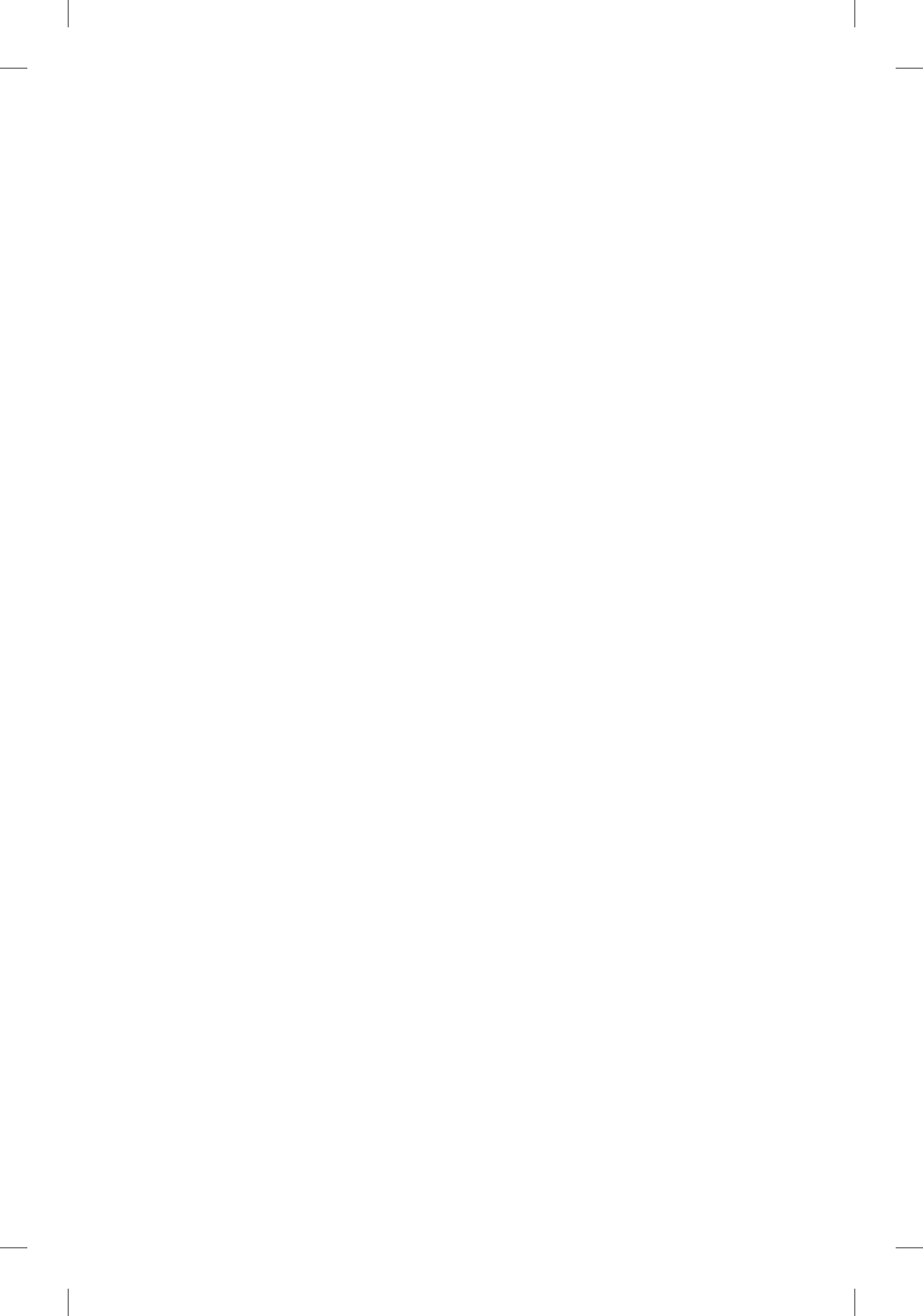


Windows of the Heavens



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A Novel

HENRY G. BRINTON

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WINDOWS OF THE HEAVENS

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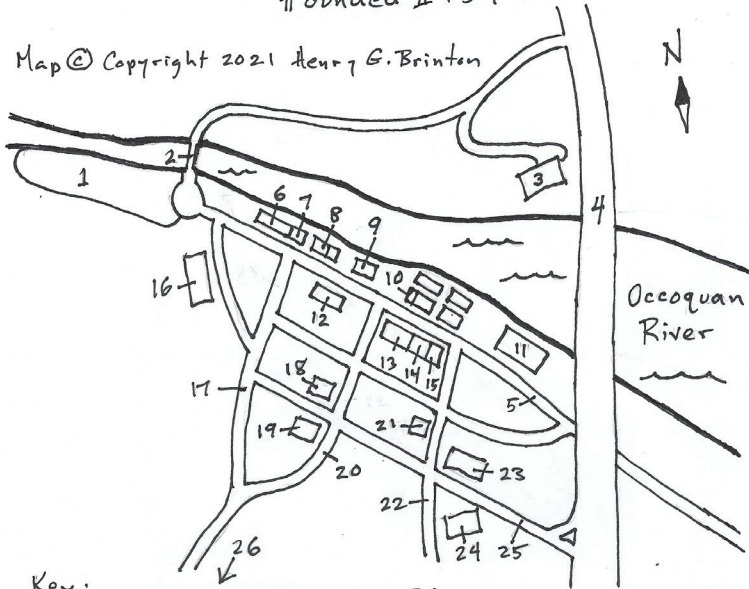
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To Bill Parent and Jay Tharp
Marathon Men

Town of Occoquan

Founded 1734

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Key:

- | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. River Mill Park | 9. Brew Pub | 19. Ranger house |
| 2. Pedestrian Bridge | 10. Harley's house | 20. Union Street |
| 3. El Castillo | 11. Maxine's Rest. | 21. Yarn Shop |
| 4. Concrete Bridge (123) | 12. Riverview Bakery | 22. Washington St. |
| 5. Mill Street | 13. Tayac & Sadie's Apt. | 23. Riverside Church |
| 6. John & Kelly's Apt. | 14. American Legion | 24. Auntie's Pie Shop |
| 7. Candle shop | 15. Post office | 25. Commerce St. |
| 8. Office Buildings | 16. Rockledge | 26. Justice Plaza |
| | 17. Ellicott Street | |
| | 18. Hammill Hotel | |

1



The steps of the Mayan temple were made for giants, not humans, but still Harley Camden climbed them, one by one, making slow upward progress on a windless summer day. Never had the sky been so clear and blue, nor the sun so powerfully bright, causing the tropical vegetation around the temple to wilt in its relentless radiation. Harley was soaked with sweat, and his clothing provided little relief since he was wearing his standard clergy uniform of blue blazer and red silk tie. *Why not my archaeological dig clothes? Or mission trip t-shirt and jeans?* It made no sense to him.

