

A devastating plague occurs. The Rumpel Man must bring about The Coming Together to save the country. Eight people who emerge from the plague with mysterious Gifts are crucial to this great uprising. Without them, The Coming Together can't happen.

## **The Eight**

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THE **8** IGH T



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# THE EIGHT

## PROLOGUE

He saw four possible futures for the United States. Only one was good. The Coming Together played a crucial role in that future. The Coming Together had to happen.

His vision wasn't sharpened yet, but he dimly saw eight people. These eight people were going to be at the forefront of the Coming Together.

He must bring these people to Montana. As clouds form and spark a massive thunderstorm, so would these people be a catalyst for a movement that would forever change history.

The Eight were far flung. He had to bring them together as a group before they could make the trek to Montana. The way was long. The way was hard. The way was dangerous.

He sighed.

He massaged his head with his hands. The time was at hand.

He began Calling the Eight.



## PART I

### **The Beginning – June 4th**

*Chad Allen*

*Willow Tree, Texas*

Vomit sprayed from Chad Allen's open mouth, splattering onto an orange vinyl chair. The break room chatter ceased.

"Gross!" A young woman leaped up out of her chair.

Chad clutched his stomach.

"Uhhhh."

He vomited again. It arced onto the white tile floor. His co-workers scattered, shouting.

Chad slumped in his chair; his eyes were closed and vomit dripped from his chin. His shirt was stained. He breathed harshly, wheezing.

Chad Allen had just become one of the first victims of Ravioli Syndrome.

The disease's odd name stemmed from the tragic case of three children who had eaten ravioli for dinner, puked up every last bit of the ravioli and even parts of their own bodies, or so the press reported.

The children died, and in the beginning, it was thought that the canned ravioli was tainted. Even after the ravioli was eliminated as the cause, the name stuck.

The cause was something much worse than tainted food. It was a virus, highly contagious. It passed from person to person in a breath or a touch.

The disease began in California. Not much was known about it then. Just a few reports here and there of people who were getting sick in California; of some strange, unexplainable virus hitting the west coast, near Los Angeles, San Francisco and San Diego.

From there, the disease spread all over the country, as travelers carried it to other states.

Debbie Irick rushed over to Chad's side. She wiped Chad's face with a wet washrag.

Chad opened his eyes. He looked at Debbie. He felt the bile rising up in his throat and struggled to keep from throwing up again. He'd heaved before, but this was *different*.

*STEVE POWERS*

“Chad, go home,” she said.

“Gimme a minute. I’ll be okay,” he said, with effort. He tried to stand up and almost fell to the floor.

“Whoa there, buddy!” He felt a strong arm yank him up and saw Glenn Kajahira. Glenn helped him sit back down, as Debbie softly patted his back.

“Maybe we should call an ambulance,” Debbie said, worriedly.

“No, no, don’t do that. If I can just go home and lie down for a little while, I think I’ll be okay.”

“Well, you can’t drive home. Let Glenn drive you home. We’ll have someone bring your car by later.”

Glenn helped Chad into the empty house, where he fell heavily on the bed he and Laurel shared, not even bothering to take off his clothes. Glenn called Chad’s wife and she hurriedly left her classroom, after arranging for a substitute.

Glenn and Debbie were dead within a week. So were all the other workers in the break room.

Chad fell into a deep sleep. He woke up when he heard Laurel’s soft voice. “Chad, how do you feel? What’s wrong, honey? Can I get you anything?”

“No. Just let me sleep.” Chad mumbled and turned over. His body felt leaden; it took a supreme effort to roll over.

Afterwards, Chad didn’t remember much of what he called “my sick time.”

His memories of being sick were distorted and half-remembered.

He’d gotten so hot he clawed at his clothes. Laurel must have grown tired of trying to keep clothes on him; he found himself naked and sweating as he thrashed about on the bed. He thought his body was on fire and desperately yearned for someone to call the fire department.

Chad vomited so many times that it was finally just one long series of dry heaves. His throat burned and chest hurt from the repeated vomiting. Bizarre, nightmarish images punctuated his sickness.

His body screamed in agony; in his few lucid moments, he wondered why Laurel wasn’t taking him to the hospital. He defecated all over himself. No matter how loudly he called, no one came.

His eyes had an immense pressure pushing on them from the inside, feeling as if they were going to explode internally from the relentless,

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insistent force. His ears popped and drained, popped and drained vile-smelling fluid repeatedly.

