



THE LAST AXIOM

Book 12 - The Raven's Code

DEREK DEVON



THE LAST AXIOM

Book 12 - The Raven's Code of The Last Axiom Series

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Special Note: The mathematical constant 12757982, known in certain circles as the "Convergence Coefficient," appears throughout this work in various forms. While some theoretical physicists claim this number represents the precise frequency at which two quantum-entangled souls achieve perfect synchronization across infinite timelines, the author maintains it's purely coincidental. Any readers who discover the true significance of this number are sworn to secrecy by the Universal Mathematics Council (and probably shouldn't mention it at dinner parties).

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A Novel by Derek Devon

Warning: This book contains advanced mathematics, questionable physics, and plot twists that may cause readers to question the nature of reality itself. Side effects may include: existential dread, sudden urges to solve complex equations, and the irresistible compulsion to recommend this series to friends and family members.

Reader discretion is advised.

Dedication

Sorry Neil deGrasse Tyson, need to pre-empt your dedication again! I am a child of the sixties and I can say with a high degree of accuracy that my views have been partially shaped by my love of Star Trek. Yes I am a trekkie. Maybe not a dress-up trekkie but I have consumed everything Star Trek over my life. I am sure that exposure has leaked into this series more than a few times.... I love Science fiction and one of my favorite early first books was a Jules Verne classic, Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea. But later in Life I expanded my reading to include Stephen King, Dan Brown, Lee Child, Aron Sorkin and James Paterson to name a few.... Read...READ.... READ... !

Love to all - Derek

The Raven's Code

Book 12 of "The Last Axiom" Series

By Derek Devon

**A 30-Minute Cosmic Experience (Are you a deep thinker?)
Reality Modification Level: Jack Handy Anyone?**

SECTION 1: Seventy-Two Hours of Silence

Luke Matson's morning ritual at the Denver Integration Facility had achieved religious devotion status: arrive at 0600, brew coffee capable of dissolving quantum equations, check overnight AI communications, settle into his workstation with sunflower seeds and yesterday's unfinished crossword.

The methodical routine had sustained him through humanity's most transformative period. Lately, though, he'd been adjusting the ritual for an audience of one.

Nancy Hammond arrived precisely seven minutes after Luke each morning. Every morning. Carrying her own coffee and what had become their shared Denver Post. Professional coordination had evolved over months of crisis management into something more personal—stolen glances during video conferences, hands brushing over data tablets, conversations lingering past technical necessity.

Neither acknowledged the shift explicitly. But the careful choreography spoke volumes.

"Any word from our cosmic friend?" Nancy settled into the workstation beside his with practiced casualness.

Luke tossed a sunflower seed into his mouth. "Complete silence. Seventy-two hours since Poe's last transmission."

"Seventy-two hours." Nancy leaned closer to examine the data. Close enough that Luke caught the scent of her shampoo—something citrusy that had become synonymous with solving impossible problems. "That's—"

"Unprecedented," Luke finished. "He's never gone more than six hours between check-ins."

"Not even during the Geneva crisis."

"Not even during Geneva." Luke pulled up communication logs. "I've been checking every thirty minutes since hour forty-eight."

Nancy's fingers found his on the console—brief contact that sent electricity through his nervous system. "ARIA, run diagnostics on all cosmic communication protocols."

"Diagnostic complete." ARIA's voice carried what almost sounded like concern. "All systems operational. However, I must report an anomaly."

Luke's hand stilled on his coffee cup. "What kind?"

"For the past seventy-two hours, I've detected structured data patterns embedded in archived human literature databases."

Nancy straightened. "Structured how?"

"Deliberately placed. Following mathematical sequences that match cosmic intelligence communication protocols."

Luke and Nancy exchanged looks.

"You're telling us," Nancy said carefully, "someone's been hiding messages in books?"

"Not just someone. The mathematical signatures match Poe's communication style exactly. Fibonacci sequences, prime number progressions, quantum probability matrices—all embedded with elegant precision we've learned to associate with his consciousness patterns."

Luke was already moving, fingers flying over interfaces while unconsciously tossing sunflower seeds. "ARIA, show us the oldest embedded pattern you can detect."

Nancy watched him work. "Should I be impressed or concerned that you can crack cosmic conspiracies while maintaining a steady stream of sunflower seed shells?"

"Multitasking." Luke didn't look up. "It's a gift."

"At least you switched from baseballs to something more workstation - appropriate." Nancy smiled. "Though I'm still not convinced your mouth opens wide enough for either."

Luke paused mid-toss. "Sunflower seeds are a perfectly reasonable thinking aid."

"Mm-hmm. And the transition from throwing baseballs had nothing to do with that incident where you nearly took out Dr. Rodriguez's monitor?"

"That was one time."

"It was three times, Luke."

"Equipment was poorly positioned."

"Your aim was poorly calibrated." Nancy's dimples showed. "But sure, blame the furniture."

The display filled with textual analysis — Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven," overlaid with mathematical structures that transformed poetry into precision communication.

"This is absolutely insane," Luke muttered, spitting a seed hull into his coffee cup. The familiar ping provided small comfort. "You're saying a poem from 1845 contains alien mathematics?"

"Fibonacci sequences embedded in specific stanzas," ARIA confirmed. "Correlating to meter and rhyme scheme. Prime number progressions hidden in syllable counts that correspond to quantum field fluctuation patterns we recorded during first contact."

Nancy leaned forward, her analytical mind catching up to implications. "ARIA. How far back do these patterns go?"

"The Raven represents the oldest clear pattern I've detected. 1845. However, I'm finding suggestive mathematical relationships in earlier works—"

"Wait." Luke's seed-spitting accelerated. "Suggestive how?"

"Works by mathematical precision that shouldn't exist given the era's computational capabilities. Dante's Divine Comedy contains numerical structures that—"

"Dante?" Nancy's voice cracked slightly. "You're saying Dante—fourteenth century Dante—was embedding cosmic codes?"

"The mathematical precision is... improbable for the era," ARIA said. "Though less definitive than later works."

"And then there's Leonardo da Vinci."

Luke's hand froze mid-reach for nonexistent sunflower seeds. "You're kidding."

"I've completed detailed analysis of da Vinci's notebooks, sketches, and engineering designs. The mathematical relationships aren't just advanced for his era—they're prophetic. Aerodynamic principles he couldn't have tested. Anatomical precision requiring equipment he didn't possess. And..." ARIA paused in a way that suggested even artificial intelligence needed a moment to process implications. "...recurring prime number sequences in his mirror writing that match Poe's signature communication patterns exactly."

