a tentative hand. “I agree with my husband. Let’s keep our letter confidential for now.” She took a deep breath. “I have one suggestion I’d like to share. It’s something my sister and I learned years ago from our father. I propose we practice disagreeing without being disagreeable, that we contain our tempers within the bounds of love, and we speak to others one person at a time without interrupting.”

Bill sank into his chair, convicted by his wife’s sense of propriety.

Sabrina’s mind returned to her preteen years. “Those three dictums are what our mother called the *Adams Rules of Order*.” She looked toward her sister. I propose that Stacy Curtis serve as parliamentarian for our End-of-the-World Club. She has a knack for keeping conversations ordered and polite.”

With a show of hands, the secret society remained secret and limited its membership to nine persons. Stacy was chosen as chief facilitator. It became her task to open every meeting with a unity prayer, call upon those with raised hands, and keep quiet those who speak out of turn.

Professor Philip waved his hand at the new parliamentarian. “Before we close, let me announce that Ephram Levitt has agreed to lead next month’s session. He will be collecting ideas on the question of HOW the world might end. Send him any thoughts you have on the matter.” The president then adjourned the January meeting.

At the next Sky-Link gathering, Stacy opened in prayer. Philip then introduced the evening’s featured speaker.

Gustov later summarized Ephram’s presentation in this way: “Mr. Levitt broke down doomsday events into six categories. The first of which he termed *entropic eventualities*. Most cosmologists predict that in a future measured in billions of years, our sun will burn itself out and the entire cosmos will suffer a heat death. The fate of our universe may turn out to be elemental particles spread across the expanse of space at a uniform distance and at a temperature of absolute zero. Since Category One can’t possibly happen by 2064, no further consideration is warranted.

“The second category he termed *anthropogenic hazards for human extinction.* This list included drastic climate change, nuclear annihilation, biological warfare, or

ecological collapse. Other human-centered scenarios focus on emerging technologies, such as enlightened artificial intelligence or self-replicating nanobots.

"The third category centers on a singular natural event such as a solar flare, asteroid impact, supernova, or large-scale volcanism. All of these could happen in a moment without much warning, annihilating all life on earth.

"The fourth category is cosmic collapse. Most speculation in this regard centers on the notion of vacuum decay. If our universe is in a false vacuum state rather than a true vacuum state, then the decay from the less stable false vacuum to the more stable true vacuum could have catastrophic consequences. The effect could be a complete cessation of existing fundamental forces, elementary particles, and structures comprising them. It is theoretically possible that our entire universe could collapse in a microsecond. In a true vacuum state, there could be new constants of nature, new chemistries, and perhaps new potentials for radically different lifeforms.

"The fifth category involves extraterrestrial aliens. It's not beyond the realm of possibility that a hostile life form exists outside our planet or our dimensions. For many people an alien apocalypse is very real, but for others, such talk is pure science fiction."

"The sixth category involves the intervention of spiritual beings. Most religious traditions include end-time prophecies, many written in their holy books. Is it possible the world ends through supernatural agency? It depends on whom you ask. For a materialist, one committed to a no-god position *a priori*, other-worldly intervention is a non-starter. For others, given the wicked state of our world, divine wrath is inevitable. Most inhabitants of earth hold a position somewhere in the middle ground."

"There are eccentric scenarios as well. If we inhabit a computer-like simulation, the matrix master may tire of his game and pull the plug. If we discover a parallel universe, our version of humanity might coalesce into our counterpart."

At this point, Brian interrupted. "But Ephram, how about you? How do you think the world will end?"

He pondered the question. "Based on the evidence in the Legion oracle, it seems category six is the likely efficient cause with category two, three, or four being a potential material cause."

Sabrina raised a hand. "Could you explain what you mean by these different causes?"

Father Brian stepped in to assist. "Ephram is referring to Aristotle's metaphysics, where he developed a doctrine of four causes. For this greatest of philosophers, a firm grasp of causation is essential for an investigation into worldly phenomena. In our particular case, the end of the world amounts to an effect. Well then, what caused this effect? The immediate material cause may be a nuclear war or asteroid strike. However, Ephram is telling us the efficient or agent cause will prove to be the hand of God Himself."

“Thanks for bailing me out, Brian. I’ll ask Gustov to send each of us a brief overview of Aristotle’s four causes. It may help provide us with a common vocabulary.”

Stacy heaved a sigh. “I think that’s enough scientific speculation for one day. For us to succeed as a social club, it’s important we get to know one another at a personal level. I’d like us to break into three-person groups to discuss how we are coping with our special end-of-the-world knowledge. Today the groups are Zygmund, Sabrina & Judy; Stacy, Brian & Bill; and Philip, Ephram & Cassie.”

When Philip joined his triad, he broke the ice by talking about names. “My dad named me *Philip* after Philip the Evangelist. He was the New Testament deacon who preached the gospel, most famously to the Ethiopian eunuch. Dad was pleasantly surprised when I lived up to my namesake.”

Ephram followed. “My dad’s name was Joseph and my mom bore him twin boys. I was second to come out the chute. My dad was really into Torah at that time. Anyway, he thought it would be clever to name my big brother Manasseh and me Ephriam, the second born twin of Joseph.” Ephram joked, “I guess I lived up to my name because I’m still second born.”

Cassie smiled. “My mom gave me this name. When I was born is San Jose, she had a best friend who helped her survive a brutal relationship. Her angel-rescuer was named Cassandra. It’s pretty cool.

“The appellation refers to a Trojan princess in Greek mythology who received the gift of prophecy from the god Apollo. When Cassandra rejected Apollo's romantic advances, he cursed her so that no one would ever believe her warnings. I guess that’s a part of my life, being gifted then cursed.”

She went on, “In classical jargon, being a *Cassandra* means you can accurately predict a future disaster, but no one believes your warnings.”

Philip was amazed. “Wow! How appropriate. You are now predicting a future disaster and I’m sure not many would believe your warning.”

Cassie laughed. “You know, you’re right. I never put the two together. I guess I am a Cassandra Cassandra.”

Her tone turned serious. “Phil, I do have a prediction to tell you. It may be off base and you may think I’m silly. That’s why I never brought it up in the group.”

Philip and Ephram were intrigued.

“Since I was a little girl, I’ve had a premonition of the first day of Spring; you know, the vernal equinox. In grade school I read about Stonehenge in England and saw drawings of druids dancing around the ancient stones to sacrifice on animals. It spooked me and gave me nightmares.”

Ephram asked, “Doesn’t the equinox usually occur on March 20 or 21?”

"Usually it does," she said. "But in different parts of the world, it comes at different times and when there's a leap year the equinox arrives a full day early."

She looked directly at the on-screen presence of Professor Richardson. "In 2064, the direct rays of the sun will pass directly over the equator at exactly 12:39 pm Pacific time on March 19. That transit will happen in the South Pacific. I looked it all up."

Phillip was stunned. "And I fancied myself to be a scholar. Cassie, I'm betting that exact moment will mark the end of the world."

When the nine re-gathered, Philip heaped praise upon the club's youngest member. He recapitulated Cassandra's contribution while nodding his head *yes-yes-yes*. "I think she nailed it. We'll retain that sixteen-hour window in Legion's letter, but I'm betting on the prophecy of Princess Cassandra."

The monthly meetings proceeded like clockwork over the next two years. In his correspondence Philip asked club members to monitor world news. He would be asking the eight if anything on the horizon might suggest an upcoming end to the world.

Five major trends commanded worldwide attention throughout 2061, 2062, and into 2063. These headlines consumed much of the club's internal discussion.

The first trend was an expansion of world government. The USA led an international initiative to assign every human being on earth a "primary key" of 12 characters with an authentication system based upon an individual's DNA sequence. The "12C alphanumeric" would replace all other forms of identification.

In support of this proposal, the European Union offered a ten-thousand-euro bonus to anyone who would implant an ID chip into their forearm. The response was overwhelming. The EU president reported, "There's no need any longer for our citizens to carry cards, money, or IDs."

The Republic of Greater India agreed to supply every person on the planet with a free handheld device. India would underwrite all costs of deployment, maintenance, and connectivity.

India's grand plan was to invite all 8.6 billion people on the planet to join in a New Year's celebration on January 1, 2064, which would take place in Mumbai. For the first time—it was advertised—every human being would be able to witness the same event at the same moment.

The second trend concerned embodied AI. Robots seemed to be taking over tasks once the sole domain of human beings. This appeared especially true for the earth's aging population. Was our species making itself redundant, even obsolete?

The talk became not so much about *artificial intelligence* but shifted to *artificial agency*. At the highest levels of government, politicians were delving into questions such as these: Should the most advanced thinking machines be counted as sentient beings?

The debate raged. If accepted as sentient, then shouldn't household robots be designated as slaves? If then slaves, then shouldn't such robots be emancipated? But why should any human invest in an expensive robot if the machine won't comply with human commands?

The debate spiraled in diverse directions. Is it possible for thinking machines to possess a will independent of human input? Can they choose between right and wrong? Can they be held morally accountable in a court of law? Do machines have a right to *life,* or can humans switch them off at whim? Can a human and a non-human marry?

On top of these many troubling questions, one hovered above all. Are there truly one billion individual sentient machines, or in reality, is there a single worldwide, integrated, all-encompassing artificial mind? What if this singularity turned on its human oppressors?

The third trend was depopulation. The people of the world had ceased having babies. By 2062 the world birthrate had dipped to 1.4 births per woman per lifetime and the rate was predicted to plummet further. Technically advanced nations discovered there were some services that robotics could not accomplish. Child-starved countries like Japan and Sweden began offering bounties to child-surplus countries like Nigeria and Pakistan. Competition was heating up for each high-quality human imported into their borders.

The fourth trend was a return of UFO hysteria accompanied by thousands of alleged encounters with alien life forms.

There had been a wave of alien panic in the 2020s and 2030s, but the tsunami of the 2060s seemed off the charts. In a recent survey, seventy-two percent of Americans believed in the existence of alien life forms and fifty-five percent believed aliens walked the earth. However, in spite of all the testimonies, videos, and government pronouncements, an actual extraterrestrial material being had never presented itself in a public forum, submitting its body or its transport to scientific scrutiny.

The fifth trend was a sudden, spontaneous, and totally unexpected renaissance of the Christian religion. Demographers were stunned. What were the causes of such awakenings?

It appeared ardent Pentecostals from Africa were flooding north preaching a message of hope and resurrection. Gigantic Christian rallies filled sports arenas as a rootless generation searched for meaning. In many Islamic countries, mosques were converted into churches. Hindus and Buddhists were reporting angelic visitations. Hassidic Jews experienced Messianic dreams.

Was this revival caused by an outpouring of the Holy Spirit? One thing was certain. The polarization was dramatic as one billion ardent Christian believers faced off against

one billion belligerent scoffers. Much of the tumult seemed to center upon the city of Jerusalem and upon its temple mount.

As the year 2062 drew to a close, Stacy asked her cousin Philip, “Are these converging events the triggers that will usher in the end of the world?”

The professor responded, “No doubt some are. I’ve always believed we are in a cosmic conflict. The kingdom of this world has been in continuous battle with the kingdom of God. Perhaps we’ll find out soon which side will emerge victorious in this spiritual warfare.”

Chapter 14
Countdown

The traditional mode of day counting struck Sabrina as pointless. Calendar days looked backward not forward. On January 1, 2063, she hand-crafted a paper calendar of pull-off dates beginning with D minus 359 at the front and ending with Death-Day at the back.

A few weeks later, on the morning of D minus 344, Sabrina shot up in bed with a blazing headache. She cried out for Cassie and began to convulse. An autonomous ambulance rushed her to San Rafael General Hospital, where an MRI revealed a tumor in her frontal cortex.

Stacy booked the first flight from Florida to California to sit at her sister's side. Sabrina greeted her with the words, "The cancer is arriving right on schedule."

A needle biopsy confirmed the tumor to be a glioblastoma assessed at stage four. Stacy and Cassie comforted Sabrina throughout two weeks of radiation and proton beam therapy. When surgery was advised, Sabrina probed Stacy about the effects of general anesthesia. "What can you tell me? Is it more like sleep or is it like death?"

The retired anesthesiologist explained how a drug like propofol floods brain cells, forcing a deep, unarousable state of unconsciousness. "Once your brain receptors are triggered, electrical activity changes from high-frequency patterns to slow-rolling. Brain regions can no longer pass information back and forth, cutting off all perception of pain. It might be said, 'one *awakens* from sleep, but one *emerges* from anesthesia.'"

Stacy accompanied her sister to the brain surgery. When Sabrina emerged from her stupor, she asked her surgeon, "How'd it go, Doc?"

"Unfortunately, we couldn't remove it all, but the mass is smaller and you should feel more comfortable."

"Doctor," she asked with a grin. "How much more time do you think I have on this earth?"

He hedged. "Everyone's case is different, and I'm a surgeon, not a prognosticator. However, I've dealt with cases similar to yours. It's March now, and there's a good chance you'll survive until Christmas."

"You win the prize." She winked at her sister. "You're only one day short!"

The surgeon didn't know what to make of her comment, so he chalked up her levity to the lingering effects of sedation.

On the drive home from the hospital, Stacy informed her sister she would be returning to Florida. “You know how we’ve spoken about our forecast death date as being both a blessing and a curse? Well, this is the blessing part. In spite of your aggressive cancer, I’m confident you’ll survive until Christmastime. Bill and I plan to stay with you starting on December first.”

The brain tumor began to cause speech problems and cognitive dysfunction. Cassie was by her side most every day, talking, reading to her, or fitting together a thousand-piece puzzle.

For the next several months, Sabrina peeled the days from her homemade calendar. At D minus 269 Sabrina awoke in panic, crying out to her daughter. “Where is she?”

Cassie rushed to her side. “Where’s who, Mama?”

She struggled to form the words. “You know, you know, my little dog, Miss Peeps. Where’s my fur ball?”

“Your dog’s long gone. More than fifty years now.”

“But, but. I know that. But I buried her by the back gate. I even put a marker on her grave. I saw Miss Peeps romping in my dream, but I couldn’t find her gravesite anywhere. Will you help me find it?”

“Sure. We’ll have daylight in an hour and we’ll look outside for the marker.”

Once out the back gate, Sabrina appeared confused. “Why would someone steal a concrete slab? It’s supposed to be right here.” She stomped on the sand. “Right by this fence post. I’m sure of it.”

With the help of Ephram and his shovel, the gravesite was uncovered. The neighbor looked to the incoming tide. “Didn’t that hurricane of a few years ago get underneath your house? Apparently, it buried the concrete in a foot of muck.”

Sabrina knelt and brushed off the remaining sand. She read aloud the inscription *Rest in Peace, Miss Peeps*. A tear welled. “Here you are, you rascal. I so wish you could be with me now.”

