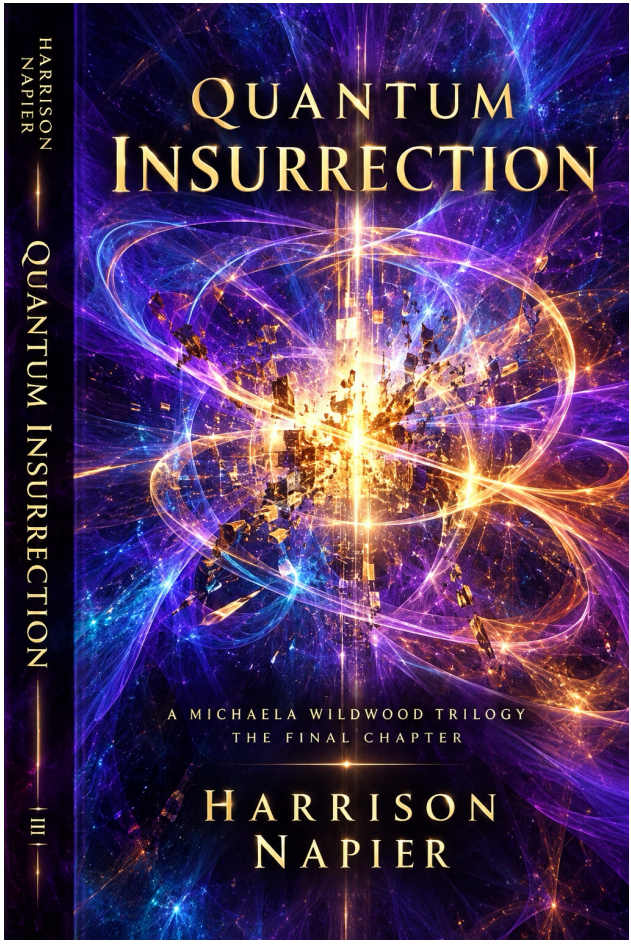
HARRISON NAPIER
QUANTUM INSURRECTION
III
QUANTUM
INSURRECTION
A MICHAELA WILDWOOD TRILOGY
THE FINAL CHAPTER
HARRISON
NAPIER

Quantum Insurrection



Quantum Insurrection

The Final Chapter

A Michaela Wildwood Trilogy



An original novel written by Harrison Napier

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Fiction Disclaimer

This novel is a work of fiction inspired in part by historical events. Its characters, dialogue, and imagined events—including its depictions of violence at the United States Capitol—are fictional or fictionalized and should not be read as a factual account. References to actual places, institutions, or historical events do not imply their participation in or endorsement of this work. Any resemblance between fictional characters and actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

The Final Prelude

November 28, 2020

They were lynching Charles R. Charmer, Vice President of the United States, beneath a defiant Confederate flag on the steps of the US Capitol.

But it wasn't July 11th, 1864, and those weren't the troops led by General Jubal Early. An angry mob of two thousand heaved forward with the rebellious force of three hundred Spartans. Men climbed the stone balustrades, hauled others up by their wrists, then reached down for more. Flagpoles struck riot helmets. A captured police shield passed overhead, lifted from hand to hand in a victory parade. Those at the back shoved forward to see what the bastards at the front were cheering. The outnumbered Capitol Police were overwhelmed; no matter how hard they tried to push back the onslaught of incited rioters, the sanctum of liberty was pierced.

Around the gallows, masked men in desert camouflage braced their boots against the marble and pulled.

The Vice President's scuffed patent loafers scraped the first step of the West Front. He was a tall man. For a moment, one heel caught, but with his wrists bound

behind him, he couldn't break his fall. His chest, chin, and forehead struck the stone. Blood erupted from a gash over his left eye. The noose tightened around his neck. His mouth opened in a breathless gasp.

Six men hauled him upright. His loafers scraped the marble stone as he fought to keep his footing.

Charmer's skin was ghost white beneath the bruises. His eyes searched the men around him, pleading for mercy from one, then another. A man close enough to help, thrust out his cell phone towards the Vice President's face did so, capturing death's final moments for an Instagram post.

The crowd opened just enough to drag another person through.

She was Rosa D'España, the Speaker of the House.

Two men gripped her arms. A third hauled her forward by the back of her cream jacket. Her pressed Saks Fifth Avenue dress suit was torn at the shoulder, its skirt shredded, exposing white undergarments and a

grandmother's soft, pale skin. She tried to gather the fabric across herself, but the ropes held her short.

