

Carl Prescott and the Riddle of Satan's Cube

Chapter 1

Carl Prescott woke to a new day. He expected to find himself back at the Bertrand Aloysius Thorndike Academic Institution or perhaps in his parents' home in Virginia. Instead, he opened his eyes to discover he was still on what appeared to be Sylvia's hideaway island. He could not remember how he had arrived here. The last thing he could recall was being unable to touch Emmanuel, even though He stood less than two feet away. "That was Brooklyn. What happened to me?" He swung his legs over the side of the bed. All the pictures of Sylvia's husbands from prior lives were gone. He held his head in his hands and tried to think. Out of the periphery of his vision, he noticed that a book sat on the nightstand next to the bed. It was quite thick. He picked it up and looked at the cover. The title was *The Riddle of Satan's Cube*.

He was about to open the cover when someone knocked on the bedroom door. Carl looked up and set the book down. He stood cautiously and headed to the door. He opened it, but no one was there. There was another knock, this time on the front door. Carl walked over to the door and put his hand onto the doorknob. This place was definitely not Sylvia's hideaway island.

He remembered the previous night. He had seen the impenetrable fog surrounding the island. He had also seen the pictures on the wall, which were now missing. With no other choice, he pulled the door open. Aida Whitehall stood outside and smiled at him. Carl was overwhelmed with emotion at seeing someone both dear and familiar. He put his arms around her and held her tightly. "Oh thank God you're here, sweetheart!" She did not return the hug, and her body was very cold. He released her and stepped back. "What's wrong?"

Her face showed no emotion or tenderness. "This was a mistake." She vanished.

He looked around frantically. "I'm sorry! Please come back!" He walked around the area looking for her. After a few minutes of staring into the thick fog, he went back inside. Siddhartha Gautama sat on the couch. The book Carl had left on the bed was now on the coffee table. "Sid? What's going on?"

"Please sit down so we can talk, Carl Sandberg Prescott." After Carl sat down, his visitor continued. "I suppose you may address me as Sid, although I have no idea who that is."

"You look just like him. Who are you if I may ask?"

"I am called Three. I believe in your reality, I am known as Mort."

Carl stood and pointed at him. "You're one of the Triad. What do you want?"

Three crossed his legs and smiled. "You already know what we want. Please sit down. You're only making this situation more difficult than it needs to be."

Carl sat. "Let's get this over then. Form the group hug to create the singularity, and then maybe I can get home."

Three sighed. "Alas, it is not so simple, Carl. One discussed all of this with Emmanuel, but I suppose he did not portray our miserable situation adequately." He winked. "You know how Ones can be self-righteous and pompous, right?"

"I never felt that way with Manny."

Three nodded knowingly. "I can imagine how you feel that way from your perspective. You and I know that the three are here to serve life. Your three have done that for billions of years and are likely accustomed to their roles. The three of us have been stuck in this limbo as long as ten universe lifetimes. After a few billion years of bickering and blaming each other, we have

settled into our new roles. Oddly enough, those roles involve bickering and blaming each other. Of course, you saw the fog.”

“Yes. Sid, I mean Three.”

Three smiled. “You can call me by any name you choose. Sid is fine or Mort, whatever you like. Do you know what the fog is?”

Carl thought for a moment. “On Earth, fog is just a low cloud. At the Crossroads of Existence and on the Rope Bridge, fog was a metaphor for time and distance. Is it like that here too?”

Three stood up. “No, it’s not like that at all; however, I would love to learn about those places from you later. Stand up. Let’s go visit the fog.”

Carl stood. “What is the fog here then?”

Three headed toward the front door. “Come along. The fog is the real reason you’re here.” He turned back to Carl who followed him. “The fog will help you understand why we need so you badly.” Sid reached the front door and pulled it open. The fog had moved onshore and now rolled a few feet from them.

“It moved. I thought it was only on the water.”

The two now stood on the porch with the fog less than a foot away. Three put his hand on Carl’s shoulder. “You’re quite warm.”

“You’re like ice.”

“Is that better?”

“Yes, thank you, Mort. Now, you’re warm like me.”

“Mort is the perfect choice and thank you. Please take my hand.” After Carl accepted his hand, Mort continued. “Each droplet of fog is a living spirit.”