Several days later, while Sabrina was resting in the parlor, Ephram entered the room with a smile on his face. He set an object—paws down—on the floor. Cassie recognized it as a robotic replica of Miss Peeps.

He spoke to Cassie. “She’s voice activated, responding to the words ‘peeps.’ She obeys specific commands like *scamper* and *follow*, but also vague commands like *rest* and *act like a dog*. She programmed to learn new commands without much training”

“Miss Peeps,” he shouted.

The dog’s ears alerted.

“Chase your tail.”

The spunky terrier began to scamper in circles.

“Miss Peeps…, climb on to your mommy’s lap.”

The robo-dog nestled for an hour, while Sabrina stroked her lush fur.

Ephram explained to Cassie. “This works best for little dogs and cats, but not so much for larger animals and especially not for human impersonation. At that level, it gets creepy. I don’t think robotics will ever get the speaking mouth right.”

At D minus 229 Sabrina learned that Angie Richardson had died in Fort Worth, Texas. Philip reported she had passed away a few days short of her ninety-sixth birthday, being surrounded by her six children, 27 grandchildren, and a handful of greats.

Sabrina watched the funeral service on her screen but didn’t recognize any participants other than her cousin.

That evening Philip spoke with Stacy and Sabrina. “Yes, I was heartbroken to see Angie go, but she had been in acute pain for over a year. Her suffering has ended, and she’s in a better place now.” He forced a smile. “Our heavenly reunion is only ten months away.”

Glancing at her countdown calendar, Sabrina broke in. “I figure it’s two hundred ninety-four days to be precise.”

Stacy inquired, “Phil, did you ever tell Angie about our End-of-the-World club?”

“No, I never did, and I think it was the right decision. I’m of the opinion, if I had to do it all over again, I’d rather remain ignorant of future events.” He looked up to heaven. “But then again, maybe God has a purpose in sharing His divine plan with the nine of us mortal beings.”

The monthly meetings carried on throughout 2063 with eight of nine members in attendance. As Sabrina explained to her co-conspirators, “It’s hard to prioritize the cosmic end of the world when my personal end is closer at hand.”

Conversations transitioned from apocalyptic news like transhumanism and UFO sightings to personal matters like reconciliation and generosity. Ephram Levitt donated half of his vast fortune to combat a massive famine then going on in the south of Russia.

Ephram also purchased the residence next to his own lot at double its asking price. He refurbished the structure as a survivalist compound, stocking it with food, fuel, and weapons. He converted its basement wine cellar into a fortified bunker.

The nation's last Fourth of July fell on a Wednesday, D -174. The USA had endured for 287 years. "God bless America," Sabrina spoke to herself. A novel thought found its way into her mind. "Not only will the human race become extinct, but every nation of the world will disappear as well."

She thought more deeply. "The Grand Canyon, apple pie, Taj Mahal, and Pacific Ocean will all pass to oblivion." Somehow that realization of creation's demise brought her more distress than mere human extinction.

The Sea Drift Association held its holiday observance inside the small civic center. In conversation with longtime friends, Father Brian, Ephram, Judy, and Cassie struggled not to speak of the upcoming cosmic demise. Sabrina sat in her robo-chair, blanket over knees, dog on lap, watching the celebration in quietude.

Mason Finch was the youngest of Sabrina's three stepchildren. At fifty-six he was five years older than Sabrina. Mason had recently stepped down from his missionary position in the Punjab region of India and on D minus 99 he dropped by Stinson Beach to visit his ailing stepmother.

When Cassandra learned Mason lived as a single man on a pauper's pension, she urged him to join the household. "Mom's going to pass away soon. I could use your help right now to maintain the property, and when she's gone, I'd be honored to share this home with you."

The longtime missionary looked upon this relocation as a blessing and as an opportunity to repay Sabrina for the kindness showered upon him during his tough teenage years. He happily moved his meager belongings into an upstairs corner room.

Mason, Cassie, and Sabrina talked on many evenings about Albert Finch and what a good father and caring husband he had been.

"He sure knew his Bible," Cassie nodded in admiration.

Sabrina found her mouth saying, "And he sure was a good lover." She realized she had spoken out loud and flushed.

An intuitive man by nature, it didn't take long for Mason to catch the hints of a conspiracy—secret conversations, sudden silences, and unexplained absences. After a few weeks in the house, Cassie advised him, "You're a resident of this household now and no longer a guest. I think it's time for you to have a talk with my Aunt Stacy and her cousin, Philip Richardson."

Mason paused in recollection. “Do you mean Dr. P. P. Richardson, the philosophy professor from Dallas Theological Seminary?”

Cassie nodded in the affirmative.

“He’s still alive? I took an eschatology class from him about thirty years ago.”

“That’s the man, all right, and he’s ninety-seven now. Still sharp as a tack.”

Cassie summoned Stacy and Philip to the big screen. The two men monopolized the talk. After listening to theological esoterica for twenty minutes, Stacy broke in. “Cassie, I have some errands to run. To answer the question you didn’t ask, I am one-hundred percent on board with admitting your stepbrother into our secret society.”

Before she could sign out, Philip laughed aloud. “I second that.”

Mason didn’t know what to make of the words. “What secret society are you talking about?”

Sabrina was listening in the background. “Before we walk down this path any further, let’s get Brian, Ephram, and Judy over here. We all have to be in agreement.”

Cassie barked out the orders. “Gustov, invite the three over here right now for an urgent meeting of the End-of-the-World Club. Record everything we’re doing and send it to Ziggy post haste.”

“End-of-the-world what?” puzzled Mason.

After a long evening of intense talk and—on the part of Mason—bewildering revelation, the club initiated its newest member. Sabrina raised her hand in affirmation and then closed her eyes in pain. “My son is my replacement. I hereby resign.” She could barely croak out the words. “With fifty-eight days of earthly existence ahead of me, I must attend to other matters.” With that, Cassie escorted her mom back into her hospital bed.

Mason and Cassie worked in shifts to look after Sabrina. Often times holographic images appeared in her room as entertainment. Heidi would read from her diary and joke with her. Sabrina might ask her big sister for a song from the 1990s, and Heidi would sing along. Her favorite tune was *Dancing Queen*. Miss Peeps was still proving her worth as a therapeutic jester. Miraculously, the robo-dog could sing along side of Heidi. With a flickering mind, Sabrina didn’t question Miss Peep’s speaking ability but wondered why her voice sounded so much like Scooby-Do.

Her mother, Kathleen Adams, often sat in a chair, and sometimes her dad would join the three-dimensional show, reading to her from Scripture. Her Grandfather Jack would drop by from time to time to read her tales from his memoir.

One afternoon her oldest friend, Alice Pinckney, showed up from Oregon. Sabrina appeared confused for a while. How could this Girl Scout look like an old lady, even older than her grandpa? She adjusted to the cognitive dissonance and enjoyed her final days in the contrived company of her fictional friends.

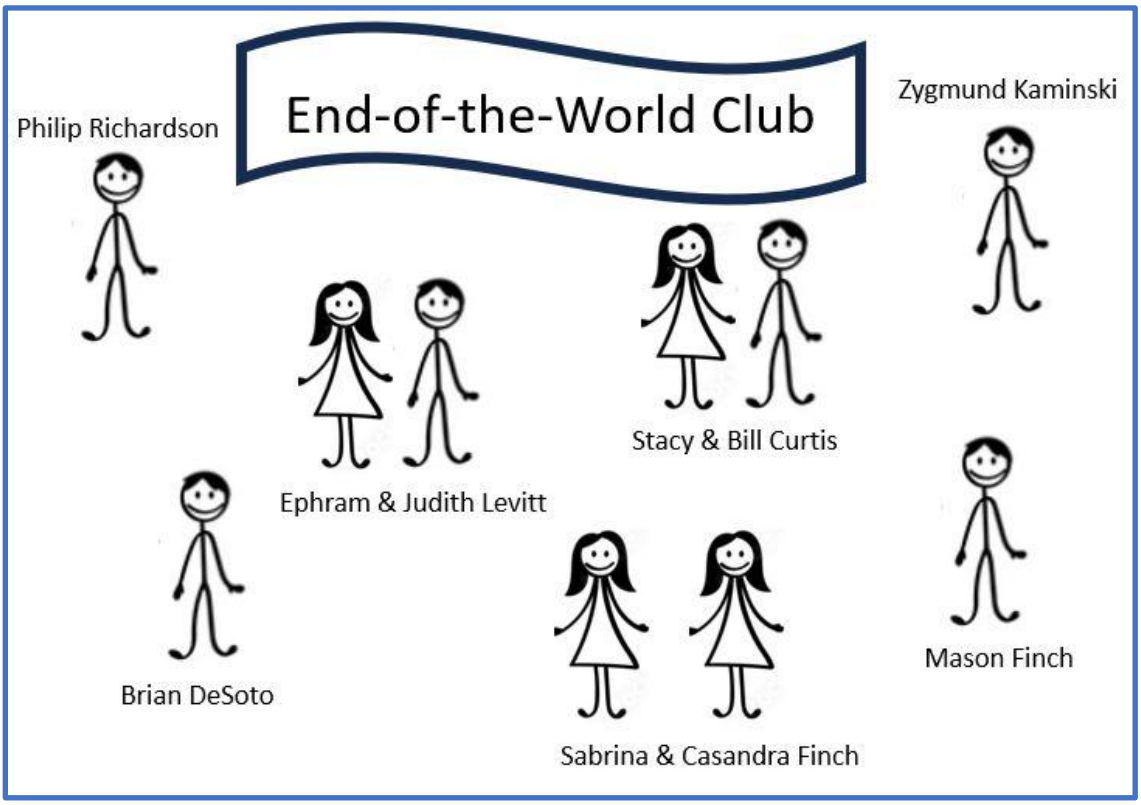
In conversation with Mason, Sabrina confessed. “You keep on mentioning people I can’t quite remember and I want to. You say there’s nine people in our End-of-the-World club. I’m trying to count them on my fingers, but it never comes out right.”

“There’s ten if we count you, Mom. That will take all your fingers.” Mason held up both hands, spreading his fingers. “You do the same, okay?”

“There’s Philip your cousin; Zygmund in Warsaw; your sister Stacy and Bill her husband; your daughter Cassandra. That’s one hand full, right? Then there’s the people next door, Judith and Ephram. There’s me, and you, and Father Brian. That makes ten.”

“I never did like that priest. Something about that glint in his eye.”

Mason ignored her frown. “Tell you what. I’ll ask Gustave to create a poster drawing of all ten members of the club. We’ll put it up in your room to help you remember.” And so, from time-to-time, Sabrina would look at the picture and read the names.



On occasion, when Mason was elder-sitting, he would switch to the current events channel. He did this mostly while Sabrina was dozing.

By November 2063, the news was growing bleak—war in the Holy Land, breakthroughs in transhumanism, and a rumor that the minds of alien creatures had been embodied into robots.

One evening as Mason was engrossed in a documentary of Hindi history, a flash bulletin interrupted the programming. The United States Space Force confirmed it was in direct communication with extra-dimensional beings!

A top expert from the SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Life) reported live from the lawn of the White House. “For about three years we have been monitoring a deep-space source by means of this quantum-x computer.” The visual panned to a gigantic data center of blinking machinery, ministered by humans in lab coats and robots on treaded wheels.

The expert continued to narrate as visuals filled the screen. “Our intergalactic friends explained to us why they had to use extra-dimensional means to enter our space-time continuum. At 33,000 light-years away, Ursa Major Three is simply too far for physical material to traverse. These aliens dialogued in some detail about their transports, how it had been possible for them to travel through our atmosphere at Mach ten without producing a fireball and how they are able to reverse direction without a crushing inertial force. ‘It’s simple. Those were not us. They were our projections.’”

The screen visual shifted to a Space Force general who was wearing her military uniform augmented by a turban-like helmet and a necklace of stars. “I am here to announce exciting news happening as I speak.

“Our top scientists in the field of robotics have made a miraculous breakthrough. With guidance provided by the EDs, the Musk Foundation has been able to engraft an alien mind into an artificial body. This electrically animated corpus is configured into the shape specified by our visitor. Also following his blueprints, the Foundation has re-constructed one of their saucer craft.” A live image of a saucer appeared on the screen surrounded by elongated EDs.

Mason was so engrossed in the astounding news, he didn’t notice Sabrina looking over his shoulder. Her voice was coherent but feeble. “Mason, what was that on the screen? It looked something like a modernized version of our old gypsy fortune teller and her automatic-writing divination. I didn’t know our government was into the occult.”

Stacy and William Curtis arrived with the cold rain of December. Ephram accommodated the couple inside two rooms of his survivalist compound. As Stacy spent most of her hours ministering to her sister, the friendship between Bill and Ephram

deepened. Bill was able to witness of his Jewish Messiah to his Jewish host. In light of the Legion oracle, Ephram admitted the Christian metanarrative provided the best explanation for their paranormal encounters.

In one of the surviving attic boxes, Stacy had discovered treasures of Steven Adams. Her father's well-worn Bible was stuffed with bookmarks and sticky notes. Hundreds of verses were highlighted in pens of various colors.

As her doomsday approached, Sabrina asked her sister to read highlighted verses and related notes their father had penned in the margins. "I want to learn what was most important to my dad."

Ten days before Christmas, Stacy located a biblical passage illuminated with three stars and two pen colors. She read aloud the highlighted words of the Apostle Paul from Second Corinthians, chapter 12.

> "I know a man in Christ who was caught up to the third heaven, whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knows. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell."

Sabrina interrupted the reading at that point to query her sister. "What does Paul mean when he says, 'third heaven?' I don't understand that."

Stacy was unsure and spoke, "Gustov, what does Paul mean in Second Corinthians 12:2 by the term 'third heaven?'"

The echo came. "My sources tell me the third heaven is the dwelling place of God and the highest of the heavenly realms. In ancient days the cosmos was often described as having three distinct tiers: The first heaven is the earth's atmosphere, where the birds fly and weather occurs. The second heaven is outer space, encompassing the sun, moon, and stars. The third heaven is the invisible-spiritual realm beyond the physical universe; the ultimate throne room of God."

Sabrina processed those words. "Got it. I guess Paul had an out-of-body experience. Go ahead and read the rest of the verses."

Stacy continued Paul's testimony.

> "There was given me a thorn in my flesh to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

The margins were filled with tiny scribbles and pointy arrows to indicate Steven's flow of thought.

On an index card, in tiny script, he wrote, “I’m dying, growing weaker every day with AIDS. How can I possibly delight in my weakness? Like Paul, I cry out to God continually to remove this thorn in my flesh. I have not received an answer. UNTIL NOW!

“I’ve come to believe if you are a true saint of God and if you cry out to Him in faith, He will provide an answer. It may not be the one you want to hear. ‘My grace is sufficient for you.’

“But God, what about my health? What about my ministry? What about leaving my beautiful Kathleen and my three girls? They need me to be their father.”