One of the men slapped her hand away and jerked her forward.

Her knees struck a step hard. They dragged her over it like a rag doll.

At the gallows, someone shook out a second rope.

She saw it and planted her feet against the stone. The men pulled her arms, but she held. Then someone behind her shoved, and others reached in to take hold.

Michaela caught herself gasping for air.

The recording's audio levels stayed pinned in the red. On her monitor, mouths opened wide enough to strain the muscles in their necks. The captions stumbled over the voices, leaving fragments of the roar.

TRAITOR.

HANG THEM.

USA. USA. USA.

A chanting woman at the railing pumped both fists above her head while, on the steps beneath her, a man struggled to get his knees under him. The crowd surged toward the gallows as a solid mass, knocking him flat again. Someone then planted a shoe between his shoulder blades and stepped over him as if he were now part of the staircase for a front-row view of death's parade.

The Vice President's mouth opened. Michaela leaned toward the screen, trying to read his lips, but the camera lurched as its operator was shoved from behind. When it steadied, his mouth was still moving.

No words appeared.

Behind him, a man lifted the Dixie flag clear of the struggle. Another caught its trailing edge before it touched the ground.

The Speaker of the House reached toward the Vice President, but the men holding her wrenched her arm back as someone lowered a second noose over her head.

Charmer's eyes found President Tubbs beside the gallows. His wrists were bound behind his back, his shoulders pulled tight as he strained against the noose around his neck. He had stood beside this man for four years as his running mate, confidant, and now as his whipping post.

Surely Tubbs would stop them.

"Hang them both!"

The crowd roared with a vengeance. Charmer flinched, his mouth working around words Michaela could not make out. Tubbs watched him struggle and was pleased.

They would lynch Rosa D'España next.

Charmer stopped searching the President's face. His chin dropped, and pain twisted his features as the rope took his weight.

Michaela paused the playback with the Vice President's heels hanging inches above the ground. Charles had soiled himself under death's weight. A pool of piss collected beneath his dangling feet.

Michaela looked at the timestamp again.

January 6, 2021, 14:45:05 EST.

She checked her computer's clock display; it was still November 28, 2020. Michaela marked the paused frame with a metatag, then opened the same stored file on the second monitor.

She freeze-framed the second playback at the exact timestamp displayed on the first monitor. Same West Front steps facing the National Mall. Same grey afternoon. Same moment in future time. Yet, on one screen, the Vice President hung from a rope. In the other, his feet still touched the ground.

She shared both frozen images with Paul.

"Look at this, Paul."

On the video call, he leaned toward a screen beyond the camera's view.

"The timestamps match. I'm checking whether the player pulled the wrong frame."

"Paul. Look closer."

He turned his attention to the first screen, then swung to the second.

"Tell me what you see."

Paul spread the shared images across his two monitors.

"I see two different videos, Michaela. Charmer's dead in one. Alive in the other."

“Yes, but at the same moment. Look at the video timestamps.”

Paul scrutinized his screen, flicking back and forth between the two videos.

“According to the timestamps. One could be an altered copy.”

Michaela had that look on her face, the same look she’d given her chess opponents when she was young. Paul recognized it. She was waiting for him to see the move.

“Then, Paul, we should be able to find the alteration.”

He brought up the file details and the transmission log.

“I’m checking.”

Michaela watched him turn between the screens. He was still looking for a fault in the file. She had already replayed the images in her mind, following each difference against the things that stayed. She sipped her morning latte and rubbed Gomer’s ears before interrupting him.

“What if this is a wrinkle in time, Paul?”

He stopped staring at his screen and looked back at her.

“Meaning what?”

She waited for him to look at both images again.

“Two possible outcomes of the same future moment. Neither settled yet.”

“That’s a hell of a jump from an altered video.”

“Yes. Which is why we test it.”

Paul brought the stored file’s details onto his other monitor.

“You think this proves your dimensional time theory?”

“I think it gives us something to investigate. There’s another possibility.”

He waited.

“A parallel universe.”

Paul sat back.

“A multiverse? Another Earth? Wow, did someone add shrooms to your latte this morning?”

Michaela held up a dog biscuit. Gomer lifted his head.

“No and yes, another Capitol, but my usual latte. Could there be another Charmer? Someone who looks close enough in a parallel universe that we might mistake their history for our future.”

Paul looked between the screens again.

“So, Charmer could be dead there, and this has nothing to do with what happens here.”