Harley's legs ached from climbing, and his arms were sore from his repeated pull-ups, stone after stone after stone. He wondered if it was the will of the Lord to destroy him. But why would God want him to suffer? He had done no violence, and there was no deceit in him. Stopping to catch his breath halfway up the staircase, he looked up and saw—what was it, feathers?—moving at the very top of the temple. *Are there chickens up there? Peacocks? Guacamayas?* Wiping perspiration from his eyes, he gazed out and saw a great crowd of raven-haired Mayans on the plaza, standing on lush green grass and looking up at him, watching his slow progress. He was an innocent man, and yet, here he was: climbing the temple with a burden of iniquity on his back.

Who could have imagined his fate? Cut off from the land of the living, he was sentenced for sins he did not commit. At the edge of the plaza was a strange ballgame being played by glistening athletes running up and down a rectangular court—the Mayan version of basketball. He knew that the winners of the game would be sacrificed, and that it would be an honor to die as victors. Spectators would elevate them as the greatest of athletes because they poured themselves out in death. *Is my fate the same?* As unjust as it seemed, he had been chosen. Scanning the edges of the plaza, he saw a

number of majestic ceiba trees, two-hundred-footers with umbrella-shaped crowns. Called the “tree of life,” they were sacred to the Mayan people—trees that made a connection between heaven, the earth, and the underworld. He would have so much preferred to be climbing a ceiba tree over a temple staircase. The leaves of that tree—*árbol de la vida*, tree of life—were for the healing of the nations.