Carl gasped. “Oh my God!”

Three looked over at Carl. “You are beginning to understand. Come along,” he said, and they stepped into the fog.

In another universe, the door to Death’s cabin at the Crossroads of Existence opened, and Emmanuel stepped inside. Luce and Mort were already seated and staring at each other. “You two look awfully serious,” Emmanuel said.

“Carl is lost forever, Manny, and as you said yourself, it is our fault.”

“I know that, Luce, but I remembered something important that we discussed with him not long ago,” Manny replied. The others sat back and crossed their arms. Manny laughed. “Let me get you all some coffee,” he said and headed for the hearth. He returned with three steaming mugs and set them down. “Mind if I try the stew?”

“You’re hungry at a time like this?” Mort asked.

Manny patted him on the shoulder. “It’s your fault, old friend. It smells amazing.” He moved back to the hearth, returned with a bowl of stew, sat, and then ate a spoonful.

“You mean the transition, right?” Luce asked.

Manny nodded. “Exactly. When we spoke to him about it, he was already very close. It wouldn’t surprise me if the transit through the other wormhole pushed him over the line.”

Mort shook his head. “Then he can’t help the Triad.”

Manny ate another bite of stew. “This is the best stew you ever made, Mort.”

“Thanks boss. Sylvia gave me some seasoning tips. Her experience with French cuisine helped.”

Manny laughed. "Yes, the experience she got from Carl, well, his soul in a previous life that is."

"Manny, Mort is right. If Carl is now immortal, he cannot add the randomness to the Triad universe."

"By the way," Mort interjected, "why are all three of us here?"

There was a knock on the door. "Here's why," Manny replied as he stood. He walked over to the door and opened it. Siddhartha Gautama stepped inside with the woman who had been the God Queen Alexis in the false universe. "I'm thrilled you two could be here. Have a seat, and I'll get everyone coffee and stew."

Mort was already at the hearth. "I'll take care of it for you, Manny."

Luce went into the bedroom and returned with two more chairs.

When everyone was seated, Alexis asked, "Why am I here?" Her eyes grew wide as she recognized the others from her kitchen. "You were all in my house." She pointed at Luce. "You came up through the floor. How is that possible?" She turned to Sid. "Why did you kidnap me?"

"Please relax, my dear," Manny began. "Of course, you remember what occurred in your kitchen last night. You have something that we need."

She crossed her arms and sat up very straight. "You're not going to hurt me, are you?"

Sid smiled at her. "Alex, you never have to worry about that with us. Manny is the Lord God. The others are Satan and Death. Even though you, Richard, and the demon queen wished to destroy them, they have no animus toward you."

"Then what do you want from me?"

Manny smiled and leaned forward. "Do you remember everything that happened last night?" She nodded. "Please tell us what you saw, heard, and felt. Please be as specific as possible. Carl's existence depends on every detail."

"I asked him into the kitchen to thank him for saving me. I know I was horrible in that universe and did everything I could to kill him, yet still he saved me." She wiped her eyes. "Then we headed for the door to the dining room. I pushed the door open and held it for him to go first. He was about to pass me when this explosion of noise erupted. I saw him covering his ears with his hands. Then, you pushed me to the floor."

"I regret if I harmed you, Alexis."

"No, I'm fine. I know you were trying to save him. The sound was deafening, so I covered my own ears."

Manny nodded. "Okay, there were a couple other things I noticed when I stepped into the room. Think again to see if you recall other details."

Alexis sat with her head down for a minute. Finally, she looked up. "For a second, I felt colder than I have ever felt before. That's when I saw a hand or something on Carl's shoulder."

"Yes, I recall those things as well," Manny noted. "Please continue."

Luce asked, "What you do mean by 'or something'?"

She turned to him. "It looked like a hand, but it was clear like glass and lit up like the sun." She pointed at Mort. "Then, I saw him come through the back wall." She turned to Luce again. "Then, you came up out of the floor. After that, Carl vanished."

"Something is missing," Manny noted. "You must have forgotten it. Please think again."

"Stop pestering her, Brother," Luce suggested. "She's been through enough already." Manny waved him off.

“No, he’s right,” Alexis announced. “I remember now. As Carl disappeared, I felt frozen and began to shiver. Then, I felt an intense pain, as though someone had stuck a needle through my eye and into my brain. It lasted only a second and I’ve felt fine since.”

