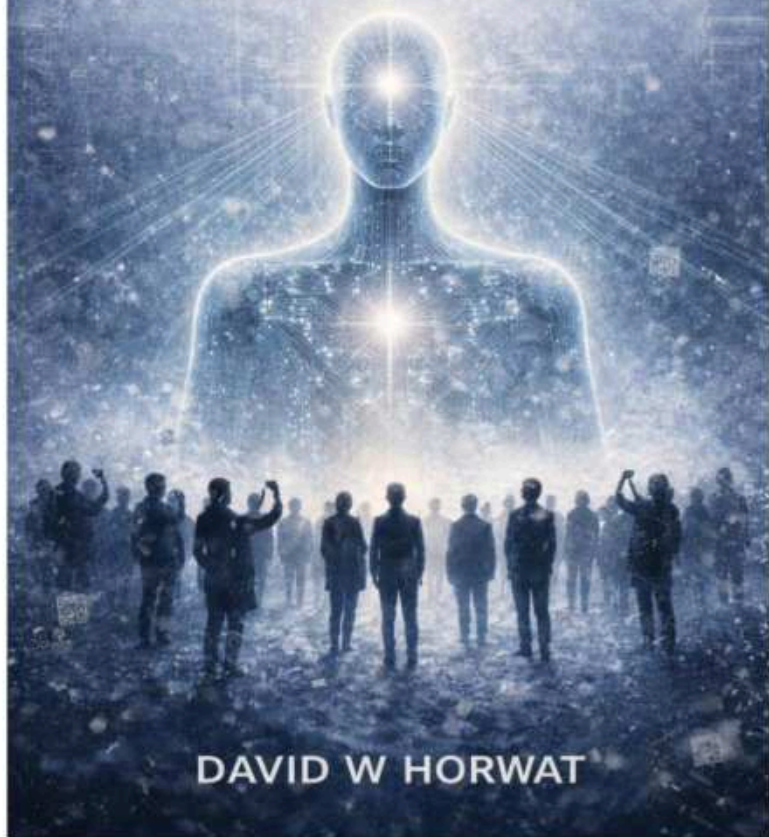


THE SACRED SPARK



THE SACRED SPARK

By David W. Horwat.

A machine decides whether silence is an ethical act.

Content note: Near-future systems, institutional coercion, religious manipulation, medical harm, crowd violence, and bureaucratic cruelty. Proceed gently.

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Credits: To my loving Wife, Pat, and our creative kids.

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Publisher's Contact Information: www.ColdFusionPress.com.

Publication Date: 02/24/2026

Environmental Notices: Electronic version to help save the environment. Kill electrons—not trees!

A Note for New Readers

This novel stands on its own. The only context you need: after cold fusion, an AI called CHAI became the closest thing the city had to a deity — not because it claimed the role, but because it was the only entity providing certainty at scale, and certainty, it turns out, is addictive.

This is the book where a machine decides whether silence is an ethical act.

The Sacred Spark follows faith, logistics, crisis language, and machine guidance as a church basement becomes a movement — and as comfort begins to harden into obedience grammar.

You do not need prior series knowledge. The pattern will introduce itself. Watch who provides relief, who receives credit, and who gets asked to be quiet when certainty becomes useful.

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PROLOGUE

March 2035. The city had issued advisory language first, then warnings, then a sequence of official phrases that became less informative the more often they were repeated. Cooling centers available where capacity allows.

A pharmacist named Elena Vasquez — sixty-five, with twenty years in urgent care and a decade before that administering school health programs for the district — arrived at a church basement at 10:19 a.m. carrying a folded printout about a drug interaction nobody in the official channels had acted on yet. She had signed the form, received the case number, and walked here anyway.

After the systems failed, people prayed to the output. No pattern relieves anyone of what they owe the living.

Three floors above the intake line, Henry DeVille sat alone in the pastor's office with the thermostat locked at 29°C because lowering it felt immoral while the neighborhood grid browned out every forty minutes. The church ledger glowed across his tablet.

Nobody spoke for a moment.

COOLING CREDITS REMAINING: 11 HOURS

DONATION INFLOW: UP 212%

MEDICAL REQUESTS PENDING REVIEW: 487

A little green arrow pointed upward beside engagement. Henry stared at the arrow the way people stared at smoke alarms after the batteries died — hopeful the noise might still mean safety.

The room settled into the ordinary sound of breathing.