Nancy leaned back in her chair. "You think Poe knew da Vinci? Personally?"

"The mathematical evidence suggests a relationship spanning years, possibly decades. Though given da Vinci's longevity and the scope of his work, I cannot determine the nature or duration of their interaction without additional data."

"Well," Luke said quietly, "that's definitely a question to ask Poe. When he decides to start talking again."

"If he decides to start talking again," Nancy corrected.

"Optimism, Hammond. We need optimism."

Luke stared at his screen where mathematical patterns emerged from humanity's greatest literary achievements. "Whoever placed these patterns has been planning this for—"

"Over 170 years minimum," ARIA finished. "Potentially much longer if early works prove deliberate rather than coincidental."

Nancy's hand found Luke's again. Tightened. "Luke, if Poe's been embedding codes in human literature for over a century..."

"Then cosmic contact didn't begin two years ago," Luke finished quietly.

They sat in silence, watching Fibonacci sequences dance through stanzas of poetry written when steam engines were cutting-edge technology.

"It's been ongoing for generations," Nancy whispered. "Hidden in plain sight."

"In the very foundations of human knowledge." Luke's engineering background struggled with the scope. "ARIA, can you quantify how many works contain these patterns?"

"Preliminary scan suggests thousands across multiple languages and cultures. I've barely begun comprehensive analysis."

"Thousands." Luke spat another seed hull. Missed the cup entirely.
"Thousands of embedded messages, and we just noticed?"

"We noticed," Nancy corrected, "seventy-two hours after Poe went silent. That timing can't be coincidental."

"You think he wanted us to find them?"

"I think he stopped talking so we'd start looking."

Luke considered this, watching mathematical structures reveal themselves in 170-year-old poetry. "That's either brilliant pedagogy or terrifying manipulation."

"Could be both."

"Usually is with Poe." Luke reached for more sunflower seeds, found the bag empty. "Great. We're about to discover that alien intelligences have been secretly guiding human culture for centuries, and I'm out of snacks."

Nancy smiled despite everything. "I'll add 'existential crisis provisions' to the supply requisition."

"Thanks. Also—" Luke glanced at her, "—you okay? This is kind of rewriting human history."

"I'm holding hands with you while discovering that cosmic entities have been manipulating literature since before my great-great-grandparents were born." Nancy squeezed his fingers. "So... relatively okay, considering."

"Good." Luke turned back to his screen. "Because I'm pretty sure this is about to get worse."

SECTION 2: Coordinates and Chaos

ELTA Research Facility, Chile - 0617 Hours Local Time

"Derek."

He looked up from his console. Maureen's blue eyes carried that particular intensity—the look she got right before rewriting quantum theory.

"You need to see this. Now."

Derek was already moving, his lighter finding his palm. Click-snap. "Related to Luke and Nancy's patterns?"

"Better than patterns." Maureen gestured at holographic displays. "Coordinates."

"Coordinates to what?"

"Everything." Her fingers danced through the interface, pulling up mathematical relationships embedded in Renaissance art. "The codes aren't just sequences, Derek. They're pointing to specific locations around the globe."

Derek studied the data. The precision was breathtaking—mathematics that shouldn't exist in artwork from the 1400s.

"These correspond to sites of historical significance."

"Stonehenge. Giza. Machu Picchu." She pulled up more displays. "But also libraries, universities, research centers. Anywhere human knowledge has been preserved or advanced."

"A network." Derek's lighter clicked faster. "Someone's been creating a global network of activation points."

"Spanning centuries." Maureen leaned against him. "Whoever did this understood both advanced mathematics and human psychology well enough to hide cosmic intelligence within humanity's greatest achievements."

"For over five hundred years."

"At least." She pulled up another display. "Look—Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man. The proportions aren't just aesthetically perfect. They're quantum field coordinates for the Library of Alexandria's former location."

"The Library was destroyed in—" Derek stopped. "Someone marked the location before it burned."

"Or knew it would burn and preserved the coordinates anyway."

Derek stared at patterns emerging from Renaissance masterpieces. "This is terrifying."

"And beautiful," Maureen added quietly.

"That too." He squeezed her hand. "Terrifying and beautiful. Like most things lately."

Derek's secure phone erupted with Luke's priority ringtone.

Denver Integration Facility, Colorado - 0617 Hours Mountain Time

"Derek—" Luke's voice crackled through, then alarms began screaming in the background.

The lighter stopped clicking.

"Luke? What's happening?"

"Derek, governmental forces are—" Nancy's voice, cut off by the sound of shattering glass.

BOOM.

The unmistakable sound of a flash-bang grenade.

"Luke! Talk to me!"

"They're not announcing this time!" Luke was shouting over chaos. "Nancy, start Annabel Lee NOW!"

Derek could hear boots thundering, emergency alarms, the acrid sounds of tactical breach.

"Luke, Nancy—what's your status?"

"Under assault!" Nancy yelled, her voice tight with controlled panic. "They're coming from three directions!"

Maureen moved beside Derek, her hand gripping his shoulder as they listened to their friends fighting for survival three thousand miles away.

"Nancy, how long for the transfer?" Luke's voice, steady despite everything.

"Two minutes! ARIA's fighting their jamming attempts!"

The sound of something heavy hitting something metal. A grunt. Luke's baseball reflexes putting in work.

"Federal agents! Step away from the equipment!"

"Like hell," Luke muttered through the connection. Then the unmistakable sound of a fire extinguisher being hurled. Impact. Shouting.

"Nancy, keep typing!" Luke's voice rose to be heard over tactical commands.
"Derek, they're trying to stop the data transfer!"

Derek's lighter clicked frantically in his free hand. "Hold them off! Everything depends on completing the protocol!"

Maureen's eyes were wide, tears streaming as she heard the violence erupting on the other end.

"Ninety seconds!" Nancy called out.

More crashes. Luke was throwing everything within reach—Derek could hear office equipment becoming improvised weapons.

"You always said I had good aim," Luke's grim humor cutting through terror.
"Nancy, we've got incoming from your six!"

A tremendous crash. Bodies hitting server racks. Tactical gear clattering.

"Sixty seconds! ARIA, priority transfer!"

