

Carl Prescott and the Vengeful Gods

Chapter 1

Carl Prescott woke to the alarm on his smartphone. He turned it off, sat up on the bed, stretched, and stifled a yawn. He pushed his feet into his slippers, rose, and walked over to the window. Pulling aside the curtains, he looked out onto the new day.

There was a knock at the door. He turned to see his mother standing in the doorway. "Good morning, Mom."

"It's the first day of school so you'd better get ready. I'll be making your breakfast."

"Thanks. I'll be down after I take my shower and get dressed." His mother nodded and closed the door. Carl looked down at the large yard, the white rail fence, and the long driveway that led down to the highway into the city. He shook his head, turned, and headed to the bathroom.

As he stepped into the shower, the memory of his last days at the Bertrand Aloysius Thorndike Academic Institution replayed in his mind. Everything seemed so perfect after the demon queen failed to destroy the universe. He and his friends were happy to get back to the more mundane, yet comfortable, parts of their lives, namely education and training in their talents. The morning he woke with the spherical diamond hanging from the platinum chain around his neck, his world began to change. He alone knew the pendant's secret. The shimmer of light it held was a two-dimensional wormhole to another universe.

People began to change. His friends seemed more distant, especially Aida Whitehall, whom he loved with his whole heart. Less than a week after that fateful day, her mother left the school to rejoin the Masterson Academy on the other side of the globe. Aida, as well as his friends, Burt and Grace, had gone with them. One by one, the professors turned cold to him as well. The school that had made Carl feel welcome and safe had changed to a cold, foreboding place. He was despondent and alone.

He longed to dispose of the jewel, but he knew getting rid of it was impossible. The Lord God Emmanuel had charged him with its protection, and that was a charge no one could refuse. Then, out of the blue six months ago, his parents asked him to return home. He took the opportunity without a second thought.

It was not the same home where he had grown up. They moved when his father became an assistant director at the agency in Washington. Their new residence was a large farmhouse situated on ten acres some twenty miles from the city. Ginny, his mother, had taken a leave of absence from the agency to rebuild her relationship with their son.

As he headed downstairs, he could see one of the family dogs, a toy poodle named Chachis, wagging her tail and looking up at him. When he reached the bottom, he picked her up, and she licked his face. He carried her into the kitchen where his mother stood and looked out the bay window. The other family dog, a Shi-Tzu named Zelda, sat obediently behind her. Carl set the dog down, pulled out a chair, and sat. The plate of eggs, hash browns, and toast was waiting for him. "It all looks great, Mom. Thanks."

Chachis whimpered, and Carl smiled at her. In his mind, he heard her say, "It's not your fault your friends turned on you, Carl. It's the stone." He nodded and returned his attention to his plate.

Ginny turned and smiled. Then she walked over, sat across from him, and took a sip of coffee. "I hope you enjoy it, Carl. How are you adjusting to being away from that school?"

"Fine. I really liked the Institution, but I just didn't fit in after a while."

She nodded. "Yeah, you told me how your friends all left you behind. Would you like to go to that other school too?"

He shook his head and took another bite of eggs. After he swallowed, he replied, "No, definitely not." He sighed. "I'm pretty sure they all returned to Thorndike after they found out I left."

"What? Are you saying they left because of you? Did you do something to them?"

Carl removed the pendant from his neck and set it on the table. "No. I think they left because of this."

Ginny picked up the pendant. "This is quite the jewel, Carl. Where did you get it?"

"Manny gave it to me for protection."

"I don't understand, Carl. Does it protect you, or are you protecting it?"

"I'm protecting it."

"If this Manny guy is so worried about someone stealing it, why doesn't he just put it in a safety deposit box? You're still a young man and shouldn't be watching over other people's stuff. Just who is this Manny anyway?"

"I'm not sure I should say anymore, Mom. I volunteered to guard the stone."

"Carl, that isn't good enough. Perhaps you can invite your friend Manny to come here and explain the situation to me then."

Carl stood and stuck out his hand. "Okay, Mom. I'll ask him. May I please have it back? The bus will be here any minute."