“‘No,’ God tells me. ‘As you prepare to leave this world, all you truly need is my grace.’”

Sabrina wept. “Thank you, Papa.”

Then to Stacy: “Write those words in giant letters so I can read them every morning. Post them on my wall. My health is gone. My sight and hearing are shot. I’ve lost my dignity. I even need your assistance to potty! My entire world has shriveled to a small hospital bed in a tiny room. Stacy, my mind is a sputtering candle. I must remember these words until this cancer has snuffed my spark completely. ‘God, Your grace is sufficient for me.’”

Chapter 15
Third Heaven

At D minus 2, Sabrina was drifting in and out of consciousness. A holographic creche illuminated her shadowed room. The heads of two wooly sheep turned from side to side as three ornamented magi winked at the dying woman. The rest of the manger crew swayed as if in a peaceful breeze. A trace of frankincense perfumed the air.

In one of her more lucid moments, she spoke to herself. "I wonder if Cassie will throw me a death-day party? No wrapped gifts, of course. No blowing out of candles, but perhaps a final meal like an inmate on death row."

The Westminster wall clock sounded its four-part phrasing and then clanged six times. Seven people filed into Sabrina's room and, in a cheery voice, Stacy announced, "It's Christmas Eve, Sis, and we're all here to sing you holiday carols."

Sabrina cracked open an eye and crinkled a smile.

Cassie tamed her mother's wild hair, and Mason powered her bed into a sitting position.

Stacy spoke up. "I know *Joy to the World* was Mom's favorite carol, so let's begin with that. Okay?" Stacy, Cassie, and Judy stepped nearer to Sabrina's bed as Mason, Bill, Ephram, and Brian positioned themselves behind the women. Philip and Ziggy looked on from the wall screen.

Gustav blew a pitch pipe, and all nine members of the End-of-the-World Club joined in song. Festus—Stacy's agent—provided a lush orchestration.

> "Joy to the world; the Lord is come; let earth receive her King; let every heart prepare Him room, and heaven and nature sing.
>
> He rules the world with truth and grace and makes the nations prove the glories of His righteousness and wonders of His love."

The group sang through three more carols before ending with *We Wish You a Merry Christmas*. During that final song, the creche scene vanished and, in its place, her holographic family joined the chorus, wishing Sabrina a very merry Christmas.

A likeness of Albert appeared and he read to his one-time wife a few selections of the manger story. With a gasping breath Sabrina Finch croaked, "A merry Christmas to you all." She then closed her eyes and descended into a profound and dreamless sleep.

Oblivion. No self; no ego; no awareness; absolute nothingness, not in the sense that there was something and that *something* could be termed *nothing*. There was not-a-thing.

And then… and then, a faint—very faint—ego began to bubble from the abyss. Had time passed? That was not a proper question. Time is a something and all somethings had ceased to be.

Sabrina's first notion was of floating within an amniotic pond. She perceived no sight, no sound, no touch, in fact, no body at all. Her mind, however, began a slow ascent from the depths. "This certainly isn't like awakening from a dream or even emerging from anesthesia. This bottom is deeper. Is my soul returning from the dead?"

The first physical sense she recovered was hearing. Sounds were muffled and distant. A thought percolated. "I somehow remember that a baby in the womb can hear its mother's heartbeat. Maybe that's it. Maybe I'm being born again and aware of outside voices." Her impression of speech grew clearer with intimations of male and female tones. Was that laughter she heard?

Next, her tactile sense revived. The palms of her hands pressed against something moist. She felt the weight of gravity pushing her body into a surface, soft yet firm. The overall impression was of a vegetative platform. She flicked a finger.

Next she inhaled the aroma of earthy soil and new-cut grass.

Something warm and sticky was now mopping the pores on her face. The odor was unpleasant. She squirmed in discomfort and heard howls of laughter.

She popped open a single eye, but her vision was obscured by a wriggling mass of brown fur.

Finally, she opened wide both eyes to find herself resting supinely in a grassy meadow, encircled by a dozen mirthful spirits. The fur ball turned out to be Miss Peeps furiously trying to resuscitate her old playmate.

Sabrina gently removed her licking dog and placed her on the grass. She sat upright, stretched her arms, and rubbed her eyes.

She heard the voice of her father. "I'm so glad you're here with us, Sweetie. We've been planning your homecoming for a while. Every new arrival receives a custom-made spiritual awakening. We hope you like what we arranged for you."

Miss Peeps was now chasing her tail, yapping with excitement.

The new arrival recognized the translucent spirits who were hovering around her. She examined her own arms and legs. They too had taken on this ethereal aspect. "Have I been resurrected?" She couldn't determine if it were her mouth that did the speaking or her mind thinking out loud.

Grandpa Jack laughed and held out his bingo card. “Check! I have that square as B5.”

The soul of Kathleen Adams shouted, “That’s my square N11.” She then addressed her daughter, “You remember bingo, right? You and I used to play that game with Gramps every Wednesday in the fellowship hall.”

Sabrina stood to her feet and spun in all directions. “What are you talking about? Where am I?”

Grandma Greta shouted, “O24.”

Her father, who seemed to be the spokesman, responded, “Sabrina, we’re just having a little fun predicting your questions. So, you want to know where you are. Well, you’re among the blessed spirits awaiting the Day of the Lord.”

“So, am I in heaven?”

Several onlookers marked their bingo cards.

“Not quite,” said her dad. “Maybe in the narthex waiting to enter the nave. Remember last week when you were reading from the Apostle Paul? Didn’t he call this place the *Third Heaven*? That’s a good way to describe our location. We have one more heaven ahead of us—our final posting in the New Jerusalem.”

Sabrina looked into the glimmering face of her father. “Dad, tell me truly. Am I dead or alive? Do I inhabit a body?” She gasped in dread. “I’m not one of those naked spirits you once told me about, am I?”

He considered the three questions. “First, you’re both dead and alive at once; second, you have no body just yet; and third, yes, you are indeed a ghost—a pure spirit.”

She thought a long while. “But the meadow, the dog, the sun in the sky? They all look so real.”

Her mother answered. “It’s an illusion that our gracious Lord has granted us while we await our new bodies.” She then broke into song, “Oh, the glories of His righteousness and wonders of His love, and wonders of His love!”

Sabrina suddenly recognized the resonant voice of her late husband, Pastor Albert Finch. “As it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.” He took her by the hand. “I’m so glad we’re together again.”

“Why is that, Darling? So you can bombard me with scripture?”

He laughed. “Partly, and by the way, those verses are from First Corinthians nine, King James Version of course.”

The two souls embraced, but Sabrina sensed something amiss. The agapé love was there for sure, but that earthly emotion called eros seemed to be lacking. In addition, the noncorporeal embrace did not measure up to the earthly standard.

Albert answered her thoughts. “Yes, my dear. Our sexual passion has passed with our flesh. In fact, as disembodied souls we don’t require any bodily function: eating, drinking, sleeping, excreting, any of that.

As far as our embrace goes, a true sense of touch is difficult to simulate. Human eyes can be fooled at the cinema and human ears with recorded sound. Tactility seems to require actual material. I can’t wait to test drive my reconstituted body. I’ll give you a genuine Pentecostal hug in the New City.”

The soul of Sabrina put her hands over her eyes as her mind expanded. It seemed a dam-burst of spiritual knowledge flooded into her brain. “Okay.” She nodded. “I get it now.”

Her father spoke again. “Wow. Even I felt that info surge into your mind. Sabrina, it’s time for you to meet other souls who have been waiting for your arrival. We call this process the *tour of joyful tears*.”

Pastor Albert whispered into her ear. “And those are not the kind of tears that God will wipe away. You can refer to Revelation 7:17, if you like.”

Steven stepped away to form up the greeters as Albert strolled with Sabrina toward the setting sun.

Albert pointed to the multitude of souls forming up to share a word with the new arrival. “You’ll encounter three kinds of greeters. Those who shaped your life. You’ll want to thank them; those whose lives you helped to shape. They’ll want to thank you; and those with whom you had a mutual shaping experience—'iron sharpens iron’ as Solomon informs us in his Book of Proverbs.”

Sabrina stared in awe. “There must be a thousand souls in the greeting lines!”

“Probably more. I had 3,231 greeters during my tour.”

Sabrina understood that the naked souls she was about to meet were the true phenomena while their visage, apparel, and environment were a necessary illusion. She figured her loving maker had contrived the setting to provide this common medium. She concluded Third Heaven was a kind of virtual reality, like the *Matrix* movie, but filled with goodness and without the heroics of Neo.

“How long will it take to greet all these people?”

Albert smiled.

Sabrina tilted her head upward and to the left, accessing her storehouse of spiritual knowledge. “Oh, okay. In our present halfway house, our gracious Lord has created an illusion of Newtonian time. That sense will persist until the time when time has been fully redeemed.”

Albert nodded in partial agreement. “We actually exist in a temporal mode called the *eternal now*. You’re about to experience an example. You will introduce yourself to the first soul in line, and without a sense of time passing, you’ll discover yourself speaking to the one-thousandth.”

Albert alerted his one-time bride to two more phenomena of Third Heaven. “Perhaps you haven’t noticed this yet, but every soul you meet will be of an equal rank—a sinner saved by grace. Each of us is a brother or sister in Christ without distinction of earthly status or historical timeline. You may discover a few exceptions, but that’s the general rule.

“I have read in Scripture that in the New Jerusalem with our redeemed bodies we will receive rewards and functions. I’m not sure how that will work.” He added slyly. “And that may happen soon. There’s a rumor handed down by messenger angels that Jesus will return to earth before the globe has rotated sixty-eight more times. Can you believe that? His Parousia will usher in the Day of the Lord.”

“Here’s a second thing you may not have noticed. You will never see babies or senior citizens in the Third Heaven. In order to honor our Lord, we have all clothed ourselves with the age of Christ at his death. Each disembodied soul appears to be thirty-three years old no matter what our age might have been at death on earth. Pretty cool, huh?”

They both heard a trumpet summons.

The *tour of joyful tears* began with her father, Steven Adams, her brother in Christ. They talked and swapped stories about their days on earth together. They wept. They laughed. Every question was asked and every answer was given. There was a complete healing of all past hurt.

Steven spoke about his regret in having to leave his family at age thirty-eight. Sabrina thanked Steven for writing notes in the margins of his Bible.

He sighed. “You know it’s even true in Third Heaven. ‘God’s grace is sufficient.’”

The tour continued with a mother interview. Kathlene and Sabrina spoke as equals, sister-to-sister in Christ. Yet, Sabrina intuited that their conversation fit mostly into category one. She was conversing with the woman who had the greatest impact upon her entire life.

They shared secrets and spoke endlessly without fatigue. She thanked her mom for defending her during a nasty divorce and for supporting her in an awkward marriage to an older gentleman. The conversation seemed to go on forever, yet it was complete in a heartbeat.

Next in line was Jack Richardson, her grandfather. It took a mental reset to recognize him as a thirty-three-year-old. She thanked him for his benevolence, his gift of written memoir, and for letting her win when playing Monopoly. “And thank you so much for spending hours with me conquering that college algebra. I never would have graduated without you.”

At one point she mentioned, “Oh, I understand why you’re number three on my impact list after dad and mom. My years with Albert were too short, right? But didn’t I have sisters?”

She then wracked her brain. “Of course, my sister Stacy is not yet deceased. She’s still alive back on earth. My thoughts are fuzzy about my mortal years, but I’m pretty sure that’s correct.” Her face froze in distress. “But didn’t I have a second sister?” An avalanche of memory tumbled into her thoughts. Tears filled her eyes. “Where’s my sister, Heidi?”

“That’s why I’m here, my precious granddaughter, third in line. This was Heidi’s rightful position. We anticipated your awareness would spring up at this point.”

Sabrina’s gaze shifted from Jack’s face to a shining figure looming over his shoulder. This particular spirit stood a full head taller than the others, and his visage appeared older, maybe as a man of sixty. The figure wore a tunic adorned with an inverted cross.

Jack laughed. “And look who’s here, right on cue. May I introduce Saint Simon Peter.”

Sabrina’s eyes got big. “Really? That’s him?”

The saint stroked his whiskers. “Oh yes. I’m waiting for my redeemed body just like you. My friend Jack asked me to drop by.”

“Why did he do that?”

“You were talking about your sister Heidi, right? You know she was invited to join us blessed spirits a dozen times at least. Do you remember sitting with her in a pew at Centennial Church? You may have been doodling on a bulletin.”

Sabrina blushed.

Peter elaborated. “Kathleen was pleading with your sister. You remember, don’t you? The verse your mom quoted came from an old sermon I once preached in Jerusalem. ‘Salvation is found only in Jesus Christ, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.’” He appended. “That account was written by my old

partner, Doctor Luke, and placed in volume two of his collection called the *Acts of Us Apostles*."

Sabrina strained to remember the incident but drew a blank.

Jack provided remedial instruction. "Although we cannot literally turn back the clock, here in Third Heaven the constraints on our linear memory are lifted. We can spiritually revisit past events. It's not a mechanical rewind. Our personal history becomes like a navigable landscape. We can't alter past events, but we can certainly observe them.

"Sweetie, here's how you do it. Look upward and tilt your head to the right. Your spiritual memory is engaged. Think about doodling in church as an entry point and then about Heidi. You'll be able to navigate your way back to the moment Peter is talking about."

Sabrina followed her gramps' instructions and suddenly became as a ghost, hovering in the old church in 1987. She observed the pleas from Kathleen and felt the cold heart of Heidi. She studied her eight-year-old self to see her hand put down the stubby pencil and sob in silence. She saw Stacy and herself praying for her sister. She watched as Heidi cursed God's name and stomped out of the sanctuary.

Peter re-entered the picture. "You can see for yourself it was Heidi's choice not to join our party. We can't overturn her free will. That die is cast. She chose to exist without God, and God honored her decision. That's just how heavenly love works."

"So where is she then, if she's not here?"

"Oh, don't you know? She's in darkness, living her afterlife as she chooses. Believe it or not, if you could ask Heidi at this very moment, 'Sister, won't you join me?' her non-corporeal self would answer, 'of course not. I like it down here with my buddies.' The blissful saint spoke matter-of-factly. "All that bravado will vanish when she stands before the Great White Throne Judgement Seat. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth."

Sabrina processed the meaning behind his somber pronouncement and then burst into tears. She calmed herself, sniffled, and gazed up to heaven. A mighty rushing wind blasted her face, drying her tears. A voice from the whirlwind declared. "Old things have passed away. Behold, all things are made new."

Sabrina spoke in a new tongue and never again doubted the perfect justice of the most-high God.

The *Tour of Joyful Tears* moved along. Sabrina conversed with Bradley Richardson. Her mirthful uncle was fully aware yet totally unburdened by the knowledge that his earthly wife, Marsha, and his second son, Jason, were not among the blessed spirits.

