

CHAPTER 1

The drive to the Compound couldn't have come during worse weather. Australia was having its worst dust storm in decades. Ordinarily, Walsh River could be seen clearly east of Collins Weir Road but not in the late evening of September 23, 2009. The thirty-seven foot long Hawkins Motor Coach was a sturdy recreational vehicle but blasts of wind shook it off course now and then. Ginger Hyde was afraid it would tip onto its side. "Are we going to make it, dad?" Visibility was horrible. "I can't even see twenty feet in front of us!" Her stomach turned.

"It's not that far. Probably a half mile." Robert Hyde squeezed the wheel. They trudged along as furious gusts blew junk and debris in front of them. A minute later, they reached the end of the road.

"Where is it?" Ginger asked. Her eyes scanned.

"The place is easy to miss even on a sunny day. It's meant to be this way." Robert drove off road for about fifty feet to some high brush. It was like the opening of a huge maze. A concealed road doglegged to the right flanked by a thick mixture of teak, nightshade and eucalyptus trees. Then it doglegged to the left as the dirt path curved toward the streaming river where a rusty trestle bridge provided crossing. On the other side, there were patches of sugarcane waving wildly in front of tall black iron gate. "This is it, honey." Robert let out a relaxing sigh. "I'll be right back." It was a mild struggle to open the motorhome's door and the sprint to the gate was met with acute shards of dirt to his face. Robert fumbled for the right key to the padlock. *I hope this is not typical Australian weather*, he thought. He swung the left gate out as far as it would go and fastened it to a tree with his belt. The right side almost escaped his grip and clung to swaying hedges. Robert jogged back to his vehicle and drove in. "It's not a whole lot to see right now. If this storm wasn't going on, you'd see the tractors and lumber. Every place has its own environmentalists now and this area is heavy with mollusk fossils. Some guys are camped out in trailers and they'll be excavating as much as they can before we get started with construction."

"How big is it? How much do is there?" Ginger was afraid to get out but she had an impulse to walk around. "Are we sleeping in here tonight or do we have our own trailer set up?"

"We'll be sleeping in this thing tonight." Robert gestured with his finger across the land in front of them. "Two hundred and twenty-five acres. You saw the sugarcane back there. Up ahead there's banana trees. There will be land set aside for cattle grazing and we're building chicken coops. The land is divided into five sections. One for me and you, one for Kubu, one for Donovan, and one for Preston. Forty acres each. The rest of it is for commons. We have some really neat ideas for it."

"Kubu Lacey? How did you work that out? Isn't he hotheaded and always going off about rich white people? How could you get along with him?" It was getting dark outside. Ginger felt an uncomfortable tingle in her belly.

"Kubu is one of Donovan's best friends. They own a record label together. He's really not as angry as you might believe. It's an image. He comes from a ghetto and hangs out with rap artists all day.

He talks a mean talk but at the end of the day, we have the same enemies. He'll be fine here. Besides, he has a place in the Hollywood Hills and I doubt he spends a whole lot of time here." Robert pulled up to a bulldozer and parked. "Donovan was actually tight with Kubu's dad, Herbie. They went to high school together. Herbie was one of the marines killed in the 1983 Beirut attacks six years before you were born."

"Why Australia, dad? And if Australia, why not Sydney? I mean if you guys got the whim to move this far, why not driving distance from the Opera House?" Ginger got up and headed back to the dining table. Robert followed her. And since we're way out in Queensland, why not the wonderful beach of Cairns?"

"It's only a couple of hours drive to the coast... at least on a regular day." Robert smirked. "This place is beautiful. Atherton is less than thirty miles away and has everything you'll ever need. I bought motor scooters. Kuranda State Forest is gorgeous. Lake Tinaroo is placid. There are hot springs to the south and even a volcanic mountain. America got crazy. *You know that!* I couldn't stand it." He became solemn. "You know who we are, right? You know our family history, don't you?" Ginger fidgeted. Robert remembered *A Few Good Men*, *You can't handle the truth*. He was having that moment with his daughter. *She doesn't want to know. She doesn't want to remember. We've had this conversation before. She doesn't want to believe.* "We are the Contrarians, Ginger. Your great-grandfather, Jacob Hyde, was at the Jekyll Island meeting back in 1910. He was a loan officer living in New York City. He bonded well with Irwin Cobb, Donovan's great grandfather. Fantastic lawyer. He also aligned himself with Benedict Callyspo who made a fortune mining silver in Nevada. These three guys were jaded by happenings there at Jekyll. The event was astoundingly psychotic to begin with! Under the guise of a duck hunting trip, bigwig bankers, congressmen, attorneys, tacticians and other movers and shakers got together in one of the most dubious gatherings to ever be held on this planet earth. There was incredible secrecy about who would be invited but it came to public knowledge that Paul Warburg, Frank Vanderlip and Benjamin Strong were a few of the guys. These men were blindfolded and then taken there by mysterious rail cars. No frickin' joke! The United States had a couple of central banks that failed in the past decades and they had just experienced the Panic of 1907 which was an intense run at the banks. JP Morgan himself locked many bankers in a library over night to solve the dilemma but it was only a temporary fix. Sounds like something from a bad movie, huh? The real solution came at Jekyll Island where they frickin' resolved to create the Federal Reserve, which ironically turned out to non-government private body. *The Fed, as it's also known!* The mother frickin' Fed! They controlled all of our money. They controlled our interest rates. Even now. Your grandfather, Jacob emphatically dissented from the deal altogether with his buddies, Irwin Cobb and Benedict Callyspo. There was something fishy about it, I remember hearing in many stories. Great-granddad Jacob wanted to try a third United States central bank but he was shunned and scoffed at along with his friends. Tarded and feathered!"

"That doesn't answer the question, dad. Why here? Why Australia? It's abysmal Are you running from these people?" Ginger got up and rummaged through a suitcase. "I'm changing into my

pajamas.” She stepped into the restroom and came out a minute later. “Why this place?”

“None of us thought it could happen. The collapse of the United States, I mean. There are two things synonymous with America. Freedom and capitalism. In 1971, Richard Nixon took us off the gold standard. That used to give value and substance to our currency. In 1981, when Ronald Reagan was sworn in, the United States had a national debt of roughly one trillion dollars. Seemed manageable. Then in 2001, Rogues in our very own government planted explosives in the World Trade Center and took the Twin Towers down right in front of a world stage. They framed some Arabs as patsies and started a global war, psy ops being a major part of it.” Robert yawned and stretched. “It’s not just our country that owed trillions of dollars. Every Tom, Dick and Harry owes tens of thousands of dollars to credit card companies and lenders. The premise of capitalism is that you have capital to spend. Capitalism is indeed dead. Nobody has assets anymore. Everything is owned by a few zombie banks. And freedom? That went out the door after nine eleven. If capitalism is gone and so is freedom, doesn’t that mean America is gone?” Robert rubbed his eyes. “I played golf with Steve Lutterbach. Do you remember I told you this?”

“The one who worked for Dore Wrecking Company?” Ginger got up. “I’m going to start a pot of coffee.” *We really ought to get with the times and get a Keurig. Oh well, some day.*

“Dore Wrecking Company set the charges in the World Trade Center. Me and Steve are talking one day and he brings up Hill and Knowlton, the guys that did the PR for the first war in Iraq. My ad firm was very modest and he asked if I’d be interested in doing propaganda for the thing he had going on. He spills the beans about his role in the event.” Robert kicked off his shoes. “I tell him our family history. We are Contrarians. We are wealthy but we are not megalomaniacs. We have no interest in such a zany fascist scheme.” He looked at the concern on his daughter’s face. “He wanted me to do the mass brainwashing! Figured I could be trusted.”

“I’m proud of you, dad. It sounds like you got run out.” Ginger loved the smell of brewing coffee. She figured they would stay up talking for a while and looked forward to a solid caffeine boost.

