



THE FAITHFUL WITNESS

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BY

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Prologue

He stood perched on the edge of a steep embankment, overlooking a dark, forbidding valley stretching far off into the distance. A thick fog rose eerily up from the marshy ground, adding a further sense of confusion to the man's already disoriented state. The ground beneath him was soft, the fog shrouding the landscape for as far as the eye could see.

He gazed into the distance through the thickening haze. Somewhere, towards the far horizon, a faint light flickered, giving him a glimmer of hope. He managed a few faltering steps forward, straining his eyes until the distant light grew brighter, almost blinding him.

A surge of anxiety swept through him as he drew himself back into the shelter of his darkened surroundings, watching the light slowly fade from view. Stumbling forward, he began sweeping his hands in front of his face, attempting to disperse the mist. As the air began to clear a path emerged at his feet, barely distinguishable in the weak light. Suddenly a faint voice could be heard in the distance. He then slowly edged his way down the trail, his eyes firmly fixed on the ground in front of him, attempting to follow the sounds that seemed to beckon him closer. After only a few moments he could feel the earth beneath him begin to move, and with each step he felt himself sinking deeper into the soil. He stopped and frantically tried to pull himself free.

As the mud began to rise up past his waist, he could feel himself sinking even further down almost as if someone had grabbed him by the ankles and was now pulling him into the very heart of the earth. Then, before he even had time to react he dropped suddenly through the bottom of the miry trap and he could feel himself tumbling downward. Helplessly he thrashed his arms wildly in the air as he tried desperately to catch himself, to grab on to something that would save him from the imminent result of slamming into the ground below.

As he continued to fall, he gradually became aware of a tremendous heat rising up from beneath his feet, growing hotter and more intense with each passing second. Plumes of smoke and bursts of hot air wafted over him in nauseating waves. It was then that he heard it ... the voices crying out to him from the darkness ... screaming in anguish ... echoing relentlessly through his head. For a moment he thought it might be the sound of his own voice that he heard, but soon realized that the screams, too, emanated from the depths below.

He felt the wind whistling by him at a fantastic speed forcing himself to lower his head ... to peer down into the darkness, and although his eyes could not penetrate the gloom, he had the unmistakable sense that he was about to reach bottom.

No sooner had the thought struck him, than his body slammed forcefully onto the hot surface of the cavern floor, instantly jarring him back to consciousness.

Chapter One

Michal sat up in his bed, drenched with sweat, the images of the nightmare still reeling through his mind. He quickly brought himself back to reality, forcing the disjointed thoughts into the depths of his subconscious. In past nightmares, the sensation of falling alone had always been enough to shock him back to wakefulness. This one was startlingly different – never before had he felt his body actually hit the ground after falling – always he had awoken just before impact. He shook his head, ridding the images from his exhausted mind, and then swung his feet over the side of the bed, picking up his watch from the end table and slipping it on his wrist.

He climbed unsteadily to his feet and made his way into the kitchen of his small, one-bedroom apartment. Almost immediately he became aware of a dull, throbbing migraine in the back of his head, something that had become increasingly more a part of his life during the past several weeks. He poured himself a cup of coffee and a bowl of cereal then retraced his steps to the bedroom, where he began dressing between mouthfuls of his breakfast. He picked up a dress shirt from the floor and pulled it on over his shoulders. It was clean, but in desperate need of ironing. The tie was a clip-on, as were all his ties. He still had not learned how to tie one properly. For the past several years he'd managed to build a fascinating array of colours and styles, all clip-ons. He slipped the tie on to his collar then ran his fingers across his twitching unshaven face. It wasn't often that he had experienced the jitters so early in the morning – yet it seemed quite understandable. The last few days and nights had not been easy. Gradually he collected himself and made his way to the bathroom, preparing himself for the rest of the day.

* * * * *

Traffic was busier than usual that morning, so when Michal finally pulled his car into the

parking-garage at work, he was forced to sprint up the stairs to the main lobby of the building.

Several of Michal's colleagues were exiting the elevator as he approached. He was relieved to see that the elevator was now empty; it would give him a chance to collect his thoughts before his presentation. He pushed a button on the panel as the doors began to close.

"Hold the elevator!"

Startled by the unexpected voice, Michal quickly pushed the *OPEN* button, and the doors jarred back in the opposite direction. A young, well-dressed woman carrying an armful of files stepped inside. Her long, sandy blonde hair framed a pleasant, round face. Two enormous, brown eyes drew his immediate attention, as did her warm, friendly smile. In the same instant, the files she was carrying slipped from her arms and scattering across the elevator floor.

"Oh, that's just perfect!" She shouted in frustration as she clutched frantically at several items that still remained in her grasp. Dropping down to one knee she began retrieving a few of the files which were now blocking the door. She looked up at Michal, her face flushed.

"I'm so sorry," she said nervously as Michal knelt down to help her. "My supervisor has me running all over town and it's really starting to wear me out."

Michal passed her a handful of files and got back to his feet. "There's no need to feel embarrassed, we all have days like these," he said reassuringly.

"Thank you so much for your help." The young woman said extending her hand, somehow managing to keep her files from spilling back onto the floor. "I'm Eva Bennett."

"Michal Paterson," he said with a grin. "I don't think I've seen you around the building before, are you new with the company?"

She smiled. "I started last week in Human Resources. I've only been working part-time so

far, but I'm hoping that I'll end up with something more permanent.”

“Well then, welcome aboard, Eva Bennett,” Michal said. “Which floor would you like?”

His hand now hovered over the control panel.

“Twelve, please.”

“Hey, I guess that means we're neighbours,” He said eagerly, pushing the button. “My office is only one floor above you.”

“What do *you* do here?” she asked.

“Well,” Michal said hesitantly. “Oddly enough, I started my career with this company in the engineering department, of all things, but for the last several years I've been working in marketing – against my own better judgement, I might add.”

“You switched from Engineering to Marketing?” she asked, looking up at him with a puzzled expression. “That seems like an odd career choice.”

“I suppose you're right,” Michal said, hesitating for a moment. “But the money is good, and I enjoy working with other people.”

“It certainly is a big company, isn't it?” Eva said

He nodded, clearing his throat nervously. “Large, unfeeling, unsympathetic, no direct accountability from management ... those seem to be the trademarks of your typical multi-national corporation. As a matter of fact, I just heard a rumour of Mr. Feinstein's most recent employee intrusion programme.” Michal said with his eyebrows raised.

“I've heard a few stories myself,” Eva exclaimed, “What did you hear?”

“Be careful, Miss Bennett,” Michal said, pressing his finger discretely against his lips. “I understand that the company installed a new security camera in the elevator, so we probably

shouldn't say anything that might ruffle the feathers of management.”

She laughed. “The next thing you know they’ll be putting cameras in the washrooms to make sure we don’t use too much toilet paper!”