The whole bedroom smelled incredibly bad, but Chad was beyond caring. He only wanted to die. Why didn't someone come to take care of him?

STEVE POWERS

**Day 1—June 12<sup>th</sup>**

*Chad and Jody Allen  
Willow Tree, Texas*

Chad blearily opened his eyes. He didn't feel sick anymore. Weak and trembly, yes, but not sick.

He called, in a shaky voice, "Laurel! Jody! Rob! Scott!" No response. He fell back on the bed, exhausted.

He tried calling again. Still no answer.

He strained to turn his head to the side. He squinted as the light from the bedside window touched his eyes. Daylight was fading and long shadows stretched from the backyard trees.

Chad tried to sit up, but couldn't manage it. With great effort, he rolled himself to the edge of the bed and let his feet hang off. Using his arms for leverage, he pushed off the bed. Grunting with the strain, he finally managed to sit up, breathing hard.

He reached out to the nearby dresser and pulled himself up to a standing position. A wave of dizziness swirled in his head; he swayed from side to side, holding tightly to the smooth wood of the dresser top.

His head cleared. He staggered into the bathroom, holding on to the wall. Several times, he stumbled and nearly fell.

He flicked the light switch. A weak light shined in the bathroom, as if the bulb was burning at half-strength.

Chad peered at himself in the mirror, straining to see in the gloom. His grubby reflection stared back at him. His hair was matted and a coarse growth of reddish-brown stubble crept up his neck, snaking its way to his cheekbones. He rubbed the stubble. From the looks of it, he'd been out for awhile.

He leaned forward and turned the porcelain handle above the sink. At first, no water came out, then the faucet groaned and water grudgingly trickled out. He felt of the water with a finger. Lukewarm. He waited a few minutes but the water never got any warmer.

He finally cupped the water in his shaking hands and scrubbed flecks off his face. He did the same with his body, trying to erase the grime and filth as best as he could.

Chad dried off with a small hand towel and looked behind him. He smiled wanly as he spotted the fuzzy purple bathrobe the kids had given him for Father's Day several years ago. He actually hated the color purple, but

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he'd exclaimed over the robe as if were the best present he'd ever received in his life.

He haltingly arranged the robe around him, wincing as he moved. He was really sore, from all the throwing up, he supposed.

He called out to his family again. No one answered. Odd. What was going on here?

Chad walked slowly to the doorway. His legs felt weak and shaky. He looked down the hallway. It seemed so long and looked different, somehow. Sheer will propelled him forward.

He finally reached the first bedroom on the left, the boys' bedroom, and looked in. The room was dark, but in the dimness, he could make out a lump on each of the twin beds.

"Rob! Scott! Wake up and help daddy!" Neither of the lumps moved.

Chad moved to the nearest bed and shook Scott's shoulder. He didn't stir. He shook Scott harder. Still nothing. Chad turned him over and pulled the covers off him, then recoiled at what he saw.

Scott's eyes were halfway out of the eye sockets and on his face, mixed in with blood and spongy matter from his eyes. His pajamas were torn and covered with feces and vomit. Scott was obviously dead and had been for awhile.

Chad shut his eyes and backed away, sinking to his knees on the floor. He thought he might throw up again. A roaring filled his head and he felt dizzy. He lay on the floor, searching for a way back into the sweet oblivion of dreamless sleep.

He didn't know how long he laid there. He thought he might just lie there and never get up.

Finally, he did manage to pull himself to a sitting position and scooted on his rear end over to Rob's bed. His hands shook as he pulled back the covers.

Rob wasn't as bad as Scott, though his pajamas were also torn and he too was covered in excrement. But he was just as dead.

My God, Chad thought, my two boys, gone, just like that. He pulled himself up, stumbling to the door, nearly tripping over some clothes piled on the floor.

The boys had never been good about picking up their dirty clothes and putting them in the laundry hamper. Chad had yelled at them plenty about that.

*STEVE POWERS*

Now, it seemed so unimportant. He would gladly suffer dirty laundry if he could only hold his boys in his arms again, kissing their little-boy cheeks.

Chad shakily left the boys' bedroom, walking down the hallway into the living room, steeling himself for what he might find. The gathering darkness outside made it difficult to see in the living room, but he could see Laurel in a prone position on the green micro fiber couch.

He didn't need to check her for signs of life; she was dead. She lay on her back, her eyes wide open, staring into nothingness.

Her nightgown was in shreds and long, red scratches covered her legs and arms.