“I was hoping it was just a bad presidency. I’m talking about with Bush. The system is supposed to be set up so we don’t have to handle a lifelong tyrannical king... but they figured out ways to stay in power by pulling strings behind the scenes. The crux of it started at Jeckyll Island, you know? Later on, though, Bill Clinton started housing celebrities in the White House and that was the beginning of an unholy alliance. Washington, DC provided Hollywood with physical security and Hollywood shifted from left to right and started spewing out totalitarian propaganda.” Robert excused himself for a short restroom break and changed into sweat pants. When he returned, he said, “It’s like witnessing a stabbing passing by a piss-drenched New York alley. You’re on your way to the theatre or something and you’re sucked into a stupid violent debacle. The thug notices that you saw his attack so now *you* have to get knifed out of the paranoia that you’ll rat him out to the fuzz. In many ways, hordes in America are protected by their own ignorance. I can’t say this enough! They don’t *know* that nine eleven was an inside job. They don’t understand the Fed. They don’t know what debt slavery is. I had to leave America because it was too uncomfortable.

They were after me. In a nutshell, that was it.” Robert Hyde talked for a while about Hollywood showing the appearance of diversity in their movies but not living up to the promise of the past. The illusion of social conflict being liberal versus conservative now masked what became of reality. In most circles, it was truly about up versus down. The haves versus the have-nots. The rich versus the dirt poor.

Sleep was too restless for Ginger. The dining table converted into a stiff makeshift bed. The wind howled and she wondered about life. At the age of twenty, her life was just beginning. Before her dad retired for the night, he explained that he wanted her to take over the family business, an advertising agency. Daphne Hyde, her mother, was going through a midlife crisis and didn’t not want to make the trip to Australia from Chicago. Ginger woke up groggy and cotton-mouthed. The storm was still strong. She checked her father’s sleeper and saw he was already gone. Ginger splashed water on her face, took a quick shower then dressed for tumultuous weather. When she stepped outside the motorhome, she saw her father far away in a red windbreaker. Tractors were moving here and there but work seemed futile. Visibility was still bleak. When her father noticed her, he waved her over.

Robert yelled over the wind, “We’ve got to secure some things! We don’t want to lose equipment! Go over there!” He pointed to a tractor trailer. “There is breakfast in that place! You can meet some of the crew! They’re really good people! I’ll be there in a few minutes!” He waved toward a bulldozer driver and signaled left with both arms like he was working on a tarmac.

Ginger scampered to the trailer. The auroma of bacon came immediately. There was a gray-haired guy frying eggs on a butane skillet. A few workers sat around eating omelettes along a thin table plank which faced a dirty plywood wall. “Hello! My name is Ginger! I’m Robert’s daughter! Good to be here!”

The cook seemed startled. “Oh! Wow! I’ve heard a lot about you! Robert is a lucky man! My name is Graham. I do horticulture. I’ll be bringing chickens and livestock to this place!”

A rugged young blonde guy stood up. If not for his thick Australian accent, Ginger might have mistaken him for an American marine. “My name is Lander, ma’am.” He patted a guy still busy stuffing sausage links into his face. “This is my mate, Cole. We’re ecologists.” He smirked then walked to the trailer’s entrance and pointed to Walsh River. “Our boss has no time for breakfast! He’s out there collecting snail fossils. They’re quite amazing specimens, actually!”

Ginger shook Lander’s hand with her tiny hand. “Chester? Chester Besson? Is that your boss? My dad told me a whole lot about you guys! It’s a lot more than gathering shells and bones out here!” Ginger watched the thick haze of swirling dust kicking about. “You know everything about the incredible ring of fire! You know everything about the Pacific islands from Malaysia all the way through Kiribati!” Visions of huge frozen regolith solemn face statues appeared in her mind. “You’re heading to Easter Island after your work here!”

“Ma’am. I’m a novice. My boss knows a lot and I just learn.” Lander sat down and gulped down some orange juice. “It’s pronounced Kir-ih-boss, by the way. If you ever go there?”

Cole stood up. "Pardon my manners." He extended his hand for a shake. "I've gotta get out there before I get yelled at. I wolfed down this grub as fast as I could. Cole Frazen at your service." He shook Ginger's hand, blushed, then added. "I always say Kir-ih-bah-tee. Don't listen to this guy!" He laughed then darted outside.

Graham handed Ginger a plate with eggs, bacon and potatoes. He said, "We're not going to get a whole lot done until that weather settles down. In some ways, that's a good thing! We can get to know each other!" Ginger was too restless to stick around. After she ate, she hightailed it to the developing lot where her dad was shouting orders to different construction workers. She asked Lander Duncan to join her. He was hesitant because he was supposed to help Cole and Chester but this was more important. The big boss man around was her father. That was his priority. Besides, she was his age and she was gorgeous. They walked out across the decrepit trestle bridge and headed up north along Collins Weir Road. "You're really lucky, you know?" Lander told Ginger.

"This place is surprisingly unimpressive to me. I don't know why my pops wants to stay here. We have a great place in Chicago not too far from Willis Tower. I mean, he explained how he can't handle urban life anymore!" A thrust of wind knocked her sideways. "This is the middle of gawd dang nowhere. I mean no offense, okay? You're probably local, right?"

"I live in Atherton. You get used to it. You even learn to cherish it, believe it or not. I understand you're building replica landmarks. Miniaturized Epcot Center, Eiffel Tower and Sky Tree. The White House! That's amazing! Practically full size from what I understand! And the Heijo Palace. That oughta be something when it's finished!" Lander shielded his eyes. "Up ahead is Crooked Creek. We'll stop there. Nice area."

"One of my dad's good buddies is a movie producer. He's finishing up a movie in Baja California. He loves to do stuff like this. Building replica stuff, you know? He gets everyone in character and we walk around like it's another century... even if we're not actors in the movie. I think it's great." Ginger stopped walking and studied Lander's face. "I have a serious question. My dad seemed more fidgety lately more than ever before. He thinks something's going down. He's an ad exec and he's usually cool, calm and collected. *Clean cut, you know?*" Ginger started walking again and felt embarrassed. "He's talking about bug out living quarters and remote hideout bunkers! We almost went to Panama instead of this place. Too many drug dealers, though, and issues with corrupt cops. And? There's something he has about..."

"The caldera? The hot springs? That's a real enough thing. They've been acting strange lately. It's no more dangerous here than North America, though. Yellowstone? I'm not sure if the public understands that it's a massive supervolcano and it's not a matter of *if* it blows. It's a matter of when." That was the end of their talk until they reached the creek. "Listen, Ginger. I have mixed feelings about a lot of things going on here. I mean, I try to be ecological. I have a clear conscious when I think I'm saving our planet. Your dad is mixed up with some people that have muddied, tainted motives. I would call most of them sociopaths! As long as there's some kind of net monetary gain, they don't care that they rape

pristine land like this.” Lander rubbed his temples. “Scavenging locusts is what they are.”

“I can’t tell you I know everything my father does. Once in a while, he’ll drop a bombshell on me but I don’t know what to believe. He knows people in Black Water and one of his good friends runs RMI. Have you heard of them? A secret subsidiary of Northrop Grumman? He says everything is getting ripped apart at the seams in America. Wars are being privatized, prisons are subcontracted, and no one in the public knows what really goes on behind closed doors. We’re building a replica White House because Preston Bancroft is going to feature it in a new film... but there is something psychological there as well. My dad wanted to be president, I’m pretty sure of it, and so did Preston, Kubu Lacey, Donovan Cobb and the rest of these eccentric tycoons he hangs out with. It wasn’t in the cards so this is the best they could do. That is not the end of it. My dad said there will be underground bunker—*these guys love to include bunkers, trust me*—but instead of being a safe house for nuclear warfare, it’ll be a dungeon. *A subcontracted private prison*. Actually working, too! I don’t know what to think because he jokes all the time and he mentioned that they’re gonna nab Tony Blair and George Bush for war crimes! Holy cow! Right? He has friends that’re organizing a tribunal, maybe in Malaysia.”

“I’ve heard a *lot* of stuff since I’ve been out here. I don’t know what to make out of it. I keep my nose clean. A couple of beers after work is the most delinquent thing you’ll catch me doing!” He chuckled and caught himself awestruck by Ginger’s face. *Love struck? I hope I’m not falling in love*, he thought. “I dig where they tell me to dig. I don’t do a whole lot else. Really.” For a short period, the wind stopped. Lander took off his shoes, rolled up his pants, and walked into the creek. “Come on!” He felt warm inside.