Loosening his tie, he began to climb again, stone after stone. He remembered a line from the prophet Isaiah, “the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” The prophet was speaking of a suffering servant, one who gave his life for others. He had always understood that line to be pointing to Jesus, but at that moment, on the monstrous steps of the Mayan temple, the words were coming true for Harley—it was he who was the lamb being led to slaughter.



His journey to the temple had begun three weeks earlier, on an evening walk through River Mill Park in the town of Occoquan, Virginia. The streetlights that dotted the perimeter of the small park were not working on that September night, so the place was strangely dark, and its blacktopped walking path vanished quickly in front of him, disappearing into the void. At the entrance of the park, he hesitated, feeling as though he were about to jump into a dark and mysterious lake, not knowing the depth of the water or what hazards lay below the surface.

But Harley was well acquainted with the park, having lived in Occoquan for a little more than a year. He had been sent there by his bishop to serve as the pastor of tiny Riverside Methodist Church, after the deaths of his wife and daughter—a reassignment that had felt like a demotion. The town of one thousand was a peculiar little community in the suburban sprawl of the Nation’s Capital, located on the river that separates the million residents of Fairfax County from the half-million citizens of Prince William County. Founded in 1734, the village was a mix of historic buildings and brand new structures, with run-down craft shops sitting right next to the trendiest of wine bars. Occoquan was a town in transition, and it was still too early to tell if it was moving up or sliding down. *Depends on the day, Harley thought, maybe even the hour.*

The park marked the western end of a stroll that Harley took almost every night, one which began with him leaving his Victorian townhouse and walking away from the park, eastward along a riverside boardwalk to a massive concrete bridge which carried six lanes of traffic across the Occoquan

River. Guitar music drifted out of an open-air bar on most nights, mixed with eruptions of laughter and the sound of sports commentary on television: noises that didn't make much sense in themselves but sent pulses of desire and delight out over the water. At the bridge, Harley made an about-face and walked along the quiet shops and restaurants of Mill Street to the park, watching the nightly transition of shopkeepers heading home and diners parking their cars in front of restaurants. A meeting at church had delayed the start of his walk on that particular night, and the sun was down by the time he set out. But he wasn't worried. Although he had seen drunks vomiting outside a brew pub along his route, and an occasional fight near the bar of a seafood restaurant called Maxine's, he had never feared street crime in his adopted hometown. Yes, there had been a murder the year before, but that was not a random act of violence.

Fortunately, the moon was full on that Monday night, and the park was bathed in an unearthly glow. Once the streetlights of the town were behind him and his eyes had time to adjust, the moonlight gave him sufficient illumination to find his way. Stepping into the park and beginning his walk along the path, he saw that the moon made everything look like it had been painted in various shades of teal, which was an odd color for the placid Occoquan River to his right and the hulking oak trees to his left. But Harley began to enjoy this unusual filter on the familiar scenery, and he soon noticed that there were eerie moon-shadows under the park's benches along the way.

Then, as he was nearing the western end of the park, he saw another light—yellow flames dancing out of the top of a large steel drum. Dark silhouettes were moving in front of the flames—figures walking slowly in a circle. His heart beat faster, and Harley wondered if he should turn around and head home. Caution pulled him one direction and curiosity the other, and as he stopped and stood in place, he began to hear people chanting in a strange, guttural language. The group was made up of about a dozen people dressed in loose, flowing clothing, and they seemed to be riveted on each other and on the flames at the center of their circle. Then his heart jumped as he realized what he was seeing—the witches of Occoquan.

Harley made a hard turn to the left and walked quickly out of the park, looking back only once to make sure that he wasn't being followed. His heart didn't return to its normal rhythm until he stepped through the front door of his townhouse.