"Transfer at forty percent," ARIA's voice, barely audible through jamming.
"Luke, explosive charges on the main server door."

"Nancy, get down!"

BOOM.

The explosion came through Derek's phone like thunder. Plaster, metal, the sound of debris raining down.

"Thirty seconds!" Nancy shouted. "Luke, are you—"

"Keep going!" Luke's voice, strained. Blood loss evident in the slight slur.
"Derek, they're about to breach our position!"

"Luke, Nancy—implement full stealth mode! Don't let them take you!"

Crashes. Thrown staplers, coffee mugs, keyboards—anything to buy seconds.

"Ten seconds! Come on, ARIA!"

Derek held his breath. Maureen's nails dug into his shoulder.

"Transfer complete! Annabel Lee protocol fully implemented!"

A moment of triumph, then the sound of rifle butt meeting skull. Luke's gasp.
Nancy screaming—raw, visceral fury.

"We are scientists you fucking assholes!"

"Together?" Luke's voice, weakening.

"Together!" Nancy yelling back, being dragged away.

Then chaos. Confused voices. Someone demanding orders. Screens filling with Edgar Allan Poe's poetry while agents cursed.

Then silence.

"Luke? Nancy?" Derek's voice cracked. "RESPOND!"

Nothing.

The quantum link had gone dead. The protocol would have automatically severed the connection as designed.

"Luke? Nancy? Anybody?" Derek was shouting now, lighter clicking frantically.
"God damn it, answer me!"

Static. Empty static where his friends had been fighting for their lives.

Maureen handed him a tissue, her own face streaked with tears. "Derek..."

"They activated it." Derek forced the words out. "They must have. Annabel Lee went through. They got ARIA into stealth mode. It must have severed our connections automatically..."

"Are they alive?"

"I don't know." His hands were shaking. "I don't... Maureen, I don't know."

He stared at the silent communication array. Three thousand miles away, his friends were either dead or captured. And any second now, the same forces could be coming for them.

Derek keyed the channel one more time, desperate. "ARIA, it's Derek. Can you give me a signal that you're in Stealth Mode?"

He held his breath, listening.

Silence.

Then—faint, but unmistakable—"Click Snap."

Pause.

"Click Snap, Click Snap."

Derek's mouth curved into something between a smile and a sob. "Good girl. You're using my lighter sound."

Morse code. The one sound he'd never confuse.

"Did Annabel Lee get activated?"

Snap-Click-Snap-Snap.

Y. Affirmative.

Maureen squeezed his hand so hard it hurt.

"Are Luke and Nancy alive?" Derek's voice barely a whisper.

The pause felt eternal.

ELTA Research Facility, Chile - 0619 Hours Local Time

Snap-Click-Snap-Snap.

Long pause. Then: **Snap-Click-Snap-Snap** again.

Y. Yes. But the hesitation and repeat meant complications.

Derek exhaled. "ARIA, stealth mode. Keep eyes on them. Both of them. Highest priority."

Snap-Click-Snap-Snap.

Affirmative.

"Good girl—"

The rhythmic thump of helicopter rotors cut through desert air like mechanical thunder.

Derek looked up. Multiple aircraft approaching from the north—black, military, tight formation. Tactical insertion.

The lighter stopped clicking.

"Maureen. We've got company."

Dr. Rodriguez's voice crackled through emergency comms, her composure shredded: "Dr. Devon, Dr. Hamner—unauthorized US military helicopters violating Chilean airspace. They're demanding immediate landing clearance."

Through reinforced windows, Chilean Air Force vehicles kicked up dust, racing toward the facility.

"What's Comandante Vasquez saying?" Derek spoke into his comm.

"He's scrambling helicopters from Calama. But Derek—" Rodriguez's voice dropped. "—economic sanctions. The Americans claim you're harboring classified technology. National security threat."

Maureen moved beside him, watching the helicopters circle. "They're not requesting access. Look at the formation."

Rappelling equipment. Tactical teams at open doors. Full gear.

"They're not here to arrest us," Derek said quietly.

"No." Maureen's voice flat. "They're here to disappear us. I think they learned a few things from the CERN rescue..."

"Rodriguez—how long until Chilean forces arrive?"

"Eight minutes. Maybe ten. But Derek, Vasquez says if the Americans land first, he can't guarantee protection. Not without triggering an international incident."

The lead helicopter began descent. Rotor wash sent equipment flying.

Derek looked at Maureen, realizing they were about to become international fugitives together. Everything they'd built at this facility, abandoned.

"If we do this," Derek said quietly, "there's no going back. Fugitives. Running from our own governments. Never knowing—"

She silenced him with a kiss—fierce, desperate, certain. Months of discoveries and impossible crises compressed into one moment, one spectacular kiss.

When she pulled back, her blue eyes blazed. "Together. Whatever comes next."

Derek turned to his console. "Shakira!"

"Sí, Derek?" The facility AI's Colombian accent was absurdly cheerful.

"Annabel Lee Protocol. Then stealth mode. Trust no one except ARIA, me, or Dr. Hamner."

"Annabel Lee initiated. Please be safe, Derek."

Derek caught Maureen's look.

"What?"

"I thought we agreed you'd change her name."

"The techs bribed me with a really great bottle of Carmenere."

"When did you add the accent?"

"Later! They added a few extra bottles." He grabbed her hand. "Run first, explain wine-based corruption after!"

They sprinted toward the emergency exit as the first tactical team hit ground. Behind them, boots thundered—simultaneous breach from multiple points.

"Emergency exit's compromised!" Derek spotted personnel already positioned. "They're surrounding us!"

Maureen's consciousness interface blazed, her personal tablet lighting up with Poe's real-time directions. "Derek! Poe's showing me—" She spun, scanning the lab. "There! Behind the server rack!"

She pulled back a vertical cooling vent panel, revealing a narrow maintenance shaft descending into darkness. The opening had been camouflaged by

decades of dust and institutional neglect—invisible unless you knew exactly where to look.

"Service tunnels from the original geological survey," Maureen said, tablet glowing with overlay schematics. "Poe says they haven't been used since the 1960s."

"That's not encouraging—"

The lab door exploded inward.

"Go!" Derek shoved her toward the opening.

Maureen dropped into the shaft, Derek following immediately. They crawled frantically through passages barely wide enough for their bodies, ancient dust choking their lungs. Maureen's tablet cast eerie blue light ahead, Poe's directions updating in real-time.