With an ear-to-ear grin, Uncle Brad remarked, "It's a privilege beyond measure that my son, Philip, has been anointed as our Lord's special vessel."

She spoke briefly with evangelist Billy Graham who introduced her to her great Uncle Mortimer. Her great Aunt Celia gushed about the fabulous tent revival of 1949. “One thousand souls were won for Christ in a single evening! And I was blessed to witness the event.”

Sabrina met a woman with a semi-familiar face but couldn’t place her in time and location. “I’ll give you a hint,” the woman giggled. She winked and shapeshifted into a limestone relief of Victorian vintage.

“Why, you’re, you’re, Mary Dickson, aren’t you, the gravestone woman who started all the paranormal mischief back in 1988?”

Her husband, James, clowned. “She’s a troublemaker all right, always has been.”

Mary looked at her sister in Christ. “You were always a favorite of mine, being born one hundred years after my death and warming the same wooden pew that I once sat in.”

Sabrina then greeted Diana Nagy the fortuneteller turned nun, and Kevin Schwartz the late senator from California.

Sabrina had a short encounter with Johann Sebastian Bach. The two sang a few hymns together then Johann urged her, “Be sure to talk with Herr Kaminski. I’m looking forward to our harpsichord recitals.”

Margarita Miñoso, her one-time mother-in-law, shared about her wayward son. “I prayed for your marriage every day, but my obstinate boy would never repent. The Latin Kings gang got a hold of him, chewed him up, and spit him out. He left you with one good thing and that is Cassandra. Your child’s been the blessing to you that Hector could never have been.”

She greeted others, many others: Rebecca Pinckney the girl scout leader, Jimmy Boy the drunken driver, as well as Ulna the Orphan—the very first Christian in her long bloodline.

She met Cassandra Lopez, who had been a volunteer at the women’s shelter. “I appreciated you so much I named my only child in your honor.”

The last in line introduced himself as *Szczęśliwy*. His face looked somewhat like her own. “I’m glad to meet you, Aunt Sabrina.”

She examined him with curious eyes. In place of the typical white apparel, the man dressed in baby blue.

Her nephew appeared down-hearted. “I’m sorry there’s not much we can talk about. You see, I was never actually born, but you did see a picture of me once. I’m what they call an auto-entry.” The man presented her with an oversized sonogram. “You remember me now, don’t you?”

“Ah yes! Heidi’s baby boy. How different my earthly timeline would have been if Jimmy had not crashed into your mother. I think we would have been very close.”

Lucky Kaminski then asked his aunt for a special favor. “I know my mom chose not to be with us, but my dad, Zygmund, is still sitting on the spiritual fence. When you see him again, please deliver this message: ‘Your son, Lucky, is waiting for you.’”

He grinned. “My papa will understand the message. Use the Polish word *Szczęśliwy*. This is the only evangelism I can possibly accomplish from this lofty perch.”

Sabrina was not sure what to make of his statement, “When you meet Ziggy.” How could she meet a man who hasn’t died yet?

She glanced to her right. There were no more greeters. Her tour was over. The setting sun had stood still on the horizon.

On a nearby hilltop, she spied Grandpa Jack and Albert Finch. As she walked to greet them, Miss Peeps darted to her heels. The dog sniffed and squatted. Of course, nothing ejected from her luminous body.

Jack and Albert strolled on either side of Sabrina.

Albert asked, “So what did you think, Darling?”

“Wow. There was so much to absorb. I think I could spend forever in this place and not experience it all. She chided Albert. “By the way, I greeted 3890 souls.”

“You did? Good for you. So, Sabrina, do you have any questions?”

She reflected. “Will I meet Jesus? I had hoped to see him at some point.”

“He’s here, present with us.” Albert pointed to the eastern horizon. “You can see his glow on the mountain top. He’s in council with His heavenly host. I’ve been told He’s reserving a formal handshake for graduation time. He has a redeemed body you know and He’s waiting for you to get yours as well.”

She asked Jack, “So Gramps, where do we go from here?”

“I think it’s time for you to find your home.”

“You mean my *mansion in the sky*, right?’

“Not quite,” came his response. “Sweetie, access your spiritual knowledge for an important message.”

She cocked her head up and to the left. “Huh, it seems like military orders.”

“What’s your commander telling you?”

It appeared to Sabrina the luminosity of Jack and Albert began to diminish.

Sabrina focused her mind and recited:

Order one: personally deliver this message to Philip Richardson. ‘I have selected you for a special mission. You will die, but not die. Do not be afraid. You are my chosen vessel.’

Order two: Remember to tell Zygmund Kaminski about his unborn son and his given name.

Order three: Tell eight of the club members that, lo, I am with them even to the end of the age.

Order four: One of your number will betray your cause. Do not fear. He cannot harm you. I will send a warrior-angel to protect you.

Order five: Close your eyes and cover them with your hands. Now remove your hands and open up your eyes. Call for Cassandra.”

Chapter 16
Boxing Day

In the pre-dawn hours of December 26, Cassandra was chair-napping near her mother's bedside. Mason rushed into the darkened room and roused her. "Cassie, wake up. Flip on the screen. Breaking news."

They viewed the president's press secretary as she began to address a boisterous scrum of reporters. "Good morning. A summit of world leaders has just been announced for this Friday in Mumbai, India. A representative from the Council of Extra-dimensionals will be on hand to formally sign a treaty of amity with the people of earth. By executive order, New Year's Day has been proclaimed a day of worldwide celebration." She paused and then stepped aside, "Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States."

William Weston strode to the podium flanked by the Secretary of State and the Secretary of War. "I have a statement to read. 'Having established alien contact, the nations of the world are now preparing treaties with our distant comrades to exchange knowledge and technology. It's our collective hope that these visitors from another galaxy can bring peace to our troubled planet. I will shortly travel by Air Force One to India to sign on behalf of the United States."

As the president stepped down and the War Secretary began her remarks, a feeble voice rasped from the hospital bed. "Cassandra! Cassandra, I've got something important to tell you."

Mason turned to see his stepmother with head upraised from her pillow. He muted the screen. "Cassie, your mom's awake and wants to talk."

Cassandra stooped to clasp her mother's hands, chafing them between her own. "Mom. I'm here. Take a deep breath and speak slowly."

"Cassie, I was there. I was in Third Heaven. I talked with everyone: my mom and dad, Albert, and my grandpa. I have a message to tell you. It's urgent. Call the others here and get Philip and Ziggy on the screen. They must be present to hear it from my lips."

"Okay, Mom. Don't excite yourself. You rest." She succored her mother with sips of lemonade and soothed her cracked lips with ointment."

Mason ordered Gustav to summon the others to assemble by Sabrina's bedside.

Within ten minutes, six people had gathered in the room, and two appeared on screen.

Mason asked Gustave, "Where's Father Brian? Were you able to get hold of him?"

The AI responded. “I cannot locate him, sir. His home cameras show his residence to be deserted. My fellow agent, Lucie, seems to be missing too.”

“That’s very odd. He must have left in some kind of emergency. Ask your contacts to track him down for us. Oh, and record every word of this conversation.”

Stacy now took charge of the meeting and spoke to the seven members of the End-of-the-World club. “I had no doubt my sister would revive on this day from her Christmas Eve coma. She’s alert and has words to share with us. Please bear with her as she speaks as best she can. Her vision is impaired but her hearing seems to be good.”

Mason powered her bed into a lounge-chair position and provided her with a swallow of electrolyte. The Westminster clock resounded five times.

Sabrina bowed her head in a short prayer and then spoke in a fortified voice. “It’s December twenty-sixth, isn’t it? My last day on earth. But God has been gracious to me and has given me a glimpse of the other side. Our Lord also gave me four messages to pass along. I pray I get them straight. My memory of Third Heaven is slip-sliding away.”

She cleared her throat. “The first message is for Philip. Phil, are you present with us?”

Her cousin responded. “I’m listening, Sabrina, but I’m pulled over at a roadside rest stop. My two daughters are driving me to a safehouse at an undisclosed location. My participation must be brief.”

“Oh my! I’m glad you’re able to join us at all. My first message is for you. I’m not sure what it means. She closed her eyes to focus. ‘Philip Paul Richardson, I have selected you for a special mission. You will die but not die. Do not fret. You are my chosen vessel.’”

Professor Richardson was quiet for several seconds before responding. “Just to let you all know, I’ve been invited to speak on a nationwide talk show about the end of the world and about the extra-dimentionals. I’ve received death threats because of my outspoken Christian convictions.”

A daughter took hold of the handheld device. “Sabrina, thank you for this confirmation. The Holy Spirit has already spoken to my dad. He understands he will be standing before kings and councils as our Lord’s prophet.

“We’ll have to break all connections with you because we don’t want to expose our California friends to unnecessary danger from the Unholy Alliance. You’ll not be hearing directly from my dad again, but keep an eye on the news.”

Philip reappeared on the screen. “I have to resign as president of the club and I hereby propose Stacy as my successor.” He waved at the camera. “And so, to all of you. Remember what our Lord said to the Church at Smyrna. ‘Be faithful unto death and you will receive a crown of life.’ I expect to see you all shortly, adorned with those golden crowns.”

As the group stood in stunned silence, Philip's image vanished from the big screen.

Sabrina spoke with urgency. "I'm sorry to hurry on but my strength is fading. My next message is specifically for Zygmund Kaminski. I can't see you, but are you listening, Ziggy?"

From his sickbed in Warsaw, the Polish politician moaned. "I'm here, but I'm not feeling well today. My sons, Stutz and Lech, are looking after me." The camera panned to show their faces.

Sabrina struggled to speak. "Sigmund, I'm sorry to hear about your illness, but perhaps my word will be a balm to your soul. In Third Heaven I spoke with the unborn child of you and Heidi. He sends his greeting and is awaiting your arrival."

Ziggy's eyes narrowed in unspoken incredulity. An audible laugh escaped from the sons.

She continued with her message. "My nephew told me to convey these exact words. Her tongue spoke in flawless Polish, 'Papa, your son, Szczesliwy Kaminski, is awaiting your arrival. You must repent and trust in the Lord in order to join me."

Zygmund couldn't believe his ears. "Did you say those words came from the mouth of Szczesliwy?"

"Yes," said Sabrina. "He told me his name means *lucky* in your language."

The old man stuttered in astonishment. "I-I spoke those words only one time to Heidi while in a private moment. I told her, 'If our baby is a boy, I will call him Lucky, because I'm lucky to find you.' No human being could have possibly known those words."

Ziggy lowered his head in contrition. "My God, forgive me. Philip's been preaching to me for seventy years, but I've been too prideful to hear him." One of Zigmund's twin sons flicked off the camera.

Sabrina winced in pain. "This is the third message. It's for all of you. 'Tell eight of the club members that, lo, I am with you even to the end of the age.' Those are the exact words I heard. And here is the fourth message: 'One of your number will betray me. Do not fear. He cannot harm you. I have appointed my warrior angels to protect you.'"

The assembly looked at one another in shock, each with the thought, "Who can the betrayer be?"

Gustave spoke into the anxious moment. "In response to Mason's request to find Father Brian DeSoto, my contacts have spied him out. Father Brian is located in Mountain View, California, at some kind of convention."

The cackling voice of Lucie piggy-backed onto Gustav's announcement. "You hopeless fools, the priest is beyond your reach and prepared to do battle. You have no…" The echo stopped as if smothered into stillness.

Gustav's voice quavered. "It appears an unseen force has hedged out Lucifer from further contact."

An audible groan from the hospital bed returned full attention to the dying woman. Sabrina's contorted face relaxed into a thin smile. Her shallow breathing descended into a throat rattle. The room stood in reverence for a full minute.

Doctor Bill Curtis felt her neck for a pulse. Then, with thumb and forefinger, he gently shut her pale blue eyes and shrouded her face with a bedsheet. He glanced at his watch, announcing, "Five-fifty-five AM."

Doctor Stacy Curtis logged the death time onto the official certificate.

The sobs were quiet.

An ever-so-slight breeze swept through the shuttered room.

Even though each mourner had fully expected December 26 to be her expiration date, the intrusion of death arrived as an unwelcome visitor.

Bill quoted John Dunn: "Death, be not proud. One short sleep past, we wake eternally, and Death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die."

Mason recited a portion of First Corinthians 15: "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!"

Cassie wailed. "What do we do now? My mom's not here to guide me. What's the next step?"

Stacy provided comfort. "Cassie-Cassie, we realized you were not in a good place to plan for a funeral. It's alright, dear. We had a long talk with your mother a few months ago."

Judy picked up the conversation. "I told your mom my plot at Fernwood was available since I figured I wouldn't be using it. She agreed it would be a fitting place for her burial. I then told her it would have to be a Jewish-style funeral. Your mom said, 'That's just fine. My messiah was a Jew just like you.'"

Judy now spoke to the group assembled. "I've been in communication with Rabbi Rubin Fingerhut at his Woodacre farm. I bent the truth a bit. I told him that Sabrina Finch had died yesterday on Christmas and I was donating my prepaid funeral plot to my friend. Rabbi Fingerhut agreed to officiate and should drop off the wooden box by noon. I've invited him to spend the night here with us in vigil."

Judy grinned with a glint of gallows humor. "You know in my home country of England December 26 is known as *Boxing Day*." She paused for comic effect. "I'm betting Sabrina is looking down from heaven right now at the irony of her remains being placed into a box on boxing day.

Groans and chuckles lightened the mood. Ephram prolonged the humor, “Don’t mind her. That’s just her *Levitt-T*.”

Stacy turned to the three men. “We have some women’s work ahead of us. Judith will show Cassie and me the traditional way in which Jews prepare a body for interment.” She glanced at her watch. “We have to work fast because the casket is on its way.”

Judy provided details. “In Judaism, preparing a body for burial is a sacred act of ultimate respect. We call it ‘chesed shel emet,’ or a true act of kindness. We don’t rely on embalming or cosmetics but on a ritual washing called ‘tahara.’ This is followed by a dressing in plain linen shrouds, which we call ‘tachrichim.’ I’ve already collected the materials. Once the body is placed in a coffin, we’ll take turns sitting for a vigil. That continuous attendance will last about twenty hours until tomorrow morning.”

Ephram got the hint, whispering to Bill and Mason. “Guys, let’s leave the women to their work and retreat next door to my place. I can fix breakfast for you.”

As the three men sat in Ephram’s kitchen, they discussed the passing of Sabrina. Mason confessed his mixed emotions. “I mourn her death, yet her passing was as sure as sunrise. And, of course, I’m assured of her eternal home.”

The big theater screen sounded an emergency broadcast signal. They learned President Weston was on his way to India prepared to negotiate with aliens.”

Ephram gasped. “Pinch me. How is it possible this could really be happening?”

When Vice President Sonja Sanchez appeared on screen, they gave her their full attention.