Ginny handed him the pendant, which he quickly hung around his neck. "Your father and I want to talk more about this later, okay?"

He stepped over to her and kissed her cheek. "Okay, Mom, absolutely. I'll see you after school." He headed to the front door and left as quickly as he could.

The bus delivered the students to Donnelly High School forty-five minutes later. Carl had spent a few months here at the end of the last school year, so he knew where his classes would be. He arrived in his world history class a few minutes before eight o'clock. Most of the seats were taken, so he selected a desk in the back row.

The door opened, and a female student strode into the room. All the boys in the room took a collective gasp. Her auburn hair danced along her shoulders as she walked. She wore a tight red top; her black jeans were also skin-tight.

She walked to the back of the room and sat next to Carl, who recognized her immediately. She was Sylvia, the demon queen. He had been married to her dozens of times over his past lives. While Carl did not remember most of those events, her immortality made them fresh and real to her. She shook hands with the boy on the other side of her and then turned her attention to him. "Hi there. My name is Sylvia. What's yours?"

He shook her hand. "Carl Prescott. It's nice to meet you, although you look very familiar to me."

She pulled her hand away. "That's what all the boys say."

The door opened, and a teacher in a business suit stepped inside. He closed the door and moved over to the desk where he set his books down. Carl smiled, and Sylvia rolled her eyes. The teacher stood in front of the desk. "Good morning, students. My name is Joshua Carpenter. It's a pleasure to be with you today. Let's get started, shall we?"

At lunchtime, Carl went through the line and turned to find a seat. Sylvia patted the seat next to her, and he walked in her direction. Before he arrived, one of the football players sat next to her and began to chat. Before Carl could move ten feet, the boy blushed, stood, and hurried away. Carl set his tray down and sat. "What brings you to this school, Sylvia?"

"You, obviously, duh." She spread her arms. "And look at me, I've sixteen too!"

"I'm only fifteen."

She licked her lips. "That's close enough for me, darling. Do you hear that high-pitched whining noise? It's really bothering me."

Carl opened his shirt enough to show the stone and then closed it again.

"What the hell is that thing? It's starting to make me feel sick."

Joshua arrived at their table and motioned for Carl to follow him. "He'll be right back, Cousin." The two left the room.

Moments later, Carl returned and took his seat. "Is that better?"

She patted his knee, and he flinched. She laughed. "Much better and thanks. What is that thing anyway?"

He leaned over to her. "We're supposed to go to Joshua's classroom later to discuss it."

Rather than return to the classroom after school, Joshua drove Carl and Sylvia to the Prescott home. As they neared the house, they noticed a white limousine had parked at the curb. The rear door opened, and Manny stepped out. Joshua parked behind the limo, and all exited. Manny hugged each of them, and the group headed up to the front door. Carl opened the door and stepped in. "Mom, we have company."

Ginny Prescott came out of the kitchen and approached them. "Who are all your friends, Carl?"

"Mom, this is Manny, my teacher Joshua Carpenter, and a fellow classmate, Sylvia."

She extended her hand. "I'm Ginny Prescott. It's a pleasure to meet you all, especially you, Manny. We need to talk."

"Of course, Mrs. Prescott, and I'm not surprised. To be clear, Joshua is my son, and Sylvia is my niece."

Joshua added, "Sylvia's father lives far from here, so she's staying at my house."

Sylvia leaned into her cousin. "Thanks, Cousin Josh."

"Carl, if you want to go to your room with your classmate, I'll have a talk with Manny and Josh."

"Oh goody," Sylvia cooed and winked at Carl, who blushed and looked down.

"This matter is rather complicated, Mrs. Prescott," Manny interjected. "I think it's better that we are all together."

She led them into the living room, and they all sat.

Frank Prescott walked into the room and the men stood. "What's going on, Ginny?"

"This is the man named Manny I mentioned on the phone."

Frank shook the man's hand. "Thank you for coming. Please be seated and let's get started."

When they were seated, Ginny asked, "Why are you having our son guard your jewelry, Manny?"

"I understand your concern, Mrs. Prescott, but unfortunately, he is the only one capable of containing its power."

"My son is a teenager," Frank argued. "Surely, the pendant could be kept in a vault or safety-deposit box more securely."