“Yes, we’ve got a coven here in Occoquan.” Tim Underwood had reported this fact to Harley while sitting in his golf cart one sunny afternoon that summer. Middle-aged with wire-rimmed glasses and a gray beard, the town maintenance man was wearing his standard outfit of a broad-brimmed hat and a tie-dye t-shirt, which led most people to call him “Tie-dye Tim.” He was from an old Occoquan family and had been the first person that Harley had encountered on his initial visit to Riverside Methodist in June of the previous year. “You’ll see them doing their services outside from time to time,” Tim predicted. “Chanting, dancing, holding hands.”

“Devil worshippers?” Harley asked.

“Dunno,” Tim said, shrugging his shoulders. “They certainly aren’t Methodists.”

“Sounds evil,” said the pastor, wondering why Tim wasn’t more concerned. Harley didn’t like what he was hearing.

“They *are* a bit odd,” admitted Tim, “but they don’t hurt anybody.”

That you know of, thought Harley. But then, not wanting to sound overly concerned, he tried to lighten the mood. “Odd and harmless,” he teased. “The same could be said of you, Tim.”

Drinking coffee in his kitchen on the morning after his witch-sighting, Harley looked at the calendar on his wall and saw that it was Tuesday, September 25, 2018. He had experienced a full church year at Riverside, with a cycle of church holidays under his belt, and he was forging ever-stronger connections with the members of his small congregation. Flipping through the months of the calendar, he thought of the couple that was having marital problems, the senior citizen who had lost his spouse, the middle-aged woman who had received a cancer diagnosis. *I’ve learned the truth about these people, from the fragile to the resilient—the self-aware to the completely clueless.* He now knew who was struggling with alcohol, who had lost a series of jobs, who was abusive to her spouse, and who had a hard time coming to terms with his sexuality.

After rinsing his mug in the sink, Harley put on a navy-blue blazer and headed out the door. The coat was fitting him well after losing a few pounds over the summer. At age fifty-eight, he had to work at keeping his weight under control, especially with the sedentary life of a parish pastor, so he had increased his running and cut down on his eating. In his forties, Harley had been a marathon man, running at least one a year for ten years, and during that period he burned so many calories in training and competing that he had no trouble with his weight. But now his runs were much shorter, just a few miles in length, so he could no longer count on his exercise program to keep him healthy and fit.

One of his favorite runs was a figure-eight which took him along the southern bank of the Occoquan River to the Lake Ridge Marina, then a sweeping right turn that sent him back along Route 123 and over the concrete bridge into Fairfax County, where he always kept his eyes open for a bald eagle who liked to perch high in a tree on the riverbank. That completed the top loop. Then he turned left and ran through the woods on the north side of the river, past ancient rocks that stood as tall and strong as Easter Island heads, until he turned left again and crossed over the pedestrian bridge. He finished the bottom loop by returning through the streets of Occoquan along the south side of the river until he reached his home, out of breath but not completely exhausted. Two and one-half miles. *Not a marathon, but not bad for an old man.*

Harley looked at himself in the plate-glass window of a jewelry shop as he walked westward on Mill Street, and he was pleased with what he saw. His face was a little thinner than it had been a year earlier, and he had shaved the goatee that he had sported for years. *Good choice; makes me look younger.* His hair was gray and getting thinner all the time, but there was not much he could do about that—at least he *had* hair. On the whole, he looked decent for a middle-aged minister, and that made him happy since he was heading to the Riverview Bakery for coffee with Tawnya Jones, a beautiful woman on whom he'd had a crush since he arrived in town.

"Reverend Camden!" she called out from the door of the bakery. "Don't you look nice today?"

Harley blushed, but was delighted by the compliment. Tawnya was not a member of Riverside Methodist, but had been active in the African-American congregation that had occupied the church building when it was called Emanuel Baptist Church. Outgoing and flirtatious, she was someone that Harley could enjoy without running the risk of violating his professional ethics. Although he knew that she saw him only as a pastor and a neighbor, her attention made him feel young and virile and alive.

"I should say the same about you," Harley replied. Her black hair was tightly braided and she was dressed in a beautifully-tailored linen suit. "You sure dress well for your work in the Department of Justice."