Michal chuckled, studying her features more carefully. He could see in her eyes that she was doing the same thing. Michal turned his gaze to the numbers flashing on a screen just above the elevator door, steeling his nerves. He had never been very good in situations like this with women. It was only when the elevator bell signalled the Twelfth Floor that he finally spoke. “Eva, I’m not usually this forward, but I was wondering if you would like to go out for a coffee with me sometime? I know of a quiet little café down the street from here ...”

“I think I know the one you mean,” Eva said with a playful smile, “*Piccolos Cafe*. Sure. I’d love to go, what time did you have in mind?”

“How about tomorrow evening?” Michal asked. “Say around six-thirty?”

She thought for a moment. “That would be perfect.”

Michal reached into his pocket and handed Eva a small pen and notebook. “Maybe you should write down your phone number for me ... if you don’t mind.”

Eva grinned as she quickly jotted down her number.

“I realize that you work only a floor below mine,” Michal said, “but it's been so long since I’ve had a date that I thought I should get it down on paper.”

Eva smiled. “Are you sure you haven't worked for the legal department as well?”

Michal laughed nervously. “Not to the best of my recollection.”

The elevator door had long-since opened, so with a quick wave Eva stepped out into the long carpeted hallway. “Until tomorrow,” she said.

Michal took in a deep breath as the elevator doors closed and he continued his trip to the fourteenth floor, then down the short hallway to his office.

For the next several minutes Michal sat behind his desk waiting for his meeting to begin. He glanced down absently at the data sheet in front of him. In spite of all the preparation that he had done for his presentation, he still felt strangely ill-at-ease. His mind was just beginning to wander when the door to his office opened and his boss' secretary stepped into the room.

“Are you ready, Mr. Paterson?”

Michal rifled through the contents of his filing cabinet, pulled out a new data sheet and placed it carefully in his bag, “Ready when you are, Miss Hamilton.” He straightened his clip-on tie, and followed her down the hall and into the large boardroom.

A dozen or so well-dressed men and women were seated around the table. One of them was his supervisor, Doug Stevenson. Doug was paunchy and forty-something, bald with an ever-present smile and a personality that exuded an insincere kind of charm. Michal always found it somewhat unsettling to be in his presence.

It had become obvious to Michal over the past several years that *Feinstein Communications* hired only the toughest managers to keep the members of staff on their toes, and Doug Stevenson was no exception to the rule.

Michal took his place at the head of the table where a laptop and projector had already been set up from the previous day.

“I'd like you all to meet the regional sales representative for *Feinstein Communications*, Mr. Michal Paterson,” Doug said supportively.

Michal felt suddenly conspicuous as several of the well-dressed executives nodded

attentively in his direction. *I think it was a mistake not to have this shirt dry-cleaned before the meeting*, he thought. *I must look terrible.*

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen,” Michal began. “I think I’ve had the pleasure of meeting most of you, but for those of you that I haven’t met, on behalf of *Feinstein’s*, I want to thank you all for coming.” He paused to make eye contact with a few of his prospective clients.

“As you’re all well aware, the purpose for this meeting is to give our agency the opportunity to demonstrate the variety of advertising services we offer in order to meet your needs. Your businesses have the unique opportunity to thrive in a market driven by fierce competition, and we want to partner with you in order to make this dream a reality.”

With the click of a button, the first slide of his presentation appeared on the screen behind him as the lights were dimmed in the boardroom.

“As you can see from the sales figures represented on the chart behind me, an overwhelming majority of the companies who advertised with our agency during the past fiscal year saw their revenues increase by an average of 58.3% . . .”

Somewhere, deep within him he could hear his voice droning on. He had done the exact same presentation countless times before. It was almost as if he was having an out-of-body experience. It wasn't long before his mind began to wander.

An hour later Michal stood confidently by the door of the boardroom, his recent participants filing past. His presentation had gone well, and he knew that his company would now be the representative for several of the firms that were in attendance.

His boss, Doug Stevenson, was the last to leave. He shook Michal’s hand warmly as he led the way out of the boardroom. "Would you mind joining me in my office for a few minutes,

Michal? I'd like to have a word with you, if you have some time to spare."

"Certainly." Michal replied.

Moments later Michal was ushered into one of the executive offices down the hall from his own. There he was motioned into a plush leather chair positioned across from an large oak desk. His boss sat down opposite him and exhaled loudly.

"First of all, I want to congratulate you on your excellent presentation. We made the decision to move you into the marketing department because we felt that you had the potential to be a first rate salesman." He paused for several long seconds, his brow wrinkling as he gathered his thoughts. Finally he continued. "Lately, however, we've found your appearance and demeanour to be - well, let's just say - rather distracting. I'm not sure if you have something going on at home or not, but we are a first rate company, and we expect our employees to present themselves in a way that will represent our business appropriately."

Michal lowered his head as he considered his words carefully. "I didn't realize that my appearance had become such a problem. I have been dealing with some personal issues lately."

Doug patted him encouragingly on the shoulder. "That's fine, Michal. I understand that we've been working you pretty hard the last few months, so why don't you drive out to the North district this afternoon and put the final touches on the Keating account for us. I'll have my secretary book a room for you at the lodge overlooking the lake."

"I appreciate that, Sir." Michal said with a smile. "I won't let you down."

Chapter Two

The heavy grey skies seemed to perfectly mirror the thoughts pressing on Michal's mind as he drove the bypass back into the city. Although a day had passed since the awkward conversation with his boss, Michal had been left with a deeply unsettled feeling. He had been grateful that his job had taken him out into the suburbs to meet with a client, but was anxious to finally be heading home to get ready for his date with Eva. His hands were clenched tightly to the steering wheel - knuckles white, a knot forming in the back of his neck. *Why am I so nervous about going out on a simple date*, he wondered. *Perhaps there's something different about her ...*

A loud *bang* jarred Michal back to reality. He straightened in his seat and in the same instant felt the steering wheel give a sudden jerk in his hands. His foot came down hard on the brake, yanking the car away from the oncoming traffic, narrowly avoiding a large transport truck that seemed to appear out of nowhere. He could feel the right tires hit gravel. Instinctively he pulled back on the steering wheel, but this time his car careened across the opposite lane, the driver's side smashing hard against the steel guardrail. Michal could feel his head crack painfully against the side window as the vehicle finally came to a skidding stop. He was fairly sure that he never lost consciousness, yet it was several moments before he was able to determine what had just happened to him. He shook his head, trying to reassemble his thoughts, touching a wet spot behind his left ear that was already bleeding and throbbing with pain.

A few moments later he heard a sudden, frantic pounding on the driver side window of his car that brought his thoughts back into focus.

"Are you alright, Son?" A frightened-looking, grey-haired man gazed down at him through the window, jiggling frantically at the door handle.

With shaking hands, Michal managed to push open the door and with the stranger's help he slowly made his way out of the car and safely to the side of the road. There Michal's legs gave out, and he sat down hard on a guardrail post.