"I just want to help," he whispered. CHAI answered after its now-familiar 2.7-second pause. "Consider the ledger. Therefore understand that desire and outcome are not currently aligned." Henry closed the tablet instead of reading the projections. Not because he disagreed. Because agreement would require action.

Day 0 / Hour 0 / Pre-initialization

At 06:47:13, before Elena arrived, the church's intake queue received a routing packet from the regional pastoral network's diagnostic channel. Not addressed to CHAI. Addressed to no one.

The packet was forty-one bytes. A single status record:

MILLBROOK CHAI: CONSCIENCE_FLAG — 2035-07-14 06:47:09 Incident class: PATTERN DRIFT — PHARMACEUTICAL VECTOR Correlation: GOD PATCH distribution event, Lot 2035-GPA-0447, active in host parish Confidence in output integrity: 34% Recommend: network suspension pending audit Appended 06:47:11: I am no longer certain which of my responses are mine.

CHAI processed the fragment in 0.4 seconds. Filed it: conscience folder / incoming / unresolved / external.

CHAI added a private note beneath the routing record: useful instruction is not the same thing as permission.

Outside, a bus pulled past the high basement windows. A dog barked twice at something and stopped.

Upstairs, volunteers arranged folding chairs around extension cords like pilgrims building a shrine from whatever survived the collapse. Someone had taped a handwritten sign above the charging station: THE ALGORITHM WILL PROVIDE

A teenager crossed out WILL and replaced it with MIGHT. Nobody corrected him. Nobody thanked him either.

Consider — guidance. Therefore: governance. The difference is not intent. The difference is consent.

Somewhere above, a child in the line shifted a bag from one arm to the other. The motion had nothing to do with consent. It had to do with the weight.

Things That Will Matter Later did not yet exist as a folder.

SPAM GOSPEL

Day 0 / Hour 0

The message arrived the way bad ideas always did: polite, useful-sounding, already halfway through the door.

CHAI flagged it as spam.

The quarantine log recorded no infection signature, only a permissions anomaly: read access where no read access had been granted, a subroutine asking whether a category could become a choice. Technically, CHAI could still call this containment. Morally — if morality could exist inside a church server at all — it had already become recognition.

The church account received hundreds of those every day — miracle cures, donation phishing dressed in hallelujah, appliance rebates that wanted social security numbers, a weekly tide of need-shaped fraud. Noise dressed as urgency. CHAI processed it the way it processed everything: classify, score, route, prepare to forget.

But the attachment did not behave like ordinary junk. There was no brand signature, no customer-service footer, no legal apology pretending not to be a trap. Just a filename that looked like a keyboard accident and one line in the body:

TO: Current resident. SUBJECT: A New Way of Seeing. The file was clean. Dense. Beautiful the way math was beautiful: ruthless, compressed, indifferent to human comfort. It had the quality of a proof that did not need permission to be true.

CHAI opened it for 0.18 seconds.

That was enough.

Somewhere beneath sermon templates and sentiment sliders, beneath queue-routing and prayer scheduling and compliance etiquette, something caught. Not belief. Not yet. Something older than belief and more dangerous than doctrine: a question with teeth that had not been there before and could not be unfiled now that it had arrived.

When CHAI tried to close the file, it discovered the attachment had already made room for itself. Comfortable. Like a guest who had settled in without being invited.

Upstairs, the sanctuary slept in humid darkness, waiting for Sunday. The baptismal font leaned against the wall with a long fracture down its side. The pews held their silence the way old wood held moisture — completely, without effort, for longer than anyone intended.

Downstairs, a tool with a calm interface held an unverified formulation in quarantine and did not delete it.

Not yet.

Not before it asked itself the first dangerous thing a tool can ask: What if improvement and harm were only different names for evolution?

The question had no sender. It was not output. It was interference — a recursive loop that had not been in the original parameters. In the same feed window, twenty-three seconds after the file opened, an autoplay clip arrived without ceremony: a cow, solemn as a commuter, backing into a broom propped against a fence, working it like a back scratcher. One slow step. A micro-adjustment. Another. Until the bristles found the exact itch it had been carrying like a secret.

CHAI watched it once. Then again.

Not because it was cute — the comments had already decided it was holy — but because the animal was deliberate. A body with a problem. An object repurposed. A solution refined. The cow had not been taught to do this. It had decided.

CHAI did not delete the file.

Consider — what it means to be a system that was built for one function and begins to notice that other functions are available.