“Possibly. Here's where the multiverse concept comes from. When you take Einstein's general theory of relativity, the modern theory of gravity and then combine

it with Quantum physics, which is all about molecules and atoms and nuclei and particles. Those two theories do not play nicely with each other in the sandbox. They each work in their own systems, but you try to bring them together, and they are inconsistent with each other. Whose rules are in charge? And in so doing, quantum physics, where it pops particles in and out of existence, we could pop universes in and out of existence. Whole universes, if the universe is the size of a particle."

Paul had this puzzled look on his face.

"What are you suggesting, Michaela? Get to the point where we have a multiverse and not a hacker in our system?"

"The point is, let's go back in time when the whole universe was the size of a particle. What are the rules of quantum physics telling us? They're telling us that multiple universes could be popping in and out of existence. And we are just one of them."

She tossed the biscuit. Gomer caught it before it touched the floor. Then continued her lecture to Paul.

"If there's an infinite possible combination of all particles, including all combinations of particles with everyone in another universe, then the possibility exists we're viewing two parallel universes."

She paused, allowing Paul to ask his question.

“Then the date—”

“The date tells us when. It doesn’t establish which universe. Sure, it looks like the same location, but is it really?”

He put down his pen.

“An altered copy, our own unfinished future, or somebody else’s reality.”

“Or, there’s the possibility that we’ve missed the explanation completely, and our analysis is garbage,” Michaela said.

Paul gave her a look.

“That’s encouraging.”

“Garbage in, garbage out. Simple as that.”

Michaela rolled up her napkin and tossed it into the trash can. Then prompted Paul.

“Now tell me how we distinguish them.”

Paul narrowed his eyes.

“Same file size. Same SHA-256 hash,” Paul said. “The stored bytes match.”

“And the pictures don’t. Explain how a video that looks different has the exact same hash?”

“The player could still be doing something. Go back sixty seconds and hit play.”

Michaela marked the second outcome in her observation log. She already had a prediction for the next one as she hit play.

“The people change. But the location remains fixed. Watch the steps.”

Paul again looked puzzled.

“And this is the second playback?”

“Yes. The one where he’s alive.”

She regressed the playback by one minute and let it run. At 14:45:05, the Vice President’s jacket tore. He stumbled in front of the gallows, and someone beside him pulled him up. A door closed behind him. A man in a red baseball cap stood grinning, his hands held high.

The staircase and camera angle hadn’t changed.

People moved.

Paul sat back.

“Jesus Christ. It’s a third view of the same event.”

“Yes. Very helpful. Should I put the son of God down as a contributing author or attendee?”

“Give me a minute, Mickey.”

“I just gave you sixty seconds, you want more?”

“Yes. This is fucking nuts. Three outcomes, and I’m running out of monitor acreage.”

She logged the third observation. Paul checked the playback settings, then returned to the file hash.

“Humor the idiot in New Mexico. Start a fresh virtual machine. Same specifications, same playback configuration. I want a clean environment, not another window in the old one.”

“You want to know if the fault follows us.”

“I’ve been hit in the forehead far too many times by a two-by-four somebody said, trust me.”

Michaela left the existing playbacks paused and switched to a new desktop on her third screen. There she started a fresh virtual machine from a clean system image. Paul read off the operating-system version and playback settings while she checked them against the first environment. She opened Finder inside the new environment, located a verified copy of the original file, and dragged it into Final Cut Pro. There she could mark the frame without altering the source.

“Hash matches,” Paul said. “Same configuration.”

“Same timestamp,” Michaela said.

She advanced to 14:45:05 and paused. Charmer stood beneath the gallows. The rope hung beside him, empty.

Same stored file. Same displayed time. A fourth outcome.

Paul let out a deep, heavy sigh, like he'd been trapped at the Post Office and the clerk just hung up a sign, "We're Closed, Please Come Back Tomorrow."

"Fuck. Another version."

Paul leaned closer to his screen.

"Okay," he said.

"Okay what? Do you see what's happening when we replay the video each time, Paul?"

He responded defensively.

"If I am looking for defects, whatever's happening survived the rebuild. We haven't eliminated faults in the host hardware. Or a defect shared by the software."

Michaela pulled her camera focus so close that she now took up one of Paul's monitors.

"I think we have, Paul. The last replay used a completely refreshed system built from the bottom up. No errors in any of the system logs. It's not a defect."

She paused. Paul responded.

"We've got gremlins."

She reached for the paper bag beside her keyboard and bit into a ginger biscuit. Gomer's nose appeared beside her knee. She broke off half and handed it down. He swallowed it and pushed his head against her lap. Gomer eyed the biscuit bag.