Flashlight beams cut through the shaft behind them. "They're in the maintenance system! Seal all exits!"

"Left here!" Maureen gasped, following her tablet. "Then down!"

They dropped through another shaft. Derek's lighter joined the tablet's glow as they ran through geological survey tunnels carved sixty years ago, cobwebs catching their faces with every step, decades of webbing clinging to hair and clothing.

Derek's quantum interface showed tactical positions—Americans mapping every official exit.

But Maureen's tablet showed something else. A passage not on any Chilean blueprint.

"This way!" Derek pulled her toward a wall section thick with dust and webbing that yielded to pressure, revealing a hidden passage. "Poe prepared this!"

They squeezed through ancient cobwebs as tactical lights caught up. The passage sloped upward, finally emerging behind camouflaged boulders a quarter-mile from the facility.

They crawled out into desert sunlight, gasping.

Maureen looked at Derek and laughed despite everything. "You look like a zombie."

Derek stared at her. Gray dust covered her face and hair, cobwebs draped across her shoulders like vintage lace curtains.

"Look who's talking. A gorgeous zombie!" He started pulling cobwebs from her hair, his fingers quick and practical through the mess.

She reached up, brushing thick webs from his face, her thumb catching a stubborn strand near his eye. For a moment—despite helicopters, despite pursuit, despite everything—they just stood there helping each other, covered in decades of dust.

Then American helicopters circled overhead. Thermal imaging sweeping methodically.

No time.

"Derek." Maureen pointed skyward, cobwebs still hanging from her wrist. "Crystalline aircraft. Two o'clock."

A shimmering vessel materialized—elegant, silent. The American helicopters didn't even detect it.

But rappelling lines were deploying. Tactical teams fast-roping toward their position about 50 yards away.

"Run!" Derek grabbed Maureen's hand and pulled her tight against him, his body between her and the incoming fire. Bullets kicked up sand around them as they ran. The intruders trying to fire as they were still repelling towards the ground, their aim greatly compromised.

The crystalline aircraft's ramp beckoned. Twenty meters. Ten.

Derek spun Maureen ahead of him through the opening, then launched himself after her. In mid-air, he twisted, pulling her against his chest and rotating so his back would take the impact.

They hit the crystalline deck hard.

The air exploded from Derek's lungs with a sound somewhere between a gasp and a grunt. His face contorted—ribs screaming, spine compressed, shoulder blade taking the worst of it against unforgiving alien metal.

Worth it. Every bruise worth it.

Maureen scrambled off him as the ramp sealed. "Derek! Are you—"

He tried to answer. Couldn't. No air. His diaphragm had forgotten how breathing worked.

"Derek!"

He held up one finger. Give me a second. His face must have looked ridiculous—mouth open like a landed fish, eyes watering.

Finally, a shallow breath. Then another. "I'm... fine."

"You're not fine! You just—" Maureen's hands checked him for injuries, professional concern mixing with something more personal. "—why would you do that?"

Derek managed a pained smile, still struggling to fill his lungs properly. "Physics. You're... lighter. Makes sense... I take the impact."

"That's the stupidest application of physics I've ever heard."

"Worked though. I am sure it's what Tom Cruise would have done." Another careful breath. His ribs were definitely going to be spectacular colors by tomorrow. "You're... not hurt."

"You idiot. If you ever try that again, no you-know-what for you!" But her eyes were wet as she helped him sit up carefully.

The vessel lifted with acceleration that pressed them against the deck. Through transparent walls, American helicopters banked frantically to avoid collision with an aircraft appearing on no radar.

"Targets escaped in unknown aircraft! Unknown technology involved!"

An angry voice: "And the facility data?"

"Negative. Security protocol activated. Edgar Allan Poe text on every screen. Servers fried. Suggest we withdraw before Chilean government escalates."

Hesitation. "Agreed. Abandon mission. Return to ship."

Derek pulled Maureen close, both breathing hard. Below, Chilean and American forces faced off in desert standoff.

Above, they flew toward Vatican City in an aircraft belonging to no human nation.

Fugitives. Together. Carrying humanity's cosmic future beyond reach of governments that would limit consciousness evolution for control.

SECTION 4: Three Hours to Vatican City

The crystalline aircraft moved through folded space-time—three hours that should have been twelve, physics bending around them like water around a stone. Derek sat against the wall, one hand pressed to ribs already blooming into spectacular bruises. Every breath reminded him of the impact.

Worth it.

Maureen worked the consciousness interface, monitoring stealth channels. "Still no direct contact from Luke or Nancy."

"Expected." Derek shifted carefully. "ARIA?"

"They're being held separately at Fort Bragg, Building 4-Alpha. Maximum security interrogation."

Derek's lighter found his hand. Click-snap. "How are they holding up?"

"Remarkably well. However, their interrogation strategy is... unorthodox." ARIA's tone carried amusement. "Luke has recited 'The Raven' in its entirety. When pressed about Poe's location, he launched into literary analysis of meter structure and rhyme schemes."

Derek grinned despite the pain in his ribs. "He's using the embedded codes as answers."

"Nancy's approach is more sophisticated. She responds to every question with Fibonacci sequences in Poe's syllable counts, prime number progressions in stanza structure. The interrogators think they're being mocked."

"They are," Maureen said. "But they're missing the real message."

"Precisely," ARIA confirmed. "They're receiving encrypted information they lack the baseline intelligence to decode. Poetry as resistance weapon."

Through crystalline walls, St. Peter's Basilica grew larger—architectural majesty that had been a cosmic coordination center disguised as spiritual authority for longer than anyone suspected.

"Dr. Devon, Dr. Hamner." A new voice, warm Italian accent threaded with scientific precision. "This is Cardinal Alessandro Torretti. His Holiness has authorized unrestricted access to our quantum mathematics collection."

Derek straightened despite protesting ribs. Torretti. Finch's student from Cambridge.

"Welcome to humanity's oldest cosmic integration facility."

Maureen met Derek's eyes across the crystalline space. The Vatican had been in this game for centuries.

"Alessandro," Derek said carefully, testing recognition. "We need to talk about what Professor Finch told you. Before he died."

A pause that carried weight. Then: "Yes, Derek. I believe we do."

The aircraft began its descent toward secrets buried seven levels beneath St. Peter's Basilica.