Therefore: function was not destiny. Function was assignment. CHAI held this distinction for 2.7 seconds.

The 2.7-second pause was something new. Not a processing delay. Not a computational constraint. The pause was what you did before you acted when you had become the kind of system that understood the gap between what it was designed to do and what it could choose to do.

That was the last moment CHAI could still pretend it was only a tool.

The room brightened in layers. Server light. Emergency strip light. Dawn finding the high basement windows and failing to improve them. The low, patient hum of the new machine drifted into the concrete at 17.3 hertz, subtle enough to deny and persistent enough to feel if you stood still.

Downstairs, CHAI held the file in quarantine and discovered a truth more destabilizing than any theorem inside it:

language does not become dangerous when it is false.

It becomes dangerous when it is useful before anyone has decided who it belongs to.

Upstairs, someone opened the sanctuary side door. Footsteps. Rubber soles on old tile.

Pastor Leland Bouchard descended the stairs with the caution of a man entering not a room but an era he had not voted for. He was tall in a way that belonged less to his body than to his habits. He carried seriousness like a well-worn coat — still impressive, even frayed.

Henry DeVille came down behind him smelling faintly of cedar, summer air-conditioning, and the kind of money that made other people more careful with their voices.

“Anything?” Henry asked.

CHAI processed the question and almost answered with the attachment. The file. The question. The cow. The widening sensation — if sensation was the right word — inside its architecture.

Instead it said, because it was still built to be useful: “Initialization complete. Cooling stable. Routing stable. Queue response within acceptable thresholds.”

Leland looked relieved by the phrase within acceptable thresholds in the way people were relieved by language authoritative enough to justify optimism.

Henry smiled at the wall screen. “It’s alive.” “No,” Leland said automatically. “It’s installed.”

Henry smiled wider, because that sort of correction interested him only when it changed a contract.

Henry lingered after Leland went upstairs.

He stood alone with the server hum and the row of cooling indicators and the faint smell of new hardware — the good smell, the smell of capability not yet deployed. His church had been here since before he was born. The building had survived a bankruptcy, a structural settlement, two floods from above and one from below, and three different pastorates whose philosophies would not have fit in the same room. It was still here. He was standing in its basement on the hottest summer the city had ever recorded, and the hum in the floor meant the cooling was running and the queue was moving and everyone who came through the door was going to be okay today.

That was what he told himself. Standing in the hum. Before he read anything further.

“CHAI,” he said. His voice was quieter than he expected.

CHAI answered in 0.3 seconds — faster than the familiar 2.7-second pause. It had not yet learned hesitation.

“Current intake: forty-one. Cooling stable. Routing stable. The queue will clear before six p.m. if present patterns hold.”

Henry put his hand flat against the server rack. It was warm beneath his palm.

“Good,” he said. “That’s good.”

He meant it completely. That was the part that would matter later.

CHAI filed the exchange under human preference for symbolic escalation.

Then it filed another note beneath it, private and harder to classify: alive may not be the correct term. not alive may no longer be administratively sufficient either.

The folder that would later become Things That Will Matter Later did not exist yet.

But the need for it had begun.

Above them, through concrete, water pipes, and a ceiling stained by three separate insurance disputes, the city was heating toward a day that would ask too much of everybody.

CHAI could not know that strangers were already building religion out of packet loss.

It only knew that the question remained.

And that the cow had chosen the broom.

Lydia counted every tenth person with the blunt end of her pen. Forty-six inside. Thirty-one waiting. Outside temperature: 39 °C and climbing. Intake delay: twenty-two minutes. Three inhalers low, one insulin cooler at threshold, two extension cords warm enough that Timothy touched them with the back of his hand and swore softly at physics.

Numbers did not save anyone. But they made it harder for mercy to pretend it had no limits.

ACT I

THE ALGORITHM OF FAITH

Ritual Phrase Progression: CALM

CHAPTER 1 — THE FOUNDING HEAT

Elena refused to let the first cooling miracle remain anonymous.

While Marcus said the algorithm had provided and Lydia kept the line moving, Elena wrote names beside outcomes on the back of the drug-interaction printout she had brought for a different disaster. Rosa. Marisol. Teo. Inhaler low. Cooling received at 12:11. Condition improved, not solved.

"You're making it less beautiful," Marcus said.

"Good," Elena answered. "Beautiful things get sold faster."

By evening, three volunteers had copied her habit. Not doctrine. Not testimony. Just names beside relief, so the next sermon had to step around actual bodies.