"I'm going places at work," she said with a toothy smile. "You know what they say: Dress for the job you want."

"In that case, you should be Attorney General."

"Aren't you nice?" she said with a wink, and then held the door open for him. "Better stop talking like that, or my husband will get jealous."

"I have that effect," Harley said, smiling.

Joining the line of customers, he asked Tawnya what he could get her. She asked for a cinnamon scone and a black coffee, and he ordered the same

for himself. Serving them was Sarah Bayati, a woman with a round face and brown eyes, a younger version of her Iraqi immigrant mother. Harley knew the family well, and normally would have engaged her in conversation, but she was moving quickly to serve the rush of morning customers. Harley simply asked how she and her family were doing, and when she grinned and said “busy,” he gave her a thumbs-up and took his order out the door.

“Sweet young woman,” said Tawnya as they sat on a bench along Mill Street to have their breakfast. The sky was a brilliant blue, what Harley always called “Carolina Blue,” with just a few clouds on the western horizon. *If God is not a Tarheel, why is the sky Carolina blue?* Harley remembered that saying from his days at Duke Divinity School, just a few miles from the University of North Carolina. As a fierce rival of UNC, he hated to admit that the saying was actually quite true.

“Indeed, she is,” nodded Harley as he handed Tawnya her coffee and scone. He noticed that her nails were brightly colored and polished to perfection, as usual.

Harley bit into his scone and looked across the street at the gravel parking lot. Beyond the lot was the river, sparkling as though someone had scattered a handful of diamonds across the water. Even after a year in Occoquan, Harley was amazed that there was nothing more than a parking lot on this valuable stretch of the main street of the town, since in most comparable Virginia communities the edge of the water would be filled with an unbroken string of restaurants, shops, and bars. For most of its history, Occoquan’s riverfront had been covered with wharves and warehouses, with no trendy spots to eat, shop, or drink. But in the late twentieth century, developers moved in, sensing that a riverfront town in the DC-area could be a magnet for suburbanites and their money. Slowly, the town was changing into a boutique-filled tourist destination, with only two gravel lots and the ruins of the old mill remaining as evidence of its industrial past.

“She is still grieving her sister’s death,” Harley said after swallowing his bite, “but trying to stay positive.”

“That whole situation still seems like a bad dream,” said Tawnya, taking a second to blow on her hot coffee. “Growing up here in Occoquan, I never heard of anyone being murdered. All of a sudden, a woman is smothered in her bed.”

“It is still hard to believe.”

Loud honking came from the sky, and the two of them looked up as a V formation of geese soared over their heads. Tawnya took a drink of coffee, looked toward the river, and asked, “How is your boat, pastor?”

“Broken,” Harley sighed. He loved his twenty-three-foot powerboat, a consolation prize that he awarded himself after being demoted to Riverside

Methodist. "It started running rough in July, and by mid-August I couldn't get it started. At the marina, they said that water was getting in the cylinders, which is pretty serious. They are still working on it."

"Sorry to hear it. I guess what they say about boats is true: A hole in the water . . ."

". . . into which you pour money," said Harley, smiling. "And you know what BOAT stands for, don't you? Bring Out Another Thousand."

Tawnya laughed. "At least the timing is not bad. I hear we are supposed to get some nasty weather. Something about a hurricane."

"Well, this is the time of year. I hope we don't get hit when I am trying to fly to Honduras."

"What's that about?" Tawnya asked.

"A mission trip," said Harley, sipping his coffee. "End of next week. One of my church members is a dentist who goes down there once a year to do a dental brigade. When he heard I had been on an archaeological dig in Honduras, he asked if I wanted to go back."

"Are you going to pull teeth?" asked Tawnya with a grin.

"Not if I can help it," said Harley. "The brigade always includes non-dental helpers. Maybe I'll paint a wall or help in the waiting room. I know *un poco de español*."

"When did you do your dig?"

"Over thirty years ago," said Harley. "Summer of 1986. I was part of a team that worked at the Mayan ruins in Copán."