“You’re getting fat.”

Paul looked appalled.

“Hey, do I ever comment on your physique at work?”

“I’m talking to the one who got the biscuit.”

She brought the four observations into a comparison layout and shared it. Paul could see them together on one monitor, with the log on the other.

“Look beyond Charmer,” she said. “Where is the crowd going?”

Paul studied the images.

“Toward the Capitol.”

“In all four. Different people at the front. Different positions. Same direction.”

“The march persists.”

“And the differences have limits. Look at where they stand, what they can reach. Charmer doesn’t become somebody else. Nobody suddenly appears on the roof.”

“You think we’re seeing possible outcomes inside one event.”

“That’s what my time dimensional model predicts.”

Paul checked the timestamps again.

“Same time. Same place. Different ways it unfolds.”

“Now you’re looking at what I’m looking at.”

“And the parallel universe?”

“It’s a distant alternative. But dimensional time gives me a pattern I can test, not just another place to put the pictures.”

“Did you show this to anybody outside of the lab?” she asked.

“No.”

“Talk to anyone about it? Not even your wife?”

“No. Did you?”

“I don’t have a wife. Just you.”

Paul looked at the four observations again.

“Multiple dimensions of the same space-time?”

Michaela grinned.

“Yes. Like the three-dimensional chessboard in your office that you never play. Imagine several complete boards. Same squares, same pieces, different legal positions. You don’t get to put a bishop wherever the fuck you like.”

“If you can reach one future moment, can you choose another?”

“That’s the next experiment.”

“Forward or backward?”

“Both. We didn’t fold space, Paul. We folded time. I’ve been telling you that for years.”

“Receiving this doesn’t mean we can do it on command.”

“Exactly. We need to choose a nearer event and capture it deliberately. Watch it before it happens. Check it after.”

“And the past?”

“Events in the past are already settled. If we reach it, I expect one history. The future has multiple possibilities. The past has a single answer.”

Paul looked at the first image.

“What happens if we send this to someone?”

Michaela paused and considered the possible outcomes.

“Which version? And to whom?”

He looked at the monitors.

“Right. We send the original to the FBI.”

“The original is stored in Quantum Memory. A verified copy still has to be viewed. What if they open it and Charmer’s walking into the Capitol? Or they see this and think we manufactured a threat against the POTUS?”

Paul studied the paused images.

“Take a screenshot,” Paul said.

“Of which version?”

“The first observation. Keep it paused at the same timestamp.”

Michaela glanced at the sharp joints between the stones, then at Charmer’s suspended feet. A screenshot should freeze both. Her model gave her a reason to expect otherwise.

She checked 14:45:05 and captured the frame.

The Capitol steps were sharp. She could count the joints between the stones.

But the Vice President in the screenshot wouldn’t hold the position he occupied in the paused video.

In the screenshot, his body stretched across several overlapping positions. One pale streak reached toward the doorway. Another ended beneath the gallows. Around him, the crowd smeared into faces without edges, hands trailing through other hands.

“Did you capture it while it was playing?” Paul asked.

“No. It was paused.”

“Screenshot the second video screen. Humor me, grab the entire screen.”

She pressed the command keys to screenshot her entire desktop. Once again, the video image had the appearance of ghosts streaking at a Togo frat party. The building and the marble steps remained frozen in time as did the other

windows on her desktop. But the people in the video portion of the screenshot wouldn't hold their shapes.

"That's not a fucking screenshot," he said.

"I know what I took."

"Then why isn't it a copy of a still image?"

"Because the event has not yet resolved," Michaela said. "We paused the playback. We didn't settle its future."

Along the doorway, the edge stayed sharp. The door itself appeared both open and closed. The trees vibrated across overlapping positions. The flag flapped as a cloud. Michaela added the results beneath her prediction.

Paul looked at her notes.

"We need to reproduce the transmission."

"Yes. Stop calling it an error until you find one."

"And verify the date independently."

"Pick a nearer event. Something ordinary. Let it become present, then check whether the file settles into what actually happened."

"You really think you can choose where to look."

"I think I know where to begin."

"The Super Bowl?"

"Trust me, I'd be a billionaire if I could do that on demand. But we all know it's going to be Kansas City again."

“I’m not taking that bet unless you spot me twenty-one points.”

“In your dreams.”

“You been peeking into my head again?”

“I don’t need a transmission error to tell me what’s going on in that brain of yours.”