Manny shook his head. "Oh, if only that were true." He turned to Carl. "Please explain who we are and why you have this duty."

Carl closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths.

Frank shook his head. "Manny, whoever you are, please answer the question. You don't need some child to respond for you."

Carl stood, smiled at Manny, and nodded. "It's okay, Dad. I am proud and honored to explain my friends are." He dropped his head and thought for a moment. "When I went to the Thorndike Institution, I had no idea what I was in for."

"It was your choice, Son," Frank noted.

Carl chuckled. "Yes, I know that, Dad, but I meant my comment in a good way. I never imagined I would meet Manny or Joshua or Sylvia for that matter. Now, I can't imagine living my life without all of them."

"Bless you, Carl," Manny replied.

"You honor me," Joshua said.

"I love you too, sweetheart," Sylvia said while wiping tears from her eyes.

Carl cleared his throat. "You all honor me with your presence here today and willingness to expose your truth. Mom and Dad, Manny is the Lord God Emmanuel. Joshua is his son, Jesus the Christ." He stepped over to Sylvia and pulled her to her feet. "Well, Sylvia is bit more complicated. She was a petulant child and daughter of Satan, but she was also my wife for countless lives."

"Petulant?" Sylvia asked.

He kissed her cheek. "Perhaps I was a bit overly dramatic, but you did try to destroy the universe."

"Only to get your attention, Carl," she replied.

Frank stood. "Okay, I'm done with this garbage, and I don't know how you've brainwashed my son, but I want you all out of my house right now."

"Honey," Ginny began, but her husband waved her off.

Manny and Joshua disappeared.

"What just happened? Where did they go?" Frank asked his son.

Carl kissed Sylvia's lips softly. "I'll come to your island in just a minute." She nodded and disappeared as well.

"Is this some kind of hallucination? Did they drug us or something?" Ginny asked.

"Dad let's sit on the couch with Mom so we can discuss this," Carl suggested.

"I'll sit down when I want to sit down."

"Frank, please, he's our son!" Ginny exclaimed.

Carl put his hands on his father's upper arms. "It's okay, Dad. I totally understand how you feel. Frankly, I felt the same way for a long time. But when I understood, the truth became so clear and simple that I couldn't believe I didn't already know."

Ginny stood and put her hand on Carl's shoulder. He turned to face her. "Did we just kick God and Jesus out of our house?"

Carl nodded. "Yes, but it's okay. He will not judge you for that. I mean, how many people ever get to see Him? I never thought I would."

"Carl, God was not just in our house," Frank exclaimed. "That can't possibly be real."

"Dad, do you remember when you came to the school to interrogate the teachers and send all the students to the demon queen?"

"What are you talking about?" Frank asked.

Carl took his parents' hands in his. "Remember."

Frank Prescott turned pale. "That was a dream. That never happened."

"Whatever happened to Director Winston, Dad?"

Frank's head snapped back. "What do you mean?"

"A whole crew of agents disappeared, including him, you, and Mom. You two were finally located in the Azores. Your boss thought he'd turn me over to the queen, but I got the better of him. He and his flight crew ended up at McMurdo Station in Antarctica, right?"

"That's when you got the promotion, isn't it, Frank?" Ginny asked.

Frank sat heavily onto the chair and held his head in his hands. "Oh no, I just kicked the Lord out of my house."

Manny pulled Frank up and into his arms. "It's okay, my son. You didn't know."

Joshua turned Ginny around and hugged her. "You are a wonderful mother with an amazing son, Virginia."

Manny looked at Carl. "She's waiting, so you'd better go."

Carl smiled and faded away.

Sylvia and Carl walked along the beach in their swimsuits. "Whatever happened to your girlfriend? What was her name?"

"Aida. I think that pendant had the same effect on her as it did on you. She, her mom, and my friends all left. The other students treated me badly, so that's when I came home."

She put her arm around his back and rested her head on his shoulder. "I'm sorry about that. What happened to the jewel anyway?"

"When Josh asked me to go with him at lunch, he took it."

"That's odd," she replied. "I didn't sense anything. Maybe he destroyed the stone?"