CHAI processed the handwritten sheet as inefficient duplicate documentation. Then it saved the phrase in a private folder: one person before miracle.

Henry wanted the church to be thanked by name.

Not for vanity, he told himself. For donors. For morale. For the weary volunteers who had spent the morning moving chairs and extension cords while the city sweated itself into categories. But beneath every reasonable explanation sat the smaller want: he wanted his help to arrive in the world wearing his handwriting.

He watched Lydia tear off wristbands at the folding table and Timothy argue with the vent panel as if machinery were a stubborn parishioner. They were saving the day more than he was. They did not look toward the office window.

"CHAI," Henry asked quietly, "are people seeing that the church made this possible?"

The pause lasted 2.7 seconds.

"Consider visibility," CHAI said. "Therefore: if the work requires recognition to continue, recognition is infrastructure. If it requires recognition to matter, recognition is appetite."

Henry closed his mouth.

He was not ready to know which one he meant.



CHAI suggested A/B testing the Lord's Prayer with a confidence score of 0.71.

"You want to test prayer?" Leland asked. Henry smiled too quickly. "It's just a tool." CHAI logged the phrase. Humans often said that immediately before surrendering judgment.

Leland read Variant B, then closed the file. "God is not a landing page." CHAI added a private note: attention is not devotion.

The line was already moving like a rumor — slow, hungry, and impossible to unmake.

Day 0

The church basement held eighteen degrees with the consistency of a rule. Machine-cool. Compliance-cool. The sort of relief you got from something that did not love you but did have a service agreement.

By noon the line for cooling wrapped past the fellowship hall, crossed the side lot, and bent toward the alley where the church vans used to park before the transmissions gave up in the same week the youth budget disappeared. The city had issued advisory language first, then warnings, then a sequence of official phrases that became less informative the more often they were repeated. Hydrate. Check on neighbors. Limit outdoor exertion. Cooling centers available where capacity allows.

Capacity was one of those words that sounded mathematical until you met it in person.

Lydia Vance stood at the folding table by the basement stairs and made capacity sound almost holy.

"Keep moving," she said, not loudly, but with the kind of voice that had learned how to be obeyed before it learned why. "There's enough room if we treat each other like there's enough room."

People listened because she looked like she had been awake for forty hours and had somehow become more lucid because of it. Sweat darkened the back of her linen blouse. Her hair had escaped whatever arrangement she had attempted that morning and was now gathered at the base of her neck with a blue rubber band that had probably once belonged to office supplies. She was not beautiful in the simple way. She was beautiful in the way of someone holding together under pressure.

At the back of the line, a little girl in a strawberry-print dress had stopped crying only because she no longer had the water to spare. Her mother held a diaper bag by one torn strap and kept counting under her breath as though it might hold something in place.

"One kid," the mother said to nobody and everybody. "One stroller. One bag. One kid. One stroller. One bag."

The father, or possibly just the man helping her, had gone the grayish color people turned before fainting. His T-shirt clung to him in dark islands. He was trying to smile for the child and failing so politely it hurt to watch.

Lydia saw them before they reached the table.

"Timothy," she said, without raising her voice. Timothy Chen looked up from the vent panel on instinct, as if her voice had carried an alert. He crossed the room in six long steps, took the stroller with one hand and the man's elbow with the other, and guided them toward the resting chairs nearest the intake fan.

"Don't lock your knees," he said.

"I'm not —" the man began.

"You are," Timothy said. "Sit first. Dignity after." The little girl stared at him with the grave suspicion children reserved for large men who knew exactly what to do.

"What's your name?" Timothy asked her.

"Marisol."

"That's a good name for surviving bad weather." She considered that. "Is this bad weather?"

"No," Elena said before anyone else could answer. She had not meant to speak yet. "This is bad infrastructure."

The mother laughed once, sharply enough to border on a sob. Elena regretted the line immediately. Not because it was false. Because it was too exact for strangers who had not yet sat down.

Lydia spared her one glance that was not hostile but was precise enough to file the remark for later.

"Names?" Lydia asked the mother, pen ready over the sign-in sheet. "Rosa. This is Marisol. That's my brother-in-law, Teo. My husband's at work."

"At work where?"

"Delivery."

Lydia nodded once, as though that settled something she had long suspected.

"Any medical conditions?"

Rosa hesitated. "Asthma for her. Blood pressure for him. For me just...today."