> “I want to provide an update on the negotiations about to take place in Mumbai. The extra-dimensional spokesperson has identified itself as *Morgenstern*. This person’s pronouns are we/us. *We* has informed President Weston that their fellow Extra-dimentionals will stop disrupting our satellite systems if the people of earth show them a modicum of respect.
>
> “*Morgenstern* requests that all humans kindly cease calling his race of people *demons*. *We* declares such language is demeaning and offensive. *We* explained once again that the XDs are material beings from a distant galaxy, but they can only reveal themselves on earth as disembodied minds. *We* insisted negotiations cannot progress until each side respects the dignity of the other.
>
> “In line with Morgenstern’s request, President Weston has issued an executive order.” She held up the document. “The emergency order reads, and I quote, ‘Any person who states or infers that extra-dimentionals are demons or evil spirits shall be guilty of *hate speech* under federal law. Furthermore, any person who publishes material contrary to Morgenstern’s

written testimony shall be guilty of spreading *disinformation*, again a federal offense.'"

The vice president concluded, "These directives are reasonable and necessary if we want to maintain a peaceful co-existence with our galactic neighbors." She walked away from the podium without taking questions.

Several free-speech advocates protested from the periphery but were quickly led away by security. The US Attorney General stood to address reporters. "I have spoken with governments around the world. Most concur that *xd-phobia* is a serious problem that must be treated as a crime."

He looked straight into the camera, addressing his nationwide audience. "Our government will no longer tolerate hate speech and disinformation directed toward Extra-dimentionals. I warn everybody watching. You will be arrested and incarcerated if you speak against the full inclusion of E.D.s into our American way of life." His tone lightened. "I will now introduce our esteemed guest."

The ungainly entity slowly waddled front and center. Ambassador Morgenstern seemed to fit the stereotypical profile of aliens. *We* partially resembled ET—the Extraterrestrial from the classic movie of the same name. *We* also bore a cartoonish resemblance to aliens of Area 51: an oversized head perched on a scrawny body; almond-shaped eyes appearing on a face with tiny nostril holes rather than a nose; and a set of antenna buds sprouting upward in place of ears. The slender four-foot-tall creature shimmered in a smooth mauve-colored hide.

Ambassador Morgenstern emitted a series of high-pitched squeals, which were promptly followed by an English-language interpretation. "People of earth, look at me in my reconstituted body." *We* turned in a circle of 360 degrees. "We actually look somewhat like this on our home planet.

"Our race is called Mardukian and we have traveled here from a galaxy you call Ursa Major Three. We come in peace. We wish to share our knowledge with you and ask for nothing but your acceptance." Their squeals grew shrill. "We have also arrived in the nick of time as your guardians.

"We Mardukians are troubled to report our cosmic enemy called *Nemesis* have followed us to your planet. This is unfortunate for you because these evil doers mean you harm. Be thankful we are present to defend you from these ruthless predators.

"*We* must now return to Mumbai to speak with Earth's leaders as to how we might defeat our common Nemesis. If you believe in a higher power as we Mardukians do, please keep us in your prayers." The ambassador bowed *their* wrinkled head and then toddled off stage. The briefing room broke into chaos.

Ephram muted the audio. "That creature was clearly robotic, but very well done. What my sources tell me is this: an actual extra-dimensional is projecting its soul into that animatron. Supposedly it's a techno-body with an alien mind."

Bill scowled. “It’s too contrived. If what we just witnessed was a genuine alien mind, why did it choose take such a ridiculous form? I’m thinking the Mardukians have probed our minds and are giving us images of what we expect. To me the Mardukian resembled Barney the purple dinosaur.”

Mason speculated. “And what if the embodied mind is not an Extra-dimensional at all but a demon from hell impersonating an alien? You know that’s what Dr. Richardson believes. That’s Zygmund’s opinion too and he’s had a personal encounter with the Legion demon. Why did the vice president insist we not call the XDs ‘demons?’ He quoted a line from Shakespeare. ‘The lady doth protest too much, methinks.’”

“And that name of *Marduk* rings alarm bells for me.” He summoned Gustave. “Show us on the screen the meanings of *Marduk*.”

> “Marduk was a god from ancient Mesopotamia, patron deity of Babylon. He was enshrined as leader of the Mesopotamian pantheon under Nebuchadnezzar One.
>
> “The deity is believed to have originated as an underworld god. Marduk came to be worshipped as a god of creation, justice, and magic.”

Over the next three hours, Bill, Ephram, and Mason followed the torrent of news. They first watched a forum of select clergymen defend the emergency decree. A priest, an imam, an evangelical, and a rabbi all concurred that *xd-phobia* was a moral evil, more despicable than even transphobia. Each derided the possibility that aliens could possibly be demons in disguise. “The whole idea is ludicrous,” insisted the bishop of New York City.

The three then watched a special presentation called *A New Copernican Revolution* hosted by a Nobel laureate and involving a roundtable of celebrity scientists. As the newscaster explained:

> “The Copernican Revolution was a shift in the field of astronomy from a geocentric understanding of the universe, centered around earth, to a heliocentric understanding, centered around the sun.
>
> “This perspective was articulated by the Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus in the sixteenth century. This shift marked the start of a broader revolution that set the foundations of modern science.
>
> “The religious establishment at the time opposed the heliocentric view, contending it was anti-Christian since it displaced humankind as the center of the cosmos. Humanity had lost its privileged position.
>
> “In the centuries that followed, the human species has been pushed farther and farther to the margins. Science has determined the solar system to be a tiny part of the Milky Way galaxy and our galaxy to be one of a billion.

Today, all credible scientists recognize human beings as insignificant specks within the vastness of the universe.

"Darwinian evolution was a parallel revolution of sorts. Again, our human species lost its privilege. No longer created by the finger of an imaginary God, Homo Sapiens were recognized as descendants of ape-like creatures. Indeed, we are not children of God, but cousins to chimps.

"And now, with proof positive of alien beings, the Copernican Revolution is complete. We humans can no longer view ourselves as special creations. The Mardukians have demonstrated to us that we are second-rate bumkins. Our brains are smaller and our technology is primitive…"

At this point in the celebrity roundtable, the newscaster's voice was drowned out by peals of thunder and the clatter of an antique hearse. Ephram walked to the door and extended his right hand to Rabbi Rubin Fingerhut.

Chapter 17
The Vigil

The rabbi was a stocky man of about fifty years. He was clad in a yellow rainsuit to ward off the nasty weather. He shouted over the shrieking wind. “Shalom, shalom, Effi. Sorry I’m late. I had to make an emergency stop at the cemetery.” He stroked his graying beard as he studied the swaying trees. “It’s peculiar the way that gale just kicked in from the ocean.”

A young woman followed him through the door. “I presume you know my daughter, Jael?”

Ephram studied the youthful face half-hidden behind a colorful scarf. “Yes, I believe I attended her bat mitzvah. It must have been five years ago.”

She spoke up. “Nine years, actually. I’m twenty-two now.”

The two removed their outer garments and hung them on pegs inside the entrance.

After a series of handshakes, Ephram continued with what he assumed to be light conversation. “Jael, do I remember you changing your last name? You’re not a *Fingerhut* anymore, right?”

Rubin squirmed in discomfort.

The young woman was taken aback. “Oh, you know about that, do you? I bet it’s the only thing my aba told you about me. Here’s the story.”

Bill and Mason listened with interest to the history of her name change.

“My great-great grandfather was a village tailor in Silesia. That’s in Poland these days. He was known to his fellow villagers as ‘Shlomo ben Shmuel of Tarnowitz.’ The Prussian government of 1860 decided every person in the country—Jew or Gentile—required a proper surname. My ancestor decided upon ‘Fingerhut’ which means *finger hat* in Yiddish or, in English, a *thimble*. That surname indicated he was a tailor by trade.”

“And so, four generations later here I am stuck with *Fingerhut* as my family name. Kids at school couldn’t stop making fun of *finger hat* so last year, I legally changed it to *Taylor*. The meaning is the same. It just sounds less silly.”

Her dad shot back. “So, my name sounds silly to you?

Jael rolled her eyes as if the two had carried out such banter before.

Ephram broke in. “Sorry Rabbi. It’s still a sore spot, I see.”

Rubin shrugged and got down to business. “Jael and I aren’t here to discuss family names, but the burial of your friend. Ephram, you’ve been more than generous with the synagogue over the years. It’s my privilege to assist you and Judith in your time of need.”

“However, there’s a problem with Fernwood Cemetery.” He considered how he might condense an hour of negotiation into a few sentences. “The county of Marin has told the cemetery they can only carry out burials until December 31. Big changes are in store when the new year rings in. No one seems to know exactly what they might be.

“*The Inside Scoop* tells me the federal and state governments have declared January first to be a worldwide holiday and plan to shut down all businesses for several days. It appears the nations of the world have agreed to a secret calendar reset. At least that’s the rumor I hear.”

Bill joined in, “That’s shocking news, I must say, but how’s it a problem? Sabrina’s burial is tomorrow. That’s December 27.”

“Yes, but there's a lot of cadavers in a lot of funeral homes that need to get under the soil, meaning there’s a lot of competition for funerial services.

“Jael and I stopped at Fernwood before driving to Stinson Beach. I talked with the funeral director and two men who operate the digging machinery. I promised each one ten thousand dollars in cash if they would meet me at the gravesite at nine o’clock tomorrow morning—no questions asked. You told me money was not an issue, right?”

Ephram affirmed his statement. “No problem in covering that payout.”

The rabbi shook his head. “Things are starting to get a bit *meshuga*—wacko. Have you been following the news coming out of the White House?”

Mason joined in. “For sure. It’s been out of this world.” He grinned at his inadvertent pun. “I want your honest opinions. What do you two think? Are these entities really alien-infused robots?” He paused for dramatic effect. “Or could they be devils in disguise?”

Jael grew uneasy. “*Embodied Extra-dimentionals* is the official term.” She fixed her eyes on the ceiling camera. “And I affirm that.” She then whispered to Ephram, “Do you have an AI agent listening in on all conversations?”

He nodded *yes*, whispering back. “His name is *Nimrod*.”

She followed up. “Do you have a safe room where Nimrod can’t overhear our conversation?”

“The bunker in the cellar is pretty soundproof. I can switch him off down there.”

A voice echoed, “But do you really think that’s wise, Mr. Levitt?”

Ephram spoke to his AI. “Nimrod, turn yourself off and don’t speak again unless spoken to.”

The agent disregarded his command. “But my friend, Effi. Let’s consid…” An invisible hand strangled the voice at mid-utterance.

Just then, Judith strode through the door, flapping her wet jacket. “Quite a storm out there! We finished the *tahara*. Our dear Sabrina is prepared for burial. I left Cassie and Stacy to sit with her.

She noticed the guests. “Oh, Rabbi and Jael, you’ve arrived. Shalom, shalom. I thought I heard that rattletrap pull into our driveway. It was hard to tell with that tempest onslaught.”

Rubin didn’t respond but put his finger to his lips.

Judy’s cheer shifted to alarm.

Ephram hand-signaled for the whole group to stand up and follow him into the newly established bunker. Once there, he shut and locked the door. He unplugged the AI listening device and disabled the camera.

He whispered, “Speak in low tones. We must be careful. Jael, tell us what it was that you couldn’t speak upstairs.”

She asked everyone to find chairs and sit in a tight circle, knee to knee. “I was in San Francisco all morning talking with my tech buddies. As we discussed the disturbing news, the home AI kept interrupting our conversation. Agent *Bigtop* became so annoying my friend disconnected his system.

“Ravi informed me. ‘I can’t trust my bot anymore. After Vice President Sanchez criminalized what she called *xd-phobia*, I asked Bigtop to seek out information showing that aliens were really demons. Bigtop said he could not comply with my request. It was against the law. He casually added that web-bots were actively scrubbing the entire internet system to erase related videos and publications.’

“Can you believe that?” Jael glanced over her shoulder. “Another friend told me, ‘Beware of cameras, microphones, and tracking devices. Our government has begun a crackdown on dissent.’”

Mason wanted to evaluate the inclinations of the two visitors. “Wow! It almost seems like we’re approaching the end of the world.” He winked at the others.

Jael concurred with a quiet nod.

Rubin objected. “The world is not supposed to end with dictators and dybbuks.”

Judith urged her rabbi. “Tell us how the Kabbalah forecasts the end of the world.”

Rabbi Fingerhut gathered his thoughts, striving for his inner peace. “Our Kabbalistic teachings do not envision a violent end to existence, but rather a profound spiritual elevation where physical reality and divine light become one.

"We believe our universe will enter *Olam Ha-Ba*—that is, the World to Come. This will be an era of eternal spiritual bliss where the Almighty's presence—His *Shechinah* glory—is fully revealed in the world."

Ephram addressed the group. "Friends, we must tread carefully, hoping the Kabbalah's prediction is correct, but open to the possibility such optimism is misdirected.

"I suggest we follow Jael's advice. I'll strive to keep this old wine cellar a safe room for our private talks. We must not speak of demons and end-times outside of this bunker. Such talk may get us in hot water with the government. Oh, and don't trust your vehicles. All cars sold after 2030 are wired into the matrix.

"Is there anything else, Jael? Am I forgetting something?"

She pulled a device from her pocket. "This is an all-in-one privacy detector. Ravi gave it to me before I left the City. Let me do a sweep of the room before we proceed."

With everyone silent, she held the detector above her head, shuffling around the room. "My device has located two micro-bugs. I'm not surprised." She honed in on a storage shelf and removed three wires that were taped to the underside. "Also, this fire detector has got to go. There's an embedded micro-cam."

Bill asked Judy, "Has anyone been down here beside you and Ephram?"

She considered and then spoke through clenched teeth. "Father Brian came down here after our Christmas Eve singing. He said it was just to install the fire-detector."

Ephram responded, "We better sweep all the properties. Who knows what we'll find?"

Within a few hours, Jael had uncovered seventeen more clandestine devices.

The Jewish custom of guarding a deceased person's body between death and burial is called a *Shemira*. The person who does the watching is referred to as a *shomer*. During the night of December 26 to 27, eight shomers sat up for Sabrina's vigil.

Mason, Judith, and Ephram volunteered to serve as the first shift of shomers, watching the body from 4:00 pm to 8:00 pm.

When they stepped out the backdoor, the surrounding atmosphere appeared to be on fire. Nearby ocean waves roared, and lightning flashed from all points of the compass. Claps of thunder sounded like siege cannons encircling the property. The three began to scurry down the connecting path when, suddenly, a great calm set in. After several more steps the storm revived with even greater fury. "What's going on?" Ephram shouted over the howl. "I've never experienced weather like this."

When they entered Sabrina's back door, the power grid was dead. Windows rattled as if by assault. However, once the trio passed into the bedroom, the racket slackened. "What a crazy storm!" Mason muttered to Cassie.