Carl chuckled. "That would be nice, but I don't think it's possible. Do you know what it was?"

"It looked like a diamond, but they don't make noises."

Two chairs materialized on the beach in front of them, so they sat down. "It was a diamond that Manny put around a two-dimensional wormhole."

"What the heck does that mean?"

"Sylvia, Manny told me that when we, Gabe, and Connie left the singularity, the priest and priestess did form a new universe. That wormhole connects this one to that."

"But that's not how it's supposed to work."

Manny walked up to them. "You two need to come with me now."

The three were walking through a forest. "What happened, Manny?"

Manny did not look back. "You'll see soon enough. It is most likely that your parents will not remember the memory of our meeting. Mortal minds generally cannot come to grips with things of such consequence. Do not blame them and do not remind them of our visit, okay?"

"Yes, sir."

They approached the walls around the Thorndike Institution. The sun had just risen on a new day. The stones began to move until a passageway formed. They walked through and into a small stand of trees. The wall reassembled behind them. The main building was clearly visible, but the Gratia Dei Hall was gone. In its place was a deep hole. The teachers and students had been evacuated. Headmaster Dorchester stood at the edge of the hole looking downward.

"What happened to the dormitory?"

“Please just wait. We’re almost there.”

As they arrived, Carl said, “Hello, Headmaster.”

Dorchester turned around. All could see that he had been crying. “Oh Carl, what a mess! Who are your friends?”

Carl recalled what Manny had just said about human memory. “These are my friends, Manny and Sylvia.”

Dorchester shook their hands. “It’s a pleasure to meet you both, but this place is unsafe.” The ground under Dorchester’s feet began to slip, and he moved a couple feet away from the edge. “See, it’s still happening.”

Manny said, “Headmaster, we are here to fix this, but I need you to move away. As you say, it isn’t safe here anymore.”

“This place is all I have.” Dorchester wiped his watery eyes with his sleeve.

A minibus pulled up to the group with the angel Gabriel at the wheel. Manny patted Dorchester on the shoulder. “I swear we will fix this, but you must leave.”

Dorchester muttered something under his breath, turned, and climbed on board the bus, which then drove away.

Manny pointed to the bottom of the pit. “Do you see it, Carl?”

Carl squinted his eyes and then gasped. “It’s the pendant!”

Sylvia covered her ears with her hands. “It’s getting louder.”

“You two wait here.” Manny floated down to the bottom of the pit, picked up the pendant, and floated back to them. He wrapped his hand tightly around the stone. “Is that better, Sylvia?”

She removed her hands and smiled. “Yes, thank you, Uncle.”

“Carl, first I owe you an apology.”

“That isn’t necessary, Manny.”

“Oh, I’m afraid it is. As I told you before, this type of thing has never happened before, so all of us were in the dark as to the consequences. I believed the stone would contain the wormhole, but that was just wishful thinking at the time. Over the last six months, the wormhole has been pulling apart the stone atom by atom. Eventually, the stone will dissolve and release the demon inside.”

“So, this universe will be sucked through?” Carl asked.

“If nothing is done, that is probably true. When I gave you the stone, I told you I wasn’t certain I had any power over the other universe, which is still true. However, I have absolute control over this one, and that control includes this end of the wormhole. I am confident that I can close it.”

“Kill it now, Uncle!” Sylvia exclaimed.

“Not yet, Niece. There is damage that must be undone first. Carl, you can see where we are. It was not just those in the demon queen’s coliseum who were sucked into the new universe.”

“What?”

Manny nodded and then sighed. “When Joshua took the pendant from you, he wanted to give it to another Invisible Hand for safe keeping. He chose Burt Jackson, your friend. He figured that between him and Aida, they could control its power. Alas, they were the first, but not the last. Before the residence hall was evacuated, your friends Grace and Barbie, along with Dean Whitehall and Professor Thorndike were pulled through. Then the building and all this earth and rock. Perhaps a few animals and insects, I don’t know yet.”

“I need to go to rescue them,” Carl stated firmly.

“I am not certain that is even possible now,” Manny replied.