Chad looked at her, then had to look away. Chad's chest felt tight and he gasped for breath, only able to draw in little sips of air. He leaned heavily against the wall.

Averting his face from the sight of Laurel, he carefully made his way to the dining room table, a beat-up old thing with scratches and gouges earned from years of kids sitting at it and pounding on it and digging their silverware into it during family meals.

Chad heavily sat in one of the chairs, put his head down on the smooth wood of the table and sobbed.

He cried for a long time, strangled moaning sounds escaping his throat. He had never felt more alone than he did at that moment.

Chad knew what he had to do next and dreaded it.

He grabbed a kitchen towel from the rack near the bar. The kitchen was dank and smelled of dirty dishes and old coffee. A dark stain covered the countertop, where the automatic coffee maker had overflowed.

Wiping his nose and eyes, Chad began to walk, ever so slowly, to Jody's room. Fear marked his every step.

Jody was Chad's oldest, thirteen years old. Her room was on the other side of the dining room, tucked in behind a little laundry room. The room had been an add-on, and Chad had built it himself, something he had been extremely proud of at the time.

Jody's room was very girly and immaculate. She made her bed everyday and cleaned and vacuumed the room, almost to the point of obsession. She liked to keep her room in order and yelled at her brothers when they moved something out of place. A polka-dot bedspread adorned her queen-sized bed.

Chad recalled the day Jody had seen it at Target and begged him to buy it. She had been ten at the time. She'd jumped up and down, pulling at his

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arm. “Oh Daddy, that is so cute! Please, can I get it for my bed? Please, please!”

Chad had bought the darn thing for her, even though Laurel didn’t think they had the money to spend. Jody was so excited when she got home; she rushed to her room, tore the old blue bedspread off the bed and tossed it aside. Then she carefully made up the bed with the new spread, got under the covers and pulled it up to her chin, grinning like an idiot. Chad laughed at her, but it felt good to see her so happy.

Chad hesitatingly entered Jody’s room. She lay on her side; her face to the wall, the polka-dot spread nearly covering her up. He could only see her head poking out of the covers. Jody’s light brown hair normally gleamed with highlights; now it looked dull and lifeless. Chad knew Jody would hate that; she spent hours fixing her hair just the way she liked it.

Outside, the dark was coming. The reddish rays of the sunset streamed through the window, casting a muted patch of color on Jody’s bed.

A sturdy oak tree, less than a foot from the window, swayed, its dark shadows seemingly beckoning him. Its leafy branches waggled up and down, as if they had an urgent message to impart.

Chad stood by Jody’s bedside. He softly called her name. No response. He took a deep breath and gently shook her shoulder.

She didn’t stir. No. Not again. Chad squeezed his eyes tight and shook her shoulder again, harder this time. As he stood there, not daring to open his eyes, he heard a faint little voice, “Daddy?”

Chad’s eyes snapped open. Jody was looking at him, confusion in her sweet blue eyes.

“Daddy, where were you? Oh Daddy, I felt so bad. I thought I was going to die. Then I thought I was all alone when no one came to check on me.”

“No baby, I’m here. I was sick, too. I just got out of bed.”

Jody looked at Chad with a question in her eyes, one he did not want to answer. He felt his mouth trying to work.

But she knew.

“They’re gone, aren’t they? Mom and Rob and Scott.”

Chad croaked out, “Yes.”

Tears began spilling out of Jody’s blue eyes, like rain pouring down her cheeks. Chad lay beside Jody, held her tight and cried with her.

In the twilight of that summer evening, Chad and Jody Allen wept. Time passed.

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Finally, Jody looked up at Chad, wiping her reddened eyes with one small hand.

“What are we gonna do, Daddy?”

Jody and Chad looked at each other. She tried to smile at him, but her mouth barely turned up at the corners before her lips began trembling.

“I don’t know.” Chad bleakly stared off into space, his chocolate-brown eyes unfocused. What *were* they going to do? What did you do when some unknown force ripped apart your family, forever separating you?

“Daddy?”

“Yes, sweetheart?”

Jody bit her bottom lip. “Um. What do we do about them?”

“Them?” Chad said, confused.

“You know. Mom and Rob and Scott.”

“Oh.” A bolt of pain shot through Chad’s head as he thought about the bodies of his wife and two sons. He didn’t want to deal with this right now. He wanted to just lie down somewhere until all this went away.