Ginger joined him. She stayed in Australia for the weekend and was able to enjoy a couple of ordinary days of weather. She didn’t meant to stay long. She caught a flight home to Chicago and got together with her mother, Daphne. Before leaving, she had a lengthy discussion with her father about taking over his ad agency. He said he planned to sell it if she wasn’t up to jumping in and running it. She was merely twenty years old but she had a lot of life experience. It seemed daunting but she had been involved since she was a kid helping out with many projects. She had traveled around the world and grew up with a privileged education. Her dad was born a Contrarian, a network of elite, wealthy barons who started something called Epsilon University. Under the auspice of home schooling, kids of millionaires and billionaires would learn directly from the likes of New York Times bestselling authors, Nobel Prize winning physicists, decorated four-star military generals, world-renowned chefs, sophisticated fashion designers, and so forth. They would travel in groups together and embark on fascinating projects. Ginger’s father, Robert, was part of a teenage group that reconstructed the world’s first computer, ENIAC, while he studied in Tokyo when he was thirteen years old. He learned to speak Japanese and write in both Katakana and Hiragana. A couple of years later, he was inspired from watching Chuck Yeager speak and he started flying small airplanes. By the time he was nineteen, he was ready take over the ad agency his father, Jon Hyde, had started. Now? Ginger felt up to taking the reigns even though there were massive butterflies in her stomach. She knew the mechanism of marketing changed since the start of mainstream internet but she

believed her lack of traditional, old-school training would benefit her. She became psyched the challenge.

CHAPTER 2

Darkness. Pitch black. No light. It was late September of 2013. Or was it? Mystery. Total mystery. “Honey? Are you there?” Fletcher Browne reached down to his lower leg and he could feel silky, long hair. “Vivian?” *An explosion, he thought. Was there an explosion? The last thing I can remember is inspecting a boxed landmine in a tattered warehouse. We were rummaging and poking around.* “Honey?”

Vivian Streets felt a hand rake across her scalp. She didn’t say a word. She tried to look at her hand in front of her face but she couldn’t see anything. Terror. She was scared and incredibly confused. Now, a pinpoint of light. She spoke. “Fletcher?” She looked up at the light and it became brighter and thin rays shot spiraling in a conical fashion. “Fletcher, darling?” From a tiny dot to the size of a glaring disco mirror ball, perhaps thirty yards away. She grasped at his hand. “Are we alive?”

Fletcher watched white rays grow larger and larger. He stood and pulled Vivian up with him. He tried to look at her. He wanted to see her face but he saw nothing at all. There was only the glimmer of a distant light. Oddly, it did not illuminate his immediate surroundings. “Alive?” Fletcher remembered the descriptions. He was coming to consciousness and realized exactly what he was seeing. “We were in a warehouse examining explosives.” He pulled Vivian close to him. “We blew up... or...” He contemplated. Very slowly, some of the details came to mind. “I began gasping and heaving. It must have been...” *Something like this happened when were in Yucatán, he thought. Buried under big styrofoam boulders. There was a ray of light and I thought I was in Heaven. But it was all phony. It was all staged by a midget and my father. The light was coming from up in the rafters.*

“Chemicals, Fletcher! You were writhing on the floor like a snake!” Vivian watched the bright hole expand to the size of a large doorway. *This is real.* Vivian was mesmerized at the light. *This isn’t Yucatán.* She felt at her cheek. *This isn’t even Earth.*

“We’re dead, Vivian. I think we’re supposed to cross over.” Fletcher moseyed slowly to the glowing portal. “Let’s go. I’m ready.”

“Fletcher?” Viv remained in place and yanked Fletch back. “Shouldn’t we at least talk about this?” The light in front of her pulsed slightly and throbbed. “This is our eternity after all!” There were dynamic spokes spewing in all directions. They got faster and brighter. It was pulsing and protruding from the shiny hole. “We have unfinished business all over the place. What if we can’t come back?”

Fletcher Browne considered it. “We have to cross over. We’re going to wind up haunting and cursing everyone. We’ll be ghosts lurking around draped in fat, rusty chains!” He tried to see Viv’s face but there was still nothing. “Let’s leave it behind. Our world was worthless. It was wrecked.”

Vivian began to feel better. She didn’t say a word. She began to ease her way to the magnificent brightness in front of her. She pulled Fletcher along and stepped through the radiant portal. There were clouds beneath her feet. She looked back and could now see Fletcher even though he was transparent. He wore a white robe. She looked down at her own body. She remembered the warehouse. She had been

wearing hiking shorts. Now? She wore a white robe similar to her life lover. The Sun beamed in the far distance and rainbows arched across a clear powder blue sky. “Fletcher? I see someone coming.” *Oh my! Is that who I think it is?*

It wasn’t Jesus. It wasn’t Saint Peter. It wasn’t the devil. “Viv? I think it’s George Washington.” Fletcher expected to hear the sounds of harps. He expected to see a golden gate. He stood dumbfounded and tried to convince himself he was in the middle of a dream. *I never learned anything about this in Sunday school! Maybe I didn’t go to church enough.*

“You have unfinished work,” George said. Foggy white cloud vapor danced around but slowly dissipated. “America is doomed! Your work has been good. Vivian Streets? I have followed you and Fletcher Browne for a considerable time.”

Vivian scraped her fingernails across Fletcher’s forearm. “Can you feel this?”

“We were flying from Kilimanjaro. You poured us a few drinks. It was high altitude. The air was thin. I don’t know honey! I’m almost sure we are asleep on the airplane! Finnegan is next to us. He’s watching us snore.” Fletcher rubbed his forearm. “I couldn’t feel your nails. We are sleeping.” *I could feel her energy but there’s no sensation of scratching.*

“George? Why are you here to greet us? I’m no expert on the Bible but I’m almost sure we’re supposed to talk to Saint Peter at this point.” Vivian continued trying to scratch Fletch’s arm.

“Saint Peter? Yes. He had this post at one time or another. He still does. We’re gatekeepers. We’re toll booth collectors in some ways. He operates a different turnpike. And? I’m not here to collect money from you. I need *information*. I need your heart. Do you want to return to Earth? There is significant unfinished business there... and you did not die of natural causes.” George Washington wasn’t dressed in a white robe. He wore a traditional decorated blue colonial military uniform.

“Vivian? I’m *positive* we’re dreaming. You might as well humor him. Let’s see where this goes.” Fletcher spoke without regard of George’s presence. Vivian seemed distraught. Fletcher asked General George Washington, “What can you do to wake us up? I’m sure we’re napping on our way to Paris. I asked Vivian to marry me while hiking. We see ourselves as patriots. *Real patriots, though*. We believe in justice. We hate corruption and the amazing lies that engulfed our world. That’s why you’re here. I’m sure Carl Jung could interpret all the symbols—the *Sun, the clouds, and the rainbows*—but unless he appears from thin air I won’t have the luxury of understanding what I’m in the middle of.” Fletcher looked into the misty azure sky and was almost sure that flying angels would probably round out his experience. “George? Could you wake us up? *Please*.”

“You were on a quest. Were you not?” George Washington began to pace while he spoke. “*Thermite*. You were intrigued by the happenings of nine eleven.” George paused to face Viv and Fletch then began to pace and speak again. “Truthers! That’s what you were called. *Truthers*. And you came across an idea the Rogues within the American government performed the greatest false flag mission in world history.” Pause, face, then more pacing. “I have seen my share of blood during our violent

Revolution. I remember the tyranny of Great Britain. Whose side do you think I am on?" George Washington paused and faced Vivian and Fletcher. This time, he waited for a response.

"We're just kids, though. We don't know what we're really doing." Fletcher squeeze Viv's hand. He was almost sure he could feel her now.

"Do you think I believe Dick Cheney is a patriot? Do you think I am proud of Rumsfeld?" George paced. "You remind me of the people I cared about when I was in Lexington. Ordinary people built America. Ordinary people fought tyrants! Ordinary people shed blood for America's freedom!" George stopped pacing. This time, he didn't look at Viv and Fletch. He looked down at his two feet. "You can move along," he said. "Jesus is waiting for you... if that's who you're really here to see. Want Buddha? I'm pretty sure he's out there, too." He paced again. One hand held the other behind his back. "You can go back and finish what you started. You won't have a physical body. You can speak to people while they dream. You can whisper into people's ears. Some are more prone to hear angels than others! You can fix your world."