He looked helplessly over at his damaged car. The black paint from the side of his sedan was scraped across the guardrail's flat, silver surface. Across the highway and parked off on the shoulder, was the Good Samaritan's vehicle.

He turned to the older man. "Did you see what happened?"

The stranger drew a deep breath. "I think you blew a tire when you ran over some debris, which pulled you across the road and into the path of that truck. Thankfully you managed to get back into your lane in time, but it looks like you over-compensated when your wheels hit the gravel, which caused you to go straight back across the highway and into this guardrail. It's a good thing no one was in the other lane. God must really be watching over you, Son."

"I think you may be right about that," Michal said. "Although my head still feels like someone took a two-by-four to it."

The man smiled. "You know how that feels do you?"

Michal chuckled good-naturedly.

"I'd better take you to the hospital. You may have a concussion, or worse. We can report the accident to the police and call a tow truck from my cell phone."

Michal felt a strange awkwardness come over him. Once again he was in the spotlight, and he hated it. "I don't want to trouble you," he said pausing for a moment, "But I am feeling a bit unsteady, so under the circumstances I think I might take you up on your offer."

The stranger stuck out his hand. "I'm Lawrence Buchanan."

“Michal Paterson.”

The older man helped him back to his feet and guided him over to the nearby vehicle. As Michal dropped awkwardly into the passenger seat he could feel every ounce of strength draining from his body. He glanced uneasily over at his newly-damaged car.

How on earth will I get through the rest of this week without my car? Michal thought as they pulled back onto the busy highway.

Several times on the way to the hospital Michal noticed the older man looking over at him, each time Michal attempted a reassuring grin.

* * * * *

The next two hours dragged tediously by as Michal endured a series of routine tests and examinations, as well as filling out endless forms. The whole experience reminded him of why he avoided going to the doctor and subjecting himself to such tortures. Finally he was led back into the waiting room, and sagged wearily into a seat beside his recent benefactor.

“Thanks for waiting for me, Lawrence,” Michal said.

“It's my pleasure,” Lawrence replied, “I was finally able to get through to one of the towing companies outside of town while they were busy running your tests, so they should be hauling your car off to a garage on Main Street even as we speak.”

“I appreciate your help.”

“Think nothing of it,” Lawrence said with a broad smile.

A nurse suddenly appeared. “Mr. Paterson. Dr. Gardner will see you now.” She helped Michal to his feet and led him into a small room where a middle-aged man in a white lab coat was already seated at his desk, file-folder in hand.

“How are you feeling, Michal?” the doctor asked as he pulled an x-ray out of a Manila Envelope, holding it up carefully to the light.

“Not too bad, under the circumstances. Did you find anything in the tests?”

A frown creased the doctor’s face as he took a seat next to Michal. “Well, as far as I can tell there were no fractures, but there's still a very real possibility that you may have suffered a concussion. Do you remember losing consciousness during the accident?”

“It's possible,” Michal answered. “I’m not sure.”

The doctor rose to his feet, slowly making his way back to the X-rays on the wall across from Michal. The smile on his face seemed to be forced as he turned back to his patient. “The accident won’t leave you with anything more than a bad headache for the next few days, but these X-rays seem to be picking up on something else, something unusual.” He pointed to a small dark area on the X-ray near the base of Michal’s skull. “It may be nothing serious, nevertheless, I’m scheduling you in for an MRI scan - just to be sure.”

Michal paused momentarily before speaking. “I have been getting a lot of headaches recently, do you think that could be related to what you're seeing on the X-ray?”

The doctor shrugged. “It could be any number of things, but before we get too excited, let’s just take this one step at a time and get you in for that scan. If you call my office Monday morning, we'll have a better idea of when you can come in for your next appointment.”

With that the doctor dropped the X-ray back into the envelope and gave Michal an officious nod. “If your headaches get any worse, I want you to make a trip to the Emergency Room. We don't want to take any unnecessary chances, okay?”

“I'll do that,” Michal replied. “I appreciate your time, Doctor.” With that he drew in a

deep, ragged breath, climbed back to his feet and slowly exited the room. As he made his way down the hallway towards the waiting room, Michal could feel his sense of balance shift ever-so-slightly. He tried desperately to regain his composure, placing his hand against the wall to steady himself. He could see Lawrence get to his feet as he entered the waiting room.

“I think that should do it for now,” Michal said. “Thanks again for sticking around. It's been really nice having someone around to make sure that I was taken care of properly.”

Lawrence grinned. “Well, It's not like I have a jam-packed schedule these days – now that I'm retired. Anyway, I thought you might need a ride home.”

“I appreciate the offer,” Michal said with a smile. “But I only live a few blocks from the hospital, so I'd feel better if I just called a cab.”

“If that's what you'd prefer,” Lawrence said, extended his hand once more. “I'll be praying for you Michal. If you want to get together to talk, please don't hesitate to give me a call.” He handed Michal a card with his address and phone number.

Michal smiled, placing the card in his pocket. “Thanks, I appreciate the offer.”

“Take care of yourself,” Lawrence said.

“You too.”

Michal made his way down the hallway, pushed his way through the doors leading outside and climbed into one of the taxi cabs waiting outside the hospital.

“343 Linden Ave,” Michal said. He checked his watch. He knew that he was running late for his date, but still felt the need to freshen up. Although the ride to his apartment took only a few minutes, it felt like an eternity as Michal considered the doctor's ominous words.

As they approached his apartment building Michal handed the driver a bill from his

wallet. “Do you mind waiting a few minutes?” he asked. “I’ll be right back.”

Michal raced up the stairs and unlocked the door to his apartment. Stepping inside he cast an appraising eye around his cramped quarters and frowned. He’d have to call his insurance company and the garage where his car had been towed first thing in the morning. Maybe they could give him a rental while his car was still in the shop. If not, he could always take public transportation to work like everyone else.

Changing into a clean shirt, he slowly removed the bandage from his head before checking himself in the dresser mirror. Aside from a great red welt emanating from around his ear, he appeared to be none the worse for wear. His head, though, was still pounding from the accident, and he knew the painkiller he’d been given was starting to wear off.

Scooping up the keys to his apartment he hurried back downstairs to the waiting cab. He’d have to get going if he was going to make a good impression with Eva.

When he arrived at the coffee shop, Michal noticed that Eva was already seated on a couch near the back. She smiled warmly as he approached the table.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” he said with a frown, sitting across from her in a armchair. “As they say in the movies, *I was unexpectedly detained.*”

Eva’s gaze was fixed closely on Michal as he stirred uneasily in his chair.

“What happened to your face?” she asked, her eyes widening.

He managed a smile. “It’s nothing serious, really, I was involved in a minor accident. I’m afraid my car lost an argument with a guardrail.”

“Oh my goodness. Are you okay?”