Chad looked at Jody, sorrow and regret etching his face. “I don’t really know, honey. I guess we’ll have to make some calls and get someone to take care of them.”

Jody reached out, gripping his hands tightly. “Oh, Daddy.”

Chad’s throat closed up. He couldn’t speak. Jody sat up and leaned forward, putting her head on her dad’s chest. He wrapped his arms around her.

They sat in silence. Darkness fell.

Thousands of miles north, a man watched Chad and Jody. The man sat in his comfortable recliner. A lit pipe hung from his mouth, a small spot of flame glowing in the darkened room.

The man shook his head. He felt their sorrow keenly, like a too-sharp knife slicing into tender flesh.

Chad didn’t yet know it, but he was very important. The man needed to reach Chad and convince him to travel north. Then Bonnie. If he reached these two, the others would follow and his plan would be set into motion.

Chad loosened his grip on Jody, stretching across her to switch on her bedside lamp. The light flickered on and off, dimming repeatedly before finally emitting its normal light.

Jody stared at the lamp. “Why’s it doing that, Daddy?” she asked.

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Chad responded thoughtfully, "I don't know. Maybe the breakers are messed up. I'll have to check on them. But I wonder about the power. That's sort of the way it acts during a thunderstorm when the power is about to go out."

Jody shivered. "I hope it doesn't go off. That would be too scary."

"It's okay for now." Chad looked around. "Jody, where's your cell phone?"

Jody pointed across the room. "It's over there. On the dresser."

Chad retrieved the phone and flipped it open. The cell's screen remained dark. He fiddled with it for a few minutes, but could get no response.

Chad made a face. "The cell phone's dead. It's not getting a signal,"

He reached for the bright purple vid-phone on Jody's bedside table and flicked a switch. The video monitor remained a featureless gray.

A buzzing sound issued from the speakers, an odd-sounding note. No matter what numbers he spoke into it, the buzzing insistently continued. He tried 911 and the operator and got the same frustrating results.

"Phone lines are out, too," Chad said.

Jody looked worried. "But why?"

"I don't know. But something is definitely up. Let's turn on your TV and see if we can find anything out." Chad walked to the foot of Jody's bed and turned on the little TV positioned there.

Static flared out from the television. Chad quickly flipped through the channels. Same result, except for one channel that flashed a text message repeatedly.

The message, composed of blood red letters on a dark blue background, read, PLEASE KEEP CHECKING THIS CHANNEL FOR FURTHER INFORMATION. THE U.S. GOVERNMENT HAS DECLARED THE ENTIRE UNITED STATES UNDER MARTIAL LAW. HOMELAND SECURITY WILL UPDATE AS NECESSARY. DO NOT LEAVE YOUR HOMES UNLESS ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY. ARMED FORCES WILL BE ARRIVING IN YOUR CITY TO MAINTAIN MARTIAL LAW. DO NOT LEAVE YOUR HOME.

Chad heard Jody gasp. He felt his own pulse racing.

The bedside light dimmed again, and then went out, plunging the room into total darkness. The two sat huddled together, the only sound that of their strained breathing.

Then the light and the television came back on. Chad looked at Jody with relief.

*STEVE POWERS*

Jody gripped his arm tightly. "Daddy, I'm scared. What's going on?"

"I don't know, baby girl. Gotta be something pretty serious, though. You have a radio around somewhere?"

"In my closet, I think. An old boom box."

Chad rummaged in the closet for several minutes until he found the boom box, which had a built-in radio. He prayed that the batteries were still good, switching the radio on.

The radio hummed to life. Chad searched the airwaves for news.

A recorded message similar to that on the television repeated itself on one of the radio stations. The other stations didn't even have static; they were eerily quiet. It was as if a giant hand had turned the stations off.

Chad spun the dial through the frequencies again, this time more slowly. He paused. Was that a voice he heard on one of the stations? He turned back. A faint whispery voice was speaking, but he couldn't understand what it was saying.

He turned the volume up all the way. Even with the sound at full force, Chad could barely make out the words.

"---and once again, this is Twofer Duke from the University of Oklahoma."

Chad listened intently. Jody leaned forward, straining to hear.

"I'm telling ya, it's a mess around here. This campus is shut down. The radio station is deserted and I'm the only one here. I'm not even sure this is getting out, but I gotta try. Worked all day on boosting the power on this baby.