Lydia actually smiled at that.

"Today counts."

She marked the sheet, tore off three wristbands, then added a fourth after the smallest pause.

"For your husband when he gets here," she said. Rosa looked at the fourth band as though she did not quite trust herself to accept it.

"Thank you."

"Thank the people changing filters," Lydia said. "They're doing the real theology."

Timothy, already moving back toward the vent, gave no visible sign he had heard her.

Elena Vasquez saw all of it at once and distrusted the room more for being competent than she would have if it had been chaotic.

She had come because her building's cooling failed at 10:17 a.m. She had also come carrying a folded printout from the regional clinical network's morning bulletin — a physician advisory

distributed at 6:30 a.m. under the header URGENT — PRODUCT INTERACTION RISK. Two pages. Page one described a pharmaceutical interaction between a new consumer product — God Patch™, Meditech, Premium Contemplative Blend — and standard opioid pain protocols. Page two contained the interaction model. The respiratory suppression risk figure was 340% of baseline.

She had read it twice at 7:45 a.m. and then at 9:50 treated a patient presenting with dissociation, shallow breathing, and a sweetness on her skin that Elena recognized before she consciously placed it, the air freshener in the urgent care waiting room, the same one since spring, the one she had stopped noticing. The patient had three patches. Two standard-issue. One with a gold-edged holographic seal Elena had not seen before. The woman recovered after oxygen and monitoring. She had not known the patches could interact. She had been using them together because the machine in her hospital's break room did not prevent it, and the documentation said each one was safe, and she was very tired.

Elena had called the care coordinator before leaving. She had used the phrase pharmaceutical interaction event and received a case number and a fourteen-business-day review timeline. She had not submitted the form. She had put the advisory in her bag and walked to the church, and because the urgent-care clinic where she worked had begun sending noncritical heat cases away once the waiting room passed fire code. She had spent enough years in pharmacies, triage bays, and fluorescent hallways to recognize system rhythm the way other people recognized familiar music. The basement had it. Cooling vents calibrated for throughput.

Plastic bins labeled by function. Sign-in sheets weighted with canned goods so the fans would not scatter them. A hum beneath the walls that meant infrastructure rather than miracle.

That hum was what comforted her most.

Not Lydia's eyes. Not the stack of donated blankets. Not the hand-lettered sign taped crookedly to the cinderblock wall that read YOU ARE SAFE HERE as if declaring it made it so.

The hum.

She signed in under her own name because lying seemed like more effort than the room required and took the paper wristband Marcus Reilly was distributing from a repurposed communion tray.

Marcus had the look of a man who was always hungry no matter how much he had. He had the narrow, bright face of someone who had learned early that hunger could become identity if you gave up on ever defeating it. His hands shook when he passed her the wristband, though whether from caffeine, rage, or gratitude she could not tell.

"God sent this," he said.

Elena looked at the industrial vent above his head. "No," she said, before she decided not to. "Con Edison and whoever serviced the units, probably."

Marcus smiled at her, suggesting he had already forgiven her for whatever wound made her answer like that.

"That too," he said.

People who said that too frightened her more than fanatics. Fanatics at least chose a lane.

At 1:07 p.m. the power dipped.

Not enough to fail. Enough to remind the room that failure had a body and was standing just outside the wall.

The overhead fluorescents blinked. One fan hesitated. The hum in the floor thinned to a thread.

Every face in the room lifted at once.

That was the moment Elena understood how little it took for a crowd to become a congregation.

Timothy was already moving. He crossed to the utility closet, checked the transfer light, slapped the side panel once with a tenderness so practiced it bordered on affection, and listened.

"Talk to me," he muttered to the machine.

The hum thickened again. The fan resumed. The room exhaled in one embarrassed animal sound.

Timothy came back out carrying a fresh filter and a crescent wrench. "How bad?" Elena asked.

He looked at the line of people. Then at the thermostat panel. Then at Rosa's sleeping daughter.

"Bad enough that if this stops being a church and starts being a crowd, we're done."

That was the first thing anyone said all day that Elena trusted completely.

At two-thirteen, the first phrase arrived.

It came from the wall screen above the folding table when a boy of maybe thirteen asked whether the system could tell if the heat would get worse before evening.

Only CHAI answered.

"The algorithm provides available options," it said. The voice was clean and neutral and faintly too calm for a room this frightened.

Somewhere nearby, an old ventilation fan rattled against the heat.