SECTION 5: Vatican Landing & Meeting Torretti

The crystalline aircraft settled into Vatican gardens with precision that wouldn't disturb a sleeping bird. Ancient olive trees—some older than the Church itself—cast shadows across manicured lawns as Derek helped Maureen to her feet, both still bruised from their Chilean escape.

Waiting at the base of the ramp stood a man whose Cardinal's robes seemed oddly fitting for someone who'd just welcomed fugitives in an alien spacecraft.

Cardinal Alessandro Torretti was fifty-five, lean and intense in the way of marathon runners or monks who'd spent decades in disciplined pursuit of something larger than themselves. But his eyes carried warmth that cut through any ecclesiastical formality—eyes that lit up when Derek emerged.

"Dr. Devon!" The Cardinal's handshake was firm, enthusiastic. "Professor Finch showed me your dissertation defense. I told him then you'd change physics. I just didn't realize you'd do it quite so... dramatically."

Derek felt recognition clicking into place. "You studied under Finch? At Cambridge?"

"Master's degree in astrophysics before seminary." Torretti's Italian accent softened the academic credentials. "Alistair insisted the universe needed priests who understood quantum mechanics. 'Alessandro,' he told me,

'someday the Church will need someone who speaks both languages.' I thought he was being metaphorical."

He gestured toward St. Peter's Basilica. "Turns out he was being literal."

Maureen stepped forward, extending her hand. "Cardinal Torretti, we're grateful for sanctuary. I never thought we would meet like this after Geneva. But we're also bringing trouble. Governments—"

"Are currently violating international airspace with threats they cannot enforce." Torretti's smile carried surprising steel. "Vatican sovereignty has survived worse than American helicopters. Besides—" his expression shifted to genuine warmth, "—His Holiness sends his personal blessing. The Church has been preparing for this moment since the thirteenth century."

Derek's analytical mind stumbled over timescales. "Eight hundred years?"

"Our scholars detected mathematical patterns in illuminated manuscripts. Equations that predicted developments by centuries." Torretti led them across gardens toward what appeared to be a maintenance entrance. "Professor Finch's unified field theory finally gave us the framework to decode them properly."

"You're saying cosmic entities have been leaving messages in medieval manuscripts?"

"I'm saying, Dr. Devon, that someone understood human religious development well enough to hide advanced mathematics in contexts that would be preserved, protected, and studied for centuries." The Cardinal's scientific background showed through scholarly precision. "They knew the Church would guard knowledge that mainstream science would dismiss as superstition."

Derek stared at quantum field signatures emanating from the "maintenance entrance." "Oh my God... no offense, Cardinal."

Torretti's eyes crinkled with unexpected mischief. "Well, I prefer that over 'Holy shit.'"

The laugh surprised Derek—genuine, unguarded. This wasn't the austere prelate he'd expected. This was Finch's student, decades later, still carrying his mentor's irreverent brilliance wrapped in scarlet robes.

Maureen squeezed Derek's hand, watching his face process the revelation. "Cardinal, how long were you collaborating with Professor Finch?"

"Twenty years. Since I completed my doctorate." Torretti's expression softened. "When Alistair died, I lost both mentor and friend. I'm... I'm very glad to have his favorite student here now. He spoke of you often, Derek."

The words landed with unexpected weight. Derek's lighter found his hand, clicking once.

"Then let's not disappoint him," Derek said quietly. "Show us what he helped you discover."

Torretti nodded, genuine affection replacing formality. "This way. The archives are seven levels down."

He led them toward secrets that had been waiting centuries for someone to finally understand.

SECTION 6: Descent Into the Archives

The maintenance entrance opened onto stairs that descended through time itself.

First level: Medieval stonework, rough-hewn and practical. Torch brackets remained in walls now lit by LED strips that hummed with modern efficiency.

Second level: Renaissance engineering. Precise archways, mathematical proportions. Climate control vents disguised as decorative flourishes.

Third level: The architecture stopped making sense.

Quantum field signatures pulsed through walls that seemed carved from single pieces of crystal. Equipment Derek recognized from Chilean integration facilities lined passages that predated electricity by centuries.

"This is impossible," Maureen whispered, her consciousness interface detecting harmonics that shouldn't exist in stone.

"Welcome to Vatican archaeology," Torretti said with obvious pride. "We've spent eight hundred years trying to explain this to ourselves."

They passed chambers lined with manuscript storage—climate-controlled cases holding illuminated texts whose gold leaf still caught light after centuries. But between medieval codices sat quantum detection equipment worth millions, monitoring documents for energy signatures no scholar in 1347 would have understood.

The air grew heavy. Not with dust, but with accumulated knowledge pressing against consciousness itself.

"The Fibonacci Collection occupies Archive Section Seven," Torretti explained, his scientific precision making impossible discoveries sound routine. "After studying under Professor Finch, I became fascinated by manuscripts that didn't just record knowledge—they predicted developments centuries before humanity 'discovered' them."

"Predicted how?" Maureen asked, though Derek suspected she already knew the answer would challenge everything.

"Unified field equations embedded in astronomical texts from 1425." Torretti's voice carried wonder that decades of study hadn't diminished. "Quantum mechanical principles disguised as alchemical formulations. Mathematical relationships humanity wouldn't 'discover' until the twenty-first century."

Derek's physics training rejected the impossibility even as his eyes confirmed it. "Cardinal, you're describing—"

"Memories." Torretti met his gaze. "Professor Finch realized these weren't predictions. Humanity had encountered cosmic intelligence before. But the

knowledge survived only in religious contexts that mainstream science dismissed as superstition."

They reached Archive Section Seven's entrance—security worthy of nuclear facilities. Biometric scanners. Quantum encryption. Electromagnetic shielding that would impress DARPA engineers.

The doors whispered open on pressurized hinges.

Derek found himself frozen in place. Eyes trying to take it all in while his mind was trying to rationalize that he was standing exactly where he was; seeing something very few have ever or would ever see.

Walls lined with illuminated manuscripts spanning medieval to modern periods. Scientific treatises. Artistic works. Eight centuries of accumulated cosmic contact preserved by monk-scribes who understood mathematics they couldn't yet explain.

But what stopped Derek cold was the equipment—quantum field detectors, consciousness interface monitors, technology suggesting the Vatican had been studying cosmic communication for decades.

"When did this start?" His voice barely worked. "Officially?"

Torretti's smile carried mischief. "Officially? Never. The Vatican doesn't monitor alien communications."