"The word is that most of the students and staff have died from this stuff. Myself, I was as sick as a dog until three days ago. Once I got well enough to get out of my crib, I been trying to find out what is going on. It's a hotbed of confusion around here, with all kinds of stories flying around, but near as I can figger, this sickness has hit the whole dang USA."

The voice paused here. Chad heard what sounded like a sob.

"I I I don't really know..."

Another long pause.

"Some folks are saying that this thing has killed off at least ninety percent of the population and that the government is sending in armed forces to control the cities..."

Chad heard a loud banging in the background, then a strident male voice bellowing.

"Mr. Duke! Open this door immediately!"

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Twofer Duke sighed dramatically. “Looks like they gonna interrupt my little talk. They gonna take me away. Sit tight. Be cool. Don’t do anything the Twofer wouldn’t do...”

The sounds of a door slamming open and footsteps rushing in could be heard.

“Later –“

There was an audible click. Then silence.

Jody stared at the radio, wide-eyed.

“What did that mean, Daddy?”

Chad shook his head. “I don’t know exactly. But I’m starting to get the idea. It looks like the sickness that we had wasn’t just some flu outbreak or something like that. It was a killer disease that’s wiped out a big chunk of the country’s population.”

Jody said, her voice breaking, “And it killed Mom and Rob and Scott.”

Chad bowed his head. Grief seemed to fill every pore of his body.

Jody rubbed her face with her hands. “What are we going to do with them? We can’t just leave them there.”

Chad shook his head. “I don’t know, honey. But it looks like all the services are out. No way to reach anyone. And I think the power is about to conk out, too.” As if to punctuate this last statement, the light flickered again.

Chad looked around. He spotted Jody’s laptop across the room.

“One more thing to try,” he said.

He retrieved Jody’s laptop and snapped it open, activating the power.

The computer’s screen brightened; Chad had no trouble accessing the applications, though the graphics seemed washed-out.

The Internet was a different story. Clicking the icon to access the Internet resulted in a stern error message.

Chad tossed the laptop on the bed. His mouth set in a narrow line, he reported the bad news to Jody. “The Internet’s gone, too. The power is the only thing left. The only reason we have any at all is because the auto-servers can maintain power for a short time without people. But eventually, without humans to maintain it, the power sources will break down, too.”

Jody worriedly asked, “When is that gonna happen?”

“I think soon, maybe another day or two. We’re experiencing brown-outs already.”

“Then what do we do?”

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“We’ll figure something out. Let me think on it. Right now, the only thing we can do is get some rest. In the morning, we’ll decide what to do.”

Jody’s eyes filled with tears. “This is awful. Things are never gonna be the same again, are they?”

Chad felt his own heart wrench. He felt like falling on the floor and screaming. He couldn’t do that. He had to remain rational, for Jody’s sake. She needed him. They didn’t have the luxury of grieving; they had no choice but to move forward.

In normal times, he would have busied himself making arrangements to have the bodies taken away and then try to compose himself enough to contact friends and relatives and make funeral arrangements.

But the world wasn’t right. It wasn’t ever going to be right again. Services he had long taken for granted were gone.

Chad reached out and stroked Jody’s hair. He gently said, “There’s nothing we can do right now. Let’s just get some sleep, okay?”

Jody clutched her father’s arm. “Daddy, don’t leave me here alone. Sleep with me tonight.”

Chad looked at her fearful face. “Okay.” He lay down on the bed beside Jody.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m really tired. Let’s just go to sleep and try not to think about things for awhile.”

Chad reached out to switch off the bedside lamp. Jody’s arm shot out, grabbing his arm.

Her lips trembled. She pulled nervously at her hair. “No! Leave the light on. I’m scared.”

Chad tilted his head, looking at Jody. He squeezed her shoulder reassuringly. “Okay.”

Jody relaxed, letting go of her father’s arm and falling back on the bed. She looked up at Chad.

“Daddy?”

“Hmm?”

“Daddy, are you scared?”

Was he scared? He’d never been more scared in his life. How could he plan for tomorrow when he didn’t even know what would happen in the next five minutes? Chad threw up a silent prayer. *Oh, Lord, help us through this.*

He looked steadily at Jody.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m scared. But we’re gonna be okay. Now, let’s just try to go to sleep.”

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Jody burrowed into her pillow and closed her eyes.

Chad kissed her on the forehead and pulled a blanket over him and Jody. The two were asleep within minutes.

The man sighed. So much work to do. He leaned back in his recliner, his rumpled clothes becoming even more rumpled. His friends and colleagues teased him about the rumpled clothes he always wore, but he insisted they were comfortable and that he didn't care about looking fashionable.