Sid, Mort, and Luce stared alternatively at Alexis and Manny.

“Have you really felt fine since then?” Manny asked.

Alexis smiled and nodded. “Yeah, well, pretty much. I’ve had this ringing in my left ear, but I thought I just slept on it wrong or something. It’s not too loud and doesn’t really affect me.”

“That is what I was looking for. Will you allow me to take it from you?” Manny asked.

“What is it?”

“Alexis, it is a trace. I really can’t go into any details right now. May I have it?”

“Will it hurt?” she asked.

Manny stood and smiled. “No, but the sensation might be a little troubling, but after a second or two you’ll be totally fine.”

She stood. “Of course, Lord.”

“Just Manny or Father is fine. We’re all family, right?”

Alexis sighed. “I need to ask you a question, Manny.” He nodded. “After everything I’ve done, why are you being nice to me? I expected to end up in Hell for eternity.”

Manny shook his head. “I thought Carl explained it to you last night.”

“He said I was part of the Divine.”

Manny walked over and put his arm around her shoulders. “That is correct. You are part of me. How could I ever hate a part of myself? Are you ready?”

She nodded. “I trust you, Father.”

Manny removed his arm and raised his right hand with the thumb and index finger touching at the tip. His hand moved forward and passed through the side of her head. A few seconds later, he removed his hand. “Mort, I need a glass jar with a lid.” The container materialized on the tabletop. Manny removed the lid with his left hand, put his right hand into the jar, opened his fingers, and quickly closed the jar. There appeared to be a small spark floating in the jar. “All done. How do you feel, Alexis?”

“You were right about the odd feeling, but I feel great, and the ringing is gone.” She pointed at the glass jar. “Is that the trace you mentioned?”

Manny nodded. “Yes, that is correct. This spark is our only hope to rescue Carl. Thank you for saving it for me.”

“I didn’t know I saved it, Father. It was just in my ear.”

Manny nodded and then laughed. “That is the way it works. When there is a desperate moment, we become very clear-minded. In that moment, we can accomplish momentous things, even though we may not recall them later. Thank you for coming.”

Alexis sighed. “May I hug you, Manny?”

He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed her tightly. “Welcome home, my beloved daughter.”

After Sid led Alexis out of the hut and toward the ornate bridge, Manny, Mort, and Luce sat down again.

Manny smiled at his brothers. “What a fabulous day!” He took a drink of coffee. “Perhaps we should have a more fortified drink, Brothers?”

“Why are there still three of us?” Luce asked.

Manny winked. "I prefer not to drink alone." They shared a laugh. "Luce, as to your earlier comment, I believe Carl can still add randomness to that universe. As long as he retains his mortal body, he has the ability. Not to mention the difficulty of remaining sixteen forever."

Mort pointed at the spark. "Is that another wormhole?"

"It is a trace, which either came from Carl or the one who came for him. Either way, we should be able to find him at the appropriate moment."

"Why not now, Brother?"

Manny shook his head. "I know how the Triad feels. If there is anything we can do to help them have a universe as full as ours, we should, and the least we can do is give Carl a little time."

With no other option, Carl's parents returned home to continue their jobs and lives. Manny had promised to help rescue their son, and they had to cling to that hope. Aida Whitehall, Carl's girlfriend, returned to Thorndike and her studies. Sylvia, the daughter of Lucifer who had been married to the possessor of Carl's soul many times, remained on her secret island. She sat on her bed with the picture of Carl Prescott on her lap. As she sipped a glass of whisky over ice, tears slipped down her cheeks.

Carl and Three stepped out of the fog, walked into the island home, and sat down across the coffee table from each other. Three smiled. "You were very generous with my children."

"That trip really opened my eyes. I can't even imagine them just floating around for billions of years. Letting me share my memories and thoughts seemed like the least I could do."

"It was quite the contrary, Carl. I also believe billions is a modest estimate. It has been so long since we began that I cannot recall if there was a precedent universe. It is possible this is all that has even been."

"That's something else I've been wondering about. Are you and the others a different set of gods from the three in my universe? I asked Manny, but he did not know."