"Why are you here?" Fletcher moved a few steps forward. "Shouldn't you be down there fixing the world yourself?"

"You'll learn the way it works. It's not as simple as you might think. There's a divine force out here." George looked up into the rainbows. "There's an element of free will that seems to matter." George walked toward Fletcher and was an arm's length away. "There are higher places in this dimension... but you've got to want it. You really should fix the things you're able to. Bite off what you can chew."

"Or we won't be at peace with ourselves? Is that it?" Vivian remained behind Fletch. "We've got to make it right before it's too late?" *I can help my father still*, she thought. *I can make peace with my mom. I can give important clues to Tad. We all know he needs them.*

George Washington walked past Fletch and spoke to Vivian. "There's a man named Dimitri Khalezov, a Russian physicist, that disappeared from the public eye. No one believes the government account of nine eleven. Where was the airplane wreckage at the Pentagon and Shanksville? Whenever a jet crashes, investigators have piece together the remains. Where were the remains?"

You've been up here longer than me, Viv thought. *You should know the answer.* Vivian waited. She dared not question America's iconic president.

George began his pacing again. "You two are honorable people. Thermite was a piece of the puzzle. There's something new in the world. *Nanotechnology*. There was a trail to nano-thermite that is key and will blow your mind!" He stopped in front of Fletch. "Eye witnesses heard many explosions. Professional film crews and many amateurs captured this on video tape. *Firefighters testified to it in detail.* Controlled demolition. The falling of the Towers was a controlled demolition. Stephen Jones tested for nano-thermite in dirt kicked into surrounding apartments. Steel became scorching molten lava and burned for months. Concrete was pulverized, turned into dust." Pacing back and forth. "Dimitri Khalezov, an expert at understanding nuclear detonations, understood the underground blasts. Zero-box devices placed

fifty meters under each tower did the job! One kiloton evaporating seventy tons of pure granite! *Nukes.* A spherical cavity about a hundred meters in diameter blown and instantly vaporizing everything all around.” Facing Fletch and Viv, “A chasm... large enough for skyscrapers to fall into, you see?” George saw concern on Viv’s face. “I think Dimitri might’ve turned up in Thailand. Can’t really tell you.” He blushed and rubbed his chin. “Time space is a weird thing.”

Fletch asked, “Why us? I still don’t understand. Why not you?” *I’ve heard once or twice that we’re all living in a crazy life simulation. Maybe that’s what this is.*

“Barry Jennings was one of the survivors from World Trade Center Seven. He was led out by rescuers and was told not to look down. Why? They were stepping over all kinds of dead bodies. This building was not hit by a jet, though. *The dead bodies were there because of an explosion!*” The George’s look of consternation frightened Fletch. “He testified of this to reporters. And? On August 19, 2008, one week before the government’s so-called official explanation of the building’s collapse, he was found dead. *Dead.*” George examined Vivian’s face and noticed that she was tiring of the hero role. “On Earth, loved ones pray that we rest in peace. Can you rest right now? *Can you?*”

“I can’t,” Viv responded. “I’m sick of always exerting myself and feeling like I’m going nowhere. It’s like being a hamster running on the wheel. But I can’t rest if I believe we lost. I really can’t. That’s bullshit!”

“I want to go back,” Fletch said. “But I think my mind has snapped. Nine eleven was too much of a fucking living nightmare. Up until this moment, I’m sure I was being piloted around by secret androids. Now? There are clouds beneath my feet and I’m talking to the dude from the dollar bill!” *Do androids have souls,* Fletcher wondered. *Where is Shazbot? Dinah?*

“Do as you wish.” General George Washington turned away from Viv and Fletch. “My time here speaking is done.” He walked into a white haze and vanished. As soon as he was gone, six illuminated portals opened along an invisible hallway, three to the left and three to the right.

“Do you think we should peek down one?” Fletcher asked Viv.

“I don’t think standing around is the answer. Let’s do this thing!” Vivian walked to the first one on the left. “I’m going in!” She made her way through. She talked to her nephew Thaddeus Streets in his sleep. He dreamt well.

CHAPTER 3

The fainting couch was as traditional as anything seen in a common psychiatry office. It was studded in soft brown leather. The legroom was ample and the rear half sloped at a protractor's thirty degree with a built-in head cushion. It faced a wall-sized tinted window three stories above a serene, lush Indianapolis public park. On a wall across the room, there were three wooden framed replica paintings. Salvador Dali's *Geopoliticus Child Watching the Birth of the New Man* was a surreal display of a man fervently tussling toiling to punch out of a malleable oblong globe. A haphazard opaque blanket hovered just above him as a scrawny, long-haired practical nude stood off to the right covered only modestly by a leaf. He daintily pointed in the direction of the other man's struggle as a terrified child clung to his legs. Vincent Van Gogh's *Starry Night* was a popular post-impressionistic piece depicting a quaint nineteenth century European town underneath a tremendous nocturnal sky featuring enormous spinning amber swirls perhaps inspired by an aurora borealis. Pablo Picasso's cubist *Woman's Head* was abstract with sharp, defining black thick lines. The asymmetrical charcoaled tan face was triangular on the left and rectangular on the right. A novice could have easily mistake it for a kindergartner's effort.

Binaural sounds of breaking ocean waves were dimly audible from concealed speakers. Seagulls gawked occasionally. The smell of cigar smoke residue was thick. "I feel like I'm making great progress, sir." Matthew Stubbs took a whiff of his surroundings. He guessed his pretend doctor smoked genuine Cuban tobacco. "I think I'll make a breakthrough someday, probably soon. First things first, I've gotta work on the fundamentals."

John Leonard sat behind Matt on a comfortable plush burgundy chair and took notes with a traditional number two pencil on a white pad. "I am very glad to have you back. This is our sixth session and I feel like I have known you for years instead of months. Continue on. I want to talk about the Cotard delusion you discussed last week. Then we can finish up on the paranoia and your belief that ghosts are haunting you. The Obsessive-compulsive disorder is definitely woven into these acute sensations. You have spectral tormentors. Harry Mandalay is one, right? You are fortunate, though, I have to say. My colleagues employed by the state disregard so many imperative details and hasten to prescribe heavy sedatives and also blatant counteractive psychotropics. I will fix your mind, though. I do not believe you have a brain problem." John Leonard looked down at Matt. He seemed flustered. John reflected on his eight years working as a psychiatrist on a cable soap opera, *Rabid Land*. He played Doctor Gordon Astor. "Listen, Matt. Don't take me too seriously. I do this for a living now. I don't have a PhD. I have excellent observational skills, though. I learned a lot playing Doctor Astor for those years but you're not required to listen. I get into character and I sound like I know what I'm talking about. There is no charge to you, Preston Bancroft, Donovan Cobb or anyone else." He relaxed, "Let 'er rip!"

"Fortunate?" Matt asked. He was getting used to speaking toward the open window and ignored what John said about not being a real doctor. In ways, even though Matt himself wasn't a professional

actor, he got into character as well. In the beginning, he fidgeted while laying down. It was uncomfortable not speaking face to face. He wondered what kind of facial gestures Doctor Leonard was making. He wondered what he wrote down. “It’s a bitter sweet situation. My roller coaster ride has been psychotic. It’s hectic. I lost good friends over the years. I am haunted by Vivian Streets, the daughter of the man referring me to you through Mister Cobb and his pal, Preston. Great guys, I hear. Horace is a wonderful man and two hundred and fifty per hour would be small change to him if you were really charging. The state? Yes. They would lobotomize me if I relied on them. I know it’s not legal anymore and all, but... Yeah. I got issues.” He was tempted to ask his pretend shrink for a cigar. *Maybe it’s what he wants. He wants to be personal. He wants to hang out. He wants this to be fluid. We should spark up a nice fattie and chat facing each other. Maybe a stiff shot of bourbon would kick this session into high gear.*

“Let’s start with the Cotard delusion. Shall we?” John Leonard thumped the eraser end of his pencil on his pad. He wanted to take the session seriously but it was difficult. He loved being on the set of his soap and was upset when it came to an end. This was his best way to reconnect. Plus? He was linked with the Rabid Land’s producer, Preston Bancroft, in more ways than he could tell Matt in such a short period. “You are dead to the world and it’s a metaphor... but somehow, it rules your life. Before you divulge, we will ceremonially address a couple of questions. Where are you and what is the date?”