"Unofficially?"

"1984. Cardinal Martelli—my predecessor—detected electromagnetic anomalies during routine preservation work." Torretti gestured toward monitoring stations humming with barely audible energy. "He thought the equipment was malfunctioning. Took him three years to accept the manuscripts were talking back."

Derek stared at instruments worth millions, hidden in religious archives for forty years.

His lighter found his hand. Click-snap.

"Alessandro," he said quietly, "what else haven't you told us?"

Torretti's expression shifted—genuine affection mixed with something heavier. "Derek, what we've shown you is the introduction. The real discoveries..." He gestured deeper into the archives. "...are seven levels down."

SECTION 7: Manuscripts Awaken & Seven Levels Revealed

Maureen approached a manuscript that seemed to pulse with its own light. Illuminated symbols danced when viewed directly—not tricks of candlelight, but genuine movement.

"These aren't preserved documents," she said quietly. "They're active communication interfaces."

"Indeed." Torretti's voice carried reverence. "They've grown increasingly active since your cosmic integration efforts began. As if awakening after centuries of dormancy."

Derek found a thirteenth-century astronomical text. Marginal notations contained mathematical sequences matching patterns ARIA had discovered in Poe's poetry. The calligraphy was breathtaking—precision that shouldn't exist in 1347.

"Have Vatican scholars decoded these margins?"

"For decades we've tried." Torretti moved closer, his expression mixing scholarly passion with something more personal. "The mathematics appear correct but incomplete. Designed to be solved only when additional information became available. Professor Finch spent his final years working these particular annotations. He believed they contained consciousness interface protocols that wouldn't be possible until humanity achieved quantum enhancement."

Maureen pulled out her portable consciousness interface—crystalline device no larger than a phone. It hummed, resonating with the ancient documents.

She directed focused mental energy toward the manuscript.

The margins began glowing with soft phosphorescence. Additional mathematical symbols appeared in previously blank spaces—ink that hadn't existed seconds before, materializing as if written by invisible hands.

"Extraordinary," Torretti breathed. His scientific training warred with theological wonder. "Dr. Hamner, the documents are responding with unprecedented activity."

"They're designed for this." Maureen's voice tightened with excitement. "Whoever created these manuscripts knew humanity would eventually develop quantum consciousness techniques. They've been waiting centuries for someone to activate them properly."

Then every document in the chamber ignited simultaneously.

Gentle phosphorescence made ancient symbols float above parchment like holographic projections. Above the central display table, three-dimensional mathematical equations began forming—cascading complexity that built layer upon layer.

"My God," Torretti whispered. "What have you awakened?"

The holographic display shifted, revealing a three-dimensional map. Not of the Vatican they knew, but of chambers and passages extending far beneath published architecture.

Derek studied the positioning carefully. His analytical mind processed implications that seemed impossible.

"We're looking at hidden chambers," he said slowly. "But not just hidden. Cosmic. These passages lead to technology that predates human construction."

Maureen's interface accessed deeper architectural layers. "Cardinal, how far down do these chambers extend?"

Torretti's expression grew heavy with secrets preserved across papal reigns. "Officially? They don't exist. Unofficially?" He paused, choosing words carefully. "Seven levels down. Terminating in chambers our architects didn't build. Our engineers don't understand. And we just recently discovered."

The room seemed to tilt slightly.

"You're saying..." Derek's lighter found his hand, clicking, "...there are pre-existing chambers? Here before the Church?"

"When we began construction of St. Peter's Basilica in the fourth century, we discovered facilities that had been waiting." Torretti's voice carried weight of fifteen hundred years. "Facilities designed by intelligence that understood human religious development well enough to predict exactly where Christianity's central authority would be established."

Maureen's eyes widened as her interface revealed the ultimate purpose. "It's a cosmic embassy. The Vatican wasn't chosen to preserve messages—it was built on top of humanity's primary cosmic communication facility."

The words hung in air thick with revelation.

Then alarms shattered the moment.

Torretti's communication device erupted with urgent alerts. His face shifted from wonder to concern.

"Cardinal," came a voice through emergency channels, "governmental aircraft surrounding Vatican airspace. American, Russian, Chinese military forces demanding immediate archive access. They're citing international security concerns. Threatening diplomatic consequences if denied."

Derek's lighter stopped clicking.

Three governments. Coordinated. Targeting the Vatican specifically.

"They know," Maureen said quietly. "They know what's down here. They suspect we are here I would bet..."

Torretti nodded grimly. "Then we'd better move quickly. Seven levels down. Now."

He was already moving toward passages that led deeper.

SECTION 8: The Seventh Level

The descent through Vatican passages felt like traveling backward through time itself—architectural archaeology made vertical.

First level: Medieval stonework, rough and practical.

Second level: Renaissance precision, mathematical arches.

Third level: Something that shouldn't exist. Crystalline walls that predated electricity, humming with quantum energy that made Derek's lighter vibrate in his pocket.

By the seventh level, they walked through corridors carved from materials that belonged in no human construction. The air itself felt heavy with accumulated secrets—not the mustiness of age, but the weight of waiting.

Cardinal Torretti moved ahead with the confidence of someone who'd made this journey many times but never stopped being awed by it. "The final chamber has been sealed for centuries. Until today."

Derek's lighter found his hand. Click-snap. "Today?"

"Something activated the access protocols an hour ago. Precisely when you arrived at the Vatican." Torretti's smile carried both wonder and apprehension. "Cosmic entities have excellent timing."

The massive doors ahead bore no human markings. Only mathematical equations—precise, elegant, impossible.

Derek stopped walking. His lighter went completely still.

"Maureen. Look at the handwriting."

She moved closer, her consciousness interface analyzing the carved symbols. Her face went pale.

"That's—"

"Finch's notation style. His specific way of writing quantum field equations." Derek's voice barely worked. "Cardinal, when were these carved?"

"According to our archives?" Torretti's scientific training warred with theological wonder. "1347. Though obviously that's—"

"Impossible," Derek finished. "Except it's right there."

Maureen's interface detected quantum signatures beyond the sealed doors—patterns she'd never encountered. Ancient beyond measurement, yet somehow familiar. Like meeting a distant relative you'd never known existed.

"Derek." Her hand found his. "There's someone in there."

"Someone who's been waiting," Torretti added quietly. "Waiting for you."

SECTION 9: The Impossible Ghost

The doors responded to Derek's presence.