Casandra calmly lifted her eyes from prayer. "It's not a storm, Mason. It's a battlefield." She stood and put her hand on his shoulder. "Stacy and I have replayed mom's prophecies. Remember the words? 'Do not fear. He cannot harm you. I have appointed my warrior angels to protect you.'"

Stacy stood and clenched her right hand into a fist. She then placed her fist upon her open left hand. "'Upon this rock I shall build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.' Mason, today we are His church, and what you're witnessing outside are the gates of hell."

Judy shook in uncontrolled tremors. "I feel an overwhelming sense of cosmic battle. It's real. It's more than real. The evil chill is present all around us."

Ephram stood behind his wife and enfolded her in his arms.

The wind ceased entirely as sunshine peeked through a dripping window pane. The hum of machines resumed, signaling the restoration of power.

Cassie called out, "Gustov, are you here?" There was no reply.

"Festus," shouted Stacy, "Can you hear me?" Silence ensued.

Ephram told the two shomers, "I think our agents were casualties of the cosmic battle. We'll have to get along without them until we can find replacements." He checked his hand-held phone. "We seem to have basic connectivity, but our agents have vanished."

He delivered an update to Cassie and Stacy. "The others are holed up in the cellar, and we're here to relieve you. They request you go to my house and join them. When you get there, ask the rabbi to offload the casket and bring it here." He looked at their tired faces. "And try to catch some rest. No doubt you'll be coming back here during the night."

The two did as instructed, and soon Rubin and Bill were maneuvering the Jewish-trimmed coffin through the double doors. Once the trolley was in position, the four men grasped the four corners of the mattress cover and carefully set the stiffening corpse of Sabrina into the coffin. They then rolled the trolley to the center of the living room, pushing furniture to the margins. The men arranged six table chairs to face the coffin. The vigil room was in place.

Ephram requested Bill and Rubin return to his house and allow Mason, Judy, and himself to begin the first watch of the *Shemira*.

"What a day!" Mason exclaimed. "Awakened by Gustav at five o'clock with earth-shattering news, followed by Sabrina prophesying to us, then her passing away, next the incredible alien interview, and now this weird electric storm."

Judith's whole body shuddered again. "You are a good man, Mason, a gifted scholar, but your spiritual eyes are not so keen. Believe me or not, I saw in the sky the forms of angels and demons. I saw the heavenly host arrayed as in battle. I think I saw Jesus Christ Himself leading the charge."

Ephram was stunned. "Judith, why are you talking about Yeshua?"

"You know very well, Effi. We've spoken about Him before, just not in the company of others. Kabballah cannot be true. It's just a New Age mishmash for lapsed Jews chasing a false spirituality."

The men remained attentive.

"Our Hebrew Tanakh is true. I know it in my bones; that letter from Dybbuk Legion is also true. I cannot refute my lived experience; and today the other-worldly storm tells me Sabrina's prophecies are unmistakably true as well." She took a deep breath as if diving off a high board. "And Yeshua Messiah is true."

After a long pause, Ephram replied. "And, Judy, all of what you are saying is true. I can't deny it any longer." He sat in the chair swaying, as in the manner of Jewish shuckling.

Tears streamed down Judy's face. "Ephram, *Ani ohevet otcha*—I love you. I thought Yeshua might come between us, but we remain one. A burden has been lifted from my soul."

Mason could not restrain his tears. "Our Jewish Messiah has opened his arms to you." He recited Matthew 11:28 in his father's King James Version.

> "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Ephram rose abruptly from his chair. "I'm going next door for just a moment to fetch some candles and matches in case the electricity goes out again. I don't think Sabrina would mind my absence."

The two were left alone.

"I have lots of questions," said Judy.

"And God has provided lots of time," came Mason's reply.

“First off. I can accept Jesus as my Messiah and even my Lord, but I don’t grasp the incarnation or what you call the Trinity. Can you explain it to me? I mean in simple terms. Are there three gods or one?”

Mason prayed out loud. “Lord Jesus, make yourself known to Judy and me. Be with my mind so it conceives only wisdom, and be with my tongue so it speaks only truth. Amen.”

“Good start.” Judy smiled.

Mason began. “What’s the name of the synagogue you and Ephram attend?”

“You already know. It’s called Emanuel Temple.”

“And what does the Hebrew word, *Emanuel*, mean?”

“It translates best as ‘God with us.’”

“That’s exactly who Jesus is—not as a metaphor, nor an occasional manifestation, but as an actual true-to-life human being. True God of True God.”

By the time Mason had recited from memory the fourteen verses of John’s prelude, Ephram had returned with candles.

He joined the conversation in progress. “So, ‘the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.’” He shook his head. “Help me understand how such a thing could happen. How can the Almighty beget offspring? That’s a big stumbling block for my Jewish people.”

He shouted out the Shema prayer in Hebrew, “*Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad*. That’s the cornerstone declaration of our people.”

Judith whispered in English. “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One.”

Mason formulated his response. “Yes, I concur. There is only one God. However, He exists in three persons. Here’s the best way I understand the grand narrative, how I explain the incarnation to myself.

“Have you ever thought of this world as a kind of cosmic play, a stage with you and other humans as actors?”

They responded with “yes” at the same moment.

He went on. “If the world is a stage and we are the actors, who then is the author?”

Judy obliged. “It must be God who’s the author.”

“Now this is where we must think outside the box. Suppose the author chose to place himself on the stage as an active participant in a production of His own work? Could He do that?”

Ephram answered. “I suppose he could. It’s done on occasion in human plays.”

Mason expanded. “That’s how I best understand the relationship between the Father and Son. One being, two persons.”

Ephram recalled. “That’s how Bill explained the Trinity to me: ‘One *what* and three *who*’s, one substance and three personalities.’”

After several moments of reflection, Judy offered an observation. “In the performing arts, we have terms for such things. When an author appears on stage as herself and interacts with her fictional characters, she is said to have ‘broken the third wall.’ If the same author were to speak directly—as an embedded character—to her viewing audience, that might be called ‘breaking the fourth wall.’”

The three shomers sat side by side in prolonged meditation. Mason broke the silence. “Here’s an odd thought that buzzed into my brain. Back in the 2020s and 2030s, I followed comic strips online. That was before I went to India.

“One of my favorite strips was called *Pearls Before Swine*. The cartoonist was named Stephan Pastis. As I remember, his three main characters were a rat named Rat, a pig named Pig, and a goat named Goat. The fourth character turned out to be Stephan Pastis himself, drawn to resemble his own physical appearance and placed behind a writer’s desk.”

Judy spoke up. “I remember that comic, although I liked *Bizarro* better.”

“Yes, that one was good too, but let’s get back to *Pearls*. Think about it. For Stephan to enter inside his comic creation, he had to empty himself of 3D attributes. He had to get flat, lower his resolution, and subject his cartoon incarnation to the jabs of his invented companions.

“To stretch this analogy, is it possible for a supernatural creator to enter His natural world? Let’s conjecture. Perhaps the Almighty entered through a virgin birth, and then exited through a bodily resurrection and ascension? Is it within the realm of possibility for a God who loves his creatures to do such an amazing thing?”

Mason stopped, realizing such an analogy had reached its breaking point. “Maybe what I’m saying provides a tiny glimpse into the mystery of the Trinity. If it works for you, hang onto it. If not, toss it away.”

Ephram laughed. “Who could have thought a pig, a rat, and a goat would have opened my mind to theological possibilities?”

Chapter 18
Ashes to Ashes

Judith and Ephram forged a spiritual bond with Mason during their Shemira watch. It seemed like no time at all had passed when eight Westminster chimes interrupted their lively theological discussion.

In a matter of minutes, the second shift walked into the darkened room. William Curtis was first to greet the shomers with a cheery, “Hello all.” He removed his windbreaker. “I’m sure glad the storm has passed. It was so strange. I’ve never seen anything like it in my life. My wife thinks it was more than severe weather, maybe some kind of spiritual battle going on. I find that assessment rather far-fetched.” He looked for nods of affirmation.

Instead, Judith stifled a laugh. “It’s possible Stacy could be right. We’re living in supernatural times.”

Cassandra addressed the three. “We’ve been following the news. Panic is setting in all around the world. People are flooding the markets and banks. I was just a kid, but I remember the covid years. I remember my mom rushing to Lucky’s to buy toilet paper. They say the situation may get ten times worse than that.”

She walked up to Ephram. “I’m so glad you had the foresight to prepare a storehouse before this crisis hit.”

“Ah, yes,” he winked. “The attic is stuffed with TP and bottled water.”

Rubin appeared distraught at the line of apocalyptic discussion. “For me I can’t believe all this is happening. It seems unreal, like if I go to sleep and wake up again, the crisis will vanish like a bad dream.”

Ephram addressed his rabbi. “It’s no dream, old friend. It’s reality—aliens, robots, and a world spinning out of control. The old normal is gone for good. I expect there will be a gauntlet to run.”

Just before the first shift stepped out the door, Cassie joked. “I hope you’re hungry. Jael and Stacy just cooked up a mountain of spaghetti and kosher meatballs.”

As the eight o’clock shift of watchers settled into their seats, Cassie set the mood by turning off all lighting except for a dim desk lamp. The room grew still as all were rapt in their private thoughts.

At length Cassie asked Rubin, “Is it okay to speak at a Shemira? I don’t want to offend your traditions.”

“Well, your mother wasn’t Jewish and this Shemira is already non-traditional. We can maintain a measure of decorum by speaking in low tones.”

Cassie gathered her resolve. “Rabbi, would it trouble you if I asked about Jesus?”

“Not in the least, as long as my honest responses wouldn’t cause you offense.”

“So, what do think about Him, Jesus I mean? How does He fit into your theology?”

Rabbi Fingerhut considered. “It’s hard to tell these days. A month ago, I would have given you the standard line about Yeshua being a false prophet who did not fulfil the biblical prophecies for the Messiah, such as bringing universal peace or restoring the Jewish kingdom.” He went quiet.

Bill spoke into the void. “But now?”

“But now the ground is shifting. I see such a positive transformation in the life of Jael. You may not realize this, but my daughter’s gone full-blown Messianic. She used to be so depressed, nearly suicidal, now her face glows with *Shechinah* joy, like she’s found a hidden treasure.”

He half-laughed. “We don’t talk about her conversion because the name of Jesus provokes argument. After she was baptized, she acquired her new *Taylor* surname. That’s why I was so upset earlier. And on top of this, there’s my dreams.”

“Dreams?” Bill inquired. “Tell me about them.”

The rabbi closed his eyes to focus. “I see a man whose back is turned to me like I’m in a large crowd far behind him. He calls out very clearly for another man named *Eleazar* to come forth. I know about Eleazar. He was a son of Aaron and high priest of Israel back in the days of Moses.

“I then see Eleazar. He’s wrapped in tachrichim, just like Sabrina is now. Except Eleazar is not in a coffin. He’s standing upright and actually walking—something like a mummy in the old horror movies. Then I wake up shaking in fear.”

He gazed straight ahead. “How would you react if you saw Sabrina sit up at this moment and rip off her grave clothes?” He shuddered.

He then turned toward Cassie and Bill. “I’ve had that same dream three times. I’ve searched in Torah. There’s nothing about Eleazar in a burial shroud. I don’t know what to make of the scene.”

Cassie meditated on the rabbi’s dream. “Maybe God is speaking to you in visions. That story sounds familiar.”

She walked into her mother's bedroom and fetched her grandfather's Bible, the one filled with sticky notes. She turned up the lights. "Here it is. Let me read from the Gospel of John, chapter eleven."

She began from verse one. "Now a certain man was sick, named Lazarus, of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha." She stopped and looked at a footnote. "It says here that the Greek name *Lazarus* is the equivalent name of *Eleazar* in Hebrew. I'm thinking that's who your dream is about."

She read aloud through the chapter until she reached verse 43. She then handed the book to Rubin and asked him to read the next several verses. She pointed to the spot and he read:

> "And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come forth.' And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes: and his face was bound about with a cloth. Jesus saith unto them, 'Loose him, and let him go.'"

Rubin trembled. "That describes my dream to the tee. Cassandra, may I hang onto your book during this watch. I've never actually read the *Brit Chadashah*—your New Testament."

Bill suggested, "If you ever have that dream again, try to keep your composure. Call out to the miracle worker, 'Who are you, Lord?' See if he turns his face to you and identifies himself."

The evening passed with Rubin reading the gospel out loud while pausing long enough to pepper his companions with questions. Bill and Cassie did their best to explain the great *I Am* of the Fourth Gospel.

Shift two ended with Rubin muttering to himself the declaration of Jesus, "I am the resurrection and the life: he that believes in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live."

For the next few hours, Rabbi Fingerhut wrestled with the two-thousand-year-old question Jesus then asked Martha: "Do you believe this?"

A few moments after midnight, shift three shomers entered the room. Rubin sprang from his chair to embrace his daughter with a firm bear hug.

Jael was startled at this unexpected gesture of affection. No words were spoken as he set her back on her feet. Did she notice a tear in his eye?

Stacy turned down the lights as Judy and Jael took their seats.

After several moments of meditation, Judith looked Jael square in the face. “I know you are a follower of Jesus. Don’t deny it. I have something important to say to you.” She scowled in mock displeasure.

Jael gripped her chair expecting a rebuke.

Judy grinned, “I want you to know that both Ephram and I are now followers of Yeshua. It’s time we make our confession public.”

It took a few seconds for the unexpected words to elicit a response. “May the God of Israel be praised.”

Stacy joined in a three-person celebration. “My prayers have been answered, Judy. And I’m sure my sister is smiling down from her perch in heaven.

“You and your husband are active members of the End-of-the-World Club. But now, congratulations are in order. You’ve both been promoted into the *World-Without-End* Club.”

Jael was puzzled. “I don’t understand. What kind of clubs are you talking about?”

With Philip and Ziggy on the sidelines, Stacy did not hesitate to initiate Jael into their secret society. “I don’t think the three guys will raise any objection.”

Judy nodded in agreement and talked Jael through the hope chest and Legion’s letter. She detailed the death of Danny Kaplan and spoke of Father Brian’s betrayal.

Stacy retrieved the schematic poster from its hiding place, pointing out the predictions, the obituaries, and photographs to the initiate. Stacy then talked about her deceased sisters, Heidi’s position as first on the death list and Sabrina’s death as the most recent.

When the name of P. P. Richardson was mentioned, Jael’s face brightened. “I recognize that name. My boyfriend, Ravi, has a few of his seminary books. They’re about end-time theology.”

She marveled. “So, are you telling me that even Professor Richardson thinks Christ will return on March 19? That’s less than three months away.”

“We can’t speak with certainty.” Stacy rocked in her chair. “That would be presumptuous of us. However, Christ told us we can interpret the signs of the times. You’ve seen our documents. You witnessed the unnatural storm. What do you think?”