“I’m alright,” He said reassuringly. “I’m just glad to be here in one piece.”

He glanced down at her empty cup. “Can I get you another coffee?”

“Sure,” Eva replied hesitantly. “I’ll have another light roast. Thanks.”

* * * * *

For Michal, the next couple of hours seemed to fly by, and it was all-too-soon before he found himself walking Eva back to her car down the street. It was a cool, dark evening; a light breeze ruffled the leaves of the oak trees lining the sidewalk. He could sense her perfume in the evening air as they made their way through the darkening shadows. It had been a long time since he had been on a date with someone as extraordinary as Eva, and from the very moment he saw her in the coffee shop he felt a great sense of peace, instinctively knowing she was somehow different. Somehow unique. Michal hated the thought of the evening coming to an end.

Chapter Three

Michal sat slouched in his recliner, staring absently at the novel on his lap. The weekend was coming to a close and all he could think about was his new and exciting relationship with Eva. She had been a most pleasant diversion from the nagging reality of the ongoing drama in his daily life, not to mention his upcoming doctor's appointment.

It had been a full two weeks since his car accident. The first week after the accident Michal had been granted some much-needed sick leave from work, and the last week he decided to take off as a part of his vacation. Fourteen days in which he and Eva had gotten to know each other better, fourteen of the most memorable days of his life.

Michal tossed the novel onto his side table. He had no idea what he had been reading for the past thirty minutes, too much was going through his mind. Pushing himself out of the chair he made his way outside onto the apartment balcony. On days like this, with the autumn sun shining, and a cool September breeze blowing in from the ocean, he was almost thankful for the solitude that seemed to mark his life. He gazed out over the skyline of the city. It was a beautiful place - several parks and walking trails visible from where he stood. Michal drew in a deep, satisfying breath. In ordinary circumstances he would have taken advantage of such a quiet morning for a leisurely stroll through the neighbourhood park - one designated strictly for dog-walkers, but seldom enforced. Perhaps if he rented a car, he and Eva could go for a drive into the mountains, then head off along one of the long hiking trails.

A sharp knock on his apartment door snapped him out of his daydream. Michal re-entered the living room and looked through the peep-hole. He could see Eva standing in the hallway, her sandy blond hair hanging loosely about her shoulders.

In a hasty attempt to collect himself, Michal brushed back his tangled hair and smoothed down the front of his shirt, then glanced helplessly around his apartment. As usual, it was a complete mess, but somehow he knew that it wouldn't matter to her.

He paused briefly, then opened the door, trying his best to act surprised. "Eva! How did you get past security?" His voice cracked in spite of himself.

She laughed. "I slipped the porter a twenty."

Michal smiled, quickly ushering her inside, "It's hard to get good help these days!" He removed her jacket and placed it on a hook by the door. "Would you like a drink?"

"A glass of *1948 Chateauneuf-Du-Pape* would hit the spot." She said, grinning broadly.

"Wouldn't you know it, I just ran out this morning." Michal said with a laugh.

Eva let out a deep sigh. "Well, then I suppose I'll have to settle for a glass of water."

She walked casually into the living room, taking a seat on a corner of the cluttered sofa. When Michal returned from the kitchen with a tall glass of water, he could see that she was flipping absently through the novel he had been reading.

"It's such a beautiful day today, Michal." Eva said, placing the book back down on the table. "How would you feel about going out for a drive? After all, we can't have you sitting around at home wasting away the rest of your vacation."

"That's just what I was thinking," Michal said, handing her the drink.

She hesitated. "How about a hike up Mount Schoen?"

He smiled. "That sounds rather intimidating."

"Don't worry," she said, getting to her feet. "We'll take it slow. Come on. I think it would do you some good to get some clean, fresh air."

“Alright,” Michal replied. “Let me grab my coat.”

* * * * *

The late morning sun shone warmly down on them as they left the city and drove along the narrow roadway that led into the foothills. Michal could feel his tensions beginning to fade. The various difficulties of life didn't seem to matter much when Eva was around, in fact nothing did. After a few minutes they pulled off the road into a gravel parking lot. A small trail, no more than a goat's path, wound its way along the base of one of the many hills dominating the area.

“Take a look up there,” she said, pointing to the craggy summit stretching out over the wall of trees before them. “That's the top of Mount Schoen,”

“Impressive. I think I'm up for the challenge,” Michal said, eyeing the edifice uneasily. They exited the car and made their way over to the edge of the parking lot leading into the forest. There he could make out the remainder of the well-marked path.

“I picked this particular trail because the grade isn't all that steep,” Eva assured him, “So it should be okay for a couple of amateurs like us to navigate.”

He smiled and shrugged good naturedly, “Keep in mind that if I don't have enough energy to make it all the way, you may have to carry me to the top.”

Eva laughed, “In that case, I'll try to take it easy on you. At least if you do make it to the top, I can always just roll you back down.”

The narrow pathway wound through a mixed forest of large oak and poplar trees. The songs of birds filled the air and Michal couldn't help noticing the vast collection of colourful wild-flowers growing along the narrow pathway.

After several more minutes walking up the steep incline, Eva pulled out a bottle of water

from her backpack, handed it to Michal, and then sat down on a fallen tree that was laying next to the trail. “Why don't we take a rest for a little while?”

Michal sagged onto the seat beside her and inhaled a long, deep breath of fresh mountain air. “I really need to exercise more often,” he admitted sheepishly. “I used to get out a lot more, but lately it seems like all I do is spend my entire day in front of a computer.” Even as he spoke he could feel the weakness and dizziness passing.

“Are you feeling well enough to go back to work tomorrow?” Eva asked.

“Actually, I decided to take another week off,” Michal said. “I still have a few more vacation days left, so I thought it would be the perfect time to use them up.”

“So I'll have you all to myself for another whole week?” she asked, her eyes twinkling. “We may have to get you out here every day. Who knows?”

He smiled at her. “That gives me something to look forward to. The only thing on my agenda is a doctor's appointment tomorrow afternoon.”

She reached over, placing her hand on his arm. “Make sure that you call to let me know how your appointment went, regardless of what happens.”

He nodded. “I will.”

After a few minutes they slowly got back to their feet, making their way further up the trail to towards summit. The remainder of their walk wasn't as arduous as Michal expected. The narrow path wound upward at what seemed to be a fairly leisurely angle, through a rapidly diminishing forest. Only once or twice did Michal find his breath growing short from the exertion of the hike. It was less than ten minutes later that they found themselves at the top, standing on the edge of a steep precipice looking out over a spectacular valley that stretched far

off into the distance. The autumn colours were breathtaking. On the side of a nearby mountain they could see a small stream of water tumbling over the side of a cliff-face. There were at least a half-dozen hikers seated on the rocks surrounding them.

Eva led him over to a large, flat rock and together they rested there. “Isn’t this a magnificent view?” she asked. “The valley looks like it stretches out forever.”