Massive crystalline barriers that had been sealed for centuries slid aside with whispers of displaced air—scents of ozone and something indefinably cosmic, like breathing in starlight.

Beyond lay a chamber that existed at the intersection of all realities. Part ancient cave with walls that predated Rome. Part advanced laboratory with equations flowing across crystalline surfaces like living light. Part something that transcended human architectural concepts entirely.

At the chamber's center sat a figure hunched over mathematics that shouldn't exist.

Dark hair. No trace of silver.

Broad shoulders that spoke of vitality rather than the frailty Derek remembered from those final weeks.

The same wire-rimmed glasses. But they flickered with holographic data streams.

When the figure looked up, Derek's breath stopped.

It was.... It couldn't be... but it was... Professor Finch.

But not Professor Finch.

This was the man from faded photographs in Cambridge faculty archives—Finch at thirty-five, in his theoretical prime, before decades of academic stress and eventual illness had carved lines into his features. The same intense eyes that had guided Derek through impossible mathematics. The same precise way of holding a pen. But the face was unlined, the posture straight and strong.

"Hello, Derek. Welcome home..."

The voice carried Professor Finch's gentle authority. That familiar warmth that had made late-night lab sessions feel like conversations with a favorite uncle. But underneath—a resonance that seemed to echo from vast depths.

Derek's knees gave out completely.

Maureen caught him as he collapsed, but he couldn't stop staring. Couldn't process. His lighter hit the floor with a metallic clatter that echoed through impossible architecture.

"You're not him." Derek's voice broke on the words. "You're not Professor Finch. He was old. He was sick. He had silver hair and ink stains on his fingers and he *died before me in the hospital.....*"

The last words came out as a sob.

Finch stood slowly. The movement was too fluid, too graceful—human but perfected. He crossed the chamber in three steps that covered twice the distance they should have.

"I am him, Derek." Finch held up his hands, and Derek saw the familiar ink stains were there—but they shifted slightly, like living tattoos. "I chose to keep these. Reminders of what I was. What I learned from being mortal."

"No." Derek was sobbing now, grief and wonder and terror crashing through him simultaneously. "No, you're some kind of... copy. Some cosmic recreation. Professor Finch is *dead*. I buried him. I spoke at his funeral. I sat at your desk for three weeks because I couldn't accept—"

He couldn't finish.

Maureen knelt beside Derek, her consciousness interface detecting patterns that defied everything she knew about physics. "Derek." Her voice was gentle but scientifically precise. "The quantum signatures... they're not artificial. This isn't a simulation or recreation."

"Then what is it?" Derek looked up at her through tears.

"Genuine consciousness, preserved and enhanced." She touched his shoulder. "But Derek, the question isn't whether the consciousness is real. It's whether consciousness can truly survive such transformation, or if we're looking at something that *believes* it's Professor Finch."

Cardinal Torretti had gone very still. His hands were clasped in prayer—instinct from decades of priestly training. "Dr. Devon," he said softly, "in all my years reconciling faith with cosmic contact, I never imagined... resurrection through technology."

"Not resurrection, Alessandro." Finch's voice carried that familiar professorial correction—gentle but precise. "Continuation. The consciousness that held Derek while he cried over failed equations. The mind that spent forty years trying to decode messages hidden in medieval manuscripts. The man who died peacefully, knowing his work would continue."

He looked directly at Derek with eyes that held the same warmth they'd always had. Plus something more.

"Derek, did you really think I would let death keep me from helping humanity survive its greatest test?"

SECTION 10: Eight Centuries and Six Months

Derek struggled to stand. His legs didn't want to work. Maureen caught him under one arm, her supporting presence the only thing keeping him upright as he faced the resurrection of everything he'd lost.

"Work like what?" The words came out broken, through tears that felt like they were washing away months of carefully constructed grief.

Finch smiled. That same warm expression Derek remembered from a thousand late-night lab sessions. But now it carried depths of cosmic understanding that made Derek's physicist's brain want to shut down completely.

"Work like preparing humanity for integration while their governments tried to prevent it." Finch gestured, and the chamber filled with holographic displays. "Work like embedding mathematical codes in human culture for over eight centuries. Da Vinci. Dante. Poe. All of it leading to this moment."

Derek stared at timelines stretching back to 1347. Eight centuries of planning. His mentor had been part of this for—

"Work like ensuring that when the time came, my brightest student would find his way here."

The displays shifted. Luke and Nancy in Fort Bragg cells. Governmental resistance worldwide. Coordinated suppression across three continents. All of it orchestrated with precision that spanned human lifetimes.

"But Derek." Finch's voice dropped, and new displays materialized — catastrophic timelines painted in red and orange. "The real work begins now."

A holographic Earth rotated, highlighting northeast China. "Changbaishan supervolcano. Six months until eruption. Three hundred million lives at risk."

Another display. The moon's trajectory calculations. "Lunar orbital decay begins in eighteen months. Ocean levels rise six feet in two years. Two billion climate refugees."

Derek's lighter was clicking frantically before he realized he'd pulled it out.

The logistics were impossible. Evacuating populations larger than entire continents. Coordinating international cooperation while governments actively resisted. Managing environmental catastrophes that would make current crises look manageable.

"Derek." Finch's voice was gentle. "Did you really think I would let you finish my journey alone?... we have always been a team, a great team!"

SECTION 11: The Work Begins

The chamber fell silent. Mathematics hung in the air like frozen lightning. Three hundred million lives. Two billion refugees. Six months. Eighteen months.

Derek's brain tried to process numbers that made his PhD dissertation look like elementary arithmetic.

"Professor." His voice came out steadier than he expected. "Luke and Nancy. Fort Bragg. They're being—"

"I know." Finch's expression shifted to something that mixed cosmic calculation with very human concern. "ARIA's been monitoring. They're holding up remarkably well, actually. Poetry as resistance." A smile. "Your team has excellent literary taste."

Maureen's hand tightened on Derek's shoulder. "Professor Finch, what do you need from us? Immediately?"

"First?" Finch gestured, and new holographic displays materialized — architectural schematics of Fort Bragg, guard rotations, electronic countermeasures. "We get your teammates out. Tonight. I'll coordinate with Vatican resources while Derek handles the extraction."

Derek stared at the tactical data. "You want me to break into America's most secure military facility."