Three scratched his chin. "I suppose that name is your version of One." Carl nodded. "Well, it is possible that we are totally separate, but I find that unlikely. In my humble opinion, there is only one God. Just like Manny, Zeus, Jupiter, and Saturn held that position in yours and previous universes, we three are just more versions of Him."

"If this is a different universe, how do you know about those precedent universes?"

Three thought for a moment. "I'm not really certain, but perhaps that came from your mind, like this physical form. In any regard, I still believe there is only one God."

"I thought it would be something like that," Carl replied. "I suppose you are in different universes because of your choices."

Three nodded. "That makes sense to me." He sighed. "I do have one real concern about having you here."

"What's that?"

"This place does not really exist. The three of us can maintain it for your physical state, but there is no source of food. We also have no idea what your physical needs are." He leaned forward. "We may never have met a living being before, and if we have, it is too long ago to recall."

"I have some strong abilities. Let me try to make some food right now." Carl waved his arm over the coffee table. Nothing happened. "That isn't good."

“We have no intention of allowing you to waste away or die. I have a contingency plan, but I will need to work out the arrangements with my counterpart in your universe. It will take a bit of time.”

“What happens if there is no agreement?”

Three stood. “Then I will return you, and we will remain as we are for eternity.”

Carl stood. “I can help you convince Mort.”

“This matter is for me and my counterpart in your universe. May I ask another favor in the meantime?” Carl nodded. “Some of my children would like to take the forms of those they saw in your mind. They would like to talk to you about being alive and especially your life and emotions. They believe it will help them to cope with the lives they hope to live in the future.”

“Of course. That will be fine.”

Three shook his head. “It may be a mistake. If I cannot make the agreement, that will be the only life experience they will ever have, and it will only be an illusion.” Three started to cry and evaporated.

Carl replied, “But it is only an illusion.” Three was no longer there to hear. Carl sat and picked up the mysterious book once more. He opened the cover and began to read:

“Most believe Satan’s Cube is a fallacy conjured up by the wicked to negate their most vile intents. If the evil you do is the fault of someone else, you are still pure and good. You will face no repercussions when you meet God. In this book, we will prove that argument is false. After all, what is evil if not an integral part of our own souls? Pray for forgiveness, sinners, for the cost of evil is eternal and without redemption.”

There was a knock on the door. Carl set the book down and headed to the door. He pulled it open to see two spirits who had taken the forms of his parents, Frank and Ginny Prescott, standing outside. “Please come in.” When they were seated, Carl asked, “How can I help you?”

“I am your mother?” Ginny asked.

Carl smiled. “Well, you look like her for sure.”

She looked at Frank and then back at Carl. “What is a mother?”

Carl blushed. “I don’t know if I was ready for that question.”

“Did we offend you?” Frank asked.

Carl held out his hand and a sterling silver coffee service appeared on the table. He stood and poured coffee into three cups. He added cream to one and offered it to Ginny, who smiled and took the cup. He offered a cup of black coffee to Frank, added cream and sugar to his own cup, and sat down. Carl picked up his cup and sipped the drink. “Be careful. The coffee is a bit hot.”

“What is hot?” Ginny asked. She sipped the drink. “What an interesting thing this coffee is. That is what you called it, correct?”

Carl smiled and put his cup down. “Coffee is a liquid made by pouring hot water over ground coffee beans. The beans are the fruit of a particular plant.”

Frank stared at his cup. “So many new concepts, Carl. Coffee, beans, cups, plants, fruit. How do you remember so many things?”

Carl put his head down. “I need to slow down and focus on what really matters.”

“What is slow down?” Ginny asked.

Carl stood and moved over to the couch. “Please make a space between you two so that I can sit with you.” When they did, he sat and put his hands onto their knees. Both flinched.

“Interesting. So you can both feel my hands on your knees?”

“It is a most unusual sensation,” Frank replied.

“But not unpleasant,” Ginny added.

“It is a very pleasant feeling to touch or be touched by someone you love.”

“What is love, Carl?” Frank asked.

“Love is what we live for, Dad.”

Frank cocked his head. “Is Dad like Father?”

Carl put his hands into his own lap. “Yeah. For a moment there, I thought you were my dad. Sorry about that.”

Frank mussed up Carl’s hair. “It’s okay, Son.”