Michal looked silently out over the rolling valley before them, then up into a cloudless blue sky. Never before did he have the opportunity to share the endless beauty of nature with someone he had cared for so deeply.

“I haven't had a day like this in a long time,” Michal said. “It's been an amazing week.”

Eva got to her feet and took hold of Michal’s hand. “It’s not over yet,” she said, her eyes now dancing. “There’s something I want to show you up ahead.”

Michal smiled. “I love a good surprise.”

Taking his hand, Eva led him down a well-worn pathway which wound along the crest of the mountain, skirting a number of craggy outcroppings and shallow gorges that peppered the hillside. As they made their way along the lightly-forested mountain top, Michal was surprised to hear voices coming from somewhere up ahead of them.

“I think we've got company,” he said.

In response Eva tugged all the more eagerly on his hand, quickening their pace through a small grove of oak trees and into a wide-open glade on the other side. There, standing across from them was a small group of people, gathered tightly together.

“What’s going on?” Michal asked.

“There’s something I forgot to tell you about Mount Schoen,” Eva said with a peculiar

expression. "It's rather famous for its zip-lining tours."

Michal looked at her blankly. "Zip-lining?"

"Come on, let me show you." Eva said, leading him to the nearest attendant who was standing on a large platform overlooking the valley.

Michal could now see that the three people in front of them were all dressed in olive green uniforms with fluorescent orange vests.

"Well, well, well, what do we have here?" one of the attendants remarked, approaching the young couple. "It's nice to see you again, Eva."

"Hello Bill," Eva replied. "I brought someone with me today."

Michal stared at the man inquisitively. "So how does this work?"

The man smiled warmly at Michal. "Why don't you see for yourself."

The attendant began walking towards the edge of the platform with Michal and Eva following close behind. As they reached the edge the attendant turned back in Michal's direction and pointed upward to a steel cable that was attached to a tall metal pole, which had been fixed to the side of the mountain. "This is where you start your descent," he said, shifting his attention far into the distance to the bottom of the mountain. "And that's where you'll finish."

"To put it in simple terms" the man said, "We strap you into this safety harness and hurl you down the mountainside on this guide wire."

Michal nodded in disbelief. "Is that all?" he said, his brow furrowing in spite of himself. "I thought there would have been more to it."

Eva flashed a reassuring smile at Michal, then led him towards the railing. "Oh, I think this should be more than enough excitement for you, *Mr. Knieval.*"

Michal peered down the steep embankment, and was relieved to see that the slope before them was not as steep as it might have been. The grass-covered surface of the mountain beneath the cable was almost devoid of trees and ran at about a 45 degree angle all the way to the bottom.

“Do you think you're up for it?” Eva asked with an amused smile.

Michal shrugged. “If it means I won't have to walk all the way back down to the bottom of the hill, then it sounds like a great idea to me!”

He noticed that two of the men were now holding a pair of helmets and a canvas harnesses which was firmly secured to the cable above them.

“Since Michal is here as a guest on your membership account, Miss Bennett, you need to ensure that he fills out this waiver form before we strap him into the harness.” One of the men pushed a clipboard into Michal's hands. “Please sign on the dotted line.”

Michal took the clipboard and pen that the man offered and slowly signed his name. “Signing a waiver form for a recreational activity can't be a good sign,” he said.

Eva laughed. “You're going to love it!”

One of the men handed Michal a helmet, then pulled his arms into the harness and quickly began strapping him in. “When you first launch off the platform you may have to pull your legs up for the first few seconds to avoid hitting the brush,” the man said with a wry smile, “Then it should be smooth sailing all the way to the bottom.”

Michal nodded, glancing helplessly back in Eva's direction. “Aren't you coming?”

She laughed. “Don't worry, I'll be right behind you. Just try not to scream too loudly. It really aggravates the bears at the bottom of the hill.”

Michal chuckled nervously. “You're hilarious!”

The next few seconds seemed to pass by excruciatingly slow as Michal attempted to steel his nerves for the ride down.

“Are you ready?” One of the attendants asked.

“As ready as I'll ever be.”

Then, without further ado, the attendant gave Michal a quick shove off the edge.

Michal's stomach immediately leaped into his mouth as the harness gave a hard tug on his lower extremities. For the first few seconds his feet brushed lightly along the tops of a few small shrubs, then suddenly . . . he was airborne – sailing fifty feet above the mountainside and travelling so terrifyingly fast that he couldn't help letting out a loud, piercing cry – his eyes riveted to the bottom of the mountain some six-hundred metres away.

He turned his head, looking back for Eva, and was relieved to see that she was already strapped into her harness – a huge smile lighting up her face.

The beauty of the wilderness passing him by seemed to capture Michal's attention in a way he had never experienced before. Then, just as he had begun to relax and enjoy the trip, a man dressed in the same fluorescent orange vest appeared in the distance below, waiting on a flat stretch of grass which Michal took to be the landing area. Suddenly, a renewed sense of fear swept through him as he realized the tremendous rate of speed he was still travelling.

At that very instant, a small hook caught the top of the wire attached to his harness and he began to slow down. By the time he reached the attendant at the bottom of the mountain, he was gliding slowly enough for the worker to grab hold of his harness and bring him to a complete stop. The trip down had taken no more than a minute, but the thrill of the ride was enough to raise Michal's adrenaline to a level he never knew was possible. His harness was quickly

unhooked from the thick guide wire and he was steered out of the way. He turned just in time to see Eva sailing rapidly towards them.

“That was fantastic!” Michal exclaimed, as Eva came to an abrupt stop a few feet away. “I can't believe that I've never been here before. Do you come here often?”

“Of course,” Eva exclaimed, stepping from her harness. “And judging by all of the screaming I heard from you, it doesn't come as a shock to hear that this was your first time!”

“Oh come on, I didn't scream that much.” He said, laughing nervously.

Eva smiled, taking him by the hand. “You were very brave.”

Michal let out deep sigh as the rubbery sensation gradually left his legs.

“Thanks for being such a good sport,” she said with a playful smile.

“It was a pleasure,” Michal replied, giving her hand a tight squeeze. “Now, why don't we get back to the city before you get any more of these crazy ideas.”

Chapter Four

The traffic outside Michal's apartment seemed louder than usual that night. Hour after hour he lay awake in the darkness, tossing and turning in his tangled bed sheets, waiting for sleep to come. His mind leapt anxiously from one thought to another, never seeming to settle on one thing for more than a few seconds at a time.

Slowly, relentlessly, his bedside clock ticked on towards morning, his mind sinking further into turmoil. Desperately he willed his dreams to wrap him in their silent embrace, yet the countless sleepless nights of the past reminded him that nothing in his power would make morning come sooner - nothing beyond taking a sleeping pill, and even that wasn't a guarantee.