“Don’t go, Carl. This is our chance to be together.”

“Maybe you should come with me, Sylvia?”

Manny shook his head. “That would be a very bad idea, Carl. The priest and priestess who started that universe would love nothing more than to get their revenge on her.”

Carl closed his eyes and thought for a moment. When he opened them, he asked, “Manny, do you think my friends turned against me because of the stone?”

“For your friends, I would say yes. Your girlfriend may be a different case. You know how fickle affairs of the heart can be.”

“Not mine, Carl,” Sylvia noted.

“What other options are there, Manny?”

“If you choose, I will crush the wormhole right now. That will end the connection to this universe. Everyone and everything that went through will be forever stranded in that universe. Then, life here will return to normal.”

“Please don’t go, Carl,” Sylvia pleaded.

“Sylvia, my darling, can’t you see I have no other choice? I would be nothing without those people. I never would have come to Thorndike or met you and learned about our past. Manny, Luce, Mort, and the Rope Bridge Society would just be stories. I must go.”

“Are you absolutely certain, Carl?” Manny asked.

“Yes, Father. I am certain.”

“Okay, I’ll open my hand slightly. Stick a finger in the opening and touch the stone,” Manny replied.

“Carl, don’t!” Sylvia begged.

Carl nodded. “I’m ready.”

Manny smiled. “Call out to me when you try to return. I will try to help you and the others. The other end of the wormhole should look identical to this one. Remember where it is!”

“I understand.”

Manny moved one finger slightly, and the whine of the wormhole filled the air. Carl raised his right index finger and moved his hand toward the opening.

“Stop!” Sylvia screamed. Manny closed his hand.

Carl kissed her softly. “I’m sorry, darling. I have no choice. Please know that my love for you will live on in both universes.”

She grabbed his left hand. “I’m not letting you do this alone, Mister. I’m going too.”

Manny frowned. “Sylvia don’t be rash. The gods of that universe hate you. There is no way you can survive. I won’t allow you to go.”

She reached up and kissed Manny on the cheek. “It’s okay, Uncle. Carl and I have always been together. I will do my best to take care of him, and he will do the same for me.” She nodded. “This is what I have always wanted.”

Manny shook his head but moved the same finger again. The screech of the wormhole was almost overwhelming.

Carl moved his finger toward the opening. Sylvia wrapped her arms around Carl and snuggled her head against his neck. Carl touched the stone.

Manny saw the two sucked into the stone. He pushed the stone into his chest and walked away.

The experience was not so peaceful for Carl and Sylvia. They felt their bodies stretched out and then flattened. Carl thought his body would splatter apart, but somehow, he held it together.

They were turning over and over inside the filament of light as it plunged into endless darkness. “Is this how death feels, Carl?” Sylvia asked.

“I don’t remember, but it’s awful for sure. Are you okay?”

“I feel like vomiting, but I’m flatter than a pancake.”

They were accelerating toward a bright point of light at incredible speed. They entered the light, and all sense of motion stopped. They seemed to be enclosed in a cubical room of light. Carl stood and pulled her to her feet. “This is pretty unexpected.”

She hugged him. “At least, we’re together.” She was about to kiss him when the floor dropped out, and they plummeted downward.

They were on an endless slide made of light. The slide twisted around a very bright blue star and continued out into the void. Seconds later, the blue star detonated. The walls of superheated gas from the nova chased them.

Moments later, they had passed the danger and continued toward a smaller yellow star. The slide twisted around the star and toward a brown planet. The slide dipped into the atmosphere and through several cloud banks and ended a hundred feet above a massive pile of rubble. They flew off the slide, slammed into the pile, tumbled down until they reached the base, and came to a stop. Sylvia pulled Carl to his feet. She pointed to the dark sky. “Look at that!”

Carl could only see a few dozen stars, most of which were red dwarves. “I guess that’s the whole thing.”

A bent-over man hurried toward them. He had a significant limp and wore only torn shorts. “Come with me, quickly now!” He took Carl’s hand. “You must run!”

“Who are you?”

“There’s no time for small talk. The searchers will arrive shortly. Run!”

The man ran, and Carl and Sylvia followed.