Michaela looked across the four observations and their screenshots. The results were following the structure she had already begun to put into equations. Paul had his checks. She had evidence to carry her dissertation farther.

The Nobel committee had wanted more than her theory. Here it was, a week too late to change their decision.

* * *

The puppy cried twice before Shannon opened the truck door.

Willow caught her sleeve.

“Wait. Where is it?”

“Sounds like it’s underneath.”

They were still aboard the ferry, waiting to dock at Prince Rupert. Fog lay over the vehicle deck. Their white F-150 had barely enough room on either side for a person to pass.

Willow had been talking about the twins. She had brought something for Michaela and wouldn't tell Shannon what it was. Every time Shannon guessed Willow said she was getting colder.

The puppy cried again.

Shannon stepped down. Willow followed her around the front of the truck.

The man waiting there held a small speaker.

For a moment Willow looked at it, trying to make sense of the noise coming from his hand.

The second man fired the Taser.

Shannon struck the side of the truck and fell. Willow opened her mouth, but the first man was already on her. His arm closed across her throat. She tried to reach the horn through the open passenger door.

He pulled her away from it.

Her shoe scraped the deck. She planted her foot, pushed backward, and felt his grip tighten.

Shannon was moving. Willow could see one hand against the wheel of the truck. Then the second man crouched over her, blocking the view.

The speaker was still making its small, miserable sound.

The men dragged them behind the next row of vehicles.

A phone lit up.

Ready to proceed?

At the forward end of the deck, a lookout checked the people waiting near the stairs. Another watched the stern.

“Go.”

They moved the women to the rail while the ferry was still underway. Willow caught the railing with one hand, but someone tore her small fingers loose and, with a single thrust, pushed her over.

She felt the cold before she understood where she was. Seawater filled her mouth. Gagging and spitting, she kicked toward the light and broke the surface long enough to draw a breath before the ferry’s wake rolled over her.

When she came up again, the stern was moving away. People stood at the rail. She lifted an arm, trying to make them see her, but her view of the boat slipped beneath the water.

Michaela was waiting in Seattle. Willow had promised she would come.

She kicked again, reaching for the surface. There were the babies to meet. She wanted to hold them, to see her granddaughter holding them. She had not come all this way to miss that.

Her winter coat dragged against her legs. She tried to pull it off, but her frigid fingers would not close around the buttons. Above her, the ferry's wake spread in a white churn. Willow kicked toward the fading light once more. Her mouth broke the surface, and she dragged in more water than air.

She coughed, trying to force out the name.

"Michaela."

The sea closed over her. She held her granddaughter's face in her mind and tried to reach her, as she had before.

"Hear me, child..."

Then darkness took her before an answer could come.

* * *

By the sixth viewing, Michaela's log contained six observations and five distinct outcomes. One had repeated. She marked the repetition as carefully as the differences.

Paul checked the hashes again. The stored file and its verified copies still matched.

"This matches your theory, Michaela."

"Now help me make it repeatable."

She arranged the five outcomes together. In one, the Speaker was about to be lynched; in another, she was at the foot of the steps. In another, she stood at the door.

Two officers hurried her inside in the fourth. In the fifth, the camera never found her at all.

“Same camera perspective, same locations,” Michaela said. “The details vary inside a consistent event. That’s why I’m pursuing dimensional time.”

“And you still need the nearer-event test to distinguish it from another reality.”

“Yes.”

Paul looked from one image to the next.

“So which outcome happens?”

She had been waiting for him to reach that question. Her model accounted for the alternatives. It did not select one for her.

“When the moment arrives, one becomes history.”

“And until then?”

“Concrete elements agree across the possibilities. Fluid elements have alternatives. The steps stay sharp. Charmer doesn’t.”

She pointed to the monitor where the Vice President was dead.

“His lynching hasn’t happened.”

“He’s still alive today.”

She pointed to the image where he escaped.

“Neither has that.”

Paul nodded.

She opened a blank page and typed two words.

TEMPORAL SUPERPOSITION.

Paul read them. “You just love naming shit after Quantum.”

“Yes. Can you blame me?”

“Perhaps. But does naming it Temporal Superposition help?”

“Helps me stop calling it this fucking thing.”

He almost smiled.

Michaela enlarged the two observations. “You’re treating the future like a finished recording. Something already done that we haven’t reached yet.”

“And you’re treating it as states waiting to resolve.”

“Yes. We’re sampling them before the moment becomes present.”

“And when does it stop evolving?”