Carl’s eyes watered, and he wiped them with his hands. “Love is complicated, and there are many types of love. One of the most important types of love is between a man and a woman, like you two. The real Frank and Ginny met twenty years ago. They both worked for the Central Intelligence Agency.”

Ginny sighed. “I remember your memory about rescuing Ginny from those assassins. Was that your love for her too?” He nodded.

“And I remember the Bridge Restaurant where they met for their first date,” Frank recalled. “Was that also love?”

“I don’t know,” Carl replied. “But eventually that date led to them falling in love, getting married, and having me.”

“Did they purchase you?” Ginny asked. “Or perhaps you were a gift from the Triad?”

Carl laughed. “No, they definitely did not buy me, but the second idea is mostly true. You see, as living beings, we maintain the species through procreation.” The others looked at him as if he were babbling. “Okay, let me step back a bit. As living beings, we must have offspring to take our place when we get old and eventually pass away. Those descendants are what we call children, grandchildren, and so on. It is a physical process that is followed by most living creatures.”

“Can you explain more clearly?” Ginny asked.

Carl turned bright red from embarrassment. “Yeah, but I don’t feel comfortable talking about that subject to my parents. Once you have your own living universe, it could well be totally different for you.”

“Let me change the subject,” Frank offered.

Relieved, Carl turned to him. “Great idea.”

Frank kissed Carl on the lips. Carl pushed him away. “Did I do something wrong?”

“I don’t know what’s happening. Why did you kiss me like that?”

“I am sorry I offended you. I saw many memories of you pressing your mouth to others. I just did not understand why.”

“No, I’m sorry for overreacting. It is called a kiss, and generally it is between two consenting people. You can’t just kiss anyone without their permission.”

“I did not know,” Frank replied.

Ginny tapped Carl on the shoulder and he turned to face her. “Son, obviously there is much we cannot know about life. Can you tell us if the end of life is worth the cost? Forever, we have been told that living is our purpose in order to be more godlike. Yet, we have lived forever and not been alive. Does life matter? Is living for a time worth the cost of dying?”

“Mom, of course it’s worth it. Sure, the way you are today can last for eternity, but in this form, your experience will always be the same. When you’re alive, every day is an adventure! Your emotions make you deliriously happy, sad, angry, thrilled, pissed off, or hopelessly in love.

Food is delicious or disgusting. People are awful, angry, deceitful, or sweet, warm, loving, and faithful.”

He stood up. “Please stand up with me.” When they had, he extended his arms. “Now join me in this embrace.” They stepped into the group hug and held each other tightly. “I don’t know what you feel right now. That is true now and will be true when you are living, breathing beings. But this sense of togetherness is real. Whether you are holding each other, or me or the Lord High God, the feeling is the same. Mom and Dad, this feeling is love.”

Hearing another knock at the door, Carl broke the hug. “I’ll be here for a while, so please come back if you can.” Frank and Ginny were still hugging each other. “I guess you understand love now.”

The two separated, and Frank smiled. “It is a most wonderful feeling, Carl.” There was a second knock at the door. “I think some others want a chance to talk to you. Thank you, Son.”

Carl hugged each of them and then led them to the door. He opened it to see Aida, Sylvia, and Barbie, another schoolmate, outside. “This discussion ought to be interesting.” The two left, and the three entered. Carl led them over to the couch where the three women sat. Carl again sat across the coffee table from them. “It’s nice to see you again, although I know you’re not really them. How can I help you?”

Aida began. “Why are we taller than you, and why are our bodies so differently shaped?”

Carl dropped his head for a moment to think. “First, all of you are taller than me because you’re older. Aida, you and Barbie are two years older than me. Sylvia is actually an immortal demon, so age is irrelevant to her. Our bodies are different because I am a man, and you three are women.”

Sylvia cocked her head. “What are man and women? And what is a demon?”

Carl blushed and looked down. After a moment to calm his nerves, he looked back at them. “This is a little embarrassing. Most living beings on my home planet are divided into male and female genders. A man is a human male and a woman is a human female. Our bodies are different as each has a different role in procreation. That means replicating ourselves for the next generation of people.”

“And the demon?”

“Well, perhaps demon is the wrong word, Sylvia. In my universe, you are the offspring of an immortal named Lucifer. Many people believe he is the source of all evil. Sylvia is his daughter, and in our ancient stories, those children are called demons. The real Sylvia is a very special woman whom I love very much.”