The Rumpled Man thought about the future. The Coming Together must happen. His far sight showed him that Chad's leadership was essential to its success. He had to bring Chad here.

But he had to help Chad and Jody deal with their grief first...

He tenderly regarded them, and then concentrated on sending out a tentative, caressing wave of warmth. In their slumber, father and daughter stirred, feeling an invisible, reassuring arm wrap around them. Their bodies visibly relaxed.

**Five years ago**

*Willow Tree, Texas*

*Internet Relay Chat (IRC) session*

Chad heard the winds howling outside. Distant thunder boomed. Rain was coming. He settled into his cushy office chair. Finally, everyone else had gone to sleep and he could talk to his online friends about the startling events of the day.

Chad logged on to the channel. Instantly, the screen filled with video representations of each of the participants chatting on the channel, seated in a comfortable living room setting.

They weren't really in a living room, of course; this was merely a computer simulation of their text chat. As the participants typed in text from their computers, their avatars spoke their thoughts for them, while a simultaneous text representation scrolled at the bottom of the screen. Chad could see that even at this late hour, a small group of chatters was active.

Chad selected his nick, Bearhug32 and began typing, using no caps or punctuation, the common usage of chatters.

*bearhug32> hey guys*

*lovetoon> hi bearhug*

Lovetoon was Candy Gray, who lived in Fargo, North Dakota.

Who else had logged in? Chad swiveled his head, scanning the right hand side of his 26-inch flat-screen monitor to look at the short list of nicks there.

He spotted mostly familiar nicks. Squeaky. Kate35. Cutebonnie. Philhead. Drbob. Squeaky was Gary Norris, a sarcastic jokester from Knoxville, Tennessee. Cutebonnie's real name was Bonnie Ryan, an overbearing woman from Edmond, Oklahoma. Chad knew Kate35 lived in a small town near the Everglades in Florida, but other than that, he knew very little about her; she was very secretive about her personal life, choosing not to reveal her real name or where she actually lived.

Chad grimaced when he saw that Drbob was signed in. That man was a colossal pain in the neck.

Drbob dominated the channel, delighting in sardonic put-downs and ripping other channel participants apart with his searing observations. His tactics included name-calling, accusations of lying and loudly (by typing in all caps) proclaiming others' sheer stupidity.

Chad didn't hate the man, but he heartily disliked him, as did many others on the channel.

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The last member of the group, Philhead, was the only channel member Chad had met face to face. Phil Gordon lived in Georgetown, about 20 miles from the Allen family.

Chad had gotten together with Phil on many occasions; the two had become good friends. Phil regarded Jody as the daughter he never had, going out of his way to make her feel special.

Chad turned his attention to the conversation in progress.

*philhead> hey chad. what's up?*  
*kate35> hi bearhug*  
*drbob> i see the channel genius has graced us with his presence.*  
*cutebonnie> oh shut up, bob. i'm tired of your yammering.*  
*drbob> why don't you do us all a favor and log off, cutebonnie?*  
*bearhug32> simmer down, you guys. so what do you think about the latest news?*  
*philhead> you mean the news about mexico and iran building a nuclear weapon in secret?*

That morning, the news had broken that Iran had established a presence in Mexico, with the two countries plotting to launch a nuclear warhead in the heart of Texas, the first step in bringing America to its knees.

Fortunately, Homeland Security had intercepted the secret communications between Mexico and Iran and averted possible catastrophe, but only after a tense 36 hours in which it looked as if the alliance of Mexico and Iran would launch the warhead they had buried in a secret location outside of Mexico City.

American military troops had swarmed into Mexico City, and now controlled Mexico. Americans everywhere breathed a long sigh of relief, while the Iranian people rioted impotently in their homeland, vowing to destroy the United States.