It was then that the all too familiar sensation rushed over him, consuming him with the terrifying thought that this had all happened to him before. Vivid flashes of childhood memories burst into his semi-conscious mind as he lay there, until the unmistakable feeling of déjà-vu completely inundated his thoughts.

The corridor that Michal found himself in had the distinct feel of a hospital. White walls, sanitized and lifeless. The familiar surroundings drew Michal back into the depths of a long-forgotten memory. He was seven years old, and had just received news of his mother's accident. Standing before him was his father, tightly clenching the hand of his younger brother, Philip.

His dad turned to him, his face ashen and drawn. "Hurry up, Michal. The doctor told us that we have to see your mother immediately!"

With a sickening rush, a wave of emotions flooded over him – the same nightmarish ones that he had experienced on that dreadful day long ago. Fear, desperation, and above all else a sense of helplessness. There was nothing in his power that could stop it from happening.

As they reached the end of the corridor, Michal's father stopped abruptly in front of a door marked 'Intensive Care'. He paused for a brief moment, glancing down at the two boys, then pushed the door open. Michal followed the older man into the small room. There, across from him lay the damaged body of his mother. Her face was almost completely covered with bandages. One arm was wrapped in a cast and was suspended above her head. A number of wires and tubes connected her other arm to an array of monitors.

Michal stepped slowly towards the bed. He could feel his heart racing as he looked at his mother' in disbelief. He had the sinking feeling that his life would never be the same.

"Sarah?" His father whispered.

His mother's eyes fluttered opened and she turned her head in their direction. She smiled, speaking softly. "Hello, Sweetheart. I'm glad to see you."

Michal's father sat down on a chair next to her bed. "How are you feeling?"

Sarah forced a smile as she glanced over at Michal and his brother standing by the doorway. "I'm feeling just fine. Why don't you boys come a little closer."

Michal and Philip moved a few steps closer to the bed. With her free hand Sarah motioned them even closer, then reached up and gently touched each of their faces as they stood by her bedside, seeming to imprint the memory deep into her mind.

She turned once again to her husband. "Charlie, remember what we talked about on the phone this morning . . ." She paused attempting to catch her breath as the pain shot through her body. "The boys will need your support now more than ever."

Charlie nodded wordlessly. Michal could tell that his dad was having difficulty keeping his emotions in check. The older man turned to the two boys at his side. "Philip, Michal, why

don't you wait for me outside in the hall while I talk to your mother?"

Their mother gave a start as they turned to leave. "Boys," she cried.

Michal turned back and moved back to her bedside. He could see her smile again – ever so slightly under the bandages.

"My life has been so blessed because of you two boys," she said, choking back her tears.

"I love you very much. Always remember that."

Michal brushed at his eyes, wiping away the tears that had gathered. He then looked up into the face of his father. For one short instance their eyes met, the image of his father's tired face burning deeply into his memory. He looked different somehow.

"Wait outside boys." He said abruptly.

Michal turned back towards the door and followed his brother into the corridor. He sat down hard on one of the chairs outside the room, gazing up at the blank expression on his brother's face. Not a word was spoken between them as they sat patiently waiting.

Suddenly Michal was awake. His eyes shot open and he stared upward into the darkness of his bedroom. He could feel his stomach begin to lurch, the bile quickly rising to his throat. He struggled into a sitting position, and then staggered to the bathroom, his tired limbs rebelling all the way. He dropped down to his knees in front of the toilet, head positioned over the porcelain.

The vomit began spewing violently from his mouth for several long seconds - most of it hitting its target. One last wave of nausea shuddered through him as he pulled himself back to his feet, dragging a wet cloth across his mouth. A feverish chill gripped him as he stumbled back to the warmth of his bed where he would wait out the last remaining hours until daybreak.

Chapter Five

The early sunlight streamed through the bedroom curtains, rousing Michal only seconds before his alarm clock jangled him awake. He was unbelievably groggy and strangely chilled, even though he knew his apartment was warm. His body began to shiver uncontrollably.

Making his way clumsily into the bathroom he turned on the shower, then checked himself in the mirror as he waiting for the water to come to temperature. His face was pale and drawn, a clear indication that his health had been taking a beating.

He shuddered once more, and then stepped into the shower.

The hot water felt good, seeming to wash away the terrors of the night. When he emerged from the shower he felt strangely energized. For the first time in days he felt half-alive. He dressed, then made his way into the kitchen, pouring a cup of coffee into a travel mug.

A coffee always seems to make the morning a little brighter, although it might take more than a cup of coffee to make this day palatable. Better just grit my teeth and get on with it.

He set the coffee on the kitchen table and was pulling on his jacket when the sound of the buzzer from the main lobby startled him.

“Hello?” Michal said, pushing the button to the intercom.

“Hi, Michal. It's me.”

“Oh, Hi Eva. I'm almost ready. I'll meet you downstairs.”

With all of the excitement taking place over the last several days he had forgotten all about how Eva had volunteered to give him a ride to his morning appointment.

Quickly he picked up his travel mug, and hurried down the stairs. Eva was standing in the main foyer holding a cup in each hand.

Michal laughed, “I see you were sweet enough to bring me a drink,” he said, glancing down helplessly at the travel mug he was holding.

“I know how you like your caffeine-boost in the morning,” she said as they exited the building. “I guess you can always save this one for later.”

“I wouldn't think of it!” Michal said, tossing the contents of his travel mug onto the grass by the sidewalk. “I make nasty coffee anyway.”

He poured Eva's coffee into his mug, then took a long sip. “Delicious,” Michal said, smacking his lips in an exaggerated display of satisfaction. “I'll be honest, Eva,” Michal continued. “I completely forgot that you'd offered to pick me up for my appointment this morning. I must be getting forgetful in my old age.”

“I think I do see a few gray hairs,” She said with a laugh as they began walking towards her car. “Besides, I thought you might appreciate a ride after all you've been through this week.”

“I am feeling rather worn out,” Michal admitted.

“Well, now you can save your strength,” Eva replied, taking his hand.

For several blocks they drove in a warm, comfortable silence, Michal sipping his coffee while Eva snuck an occasional worried glance in his direction. Finally Michal seemed to awaken from his reverie and shot Eva an apologetic look.

“Do you have anything planned for the rest of the day?” he asked.

She smiled. “As a matter of fact I don't have to go to work today, so I was hoping I could prepare a home-cooked meal, just for you.”

“A home-cooked meal? I could never refuse an offer like that!”

“Well, a *home-cooked meal* might be a slight exaggeration. Home-cooked it will be, but

from the home of Chef Ping, and he's even kind enough to deliver it!"

"That sounds great," Michal said with a smile, taking another long sip from his coffee mug. "You seem to have a real affinity for deliveries."

"You should be thankful that I rely on deliveries," Eva said as she pulled into a parking spot near the front entrance of the hospital. "Being raised by my father hasn't exactly given me the traditional 'housewife-like' qualities that you might expect."