Aida frowned. “When you visited the fog, I felt that you loved me.”

“And I thought you loved me,” Barbie added.

Carl groaned. “I’m making a real mess out of this. The truth is that the spirit inside me is immortal, like all of you.”

“I’m confused, Carl,” Barbie said. “I believed that these people were mortal and died. Is it just you who is an immortal human?”

“Let me step back a moment,” Carl said.

Aida shook her head. “But you are sitting down.”

“That is just an expression meaning I want to start over again. The reality of me is the same as you. I have a soul that is immortal because it is part of the Most High God. In my universe, we live many mortal lives. While the physical body does pass away, the spirit inside me lives forever. Each life gives me the opportunity to learn and love again.”

Aida asked, “Carl, so we know you love all of us, but what exactly is love anyway?”

Carl smiled. "You know, it's hard for me to hear any of you say that. I know you aren't really them, but each of them is the embodiment of love to me. All three of you are warm, sweet, loving, and make me feel wonderful inside." Carl stood. "Please stand up." They complied. Carl walked over to Barbie who was first. He spread his arms. "Put your arms out like this." When she had, he stepped into her embrace and put his arms around her. "Hold me like I'm holding you." After she did, he kissed her lips. She kissed him back and squeezed him even tighter. Finally, he released her. "I don't know what you just felt, but I felt love."

Barbie wiped tears from her face. "It felt like magic. I apologize if my face is leaking."

Carl caressed her cheek. "We call that crying. It is totally normal." She moved aside and Carl approached Sylvia whose arms were already open. They hugged and their lips met. After a second, Sylvia slipped her tongue into his mouth. He reciprocated. When they separated, Carl said, "Wow!"

Sylvia moved aside and Aida frowned at him. "I do not know why, but I am feeling something very negative now. What is that?"

Carl caressed her cheek and she trembled. "Most likely it is jealousy or feeling betrayed."

"What do those things mean?"

"Jealousy is when you like someone, and they like someone else instead. Betrayal is when you are in a relationship and your partner cheats on you."

"I think I felt both."

Carl smiled. "I'm not surprised. Aida, in my universe you are my girlfriend. That means we are in a serious relationship. I am supposed to be faithful to you and give you all of my love. If I kiss another woman, it is a betrayal of that trust."

"Then why did you do it, Carl?"

"I'm trying to teach you a bit about life, and none of you are the people I know from my reality."

Aida blushed. "I must have forgotten that. I'm sorry."

Carl pulled her into his arms. "There's no need to apologize, my darling. I do love you." They kissed passionately for several seconds. "I miss you so much."

Sylvia and Barbie pulled them apart. "Now we're all feeling jealous and betrayed," Sylvia said. "I think we've seen enough of this. In reality, how do you deal with these terrible feelings?"

Carl sighed. "It's hard. Part of the experience of life is learning that not everyone is who they claim to be. Sometimes you fall for someone and later find out they are bad. Your feelings are hurt and your heart gets broken. Eventually, you learn from the mistakes and move on."

Barbie replied, "Perhaps it is better as we are. We have no hearts or feelings to be damaged."

Carl shook his head. "Definitely not, Barbie. Sure, some relationships don't work out and it's hard to get over the shock. Eventually, I believe you find someone who completes you. Then your life can be wonderful."

"What part of you is incomplete?" Sylvia asked.

"That's another expression. Because we are separated into men and women, we have a need to share our lives with someone. It's like Frank and Ginny who were just here. They got married and had a son, namely me. Love, faith, devotion, and family are what life is about."

Barbie put her hand on Carl's shoulder and he turned to look at her. "I have a final question. You said you are part of the Most High God. Does that mean One?" He smiled and nodded. "I still do not understand. To us, he is egomaniacal, pompous, cruel, cold, and dismissive."

The door flew open, and One strode inside. He waved his arm, and the three women evaporated into fog and drifted away. He walked over to Carl and pushed him down onto the couch. "Listen to me, boy. You are here to do a job, and you'd better do it right. I don't have time to deal with your lies about what is true and real. That is my job to decide." He pointed at Carl and grimaced. "You got that, kiddo?"