*bearhug32> yeah. that was scary, wasn't it?*  
*lovetoon> it sure was. what scares me, though, is that next time we might not stop them in time.*  
*drbob> you boobs don't know anything. the government is just using this whole thing as an excuse to invade iran and annex mexico into the united states. ignore what you see in the media. it's complete fabrication,*  
*cutebonnie> and you know this, how, bob?*

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*drbob> any intelligent person can see that our president wants more power, more excuses to assert himself. he's a complete idiot who should be tried in a court and convicted of treason.*

*cutebonnie> pltttt. don't listen to bob. he's ranting as usual.*

*kate35> i don't think it's made up. iran hates us and wants to bomb us all.*

*philhead> well, it's hard to separate the facts from the rumors, but something happened here. we need to be on our guard. we need to be prepared for what might happen in the future.*

*squeaky> hah. for what? some crazy iranian running into my house with a bomb strapped to his chest? i'd just offer him some sugar pops cereal for breakfast and he'd forget all about the bomb. hehehe.*

*drbob> squeaky, you are a moron. everything is a joke to you.*

*squeaky> well, just because you're a doctor doesn't mean you know everything. so why don't you just go away.*

*cutebonnie> well, we should take this seriously. you know what i think we should do?*

*bearhug32> what's that?*

*cutebonnie> have a plan for all us IRCers in case something bad really does happen. like maybe meet somewhere as a group.*

*kate35> i think that's a great idea.*

*drbob> oh, you don't seriously think we need to do this? i'm telling you, this is a bunch of crap put out by the president and his henchmen.*

*philhead> go on, bonnie.*

*cutebonnie> let's make a pact. let's all meet somewhere if something really, really bad happens. we can all meet here at my house. i will email directions to my house. print it out and keep it in a safe place.*

*drbob> oh brother. this is ridiculous.*

**drbob has left the channel**

*bearhug32> don't mind him. let's do it, bonnie. i hope we never have to use it, but it sure can't hurt to have a plan in place.*

*cutebonnie> i'll have it to everyone by tomorrow, even that distasteful drbob*

Five years had passed since the little group had made their pact. The deep drifts of memory had obscured that particular IRC chat session. The Rumpel Man knew he had much work ahead. He'd have to stimulate Bonnie's brain to retrieve the memory, then she could use her Gift to remind the others of the pact they had made.

*THE EIGHT*

*Bonnie Ryan  
Edmond, Oklahoma*

Bonnie Ryan lay in her soft bed, a lightweight green quilt pulled up to her chin, thinking about the ruins of her beloved garden. She loved her garden. Nothing made her feel better than to be in her garden, feeling the rich, loamy soil between her fingers, scattering the tiny seeds that she knew would eventually grow into a flower or a vegetable or a fruit.

Her garden was gone. It had saddened her to look at the ruins of her garden; while the sickness had ravaged her, someone had trampled the garden. Bonnie thought perhaps hungry dogs had perpetuated the deed, in search of food.

As if to make up for the loss of her garden, she had thrown herself into cleaning her house, a complete reordering of the house from top to bottom.

Other years had seen similar crusades, but none compared to this one. This one was the mother of all “Bonnie-zillas,” as her sons liked to call her determined attacks against untidiness and any germs that might be lurking in dark corners.

Her need to keep a clean and organized household bordered on the compulsive. Her son loved to tell the story of how he had been eating lunch, and made a side trip to the restroom.

When he came back, he discovered that Bonnie had thrown his sandwich in the trash and poured his soft drink down the drain, wiping the table clean and obliterating all traces of his lunch.

Bonnie’s obsessive habits, paired with a controlling personality, contributed heavily to the dissolution of her marriage.

The night before he fled the stress trap of his life, her husband, Ron, had said, sighing, “Bonnie, I do love you. But you are just too controlling and too obsessed with keeping everything in this house in order.”

Bonnie protested, “I am not controlling! There’s nothing wrong with keeping a clean and orderly house.”

“Not controlling? Then why is every single bill that comes to this house in your name? Why can’t I grow a mustache without you threatening to withhold ‘bed privileges’ if I so much as let a single hair sprout on my lip? Why can’t I sleep late on Saturdays because you have a long list of things for me to do? Bonnie, you are a controlling person and it has worn on me over the years. No more.”

Bonnie shouted at Ron, “You leave this house and you’re not coming back! You better think long and hard about that.”

STEVE POWERS

Ron sighed. "I've thought about it, believe me. The best thing is for me to leave. Seth and Tim are going with me." Seth and Tim were their two teen-aged sons.

The next day, Ron and their two sons left for Oregon. Evidently, Ron had been planning this move for a while, securing a job and house there, enlisting Tim and Seth's cooperation with the plan.

Remembering this, Bonnie felt a sharp pang of regret. Okay. Maybe she *was* a bit controlling. If things didn't go according to the "Bonnie plan," she felt angry, irritable and anxious.

Ron had left three months ago. Now this. This was so unfair. Why did all this have to happen to her?