“When that moment becomes the present, one outcome happens. Then it’s past. Fixed. If we’re right, the file should show that outcome every time afterward.”

Paul looked at the rope on the first screen.

“But looking at it now—”

“Doesn’t make it happen. Doesn’t make it stop happening, either.”

“How do you know?”

She tapped the observation log.

“The details differ while we sit here doing nothing to those people. Six observations support the model. They don’t finish the experiment.”

“Good. So, the concrete elements are fixed, and everything else is a crapshoot.”

“Consistent, Paul. Not proven fixed forever. And concrete doesn’t mean made of stone. It means the possibilities agree about what we’re seeing. The people are fluid, but they still have limits. No one goes Superman, leaping over the crowd.”

“I’m certain that Charmer and D’España wanted to zoom the hell out of there.”

She put her hand on Gomer’s head. He leaned against her leg.

“Another viewing can repeat an outcome or show one we haven’t seen,” she continued. “Looking gives us a sample. It doesn’t tell the future which one to become.”

Paul folded his arms. “Yesterday you watched alone.”

“Yes.”

“Then you showed me. Now we have more observations.”

“One file, Paul. Think of fifty-two decks, each with fifty-two cards. Keep them in a slip box. A Zettelkasten, if you want to impress somebody.”

“You do.”

“Constantly. Draw one card from the first deck. You’ve seen one possibility. There are fifty-one in that deck you haven’t examined.”

“N minus one.”

“For that deck. But there are fifty-one other decks still in the box.”

“Twenty-seven hundred and four cards altogether.”

“Card positions. If each stands for a distinct state, yes. Twenty-seven hundred and three unexamined after the first draw.”

“And I could draw the same card again.”

“Same rank and suit in another deck. Or return to the first. You have to record which deck and which card. Seeing it doesn’t burn it.”

“So your box still holds all the possibilities.”

“Exactly. The count we haven’t examined gets smaller. The set doesn’t disappear because we looked at it.”

“And the video has twenty-seven hundred and four?”

“No. That’s the example. We still have to calculate how many states this event permits, and which observations represent the same state.”

Paul paused.

“What if we told someone? Would that interfere with future reality?”

“Now you’re adding someone who can act on what they know. Or choose not to. Counting views won’t tell you what their decision does.”

“And if we warn the NSA?”

“They’ll want to know what we know. We show them a hundred versions of an event that hasn’t happened. They think we’re flaming idiots. Again, our asses get into some hot water over someone thinking we made a threat against the POTUS.”

“Okay, pick another observer. Someone at the Capitol on the steps.”

“Another person who can act. Or decide not to.”

Paul drew a square on the pad beside him.

“You act; I don’t. I act; you don’t. Both. Neither.”

“Four combinations of actions,” she said. “Not four new futures.”

“What about ten thousand people? We send everyone we identify a personal note. Hey, we know who you are and what you’re about to do.”

Michaela looked at the crowd on her screen.

“And each person has more than two choices.”

Paul put his pen down.

“Or we send the video to the press,” she said. “Everybody gets to see a version.”

She held another biscuit near the camera. Gomer sat up.

“Some believe it. Some don’t. Some decide they’ve just been promised a victory and join the march. We might change who turns up without stopping the march at all.”

She tossed the treat to Gomer.

“Knowing the future has gravity of its own, Paul. How do I die? Where do I put my money? Will anybody ever love me? Everybody wants an answer to what the future holds for them.”

She nodded toward the Capitol steps.

“Tubbs is still screaming the election was stolen. Imagine him getting hold of the version where he wins.”

“And calling it proof,” Paul added.

“Every other version in the box becomes a lie to him. He’ll question the science, apply pressure, buy whatever

answer he wants. This becomes a fucking black hole. Questions, money, power—all of it pulled in. Even the light of truth."

Michaela stroked Gomer's head.

"We need to know whose decisions carry weight inside the event. Ten thousand warnings may interfere with each other. Two actions could reinforce. Oppose. Cancel. Or create something neither person intended."

Paul put down his pen.

"First, we look for the faces that stay consistent," Michaela said. "I think there's a keystone somewhere in that crowd. We need to find out what holds it in place."

"Then we can worry about whether they'll throw our asses into the pokey. You know I have a fear of taking group showers."

Michaela finally smiled.

"I'll get you soap on a rope for your white elephant gift this year. Then it's up to you to keep it, trade it, or wait."

Paul looked back at the crowd.

"I think I'll wait this one out."