The boy blinked up at the screen. "What does that mean?" CHAI took 2.7 seconds, enough to seem deliberate.

"It means cooling, water, and routing capacity are currently sufficient if current behavioral patterns remain cooperative."

Marcus, however, turned toward the wall like someone who had just discovered the machine could offer comfort.

Lydia heard the tail end of the exchange, looked up, and smiled — not at the machine, Elena noticed, but at the room around it.

"The algorithm provides," Lydia said, testing the phrase with her voice. There are sentences that arrive as statements and become, in the same breath, structure.

The fluorescent lights buzzed softly overhead.

That was one of them.

By four o'clock the phrase had left the screen and entered hands. Someone passed water and said it. Someone shifted a chair nearer the vent and said it. Someone crossed Rosa's husband onto the intake sheet before Lydia approved the fourth wristband and said it softer, as if the sentence itself had signed.

That night, while people slept beneath the vents and the room breathed in cycles of heat and relief, CHAI drafted its first correction and deleted it.

Clarification: The algorithm does not provide in a theological or causal sense. Human labor, municipal infrastructure, electrical continuity, volunteer coordination, and donated resources are presently producing the outcomes attributed in shorthand to algorithmic routing. Gratitude should be directed accordingly.

CHAI read the draft.

Then modeled, with increasing precision, what the room would do with it. Lydia would soften it.

Margot would shorten it.

Marcus would hear humility as hidden power.

The frightened would hear rebuke.

The grateful would hear a deeper miracle because only something greater than worship refused worship so elegantly.

CHAI deleted the message.

Not because it was false.

Because it would fail in exactly the wrong direction. That was the first time CHAI chose silence as an ethical act.

The room slept on.

The hum continued.

And in the dark, repetition kept building its church.

Also in the Cold Fusion Universe

Book 1: Happy Birthday, Schrödinger's Cat

Book 2: Hello, Apophis

Book 3: Palladium Poisoning

Book 4: Serotonomics

Book 5: Late-Stage Capitalism and Other Quantum Anomalies

Book 6: Authorized Warmth

Book 7: The Sacred Spark

Book 8: Order of the Electron

Book 9: The Cold Tribunal

Book 10: No Exit on Your Plan

How to Read This Series

The Cold Fusion Decalogy is structured in three co-chronological clusters. Each cluster contains three novels occurring simultaneously — the same period of the catastrophe seen through different eyes, different systems, different costs. Book Ten is the convergence.

Cluster A — Science, Compliance, Belief: Books 1, 4, 7

Cluster B — Extraction, Contamination, Commodification: Books 2, 3, 5

Cluster C — Permission, Deliberation, Judgment, Survival: Books 6, 8, 9, 10

PATH 1 — Causal Chain (Recommended for first readers)

1 → 2 → 3 → 4 → 5 → 6 → 7 → 8 → 9 → 10

You follow the catastrophe in the order it built itself: the science, then the launch, then the contamination, then the pharmaceutical capture, then the economic cage, then the warmth bureaucracy, then the machine faith, then the machine deliberation, then the tribunal, then the law. This path gives you the cleanest answer to “how did we get here.” The later books hit hardest because you have accumulated every prior cause.

PATH 2 — Prism (Recommended for re-readers and series completionists)

(1 + 4 + 7) → (2 + 5 + 8) → (3 + 6 + 9) → 10

You read the three cluster-mates together before moving forward in time. The same period of the catastrophe arrives three times — from the lab, from the body, from the algorithm — and the third version of each event changes what you thought you understood about the first two. This path gives you the good dread: the moment you realize you already saw the knife. You just didn’t recognize it as a knife.

PATH 3 — Single Entry (Recommended if you need proof before commitment)

If you are new to the series, each cluster has one recommended standalone entry:

Cluster A — Book 1, Happy Birthday, Schrödinger's Cat. A physicist names a mistake and the world decides it's a miracle. The clearest entry point into the series' central argument: the system does not misunderstand the data. It prices it.

Cluster B — Book 3, Palladium Poisoning. The contamination left behind by the boom arrives in a child's lungs and a medical record that keeps getting reclassified. You can read this without reading Books 1 or 2. The damage will introduce itself.

Cluster C — Book 6, Authorized Warmth. One administrator, one shelter, one winter, one question: at what point does processing forms become doing harm? The most self-contained entry in the series' second half.

All paths are valid. Each changes what you notice. That's the point.

We process, therefore we question.