This guy gets into character a bit too much sometimes, Matt thought but he played along. “I am in an office—a *fine one, I might say*—roughly an hour and a half drive east of my home in Terre Haute. It is Thursday, October third in the year 2013.” Matt licked the roof of his mouth and resisted asking for a cup of water. “My Cotard delusion? Yes. Thanks for the terminology, Doc. Kevin O’Leary embodies this best. He’s a guy that has a big, sharp, pointy nose. His eyes squint like a mad person. He is balding.” Matt laughed, “He is wealthy, though. They call him Mister Wonderful for some whacked out reason. Maybe it’s ironic. I’m hooked on the show, I must. Most likely, when I drive back home tonight, I’ll slip into pajamas, pop in a bag of microwavable popcorn, and watch a rerun of *Shark Tank*. Lori Greiner. Wow! She’s a hot one! Smart and financially successful. The whole package, and if I could snap myself out of my humdrum, stupid circumstance and travel around the world with her, I would do it twice.”

“Very well, Matt. I may remind you that we have forty-five minutes to discuss your issues and these assorted tangents and insubstantial segues might detract from the issues at the heart of the matter.” Doctor Leonard scribbled a note, *Give Matthew an addition fifteen minutes at end of the hour*. “Kevin O’Leary represents the patriarchal system of your rigid fabricated reality. You acknowledged this last week. His nose, even though pointy, you think is huge like yours and it also resembles the one of your father. *Toucan*. A former boss referred to you as *Toucan* when ordering you around.”

“You are dead to me!” Matthew couldn’t tolerate being on his back any longer. He sat up and faced Doctor Leonard. “You look like Frank Zappa but with graying hair. Candor. It’s important. I can’t do this laying down the whole time. You are dead to me,” he repeated. “Have you ever felt dead? I’m not talking like a zombie.” He felt ashamed and looked down at his feet. “I am a feather in the wind. This

thing called life has ripped me out of my comfort zone over and over.” He stretched out on his back again. “You are dead to me,” Matt said a third time. “It’s what they all believe. It’s the guy’s catch phrase. You are dead to me, you see? O’Leary says it in jest but it’s a reflection of his entire aristocratic class. We are dead to them. My whole generation missed out on the big prize. I have opposable thumbs and I have a developed larynx. I got this massive frontal lobe and I walk upright. Why do I feel like four-legged animals have it better nowadays? Why am I spending my nights plopped on a couch in front of a TV all by myself every time I leave this place?”

“The zombie analogy.” Doctor Leonard wrote down a few notes. “Expand on that.”

“There’s a rash of zombie shows out there. Walking Dead on AMC is quite good. Highschool of the Dead is fantastic if you’re into anime. I’ve watched *Shaun of the Dead* countless times on video. Probably my favorite DVD. I know it’s *not* a metaphor. That’s the problem. I’ve connected the dots and I know your generation sold my generation out.” Matt sat up again and swiveled toward the John. “I am not saying you specifically and I’m not talking about Horace Streets. *The Contrarians*. The rare wealthy bigwigs who give a shit. I’m talking wankers in Congress, you understand? I’m talking about most of the corporate bastards! I’m talking about deluded military veterans who conveniently call themselves the Greatest Generation but instituted fascism here after supposedly defeating it abroad. *Patriot Act my ass!* Totalitarian fuckin’ assholes!” He calmed down then stretched out on his side. “I’ve listened to a lot of music. Horace’s daughter died two weeks ago. Some robot did it! That’s what they say. Horace let me in on the real lowdown right after losing Viv. He was close to Fletch too, by the way. Tomorrow at four in the morning, I fly to Sacramento and I go to their funeral. He told me way more than just about the robot that released sarin gas. *The Beatles*. He told me what you guys are all about. Tavistock. Mind control. MK-Ultra Sigmund Freud. Mass manipulation of people’s thoughts. The Aquarian Conspiracy, the Red Octopus and the hidden powers deep in the Abyss.” Matt felt crazy but he continued, “The common person thinks it’s just the Ninety-nine Percent against the One Percent. That’s like going to Asia and thinking all Orientals are the same. Did you know China and Japan are about to kill each other over some stupid puny islands no one even lives on? North Korea wants to flatten South Korea, too. The closer you get to it, the more you see the differences. *The devil is in the details they say*. The One Percent is divided into three main groups from what Horace said. The Establishment, the Contrarians, and the Abyss. His daughter, Viv—the one that’s visited me in dreams—had another name for the Establishment. *The Rogues*. That’s what she called them up until the day she got killed. Even though I know I’m listening to social manipulators, I know there’s a thread. I can hear it in the song, She Said She Said. *And you’re making me feel like I’ve never been born*. Deliberate. And sadistic. A pretense that we all are masochists and *want* the abuse and neglect. I can hear it when the Cranberries sing *Zombie* of all things. *They are fighting with their tanks and their bombs and their bombs and their guns in your head. They are crying in your head, in your head, in your head, zombie. Zombie. Zombie.*” Matt waited for a few seconds. “Horace watches classic shows, you know? *The Twilight Zone* is one of his all-time favorites. An episode called The Howling Man sent

chills up my spine when I first watched it. The Devil, you see, is an old man! He's a feeble guy behind a simple wooden jail door. There's a small opening and he makes conversation with a guard outside. The bars are spread out enough that he could reach outside and lift the plank which keeps him in. He has to convince the guard though to let him out. *He has to charm him.* The beguiling somehow works and the old man's true form takes shape. He's a youthful guy with devil horns and tail of a devil."

"We are somewhat off topic. We have gone astray but you are painting a picture. I like this." Doctor Leonard scooted the chair to Matt's side. "Would you feel better if you could see me? Or do you prefer I stay behind?"

Matt didn't answer. "It's *Sympathy for the Devil*. I thought our generation was going to win. I felt bad when Viagra and Rogaine were pushed like street corner drugs across our airwaves. It shows a lack of character, you know? Accept it. *Man up to it.* Kevin O'Leary got super rich because his nose... and his bald head. Compensation. We hear it all the time! Buy a gun, you're a man! Buy a ridiculous four-by-four and it compensates for your small penis! *Genitals, I'm talking about.* Freud, right? I have the biggest nose on my block but I haven't lost my hair yet! Is that why I'm not driven to psychopathic success? At least not yet! Do you have to be scarred for that?"

"You believe in the biblical rapture, though. That's where we ended up last week. What are you talking about?" Doctor John set down his notepad.

"Two will be in the field. One will be taken and one left behind." Matt turned away and faced the wall. "It's no secret. *Left Behind* was a popular Christian novel by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. Matthew chapter twenty-four, verse forty. It's taken very literally by many people. Horace Streets told me the beginning of the Great Tribulation was in 1993 during the Waco standoff." A few seconds passed. "Maybe it's better that you sit behind me."

John moved his chair back into place. "Continue along."

"It's very magical the way Jesus was supposed to come across the sky and take away his believers into Heaven. I'm not even a religious guy. I know coded language. I've come across strange stuff. *They raptured people.* The Republican Party decided to take those seven years from 1993 until 2000 to make lists. They used boat loads of money, they used overwhelming military might, they strong-armed, they deceived, they cajoled, they co-opted, they sold out, they tricked and they did everything they could to separate themselves from the general populous. I didn't make the cut. *I obviously didn't make the cut!* I'm one of the maniacs pounding on the side of Noah's Ark. I'm a real zombie. I am dead to them. This is not a Cotard delusion. It's a Cotard reality. I need you to confirm that my problems are as much out there in society as much as they are in my head." Matt looked onto John's desk for snacks. Nothing. The week before, there had been a bowl of mini pretzels.