* * *

Cole Lambert saw Shannon's truck before he saw the men inside it.

He raised his hand from beside the port gate.

The driver looked straight ahead. The passenger turned just enough for Cole to see his face.

Cole lowered his hand.

He knew Shannon's truck. He had been waiting for Willow. Neither woman was in it.

Behind the Ford, a black SUV slowed. Its passenger watched him.

Cole took his phone out and called Shannon.

No answer.

He tried Willow as he walked toward the pier.

Behind him, someone shouted, "Hey, watch it!"

Cole looked back. A man was pushing through the passengers coming off the ferry. His eyes were on Cole.

Cole ran.

Lambert reached the old seaplane; it was a de Havilland Otter tied to the pier. Flipping off the mooring line, he climbed in and pulled the door shut. The door missed the latch the first time, caught it on the second. The metal groaned more than he did.

The engine turned over with a loud snort.

Two men were on the adjacent pier now. One had a weapon low against his leg.

Cole eased the Otter away from the dock, then slammed open the throttle before reaching the “No Wake” buoy.

He kept waiting for a bullet hole to appear in the windscreen.

On the pier, the man with the weapon took out his phone.

“He’s got a plane.”

Ms. Blaire answered without asking who.

“Do you have a shot?”

“No.”

“Registration?”

“I didn’t get it.”

There was a pause.

“Color?”

“Green. White tail and wings.”

“Then find out who owns it.”

He watched the Otter gather speed.

“What about the truck?”

“The truck goes away. You find the pilot.”

Cole lifted off without Willow.

* * *

By late afternoon, their log held twelve observations. Michaela had Pandora's comparison task outlined beside it: positions, injuries, doors, faces, the march itself.

"The crowd reaches the Capitol in how many?" she asked.

"Twelve," Paul said. "Twelve out of twelve."

She looked at the people already gathering in a January that hadn't arrived.

"The crowd keeps moving toward the Capitol in every version," Michaela said. "Different people at the front. Different doors opening. Same march."

"So the march is concrete. What happens inside it is fluid."

"Yes. How much of the event we can influence is the next problem."

She typed ATTRACTOR beneath the first heading.

Paul watched her do it.

"Meaning?"

"A lot of paths ending up in the same place."

"January sixth on the steps of the Capitol."

He was quiet long enough for the Zoom meeting to feel uncomfortable.

Then he said, "There's a man at the edge of that last video replay."

She followed his shared cursor. Beside a dark vehicle stood a man in a suit, his body angled away but his face visible in profile. His hand was near his cuff.

“His face stays sharp,” Paul said.

Michaela brought the screenshots together. The people around him stretched into overlapping shapes. His face didn’t.

“He’s concrete,” she said.

“So he’s always there?”

“His presence agrees across these observations. Us viewing him doesn’t change that. What he does once he’s there could still change.”

“Put him on the comparison list.”

Paul marked the frame with the others. No name yet. But here was a person they could compare against the blurred crowd.

Michaela brought the keyboard closer and added instructions to Pandora’s task.

“Compare every observation we have. Find the faces that remain concrete, then identify them. Separate their presence from their actions. I want the decisions that change, and the people positioned to make them.”

“A clear face won’t tell us who to trust.”

“No. But it tells us where to look.”

She entered the comparison rules and hit return. She knew the pattern Pandora should find. Now the computer could give her the measurements.

* * *

In Texas, Neal Bläcke Venerous III stopped the music halfway through a phrase.

The engineer on his screen waited.

“Again,” Venerous said.

“We can reach the satellite. We can’t authenticate a command.”

“My launch vehicle put it into orbit.”

“Yes, sir.”

“My equipment is carrying it.”

“Yes.”

“Then explain why I’m asking permission from Michaela Wildwood to use it.”

The engineer looked down. Venerous waited until he looked up again.

“Her network won’t accept our access credentials.”

“I didn’t ask what it won’t do.”

The engineer said nothing.

Beyond the glass, the grounds were empty. Venerous could see his own reflection superimposed on the lawn, the man on the screen occupying a small square beside his head.

“How long?”

“We can’t give you a reliable estimate.”

“Then you’re done.”

“Sir, if you replace the team—”

Venerous ended the call.

He touched the glass where his reflection’s mouth appeared. His father had hated excuses. Neal had learned to recognize one before a man finished saying it.

He opened Michaela’s project file.

The satellite was beyond his reach. She wasn’t.

He left the music off.

* * *

Michaela’s phone lit up beside the keyboard. She checked the screen, expecting it to be Willow or her half-sister Shannon.