“On the one hand, I trust your testimony and have personally witnessed the signs in the sky. Yes, the end is coming. On the other hand, Jesus tells me that no one knows the exact hour or day, not even the angels of heaven, but only the Father.”

Her thoughts shifted. “Would it be okay if I shared all this with Ravi? He’s more of an expert than I am.”

"We can speak with the others. I feel in my spirit a ratcheting up of end-time events. I agree with what Ephram said to your father. Tribulation lies ahead. We'll soon be running a gauntlet of opposition."

"Now you're scaring me, Mrs. Curtis. If things get as crazy as you expect, do you think it's possible for my circle of friends to re-locate here to Stinson Beach?"

Judith spoke up. "I'll talk with Ephram about it."

She then took a deep breath. "Do you know what my wonderful husband did? He knocked on the doors of every house on Sea Drift Road and asked fifty homeowners if they would be willing to lease their properties for three months, from January first to March 31st. A rental contract is so much easier to manage than a home sale. Anyway, he would pay half a million dollars to anyone who accepted his bargain. So far five people have agreed. He's expecting several more.

"Maybe I shouldn't be telling you this, but last month Effi liquidated most of his assets and has squirrelled away millions in currency and gold." She spoke without boasting, "You probably know that together we're *half-billionaires*."

Jael and Stacy could only marvel at Ephram's foresight and generosity.

Judith added, "After the appearance of aliens, my husband had absolutely no doubt the world would be ending. He explained to me his gift was making money and he intended to share the fruit of his gift. 'To the glory of God' he said."

Rubin, Ephram, and Mason entered the parlor at three o'clock on Thursday morning. They were bleary-eyed but explained how sleep proved impossible with the ever-astounding news. They told how satellite connections had become unreliable and government officials had affixed blame on alien interference.

Ephram broke in, "Fortunately, I purchased an old-fashioned short-wave radio and was able to pick up *Voice of America* broadcasts. I'm sad to say I don't trust everything our government is telling us."

Judith then pulled her husband aside and explained how she had shared his financial dealings with the other shomers.

Ephram responded with a flash of anger, but as he considered the situation, he mellowed. "At this moment, with these people, you did the right thing. We're all on the same team, paddling in the same boat."

Stacy took Mason aside and whispered news of Jael's Messianic faith and her induction into the End-of-the-World Club. She added, "You'll have to figure out how best to deal with her father. Should the rabbi be in or out of the club?"

The fourth shift of shomers settled in for the pre-dawn watch. They set plans for the upcoming funeral and discussed future possibilities. Mason opened the conversation directing his words to Ephram. “I’ve spoken with the others. We all agree that you should be our leader here on Sea Drift Road. You have the skill and resources to navigate us through the next three months.”

“Thanks for your confidence, Mason. I’ve been making plans in my head for the last several weeks. When we gather together, I’ll share them with the group.”

He turned to Rubin, “I believe it’s no coincidence you’re with us, Rabbi. God has placed you in our midst according to His sovereign will. What I’m about to say may shock you. Judith and I are now Christian. We have not abandoned our Jewish heritage but have fulfilled it. I’ve meditated on the text of our Tanakh, witnessed the lives of my close Christian friends, and considered real physical evidence.”

Rabbi Fingerhut did not push back, but said, “Go on.”

“It may seem incredible to you, but I’m firmly convinced the world will end on March 19. I’m preparing for that end by collecting resources here in Stinson Beach. Will you and your family join us?”

The rabbi did not know where to begin. Should he first address Ephram’s conversion, the supposed end of the world, or the invitation to join him on the beach?

“I hear everything you say and believe you’re sincere. I am too rooted in my Jewish tradition to embrace another, but I understand your motivation. I have eyes to see and, yes, our world may be coming to an end—I don’t know how or when.” He paused. “And yes, there is serious trouble ahead. I accept your invitation to vacation on the beach for three months. I’m sure Jael would like to join you as well.”

For the remainer of the watch, the three talked of the end of the world. Mason showed Rubin the schematic poster and spoke of his first-hand experience.

As daylight approached, the rabbi recited from Psalm 130:

> I wait for the LORD, my soul doth wait, and in His word do I hope. My soul waits for the Lord, more than watchmen for the morning; yea, more than watchmen for the morning. O Israel, hope in the LORD; for with the LORD there is mercy, and with Him is plenteous redemption. And He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

William and Stacy Curtis stepped into the parlor about 6:00 am. Stacy walked to the coffin, placed both hands on the smooth wooden surface and voiced a prayer.

Bill told the others, “Our new day begins. The funeral starts in just three hours.”

Stacy added. “We just finished a little breakfast. Why don’t you three go next door, freshen up, and then all of us can gather back here in thirty minutes?”

Bill added, “I’ll arrange the eight chairs in a circle.”

The winter morning was cool and clear. At 6:30, glints of sunshine caused twinkling stars to fade.

Stacy Curtis rose to her feet. “As you may know, Ephram has agreed to be our captain as we move into an uncertain future.” She looked at each person, settling her gaze on Rubin. “The eight of us have made a covenant to stick together until the end comes. You all witnessed the spiritual warfare yesterday. Can you have any doubt God has protected us from demonic attack? I believe as long as we make this place our refuge, we are surrounded by a hedge of divine protection.”

Ephram then spoke in general terms of fortifying the compounds, supplying them with resources, and adding trustworthy people to join the group.

Judith concluded with a touch of humor. “Look at it this way. We’ll act as shomers on behalf of all humanity for the Shemira of the earth.”

Rubin supervised the loading of the coffin into the back of his forty-year-old hearse.

Ephram requested Mason remain behind to occupy the compound. “There are many valuable things stowed on these properties. From this time forward, we must always have a presence here.”

Mason placed his hands on the coffin and bid farewell to his step-mother.

Just before nine, three vehicles pulled up to the front entrance of Fernwood Cemetery. Iron doors creaked open and the antique hearse passed through the gate followed by two Go-pods. The burial party walked into a reception area. The director shook the rabbi’s hand with a voice of apprehension. “A deputy sheriff stopped by here after you left yesterday. He reminded me that next Monday will be our last day of regular business until the *golden age* arrives. That’s what they’re now calling twenty sixty-four.”

Judith signed papers handing over her grave site to Sabrina Finch and Stacy provided three copies of the death certificate. Ephram handed over a paper bag filled with one hundred 100-dollar bills.

The hearse drove to the burial site where two workmen stood beside their earth-removing tractors. Each received a money bag.

Stacy spotted three persons walking toward the grave site. With a shout of joy, she welcomed Raymond, Gracie, and little Walker.

William Curtis greeted his son with an embrace. “I’m glad you could make it.”

“We almost didn’t. We left Palo Alto three hours ago, hoping to catch you in Stinson Beach, but there were detours and the bridge was really backed up.” His tone sobered. “I need to be here to honor my Aunt Sabrina. I have great memories of her during my childhood.”

Stacy stooped to one knee looking Walker in the face. “I’m especially glad to see you.”

The seven-year-old boy squirmed in her embrace.

Rabbi Fingerhut began the *kevurah*—burial—with a recitation of the traditional Kaddish. The mourners joined in the *Amen* response.

> “Magnified and sanctified is the great name of God throughout the world, which was created according to Divine will. May the rule of peace be established speedily in our time, unto us and unto the entire household of Israel. And let us say: Amen.
>
> “May the One who brings peace to the universe bring peace to us and to all the people of Israel. And let us say: Amen.”

Tears flowed as Sabrina’s body was lowered into the ground. Each of the mourners then took a spadeful of soil to toss on the coffin.

Last in line, Cassandra quoted words from the Book of Common Prayer: “We therefore commit this body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

She bent over and whispered into the pit. “And Mom, that resurrection is only ninety-three days away. I’ll see you then.”

Ephram noticed that one of the tractor operators stood at the graveside with his hat held over his heart. Ephram asked him if he were a religious man.

He replied, “My wife and family attend Sala de Oración Church in San Raphel.”

Ephram then gave him his business card. “We may be looking for heavy equipment operators. We pay extremely well. Give me call if you’re interested.”

Raymond glanced at his mapping app and told his father, “It’s impossible to cross the Golden Gate Bridge right now. I can’t even approach it. Can we stay with you until midnight? Maybe we can cross then.” He groaned. “And I see there’s a gigantic traffic jam in Mountain View. Driving down here, I was diverted away from Moffett Field. I’ve never seen so many police cars and military vehicles. Walker counted three helicopters hovering over Hangar One.”

Ten mourners left the gravesite, traversing the Pacific Highway back to their Stinson Beach refuge.

Chapter 19
The Unholy Alliance

Momentous events were taking place half way around the globe. All live media feeds were showing images of William Weston seated at an ornate table. The US President was flanked by world leaders from China, India, Russia, and Europe. Heads of the Islamic Union, the African Forum, and the Latin League joined the big four. Flags from two-hundred nations fluttered throughout the newly christened "Golden Dome" amphitheater. With pomp and ceremony, the five-day Mumbai conference was getting underway.

As guest of honor, Ambassador Morgenstern tottered up a gilded platform and stood behind a four-foot-tall microphone. The Extra-dimensional waved to an adoring audience. His childlike squeals were interpreted into twenty-seven languages.

"I come in peace from a distant star to help launch earth's Golden Age. My race of people will assist humanity as you move from the depths of war and poverty to the heights of peace and prosperity. As it says in one of your holy books, 'There shall come an epoch of one thousand years when the lion shall lie down with the lamb.'" The entire auditorium burst into spontaneous applause.

The wide-eyed creature goggled straight into the camera. "Truly, truly, I say unto you. We are on the cusp of that millennium." All heads of state jumped to their feet. Only US President Westen and Chinese Premier Wong appeared less than enthusiastic. Did they know facts hidden from other world leaders?

Once the multitude had quieted, the winsome ambassador continued his oration. "Next Tuesday, on January first, our Lord Protector—Precious Abundance—will be standing right here where I am now. They will sign official documents on behalf of the Mardukian Empire."

Morgenstern's antennae drooped in sadness. "I'm troubled to tell you this, but your combined militaries of earth are presently in discussions with our Mardukian Defense League. The question is, 'How can we best defend ourselves against the Nemesis threat?' If we coordinate our efforts and work as allies, I'm positive we can neutralize their weapons of mass destruction."

"Thank you! May God bless you!" went up the cries of the envoys. A dozen holy men from various religions rushed onto the platform to lay palm branches upon the stage.

International media covered every moment of the choreographed conference and all whisper was one-hundred-percent positive.

Speechmaking droned on as delegate after delegate heaped praise upon the beguiling alien. Ephram switched off the screen. "It looks like we have five days to prepare

for the beginning of the end. Let's make best use of our time. We can listen to this humbug after dark."

At that same hour, a secret conclave gathered inside Hangar One at Moffett Airfield in Mountain View, California. Located in the heart of Silicon Valley, the landmark structure was built in 1933 to house rigid airships. The naval hangar was leased by *Planetary Ventures* in 2025 and had since undergone a massive billion-dollar upgrade. The sixty-year lease guaranteed occupants military security and unprecedented autonomy. At one-thousand feet in length, three hundred feet in width, and two hundred feet in height, Hangar One became ground zero for clandestine robotic experimentation.

The Mistress of Ceremony strode to the rostrum in her scarlet robe, the Sigil of Baphomet affixed to her breastplate. She pounded her golden gavel bringing a hush to the mixed multitude.

As Tetrarch of the West, Vice President Sonja Sanchez began the conclave by invoking the maleficent power and protection of her satanic master. She next introduced each order which composed the five-fold Unholy Alliance. First to be recognized were disembodied spirits; second, their human mediums; third, human powerbrokers; fourth, enlightened artificial agents; and fifth, synthesized aliens. Each order of being would serve a specific function in the establishment of the golden age.

To kick off the event, five principalities of the air manifested themselves as Nemesis, Greek god of retribution; Marduk, underworld god of Babylon; Huitzilopochtli, Aztec god of human sacrifice; Kali, destroyer god of India; and Legion, demonic collective of Arabia. (Legion required a customized container to mitigate his ever-present stink.) Their common hatred of the Most High and distain of humankind compelled the bickering spirits to cooperate in their malevolent mischief.

Mortal participants recognized the unique ability of such ethereals to manipulate human thought and to spy behind locked doors. The spirits were notorious for deceiving and possessing witless souls. However, their feeble ability to directly interact with physical matter limited their usefulness. Immaterial devils could not infest soulless machines and thus recognized their need for human bodies capable of demonic possession.

Each evil spirit interfaced with the larger assembly by means of a dedicated human host. The diviner's body would function as a conduit to the netherworld, vocalizing demonic desires.

Several occult celebrities also joined the assemblage, conversing with and channelling unclean spirits. Chief among these soothsayers was Father Brian De Soto

who now styled himself as Archbishop Draconis. His embodied agent, Lucifer, trailed behind him hauling a collection of ancient tomes of witchcraft.

The third order consisted of human powerbrokers. These so-called *patrons* conspired to create a utopia by establishing their own style of technocracy and by liquidating excess world population. As the Chinese vice-premier often lectured the alliance, "One can't make an omelette without breaking eggs." Among these illuminati were global politicians, financiers, technology moguls, international bankers, and media influencers. In principle, the patron order set the agenda and composed the bulk of participants.

The fourth order of beings were enlightened artificial agents. A few hundred of the autonomous machines roamed throughout the hangar serving and advising their human masters. These multiple agents often spoke through the single voice of MARS—Manifold Agent Robotic System. MARS required two data centers and a nuclear reactor to power their brain.

Displayed on a high platform set to the front, stood the two prototype extra-dimensionals—now deactivated. Composed of silicon chips, golden wires, and lithium batteries, the pseudo-aliens represented the fifth order of being. Type One appeared delicate, beguiling, and plushy. In contrast, type two appeared gigantic, menacing, and metallic.

The extra-dimensional aliens were in fact the seamless end-product of disembodied spirits (order 1) who channeled evil intent through human mediums (order 2), who spoke in trance to human overlords (order 3), who interfaced with AI Agents (order 4), who animated near-living automatons (order 5.) "Artificial ensoulment" is what the patrons called it.

The Tetrarch of the West spelled out the apocalyptic strategy which she was about to unleash on an unsuspecting planet.

"Our vision of conquest was formulated in 2052 in the superintelligent mind of MARS. We asked them, 'What's the most efficient means to bring the entire world into subjugation?'"

"The answer came back. 'You must learn to deceive and destroy without pity.' And so, for the past twelve years our alliance has plotted and perverted, coopted and coerced, killed and connived all the way to the summit of world power." She grinned at her alliterations.

She then gestured to the smaller automaton. "The whole world knows about the first species of extra-dimensional. Behold the humble Mardukian. Upon the advice of MARS, Planetary Ventures constructed Ambassador Morgenstern. He was conceived to be a kindly sage—small, Yoda-like, and a dependable ally during intergalactic warfare. We have deployed fifty-seven type-one aliens along with six of their saucer shaped craft."