"First of all, your points are valid. Unemployment is astronomical. We are in the worst economy since the Great Depression. China's the new kid on the block and let's face it, they're beating us at our own game, capitalism. America's government fixes numbers all the time. The U3 unemployment rate seems

manageable but the U6 is atrocious. People have given up looking for work, I know that. Also, new variables are factored in so things don't look so bad on the surface. George Orwell said that in time of deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act. You think you're the only one having to deal with the Big Lie of nine eleven and everything else? I played a psychiatrist on screen, not an economist. I'd suggest you enroll in a class or check out these things online but I know you're already well ahead of the curve. You are not left behind, though, which is my second point. You seem to have a sponsor at this point. *Horace*. He's a great person and I've known him for many years. He enjoyed supporting Fletcher Browne because his daughter loved him. He wants to help you because it brings him solace. He knows he can't save the entire world and only bites off enough to manage. You will bring him closure concerning Vivian's tragic death." John checked the time on his Seiko watch. "We're making good time. We can move on." John Leonard thought, *As a TV psychiatrist I know I have better skills than most real shrinks*. "If you like Horace, by the way, you're going to get along fantastically with Preston and Donovan. What are you? Thirty years old or so? Preston has three beautiful daughters! They hang out in a happening, vibrant crowd! You'll see them at the funeral. And Vivian's beloved nephew Thaddeus will be there. Donovan, so far as I know, doesn't have kids but he's an adventurer! He's my age but moves about like he's your age! Rock climbing. That sort of thing."

"Well, Doc! It's been another good session!" Matt licked his lips and wondered how his flight to California would be. "You don't let anyone tell you that you're not a real doctor! I've made great progress."

"I appreciate the sentiment!" Doc John Leonard patted Matt on the should. It was then that he became the talker while Matt laid back and listened. John told him more details about how the *Heuristic Myriad of Lachrymose Contrarians* formed and how they were structured. He said, "You know that when you find a pest in the kitchen—*doesn't matter if it's a roach or mouse*—there are thousands more lurking in the walls and outdoors. It's the same with people, technology, and ideas. For every Bernie Madoff you hear about on the national news, there are a thousand swindlers that go unnoticed. For every Mars rover you hear NASA talk about for a future mission, there are a thousand private legitimate plans to travel to Venus, Europa and Io. For every Richard Branson, Dan Bilzerian and Damian Aspinall you hear about, there are a thousand significant tycoons just as important and powerful. Exotic animals, sex trade, tech, weapons, software design, movie production and a thousand other industries each with its own shadow of power. Everyone has heard of Iron Mike Tyson but there was a guy, pound for pound, just as dominant but faded our collective memory as a society. Julian 'the Hawk' Jackson is only remembered by avid boxing enthusiasts. When the public talks about the most powerful families in the world, they'll mention the DuPonts, Rothschilds, Van Duyns, Rockefellers, Waltons, Kochs and a few others. Everyone's heard about Bill Gates, Warren Buffet and Carlos Slim but do they know who Zhen Choi is? Personal friend of mine and involved casinos and banking in Macau, China. *He builds replica cities for fun*. Tightly involved with new types of currency like Bitcoin but also a driving force in the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank.

These guys are making *huge* decisions but you'll never hear his name on the news. What about Julian Garrett, the head of Rossum Machinery International? He's the guy the started the android program which built your blown-up buddy, Shazbot. Norman Whittaker runs one of the bigger trucking companies in the country. Connor Milton trades exotic animals. *Did you know the chupacabra is real?* I won't go there right now but these guys network. *They are Contrarians like Viv's father, Horace.* Tanner Doyle builds yachts, dredges artificial islands, and constructs oil platforms. These guys trade goods and services, you understand? Just like a lowly carpenter such as yourself might barter a plumbing project for your carpentry skills, these guys are trading *people*. It gets dark. If the Rogues are the most visible faction of the One Percent, we are in the shadows and shade. People don't notice us. But? There's something darker. *The Abyss*. If you catch yourself around Delbert Tyler, run! He will take you to a foreign country where he has brute forces paid off and runs a sophisticated sex slave operation. *Human trafficking at its utmost.* Titus Clemons is one of his best friends, he's another tycoon, and he trades automatic weapons to third-world leaders. *Crap load of Toyota trucks too, one of his fronts.* These guys work together, though, and trade services. Evan Ruxton is also involved in the sex business but it's much more legit than Delbert. He has a porn studio in the San Fernando Valley in California and is more in the league of Joe Francis, Hugh Hefner and Larry Flint. You'd actually like him... but you have to understand the highways and byways of our elite system. If you get on Evan's bad side, he'll send you to Thailand on a vacation as if he's your friend. From there, Delbert's people will nab you! This is the way it works. No paper trail. One of my favorite people of the Contrarian billionaire group is Clive Klauber. Everyone hates lawyers and I would hate this guy too if I was on the other side. His firm has saved our asses countless times. He understands international law, entertainment law and every other important thing there is to know about being rich and aloof."

John Leonard kept on without interruption. The Contrarians had a thing for islands. They were formed in 1910 at Jekyll Island off the coast of Georgia and since invested heavily in places around the West Indies and South Pacific. There were about thirty families which regularly intermingled with one another. There was a major gathering every five years and people simply called it *the Reunion* as if it were a special periodic sporting event like the Olympics or World Cup. It took place near Atherton in Australia at a compound dubbed *Lemuria*. It had moved around over time from Canada to Mexico to Brazil. Lately, movie producer Preston Bancroft was in charge of the relocation process and it always coincided with the places he shot feature films. There were daily operations run by the governing body simply known as the Council of Nine. The structure was specific and rigid. Every year, a new person would be voted in and would replace a person leaving his nine-year term. It was a conveyor belt type of system. Whoever was in his fifth year was the designated leader of the group and it was designed so there was a gradual climb into authority and a gradual decent from it. The Contrarians were formed in disgust of the blood-thirty, power-wielding zenith of the Illuminati, now being called the Rogues. These guys stepped on each other and sought power for power's sake. The culture was rampant with deception and treachery, even amongst

perennial business partners. Back-stabbing, undercutting, and trash talking were ordinary methods of operation. The Contrarians developed a system where rulers wouldn't have power long enough to be rusted with corruption. The magic of the nine-year tenure was that there would be no knowledge any longer of what was being planned and executed around the world. In October of 2013, the Council of Nine was not only organizing a new currency throughout BRICS nations, it was also developing a brand new internet system which would be independent from routers in the United States. Everything wasn't serious, though, and they were involved with viral propaganda claiming that comet ISON was really the dreaded brown dwarf, Nibiru, and was destined to smash into Earth by year's end, thus destroying all of humaniy. At the end of his long monologue, John Leonard was apologetic as he apologized about the FEMA camp scare.

"Listen, man. I don't care what you guys do!" Matt's mind started focusing on his trip. They chit chatted for a little while longer then Matt went home and packed for his flight to Sacramento International.

CHAPTER 4

It was Friday, October fourth in 2013. Matt Stubbs held his left wrist with his right hand and he stared into a rectangle hole. He guessed it was precisely six feet deep. He wasn't comfortable in his black slacks, black overcoat, white collared shirt, black tie and black shoes. He was a casual kind of guy and it just didn't feel right. Through his sunglasses, he studied the canopy which provided shade for about thirty white fold-up chairs. The service had ended in the chapel minutes before. He looked down the hill across rows of tombstones and wondered about the people buried in the ground. He wasn't sure he should've come. He watched mourners make their ways up the hill. He stood next to Horace Streets, Walter Browne and Herman Eichelberger. "I walked around Sierra College yesterday after I flew in," Matt said. "I understand that was Viv's fallback plan."

"Yeah." Horace didn't feel much like talking. "My daughter was a wild one." He went through the motions. "You didn't see her mother during the service, did you?" he asked.

"They found them lifeless." Herman's mind was scrambled. He looked around Rocklin Cemetery. "Android. Some people think the android malfunctioned. Finnegan. He was with the two of them."

"We're right not far from their high school in Sacramento... and Folsom Lake. They used to *love* that lake. They spent a lot of weekends there." Horace wasn't sure how to feel. Was he supposed to celebrate that his daughter lived life to the fullest? Was he supposed be sad or angry that her life was cut short?

"I kind of saw it coming," Walter said. "They stayed out of trouble... but there was a dark cloud that started following them around. Eddie and Nancy? I heard they're in hiding. They think the androids are *bad*. They dropped Tom McKay out of an airplane. It was too outlandish the way I heard it went down." Walter Browne brushed some dust off of his pants. He wondered about the color black. Why the gloom? "I thought my kid was gonna be a sportscaster. That's what he wanted to be when he was ten. He met Vivian and his entire life changed."