Michal laughed, "You seem to have a pretty good handle on things." As he glanced up at the large building before them he suddenly became aware of his rapidly accelerating heart rate. "I guess I'm a little more nervous about this appointment than I thought." He took a deep breath and opened the car door, but before he could exit, Eva reached over and took his hand.

"You'll be fine," she said. "You can tell me more about your appointment this evening at dinner. Why don't you stop by my place around six o'clock?"

He leaned over and kissed her, "Thanks, Eva, I'll see you then." He quickly exited the car and made his way into the busy hospital.

Much to his delight, the instructions given to him from Dr. Gardner had more or less spelled out his itinerary for the remainder of his stay at the hospital. At the Radiology Department he was led into a well-lit room and arranged face-up on an observation table. At the head of the bed there was a large cylindrical machine with a hollow centre.

"We're all set for your scan, Mr. Paterson." The technician said. "Try to keep still."

Before Michal could respond, the technician pushed a button on the control monitor and he could feel himself sliding head-first into the large cylinder, the machine humming noisily in his ears. He forced himself to remain motionless as the unusual sensation of bright pulsating

lights flashed through his brain. After several long moments, the machine finally whirred to a halt, the lights vanished, and he was slowly moved back out of the cylinder.

“Now, that wasn’t too bad, was it?” The technician asked, helping Michal to his feet.

“I suppose it wasn't,” he responded.

The technician then ushered Michal into a small adjoining office. “Please make yourself comfortable, the doctor will be with you in a few minutes.”

Michal sagged back into the chair next to the room’s lone desk. He fidgeted restlessly with a nearby stethoscope attached to the wall. There was something about hospitals that made Michal feel particularly uncomfortable. When Dr. Gardner entered, Michal hurriedly replaced the instrument and straightened up in his chair.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting, Michal,” Dr. Gardner said, taking his seat behind the desk. “How have you been feeling these last few weeks?”

Michal hesitated, exhaling slowly. “Not too bad, although I have been having brief spells of nausea the last several days.”

“It’s most likely just your nerves reacting to stress,” Dr. Gardner said. “but I’ll be sure to prescribe something that will help soothe your stomach.”

“Actually,” Michal said hesitantly. “Nausea has been the least of my worries. For some reason I’ve been having these strange hallucinations over the last few weeks - kind of like the nightmares you have when you’re asleep, the only difference is that I also have them when I’m awake. It’s almost as if I’ve been there before, sort of like the feeling of déjà vu. The experience is often so intense that I end up getting sick immediately afterwards.”

“That's interesting,” Dr. Gardner said. “Of course this isn’t really my area of expertise,

but your problem could simply be the result of something as innocuous as a small lesion on your brain. That's at least one possibility. Anyway, the tests we ran today should pick up any potential abnormality. We'll have the results of that scan by the beginning of next week. In the meantime, why don't I book you in for a quick update on Monday at two o'clock?"

Michal nodded, rising from his chair. "Thank you Doctor. I'll see you on Monday."

Chapter Six

The autumn sun was just beginning its daily descent when Michal made his way up the lane-way to Eva's house. Located on the outskirts of the city, the setting was absolutely breathtaking, situated high on the edge of a limestone cliff overlooking the ocean. The front yard of the large two story building was dominated by a beautiful flower garden and *koi* pond.

Michal shook his head in amazement as he carefully eyed the intricate designs of the massive house before him. He mounted the front steps to the large double oak doors and rang the bell. It was several long seconds before Eva appeared. She was wearing a white satin dress, her sandy blond hair hanging playfully down to her shoulders.

"Wow, you look so beautiful," he said, smiling broadly.

"Well, thank you," she replied, blushing slightly. "You don't look so bad yourself."

Michal stepped inside the house placing his jacket on the coat rack by the door. "This is quite an extraordinary home you have here."

"Would you like a quick tour?" She asked, taking Michal's hand.

"I'd love one." He said obligingly. "To be honest, I never would have expected that you lived in such a spectacular house. Why haven't you taken me here before?"

"It's actually a family home," she explained. "I think most people are intimidated by the size. My father's a businessman who works out of the city, but he visits me quite regularly. We actually lived here for most of my childhood, but now my father uses this place mostly for his stop-overs and business meetings. I think he views this house more as a part of our family's heritage. It's been in the family for four generations."

"Well, I have to admit that your home is quite impressive," Michal said, admiring the

solid oak staircase, which wound its way upward to the second floor.

She led Michal upstairs to a large white door at the end of the hallway.

“I wanted you to see this room first because it has a special place in my heart.” She opened the door and ushered him inside.

“This is the bedroom that I used to sleep in as a girl,” she said. “I haven’t actually slept here in years, but my dad kept it exactly the same way as it looked when I was a child.”

Michal gazed around the bedroom. There was a beautiful canopy bed across from them, decorated in white lace and covered with satin sheets. Next to it was a dresser with a large mirror and a shelf along the near wall that was lined with porcelain dolls. The whole room looked as if it had come straight from the mind of a little girl who dreamed of one day becoming a princess.

“You have great taste,” Michal said softly. “Even as a child.”

“Actually, my father picked out most of these dolls on his business trips.”

“Still, he must have known your taste,” he insisted.

Eva turned towards Michal with a smile, and then playfully pushed him out into the hallway. “Why don’t we finish our tour downstairs?”

“The architecture of this house really appeals to my background as an engineer,” Michal said as they started back down the stairs. “When was it built?”

“I’m not exactly sure. It’s been in the family for several generations. I think it was built by my great grandfather just before the First World War.”

Michal was led into the living room, which was enormous, and filled with over-sized, antique furniture. A large stone fireplace dominated the far wall. Directly above the mantel was an abstract painting that made absolutely no sense to Michal, yet he couldn't take his eyes off it.

“This is certainly an interesting piece,” he offered diplomatically. “Do you know of the story behind its creation?”

“Well, as far as I can remember, it came into the family when my grandfather was serving as a diplomat in Italy. According to my grandfather he managed to buy this painting from an obscure local artist by the name of Pino Pascali.”

“Pino Pascali?” Michal said, stepping closer to the canvas. “Are you sure about that? If Pino Pascali painted this, it would be worth a small fortune!”

Eva hesitated. “Well, my dad did tell me that story when I was only a little girl, and he is known to be a bit of a practical joker. Knowing him, he probably painted this thing himself, but didn't want to admit it. I always thought this painting was hideous.”

Michal chuckled as he leaned even closer to the large, unusual-looking painting, studying it intently. “There it is,” he finally said, pointing to a spot halfway up the left-hand side, about an inch from the frame. “You can see the artist's name just inside that red triangle. It's in a slightly different shade of red, really hard to pick out.” He leaned even closer. “It's initialed, D. B.”

“Donald Bennett!” she said, disbelief sounding in her voice. “That's my grandfather! I should have known! It serves me right for not taking a closer look at that ugly thing.”