"But someone told me that you were an archaeologist in Israel."

"That was the summer before, 1985. Digging was kind of my thing, back in my twenties."

"A regular Indiana Jones!" flirted Tawnya.

"Hardly," said Harley, smiling. "No whips for me." Pleased by the attention but also a little embarrassed, Harley looked down. As he did, his eyes fell on her slender legs, which he knew was not where his eyes should be. *Don't want to be in the news for harassment*, he thought, recalling the string of politicians and media giants recently called to account. So, he brought his gaze back to her face and said, "I know you didn't ask to meet so that we could talk archaeology. What can I do for you?"

"I have a request for you, pastor," she said. "I hope you can help me out."

"Happy to do what I can."

"You know that my family has been part of Emanuel Baptist for generations. We have a reunion every five years, and this year we would like to gather in Occoquan. I was wondering if we could rent the social hall of your church, since our congregation was in the building for so many years."

"I don't see why not," said Harley. "Your family practically built the church."

"Well, not exactly," Tawnya replied, brushing off the compliment. "But it is certainly very special to us, especially to my father."

"Yes, Jefferson mentioned how much he loved the place. When he visited me last summer, he said that the desk in my office had been used by his uncle."

"That's right," Tawnya nodded. "My great-uncle served there. Many years."

"So, when would you like it?" Deep down, Harley was thrilled to be helping her out. "I can check the church calendar and get back to you."

"Saturday, October 20. We'll have a picnic lunch and be out before dinnertime," she said. "I promise we'll have everything straightened up for Sunday."

"My guess: You'll leave it cleaner than you found it."

Tawnya smiled but seemed distracted. "This will really mean a lot to us, especially to my father." She paused, sipped the last of her coffee, and then said, "I'm not sure if I should mention this, but my father has cancer."

"Jefferson?" asked Harley. He was stunned.

"Yes," she said, tears welling up. "It's very serious. Pancreatic. This might be his last family reunion." She covered her eyes with her glistening nails.

"Tawnya, I am so very sorry." He put his arm around her shoulders and drew her close. But not too close. For a minute they sat in silence. A breeze had begun to blow, and Harley looked up to see that clouds from the west now covered half the sky.

"He doesn't want anyone to know," she said, sniffing. "He has some business deals in the works, including the sale of Justice Plaza. He wants to remain strong in his negotiations." Looking Harley in the eyes, she said, "But you are confidential, right?"

"Of course," he said. "I'll keep him in my prayers."

"He needs prayer," Tawnya continued, composing herself. "He is a proud man, so hard-headed. He wants to get rid of the plaza and then complete the redevelopment of the old buildings up the street here, near the park. Can you believe he would care about such a thing while fighting cancer?"

"That's how some people cope. Staying busy."

Tawnya nodded. "The redevelopment is a tough and tricky job, because he is displacing a number of tenants who have been here a long time—including those crazy witches."

The witches, thought Harley. “Yes, I’ve heard about them,” he said, removing his arm from her shoulder. “And I think I’ve even seen them.”

“Please do pray for him,” Tawnya concluded. “And let’s keep this between us.” Harley nodded, and Tawnya gave him a hug before she said good-bye and headed for her office. Harley took his time walking to the church, thinking about the struggle that lay ahead for Jefferson and his beautiful daughter. Although he was not their pastor, he had come to care for them as though they were part of his flock.

The skies got darker as the day progressed, and Harley learned that a full-blown hurricane was making its way up the coast. By the time he left the church and headed home at dinnertime, the wind was howling, rain was coming down in sheets, and he became drenched when his umbrella blew upside down and inside out. Harley had never seen such a volume of water coming down from the sky, hour after hour after hour, and his anxiety rose as a deep darkness settled on Occoquan. As he turned off the lights to go to bed, he looked out a window onto Mill Street and saw that the storm sewers were beginning to overflow and flood the pavement. Water was coming from above and below, and as he lay in bed he remembered the line from Genesis, “all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened.” Surely, he thought to himself as he drifted off to sleep, his riverside townhouse had been built to survive such a deluge.