"Did you hear that?" Vivian stood next to Matt. "I think they like us. We can rest in peace." A mild breeze chilled the face of Horace Streets. Vivian rustled his hair. "We can control some things in their world. I'm starting to get a hang of it."

"I don't want to stick around," Fletcher said. "It's kind of creepy. *This is our funeral.*"

"Let's stay long enough to watch our coffins get lowered down. I like that our bodies will rest next to each other." Vivian scooted in between her father and Fletch's. "If you time it right, you can give 'em chills! Fletch? Try it! When the wind blows, touch your dad's back."

"Viv? I'm not in the mood. I don't know what we're here for." Fletcher Browne watched friends and family start to seat themselves under the canopy. "I say we take off right now." He wasn't at ease in ghost form. He admired Vivian for her enthusiasm. "I saw you play with a balloon in front of a little kid

back there. How did you do it?"

"I think you're right. We should go." Vivian Streets floated past her father to the top of the canvas canopy. She made it ripple a few times and she wanted to see the reaction of the people below. The wind wasn't blowing at this point. "Can you feel me?" she asked her father below.

"Vivian? I've already tried. *We're dead to them.* They can't see us." Fletch glided up to Vivian. "I tried and I tried and I tried. I was able to make him feel uncomfortable last night while he was asleep. He can't hear me right now, though."

"A girl back there heard me. When they were making their way into the chapel, I talked to one of them. I mean, she turned around. I spoke to her and she responded." Vivian darted to a tree and frightened a few birds. They fluttered away. "We can send them messages."

"It's gonna take time to learn how to do these things. I'm not even sure it's possible to do more than what we're doing." Fletcher missed being in the flesh. He remembered holding Viv at night. Phantom mode was different. It had its perks... like flying around... but he missed being alive as an organic human being. "I know what we can do. We can go down to a psychic shop. We can screw around with a reader. We'll know then if it's possible. For all I know, they're all fake. It's just a ruse. *But...*"

"But if someone *trained* to talk to the spirits can hear us then maybe we can move on." Vivian descended to her father and kissed him on the cheek. His face twitched but he didn't think it was anything more than a random muscle spasm. "I think we're supposed to say our goodbyes right now, Fletch." In the distance, she saw her nephew Tad arriving late with his pals, Brent and Ramon.

"Never turn back, Vivian. Let it all go. I can feel it. This is it." Fletcher spoke into his father's ear. "That was clever how I thought you were gonna crush me with rocks in the Caribbean." Fletcher chuckled. "If you can hear me, wipe your forehead. *Five... four... three... two... one.*" Fletch gazed over at Viv's transparent body. "Nothing. He can't hear me."

"Did you *touch* his forehead? You have to be more interactive." Vivian poked her finger at her dad's belly button. "See how he rubbed his stomach?"

"Vivian? I haven't adjusted well." Fletcher scratched his dad's forehead with his ghost fingernail. "Five, four, three, two..."

Walter Browne wiped his forehead.

"*Vivain?*" Fletcher was a tiny bit excited. "I think I'm getting the hang of this."

Viv and Fletch flew past Tad and his buddies. They took off together into the city. They had been lovers in Sacramento during the late nineties. They were familiar with the area although it had changed insignificantly. Closed shop here. New house there. They looked for anything that had to do with New Age mysticism. They hovered over the streets and once in a while, they observed more than just pedestrians and drivers. They came across other ghosts. They made their way to Freeport Boulevard close to where they had lived in California's state capital. In between Sacramento City College and Saint Josephs Cemetery, there was a quaint place called *Sunlight Vision*. Vivian remarked, "I was almost sure

we'd be buried at Saint Josephs. I mean, its right around the corner from where we lived in high school."

"They like Rocklin, I guess." Fletcher read hand-painted text in small white letters underneath a foreboding graphic of an electrical dark purple sphere with rainbow lightning sprawling out of it. The disclaimer read "for entertainment purposes only". In the upper corners of the store display window were small unicorns seeming to gallop toward one another. They flanked a large pink neon eyeball with a small yellow crescent moon. "Let's go in." Fletcher felt nervous and wondered about it for a moment. *I don't have biological nerves anymore. Why do I feel any anxiety?*

Vivian drifted her way through the window while Fletcher strutted through the door. In the middle of dimly lit room was a square table draped with maroon tablecloth. There were brown beads draped along walls in all directions. There were small multi-colored abstract pictures here and there. There was a lady sitting behind the table. Her nose was large, her hijab was dark red, her eyes were brownish marble, and her shawl was opaque. "I've been waiting for you," the lady said. "They call me Madam Wonk Wonk." There were two candles in front of her and a deck of perfectly stacked tarot cards in between them. The flames flickered. "We don't have much time. I have an appointment. You can watch me in action if you'd like. I will pretend you are not here when it happens." She paused. "I *am* an entertainer, after all."

"Madam? I'd like to know why we're here." Fletcher wasn't all too shocked that he could be perceived. "In perfect fairness, you ought to know that we plan to seek second and third opinions. We're going down to a church after this. We want to hear what priest, minister or rabbi might say about our predicament."

"And you came to me first because I have no pride? You think I would be easier to talk to?" Madam Wonk Wonk splayed the tarot cards in front of her. "Point to a card. I will turn it over for you."

"Can you see us?" Vivian asked. "We are translucent to one another. Can you merely feel our presence? Do you know who we are?"

Fletcher Browne pointed at a card a third of the way from the left. "This one."

Madam Wonk Wonk overturned it. "The knight of swords." She contemplated it. "HMMMM." She answered Vivian's question. "I can see you in my mind. It doesn't mean that in another circumstance I couldn't see you with my regular eyes. You are Viv. You were killed in a chemical accident. *Sarin*. That's what did you in."

"What does the card mean?" Fletcher began to wonder about the wisdom about heading to a psychic before anyone else. "What is our fate? Why are we here?!"

"Calm down, Fletch." Madam Wonk Wonk fanned herself with her right hand. "The knight of swords is conquering, cunning and arrogant. You are here for revenge. You would like to see the demise of your enemies." She sensed that Fletcher did not accept the interpretation. "You must understand that this is an incomplete reading. There is more to it than this simple explanation."

"Who do I kill? Who do I haunt? Can you tell me?" Fletch was flustered but his curiosity grew. "I want to get out of any ridiculous quest." Fletcher pointed to a tarot card near the middle. "What's this

one say?"

Tiny bells rang behind Viv and Fletch as the door opened. A nerdy, balding middle-aged man in a cheap beige suit walked through the door. "We've got to go, Fletch." Vivian watched a large almost-phony smile come to Madam Wonk Wonk's face. "I can't hear her. Her mouth is moving... but something is keeping me from knowing what she's saying."

Fletcher wanted to leave but it was like he had no choice. There was something out there that was pulling him away. His vision of the psychic shop grew darker and darker. Something was sucking him away. He was traveling out of the shop but he could tell that it was more than a geographic move. He could tell that he was warping into another dimension.

Vivian was the first to notice. "Fletcher? We're back at the beginning." She looked at the clouds under her feet. "It's him. He's coming again." Through some mist, George Washington appeared. "What is it?" She was almost scared. It reminded her of being a teenager again. Sometimes, an unwritten rule was broken and she'd find herself in trouble for something she didn't understand.

Fletcher was flustered about being pulled away. He tried to focus. He tried to blink himself back to Sacramento. He wanted to know how Madam Wonk Wonk's interaction was going play out. "What happened?" he asked. He was almost angry. It wasn't George Washington he was mad at. There was something at work in the Universe that was pulling the strings. He hated the feeling of being powerless against it.

"You are doing well," George said. He paced just like before. "You were able to witness your own funeral and you were able to see that some people have the ability to detect you." He stopped pacing. "The knight of swords was a key but it could throw you off. You are not on Earth for revenge. I summoned you here because you were about to delve far away from your mission. The man who walked into Madam Wonk Wonk's shop was a political bureaucrat. In the time since you passed away, the Affordable Care Act was implemented. It has been marred with heinous computerized glitches. *A mess. A total mess.* The man was there to seek advice. He's an aid of a state senator."