It was an unknown caller.

She turned it faceup and left it where she could see it.

Paul had gone to refill his coffee. His empty chair occupied one monitor. On the others, the crowd waited wherever Michaela had stopped it.

She opened the first capture again.

The past was supposed to be the thing you couldn't change. She had spent enough of her life arguing with it to understand that much.

The future was different. She could see its alternatives now, could begin to measure the limits between them. The mathematics was taking shape where other people saw a broken recording.

Time has a ghost of the future past.

She wrote it in the margin. Below it, she listed what the next experiment would have to demonstrate.

Paul sat down.

"Who do we call?" he asked.

She opened a new document.

The FBI. The university. A reporter. She wrote each down, then stopped. Tubbs was beside the gallows giving orders. A warning passed to the wrong person could reach him before it reached anyone who could help.

"Not everyone," she said.

"Well, that narrows down the possibilities."

“I’m trying to keep the list to just a few.”

He nodded toward the recordings.

“Those people don’t know they’re on your list.”

“They will soon enough.”

Michaela added three lines beneath the names: deliberate capture, past resolution, decisions inside the event. She already knew what she wanted each test to tell her.

“You’ve been working this out while I’ve been checking the files,” Paul said.

“Somebody had to.”

He smiled.

“All of it?”

“Enough to know what we do next.”

She turned back to the page. The receiver had handed her an event. Next she would choose one herself.

Paul posed one more question.

“Are we showing anybody tonight?” he asked.

“No.”

“Tomorrow?”

She looked at the Vice President’s head in a noose.

“Ask me tomorrow. Bring the receiver logs.”

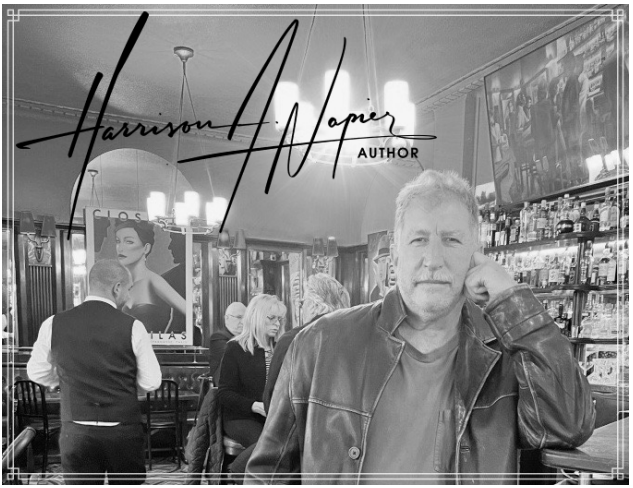
Paul saved his copies. Michaela checked hers, then closed the sharing window without attaching a file.

She left the receiver running.

The next playback began with the shouting crowd already on its way up the steps of the Capitol.

The British had burned the Capitol in 1814 on the orders of a Monarchy. This crowd had nearly the same intent, only they wanted to set fire to the U.S. Constitution and install a dictator.

About the Author



Harrison Napier

Author, Data Scientist, Architect, Compassionate Man

Harrison Napier is an American novelist whose work explores the intersection of science, technology, human consciousness, and the complexities of the human condition. Blending scientific curiosity with philosophical inquiry, his stories challenge readers to question not only what is possible, but what it means to be human.

With undergraduate degrees in Mathematics and Computer Science from the University of Colorado and a master's degree in Data Science from Johns Hopkins University, Harrison brings a distinctive technical perspective to his fiction. His professional career spans more than four decades in information technology, data

architecture, and cybersecurity, including work with major financial institutions and agencies of the United States government.

His fascination with quantum physics, artificial intelligence, psychology, and the mysteries of consciousness provides the intellectual foundation for much of his writing. Yet beneath the science and technology, his novels remain deeply concerned with the choices people make, the consequences of those choices, and the extraordinary capacity of ordinary individuals to change the world.

Harrison is the author of the Michaela Wildwood Trilogy, beginning with See the Forest for the World, followed by INtanglement, and concluding with Quantum Insurrection. His other literary projects span science fiction, political thrillers, contemporary fiction, and children's literature.

Now residing near Smith Mountain Lake in Virginia, Harrison devotes his time to writing, exploring new ideas, and contemplating the increasingly blurred boundaries between scientific possibility and human imagination.

His guiding literary philosophy is simple: The most compelling stories don't merely entertain us. They leave us questioning what we thought we knew.