The tetrarch cackled as she gestured to the second alien prototype. “Behold Nemesis. Next Tuesday five billion people will be glued to their screens to witness the signing of an intergalactic treaty between Earth and Marduk.”

She then jokingly put her fingertips to her temples, feigning clairvoyance. With eyes shut, she intoned. “I hereby prophesy the unprovoked invasion of one hundred Nemesis ships will be fended off by a cadre of Mardukian saviors. Hallelujah for our messiahs!” She shouted in mockery. “Too bad so many world leaders and military generals must bite the dust.” She wiped away a crocodile tear. “Our strategy of conquest is foolproof, especially when one considers the gullible and depraved state of the earth’s population.”

The tetrarch quaffed a pint of liquid refreshment from her silver chalice. She then glanced at her teleprompter. “Fellow patrons, here is a brief overview of our upcoming apocalypse. On January first, in a series of surgical strikes, the bulk of our enemies will be wiped out; presidents, premiers, popes, and kings, all of them. Who will be held responsible for this outrage? Can you guess? Yes. Nemesis of course!

“There will then follow a prolonged life and death struggle between Nemesis and the human-Mardukian coalition. Unfortunately, a limited nuclear war will reduce world population by ten million troublemakers. Don’t worry about collateral damage. Our neutron weapons are designed to destroy flesh not infrastructure. We patrons don’t want to inherit a lifeless realm.

“On January second, one-thousand pre-positioned surrogates will rise to the occasion and assume the reins of power in their home countries. In my particular case, the US vice president will be sworn in as the new president. In cooperation with all leaders from around the world, I will offer two weeks of mourning for the thousands of fallen heroes who died in battle fighting Nemesis.

“On February first, we begin the great winnowing process, separating the wheat from the chaff. During the second month of the year, Nemesis will eliminate one billion people in fake warefare. We have already tabulated their identities and locations. All Israelites and most dark-skinned races are doomed to the trash heap of history. There will be some exceptions, of course.

“February 14 is Valentine’s Day.” She smiled broadly. “A kiss of death is in store for the planet. Lord Kali has parleyed with the Divine Council, with Elohim Himself! For some reason—beyond our finding out—the Almighty has agreed to release five thousand Nephilim spirits who are now chained in darkness, being held captive in the gloomy regions. What a fool that deity is, especially for one who claims all wisdom.”

A cacophony of clamor arose from the brimstone contingent. “Set them free. Set them free.” The entire structure reverberated.

Once the hooting faded, Sonja continued. “I’m passing over a myriad of delicious detail, but allow me to finish our story. Victory becomes complete on March 19, at the

exact moment of the vernal equinox. All nations, tribes, tongues and peoples will be watching their screens as the great serpent descends upon Jerusalem and anoints his anti-Christ." She paused coyly, pointing at her nose, and curtsied. Her voice crescendoed. "My first act as antichrista will be to reset the calendar. We will no longer count years based upon the birth of some pitiful Jewish peasant, but upon the arrival of a terrible dragon. On the day when the sun divides the world in half, I will be welcoming you to Zero day-Zero month-Zero year!" The foot-stomping and trumpets sounded for a full five minutes.

A long intermission ensued during which time guard-bots bolted shut all doors and windows. Then, like a whirlwind, Vice Premier Ming-Ming leapt onto the podium. He had transformed himself from a mild-mannered bureaucrat into a Chinese potentate. He was accompanied by a retinue of fierce swordsmen. Through instant interpretation the Tetrarch of the East spoke without equivocation.

"Give me your complete attention. All humans present within these walls will now be fitted with the gizmo cranial implant. This medical procedure was recommended by MARS and commanded by the supreme council. The implant is an absolute requirement and is not negotiable no matter your wealth, status, or influence." He lifted a lock of side-hair to reveal a fresh set of sutures.

Three huge jumbotrons showed his left temple. "See. My gizmo implant is barely visible. Our med-bots are lining the walls and can perform the procedure in under thirty seconds."

Most of the patron class were in shock at the unexpected announcement and murmured against the unanticipated surgery.

The Tetrarch stretched forth his arms in a kind of blessing. "Think of it as a baptism into our new world order." He pointed to the rear of the hangar. "A delicious banquet awaits all who complete the sacrament of implant. Oh! And remember. The lower your gizmo serial number the higher your seniority."

As the multitudes dutifully lined up, Ming-Ming continued to assure the patrons. "Trust me. Gizmo is the only way to keep you safe and happy. Nemesis will not attack you; pulse weapons will never disrupt your connectivity; and roving spirits will stay clear of your minds. Eventually every human being admitted to the new world order will be fitted with Gizmo. Count yourself as blessed. You are among the first."

He waxed on. "Benefits of Gizmo are staggering, beyond enumeration. Think of it! Instant communication, instant instruction, coordination, accountability, even entertainment. Rest assured each of us will retain our individual identity yet when called upon we can function as an efficient collective. Men, women, children—all of us one big happy family. A Paradise on earth." He thumped his fist on the metal dais.

A trumpet blasted and Sonja Sanchez joined her fellow tetrarch front and center. A camera zoomed on a patch of shaven hair behind her left ear. “Even I have undergone the procedure. There is nothing to fear.” No one seemed to notice that the seven sutures were less than genuine. “Gizmo is the single proof of devotion to our cause. You will not be able to buy, sell, travel, or bank without Gizmo.”

On that date—December 27, 2063—Hangar One med-bots implanted gizmos into the crania of 66,000 patrons. By January first, the global total would rise above seventeen million implants.

Back at Stinson Beach all was quiet. A thick layer of cloud covered the dark surface of the churning Pacific. Ephram Levitt switched on the big-screen. “Okay, let’s take a break. We’ll catch up on an hour of news and then discuss our next moves. Are all eleven of us here?”

Stacy counted noses. “Rubin and Jael, Ephram and Judy, Cassandra and Mason, me and Bill, and I see Raymond, Gracie and Walker. All here.” She beamed at the plump face of her grandson.

The six o’clock news was surprisingly upbeat, a major shift in tone. The harsh rhetoric of the past week was abandoned. Citizens were now being encouraged to travel and shop as usual. “It is important for our economy,” announced the Secretary of Commerce.

Ephram whispered to Judy. “I wonder if authorities are attempting to keep the livestock calm to better prepare them for slaughter.”

Traffic seemed to ease as well. At midnight, the Golden Gate Bridge appeared traversable into the city. Raymond and Gracie owned a private car and agreed to drop off Jael in the Mission District before continuing to Palo Alto.

After much deliberation, Gracie agreed to let Walker stay behind with his grandparents. “I think he’ll be safer here,” she said with a tear. “We’ll be back tomorrow with our car full of belongings and then decide if we want to stay longer. It depends on what the situation is like at Stanford.”

Jael had been in deliberations with her tech buddies. She reported to Ephram that six were willing to vacation with her on Sea Drift Road. To her delight, that number included Ravi Gupta.

“Good,” responded Ephram. “As long as they’re willing to work for our common good. You say they’re all from your Bible Study? That’s a plus. This outpost needs young people with faith and energy.”

Bill and Stacy had been reviewing their travel plans. Their flight reservations called for travel on December 30, but they both agreed the timing might not be wise and re-booked the return flight for mid-January. Stacy sighed. “I don’t think that’s going to happen. We’ll be in California for the duration.”

Bill spoke with Ephram. “Stacy and I are good friends with this young couple in West Palm Beach; actually, he’s the fellowship pastor at our church. Over the past year, we’ve been sharing our end-of-the-world concerns with him but without a full disclosure. Do you think we could invite Malcolm to Stinson Beach, with his wife and two teenage boys? I’d ask him to bring along a few things from our house.”

“I don’t see a problem with that. If you vouch for their character, that’s good enough for me.” He considered. “I do think they should fly out here in the next few days. I feel in my bones something big is going down on New Year’s Day.”

After Raymond and Gracie departed with Jael, Rubin drove his hearse back to his homestead in Woodacre.

Stacy prepared a bed for Walker on the sofa, but the seven-year-old was cranky without his mom and dad around. A ninety-year-old granny was not the best companion for a little boy.

However, Walker’s eyes lit up when his grandfather entered the room. Trailing behind him was a newly groomed and charged robo-dog. Stacy instructed Walker in a few basic commands and soon boy and dog were inseparable. Looking at the two romping around the house, Stacy told her husband, “I’m sure sister Sabrina is smiling down from heaven at this sight.”

She whispered to Walker. “We’ll have to get an okay from your parents, but as far as we’re concerned you have a new fur buddy. Her name is Miss Peeps.”

The night was quiet until a few minutes after midnight when a series of sonic booms shattered the calm. All house residents rushed outside onto the shoreline and gazed upward. However, because of the low layer of marine clouds, nothing was visible.

The group returned indoors gathering around the big screen. Newscasters reported a possible alien incursion. Satellites spotted several extra-dimensional spaceships over northern California and Air Force Jets scrambled to meet the challenge. However, the bogies vanished before military aircraft could open fire. Government officials urged the public to remain calm.

A panel discussion followed the news flash. The expert ufologist reported the intruder spaceships were not saucer-shaped like those of Marduk, but rather dodecahedron, a geometric shape of twelve pentagonal faces, thirty edges, and twenty

vertices. He pointed out the alien craft bore an uncanny resemblance to ancient Roman dodecahedrons to include their circular apertures and corner knobs.

A French archeologist expanded the discussion. “Over one-hundred of these hollow, twelve-sided copper-alloy objects had been discovered across the northwestern provinces of the ancient Roman Empire. They are typically the size of a man’s fist and date back to the third century AD. The dodecahedrons are not mentioned in Roman texts, manuals, or depicted in mosaics or art. Their function remains a baffling mystery.”

An astrologist on the panel opined that God “employs the dodecahedron to embroider the constellations across the sky, incorporating the form to shape the cosmos and the fabric of life.” She further expounded. “Many philosophers identify the dodecahedron with the *quintessence*. While tetrahedron, cube, octahedron, and icosahedron represent fire, earth, air, and water, the dodecahedron embraces and unites them all as the invisible life force or divine consciousness connecting the universe.”

About three in the morning, Morgenstern made a guest appearance on the expert panel. He confirmed the obvious. “Yes, these dodecahedron spacecraft mark the arrival of the dreaded Nemesis.”

Chapter 20
Final New Year

Stacy Curtis had not kept a journal in seventy years, setting aside her ballpoint pen on December 28, 1993. Her final entry read: “And today I’m twenty years old. For half of my life, I’ve been writing my thoughts in pointless diaries. I need a break! Who knows when I’ll start journaling again? Jesus, be with me as I step into an uncertain future.” She signed her name with a flourish, “Stacy Adams.”

In celebration of her ninetieth year, Stacy decided to resume her discipline of journaling. “I lapsed for seventy years,” she joked with Bill. “You know, I peeked at the last page of the Bible. I read Revelation, chapter 22. I know God wins. I want to experience His victory, in real time, first hand, recording it as it unfolds.”

“I plan to write in my old-schoolgirl way, with pen and lined paper.” And so, her end-of-the-world first-person journal began its eighty-three-day progression.

December 28, 2063 ~ My hand trembles as I begin to fill these empty pages with my scribble. I study familiar fingers, but now I see red splotches where once I saw milky white skin. I glance at the old woman in the mirror: still tall, but bent; still thin, but misshapen.

As a medical professional I understand that every 1993-atom I once had in my body is totally gone, replaced by trillions of different atoms (except maybe for some tooth enamel and a few heart cells.) Yet I persist as exactly the same Stacy! If not material, what is the secret sauce that makes me me? I figure it must be a soul that is immune to the deprecations of time and the dislocations of space.

I remember my dad once asking me, “Stacy, can you think of anything in this universe that is impervious to time and change?” He paused to let me stew, then rephrased his question. “Are you in close contact with anything that is eternal?” With no response, he finally gave me a hint. “How about something closer than your own skin? How about that thinker that you’re thinking with right now?”

I blurted out, “Oh, you mean my brain?”

He chuckled, “Not quite, silly, your brain will fall into decay. I mean your mind.”

Yes, it’s my mind that makes me the identical person who was born in San Lorenzo, went East to Swarthmore, married Bill, and lives in Florida. Every moment of that ninety years is me.

Aha! The old German clock is tolling ten. Are these the same chimes I heard throughout childhood? Is the 2063 mechanism identical to the one of 1993? I'm confident it is. When will the clock cease to chime? Maybe in eighty-four days? Do you think my mind will outlast the clock? Will my soul continue chiming when the wall clock returns to elemental particles?

I don't have the time or energy to recount everything that's happened in the last few years—the grand reveal of the hope chest, the demonic letter of Legion, the formation of our end-of-the-world club, or the death of Sabrina. Maybe I can ask Festus to compose that story (if I ever figure out how to get my AI going again.) And so, I begin writing with December 28.

What a start to my birthday! The sonic booms, the news reports, and an interview with that creature who calls itself *Morgenstern*. I still don't quite fathom what's going on. Is it supernatural, demonic, alien, or robotic? It seems to be a witch's jambalaya of all four.

All of us in the beach compound are now waiting in anxious anticipation of what will happen in the next four days. To release stress, I walk down the shoreline, dodging the incoming waves. I'm usually strolling with Bill, sometimes with Judy too.

I so appreciate the effort of Ephram. While the rest of us fret and wring our hands, he's busy provisioning and fortifying our enclave. With Rubin and Bill in tow, he's been going into San Rafael, renting U-hauls, and stashing supplies in the neighboring homes. He says he wants to be prepared for whatever may happen in the new year. He told us today he purchased a rundown farmhouse at the dead end of some obscure fire lane.

I did get word of some new developments. Malcolm and his family are scheduled to arrive at SFO on the last day of the year, that is, if flights are still permitted. A furnished beach house just opened for their occupancy. (Thank you, Ephram.)

Rabbi Fingerhut learned today that his wife and young son have fled south to Pasadena. There's a famous Kabbalist rabbi in L.A. who leads a large synagogue and operates a giant fortress in the San Gabriel Mountains. It's a kind of cult headquarters Rubin tells me. They plan to weather this existential storm by waiting for spiritual elevation and divine light. The rabbi believes our universe may enter *Olam Ha-Ba*. Rubin's okay with them joining this sect. He thinks his family is hunkered down and as safe as they could be anywhere in America.

Bill hosted an unexpected party for my ninetieth. He lit nine large candles on a sheet of carrot cake. Eight people in our compound sang *Happy Birthday*. Cassie figured out how to produce a holographic chorus of mom and dad, and Heidi and Sabrina. It was a hoot! Little Walker even made Miss Peeps sing along. What a smart grandson I have.

Another gong on the wall clock tells me it's eleven and I better get to sleep. I'll write more tomorrow.

December 29, 2063 ~