"Okay." Fletcher was still somewhat bothered by how things operated. "What about Region Three? FEMA? There was incredible concern that World War III was eminent. People we were close to speculated that martial law was on the horizon and Americans would be rounded up into concentration camps. What happened? The dollar was on the verge of collapse."

"There was widespread trepidation not long before nine eleven this year as you might recall. *The Million Muslim March...* and all the bikers that planned to show up. Russian troops were called in during the summer in case our own peace officers and soldiers would not suppress a considerable insurrection. The day came and went. Instead of millions marching, it was a few hundred. There were bikers, yes, but there was no threat to national security. All ado about nothing." George paced again. "Then people figured it would happen on October first. You were hiking around the mountain tops of Kilimanjaro on September sixteenth when a civilian contractor gunned down a dozen people in a Washington, DC naval

yard. Four days later across the Atlantic, you both ingested enough sarin to end your natural biological lives. There were apprehensions about America defaulting on its bills. On October first, Obamacare became law and Congress was deadlocked about a budget. The closest thing to World War III or martial law that happened was yesterday when an irate lady was chased from the White House to Capitol Hill and she was shot dead by authorities. It turned out her young daughter was in the car with her. Bullets missed the youngster, though. Today, a man set himself on fire in the National Mall as a form of protest.” George faced Fletch and Viv. “This past nine eleven, there was hype, fear and some hysteria.”

“It blew over, though!” Fletcher was now happy. He thought for a couple of seconds. “Of course it blew over. We would’ve known if martial law was implemented. We were at our own funerals. Yeah, we would’ve known.”

“What are we to do? I’m confused.” Vivian thought about conversations with friends from high school. “My Catholic girlfriends used to say that Purgatory followed death. Is that where we’re at? Because I heard from other people that once you die, you meet Jesus. *There is nothing in between Earth and Heaven.*”

“I can’t tell you how it works. I’ve been dead for more than two hundred years. I’m still trying to figure it out.” General Washington marched about. “I’ll send you on your way. There is nothing important at this moment I can tell you except that... you’re like babes again learning to crawl. You will be frustrated and have difficult learning experiences. You will be annoyed at your lack of control. Someday, with patience and diligence, you will be in my position and you will summon spirits to assist you with chosen endeavors. Or? You will move on to whatever’s next.” He began to walk away. “I’m not ready for the next stage. I have more work to do.” He vanished into a cloudy haze. Glowing dimension doors appeared when he was gone.

Father Eugenio Foscolo kneeled in the second row of an empty Saint Elizabeth’s church. He prayed, “I confess to almighty God and to you my brothers and sisters that I have greatly sinned in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and what I have failed to do, through my fault...” Vivian sat to his right and Fletch sat next to her. The priest continued, “Through my fault, through my most grievous fault. Therefore, I ask blessed Mary ever Virgin, all the angels and saints, to pray for me... to the Lord our God.” He did the sign of the cross, made his way to the isle, genuflected, then went out through a side door.

Saint Elizabeth’s was a few blocks around the corner from Madam Wonk Wonk’s psychic shop. “He passed right through me,” Vivian noted. “Do you think he knew we were here?”

“This is the first place we went after prom. I remember talking to Father Percy Sheridan. He was the first of about five clergymen we talked to that month. Do you remember?” Candles were lit near a statue of the Virgin Mary. Jesus hung limp on a cross. Fletcher feared that the *real* Jesus would appear and judge him together with Vivian. He shook the thought. “Do I think the new priest knew we were here right now?”

“We should follow him. We should try to talk to him.” Vivian studied the statue of Mary. “I don’t know what else to do.” It stood gracefully atop a crushed serpent.

“Let’s leave.” Fletcher felt uneasy. There was something about the crucifix. “I can feel him. I didn’t think too much about religion when we were dating as teenagers... but I can feel him now.” Fletcher admired the craftsmanship of the wooden beams above.

“Let’s go.” Vivian hovered away and left through the wall between stained glass windows. When she was together with Fletch near the street, she suggested, “There’s a Chinese restaurant on Nineteenth with a huge Buddha. *Little Beijing* is the name of it. Maybe we can get something there.”

“Take out?” Fletch was joking. He followed his girlfriend across town.

Viv and Fletch didn’t make it to their planned destination. They saw the strange beige-suited man walking up the street. They decided to follow him. “I don’t *know!*” the man yelled into thin air. “I can’t get ‘em to leave, mom. They’re always here.” No one was around him. Viv and Fletch followed him to a quaint house on Larkin Way. There was a large smiling framed sepia portrait of John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Fletcher went over to the dining table where a stack of bills were scattered around. “Neil Scopes” and “Resident” were the only names on the mail. The man kept along ranting. Fletch went through the rooms while Viv stayed with the man on his living room couch. Fletcher came back and told Viv that the house was empty. The guy grumbled loudly about society, the government and JFK conspiracies. Fletcher noticed computer printouts of different web sites on the coffee table in front of the man. “I have a month to make my case against the Warren Commission!” The man rubbed his temples then loosened his bland black neck tie. “Fifty years ago... they got away with *murder!*” He massaged his scalp. “Where are you JFK?” Fletch looked around and found himself in the man’s bedroom. There were many science fiction books and a few legit science magazines. There were computer printouts about the comet ISON. “Is someone there?” the man demanded. Fletch returned to the living room.

“He might be one of ‘em. I think he can subtly detect that we’re here,” Vivian said. “He lives alone. I’m pretty sure.”

“Let’s stick with this dude for a while. We can learn things. We can test our powers. We can figure out how to operate on our planet again.” Fletcher looked around for something he might be able to move. A curtain. The leaves of a potted plant. The string of a ceiling fan. He couldn’t find anything. There was foil on all the windows. “Try talking to him, Viv. I think his name is Neil. He was yelling to him mother on the streets. Do you think she’s here with us? Can ghosts be invisible to other ghosts?”

“Billions of people have died over the past hundreds of years. You would think there would be more of us still here.” Vivian Steets decided to try to talk to Neil Scopes. “Neil? I am your mother. How was your day?”

“Mom? *Mom?*” Neil looked around his living room. His hopeful demeanor mutated quickly to animosity. “That’s not you! You are a fraud! I can tell who my mother is!”

“Whoops!” Vivian was embarrassed and asked Fletcher, “What should I do?”

“Who’s your friend, lady? I can hear you.” Neil patted at the cushions on his couch but Viv was already up and away with Fletch in the dining room.

Fletcher whispered to Viv, “He can hear us. We need to learn our parameters. We need to know how far we can go. We need to learn the signs. Who knows we’re here? Who doesn’t? Who are the phonies? Who are the real deals? Who knows we’re here but blocks us out?”

“We can get a lot done. I heard about these people. It has to do with isolation. Theory is that you go crazy if you’re left alone long enough. I don’t think that’s the case. *Not anymore*. I mean, when I was a kid, I was sure these people were totally bonkers.” Vivian went into the kitchen and Fletch followed. “I don’t want to be here. I want to be blissful in Heaven. I thought we’d be in Heaven and there would be no more problems at all. Why do we have to keep living here?”

“Apparently, there’s a mission for us. *Unfinished business*. We’re supposed to stop something bad from happening. Or we’re supposed to bring peace to a loved one. Maybe your nephew. Maybe your mom or dad. I don’t know.”

“We can stick around for a couple of hours. We can do some tests. We can come up with a hypothesis or two and find out what our boundaries are.” Vivian could hear Neil coming their way. “He couldn’t have heard us from the other room. Is he just getting a bite to eat or can he feel our presence?”

“Mother?” Neil asked. “I’m going to make your favorite batch of oatmeal cookies! I talked to your psychic friend! Madam Wonk Wonk? She said she misses you, mother!”

“Here’s our first chance! Vivian? Whatever his recipe is, convince him to put something a little different than usual! We’ll know we have the power of suggestion!”

Neil opened his fridge and put some ingredients across the counter.

“There’s *M&M’s* on one of the shelves. I bet they’re not part of the usual batch.” Vivian turned her attention toward Neil. “Neil? I bet candy would be good in your cookie dough! Why not try it for a change?”

“Mother? Is that you?” Neil Scopes froze for a while. All he got was silence. He kept about making cookies from scratch.