Bonnie knew she had overdone the cleaning; it was too soon after her sickness. Her body ached. Even just shifting in the bed brought sharp twinges of pain. Her eyelids fluttered. She was so tired...

Bonnie had many vivid dreams. Then one dream came that wasn't a dream...

Bonnie walked into a darkened room. She saw a small cherry-red glow and smelled the comforting, rich aroma of a lit pipe. A voice spoke out of the darkness.

"Hello, Bonnie."

Bonnie strained to see who was speaking, but could see nothing more than the vague outline of a seated figure.

"Who are you?"

"My name isn't important right now. Come with me. We have much to do."

She felt him lightly touch her. A tingling sensation buzzed in her head. Suddenly, a moving image flooded her mind. She saw herself sitting in front of her computer, typing.

"Move closer, Bonnie."

Bonnie obeyed. As she drew closer, she could see what she was typing on the screen. The tendrils of memory stirred.

"Oh, that's from five years ago, after Iraq and Mexico nearly bombed our country. We made a pact to all meet again if something terrible happened. I'd forgotten about that."

"The time is now. You must all meet. You must remind the others of this pact."

"How am I supposed to do that?"

THE EIGHT

“You have a Gift. Use it.”

“A Gift?”

“Yes. You can walk into others’ dreams. Concentrate. Let your mind roam.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“You can do it. Clear your mind of clutter.”

Bonnie still didn’t understand, but she felt the voice’s urgency. She stood stock-still, trying to empty her mind. She felt silly.

“You’re doing fine. Keep trying.”

She renewed her efforts. Suddenly, she felt a *whoosh* in her mind. Images blurred in rapid succession before finally coalescing.

Bonnie opened her eyes again. She stood in a room lit only by a pale glimmer of moonlight. Two figures lay on a bed, huddled together.

“Reach into their dreams, Bonnie. Tell them that they must travel to your house.”

Bonnie took a step towards the bed. The moonlight fragmented and the bed’s outlines blurred.

She saw a man and a young girl standing in front of her. The man had a reddish-brown beard and light brown hair. He was not very tall and was compactly built. His mild brown eyes calmly gazed at Bonnie. The girl had startlingly blue eyes and short brown hair the same shade as the man. Thin and gangly, she looked to be in the early stages of puberty. She tightly grasped the man’s hand.

The man looked oddly familiar, but Bonnie couldn’t place him. Realization suddenly flooded into her. Why, that was Chad Allen. She recognized him from photos he had placed on the IRC channel they both frequented.

The voice spoke again.

“That’s right, Bonnie. Speak to Chad. Tell him that he and his daughter must travel to your house. Tomorrow. They need to leave tomorrow.”

Bonnie hesitatingly spoke.

“Chad?”

“Yes. Who are you?”

“I’m Bonnie Ryan. From #Wayfarers. Remember me?”

“I do. What are you doing in my dream?” Chad turned his head to look at the young girl, who looked quizzically at him.

“Chad. Remember the pact we made five years ago? When we said if something terrible happened, we’d all meet at my house? It’s time. Come to my house in Edmond. Leave tomorrow.”

*STEVE POWERS*

Chad didn't seem surprised. He considered what Bonnie had said and then turned to the young girl.

"You heard what she said, Jody. Now I know what we're supposed to do. We're going to Bonnie's house tomorrow."

"Yes, Daddy."

Bonnie raised a hand. "I'll see you tomorrow, then. Be careful."

Chad and Jody stared at her. Bonnie felt herself fading away. She heard the mysterious voice speaking to her again.

"Come. We have more people to visit."

That night, Bonnie slipped into the dreams of the other five people, reminding them of the pact and that it was urgent that they come to her house in Edmond. Not two days from now. Not a week from now. Tomorrow.

The Rumpled Man smiled in satisfaction. If all went well, tomorrow night, Chad Allen, Jody Allen, Bonnie Ryan, Bob Rodgers, Gary Norris, Katie Jurenka and Phil Gordon would all be gathered at Bonnie's house, preparing for their long trek northward.

That left one more person to bring into the fold. None of the others knew this person. The Rumpled Man ran his hands through his hair. This would be a difficult task, to bring this young man to Bonnie's house. He had to think this through.

A devastating plague occurs. The Rumpel Man must bring about The Coming Together to save the country. Eight people who emerge from the plague with mysterious Gifts are crucial to this great uprising. Without them, The Coming Together can't happen.

## **The Eight**

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