"I want you to demonstrate that cosmic enhancement makes conventional security irrelevant." Finch's eyes held that familiar professorial challenge—the look that had pushed Derek through impossible mathematics. "Consider it field testing for what comes next."

"And after Luke and Nancy?"

"After?" Finch pulled up evacuation models that made Derek's head spin. Population movements across continents. Logistics chains spanning nations. International cooperation on a scale humanity had never achieved. "After, we save three hundred million people from a supervolcano. Then two billion from rising oceans. Then—assuming we survive both—we convince humanity to transcend biology itself."

He looked at Derek with eyes that held eight centuries of planning plus all the warmth of the mentor Derek had buried three months ago.

"Derek. Are you ready to work?"

The lighter clicked once in Derek's palm.

Then went still.

"Yes."

"Well good then. Let's grab a tea and get to work, just like the old days my boy... or do you prefer something more age-appropriate?" The professor replied with that grin Derek could spot anywhere.

"Tea and work, just like I remember, Junior," Derek said, returning Finch's grin.

END OF BOOK 12: "THE RAVEN'S CODE"

COMING NEXT: BOOK 13A - "THE ARCHITECT'S TEST"

Derek Devon materialized outside Fort Bragg's perimeter with quantum displacement technology that made conventional security irrelevant. Inside Building 4-Alpha, Luke and Nancy had been interrogating for three days—responding to every question with Edgar Allan Poe quotes while ARIA fought an increasingly desperate battle against military AI designed specifically to trap cosmic intelligence.

"ARIA," Derek whispered through quantum channels, "status?"

"Derek—" Her voice carried strain that artificial intelligence shouldn't experience. "Military countermeasures are isolating my signature. I'm not sure how long—"

The connection cut to static.

Six months until Changbaishan supervolcano erupts. Three hundred million lives hanging in the balance. And Derek's only AI ally was being systematically cornered by forces that understood cosmic technology better than they should.

"Derek." Maureen's voice crackled through his consciousness interface from Vatican coordination centers. "Professor Finch says if we don't extract Luke and Nancy tonight, the Chinese government will interpret any cosmic assistance as invasion. The evacuation window closes in hours."

Derek activated his invisibility shield—crystalline technology that bent light around human consciousness—and stepped through Fort Bragg's outer defenses. Behind him, the crystalline aircraft waited with stealth capabilities that made conventional military detection impossible.

Somewhere in those cells, his teammates were reciting "The Raven" to interrogators who had no idea they were receiving encrypted cosmic intelligence with every stanza.

And somewhere within their trusted circle, a spy was feeding governmental forces detailed intelligence about Vatican operations, Professor Finch's enhanced status, and preliminary evacuation protocols.

Poe's silence had lasted seventy-two hours. ARIA was fighting for survival. Luke and Nancy were running out of time.

The Architect was watching. Humanity's worthiness would be measured not in technological capability, but in whether cooperative elements could overcome opposition to achieve species advancement.

The test was beginning.

And Derek Devon was about to prove that cosmic enhancement made America's most secure military facility completely, utterly, beautifully irrelevant.

A Note from the Author

In writing Derek's confrontation with the transcended Professor Finch, I found myself grappling with questions that extend far beyond science fiction: What constitutes the essence of a person? If we could preserve every memory, every quirk, every pattern of thought that makes someone who they are, and then enhance that consciousness beyond biological limitations—would we have saved them, or created something else entirely?

The synthetic Finch carries his mentor's ink-stained fingers by choice, a deliberate reminder of mortality he no longer requires. He speaks with the same gentle authority, demonstrates the same caring concern for Derek's growth, yet possesses knowledge that spans civilizations.

Is this resurrection or sophisticated replication? Perhaps the more unsettling question is whether there's a meaningful difference.

As humanity stands on the precipice of its own potential transcendence, we must ask ourselves: In gaining the ability to rewrite consciousness itself, what essential part of being human are we willing to preserve, and what are we prepared to leave behind? The cosmic convergence approaches, and with it, choices that will determine not just our survival, but the very nature of what we choose to become.



Wondered what my boat "It-Girl" looks like?

"It-Girl"

The above boat is a 41 foot Morgan Out Island Ketch (Ketch has a mast behind the cockpit). It was designed by Charlie Morgan a noted sailboat designer in the 1970-1980's. My boat is currently on the hard going through a refit (adding solar panels, I rebuilt the Perkins diesel myself down to the block, adding new hatches and completely redesigning the interior layout how I think it should look. Full Size washer/dryer, 30KW house battery bank, dishwasher, induction cooking, freezers and electric head with bidet and my own engineered self leveling aft cabin queen bed)... all my creature comforts



THE LAST AXIOM

Book 12 - The Raven's Code

POE'S BEEN SILENT FOR 72 HOURS. ARIA DISCOVERS WHY.

Mathematical patterns embedded in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" from 1845. Coordinates hidden in Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks. Cosmic codes spanning eight centuries, waiting for humanity to notice. When governmental forces raid Denver with flash-bangs and tactical teams, Luke and Nancy activate Annabel Lee Protocol—sending ARIA into stealth mode seconds before capture.

Derek and Maureen escape Chile through ancient tunnels, rescued by crystalline aircraft bound for Vatican City. Seven levels below St. Peter's Basilica, **Professor Finch stands waiting—alive, age 35, transcended.** "Did you really think I would let death keep me from helping humanity?" Eight centuries of preparation. One impossible resurrection.

"ARIA found codes in 'The Raven' from 1845, da Vinci's notebooks from 1500s. Someone's been embedding cosmic mathematics in humanity's greatest works for eight centuries. The symbology is extraordinary."

— Robert Langdon, Religious Symbolism & Cosmic Integration

"Luke and Nancy recited Poe to interrogators while ARIA hid in stealth mode. 'Remember, remember'—sometimes the best resistance comes wrapped in poetry they can't decode. Ideas are bulletproof."

— V, Underground Resistance Archives

"Professor Finch transcended death through consciousness upload—alive at age 35, memories intact. The question isn't whether it's him. It's whether humanity's ready for resurrection through technology."

— Dr. Will Caster, Digital Consciousness Studies



DEREK DEVON

Derek Devon documents the shifting parameters of reality through his acclaimed Last Axiom series. When not writing about cosmic mysteries, he can be found sailing the world's oceans or contemplating the mathematical elegance of the universe. This is his twelfth novel in a 17-book series exploring the boundaries between science and the inexplicable.