Michal laughed. “Come on now, it looks like your grandfather was quite a talented painter. Did you inherit any of his artistic traits?”

“No, I don't think any of his 'artistic' traits rubbed off on me,” Eva said. “Although I do enjoy scrap-booking some of my old memories.” She paused. “Perhaps I can put together a few pages for you sometime, if you're interested.” She took his arm and drew him away from the painting, leading him into the adjacent room, even more enormous than the last.

A large mahogany dining room table, covered with light green linen and a setting of fine china served as the room's centerpiece. A hand-crafted grandfather clock made from dark cherry stained wood stood in the far corner of the room next to a silver-serving tray. On a raised dais opposite them was a magnificent-looking grand piano.

"Wow," Michal said, obviously impressed. "Do you play?"

"A little," Eva admitted.

"How about playing something for me?" Michal asked.

"I'm not that good," she said, brushing her fingers along the keys.

"That doesn't matter," Michal said with a smile. "Besides, we could really use a little pre-dinner music while Chef Ping works his culinary magic."

"Well," she said, taking a deep breath. "I suppose we do have some time." She took her place at the center of the keyboard while Michal pulled a chair up beside her.

Eva opened the music book and again sighed, almost as if steeling herself for some sort of an arduous trial. After delaying for another few seconds she once again ran her fingers lightly up and down the keys. She peered down at the music book, glancing nervously at Michal.

"Chopin," she said simply. "I hope he's a forgiving soul."

Michal sagged back into his chair as the melody rolled out of the grand piano. For some reason he knew Eva's playing would be beautiful. She struck him as the kind of person who never did anything half-heartedly. He studied the young woman more carefully, his brow furrowing. There was so much about Eva Bennett that kept surprising him - things about her that she managed to keep carefully hidden. *What else is there that she hasn't yet revealed?*

Chapter Seven

The next few days went by all too quickly. Days of reflection, days spent with Eva, days on country paths, on lonely deserted hillsides. And with each passing moment Michal found his thoughts focusing more on Eva Bennett and how he had finally found someone that he could be himself around – someone, in fact, that he would be happy to spend the rest of his life with.

Then, his final week away from work was finally over – with all its pleasant diversions and healing powers. His head no longer ached from the car accident, and he found that sleep finally came easier – with fewer nightmares. Today, however, it was back to work, and then back for another appointment at the hospital in the afternoon.

He had barely set foot in the office building when the lobby receptionist greeted him, “Mr. Paterson.” She said, pulling a piece of paper from a pile and handing it to him. “Mr. Stevenson would like to see you in his office as soon as possible.”

Michal could feel his heart accelerate. “Thank you, Miss Hamilton.” He took in a deep breath and punched the Fourteenth Floor on the elevator panel.

When he reached his floor, he slowly made his way down the hallway, stopping just outside his boss’ office. He took a final moment to collect his thoughts as he poured himself a drink at the water cooler. He glanced down at the shirt and tie he had purchased on the weekend. At least he was well-groomed. Finally he stepped up to the door and gave it a tentative knock.

“Come in,” a male voice welcomed.

Doug Stevenson was seated at the desk across from him. He looked up from his paperwork and beckoned Michal forward.

“Have a seat, Michal.” Mr. Stevenson pointed to a plush leather chair. “We missed seeing

you around the office. How have you been feeling since your accident?"

"I'm feeling much better. Thanks."

"A car accident can certainly take a lot out of you," Doug said. "I went through a similar experience only a few years ago, and it shook me up pretty good. I think you were wise to take some time off . . ." He hesitated before continuing. "Let me explain why I brought you in here, Michal. A new project has just come across my desk that I think would be perfect for you. It's a unique project that offers a different kind of challenge than what you might be used to, but I'm certain it would be ideal for someone with your particular skill set."

Michal leaned forward in the chair, taking a package of files from his boss. "Sounds intriguing. What sort of project are we talking about?"

"Have you heard of Goldman Industries?"

Michal nodded. "Of course. They're the largest construction firm on the island."

"Well, they would like us to handle all of their future advertising, but unfortunately when their founder passed away earlier this year, he left things in a bit of a mess. We'd like you to take a trip up island to see if this is an account that our company should be taking on. I realize that this seems like an odd request to ask of someone working in your department, but we really feel that you have the discernment necessary for handling this particular assignment."

Michal hesitated for a moment. "I appreciate your confidence in me, Sir."

"I know you're ready for this, Michal" Doug said. "I would like you to spend the next few days going through these documents with a fine-tooth comb. After you've familiarized yourself with the company, we'd like you to generate a few recommendations as to how we can meet their expansion needs, should we decide to take them on as a client. They also have future

plans to open up two new locations on the east coast, but the members of the board aren't really sure if they're financially prepared for such a large undertaking. Anyway it's all there in that folder. Does this sound like something you can handle on your own?"

Michal got to his feet with the packet of files and shook his boss' hand. "I'll do my best, Sir." With a quick nod he exited the office.

Michal leaned back against the wall and glanced down at the bundle under his arm. A sense of foreboding crept over him as he considered all of the extra work that this assignment would entail. It wasn't in his nature to avoid challenges such as this, but additional responsibilities at work were the last thing he needed.

He made his way back down the long corridor leading to his office, nodding absently at the many greetings he met along the way. As he made his way past one of the large boardrooms, he could hear a man's voice shouting in his direction.

"Michal!" The voice bellowed.

It was Gavin Edwards, one of the more obnoxious salesmen in his department.

"Did you get a chance to book your drivers test?" Gavin shouted. "Maybe they can teach you how to keep your car on the road!"

A few coworkers sitting nearby laughed nervously as Michal continued down the hall towards his office without breaking a step.

"As a matter of fact, I did," Michal said over his shoulder. "I heard it's right next door to the AA meetings. So maybe we could carpool together!"

The sound of additional coworkers joining in the laughter gave Michal a grim sense of satisfaction, knowing that his comment had probably struck a nerve with his coworker. There

was something about Gavin Edwards that rubbed him the wrong way.

Stepping inside his office, he flicked on the lights and placed his briefcase on a chair near the door. Other than the large desk and chair dominating the room, the only other pieces of furniture were a four drawer filing cabinet and a severely dehydrated plant slumped over in the corner. He crossed the room to the window behind his desk and peered outside. The dark, overcast sky dampened his spirits even further. Gradually, though, his mind began to clear.

He sagged back into the chair behind his desk and stared vacantly at its bare surface. He would be hard-pressed to make it through the rest of the week if he didn't get himself organized. After the wonderful respite of the past few weeks, he was sick at the idea of returning to work.

Chapter Eight

The remainder of Michal's first day back at the office ground by tediously. Try as he might it was impossible for him to hold his concentration for more than a few minutes. Time and again he would glance up at the clock in frustration as the hours seemed to drag by.

The new account was even more disorganized than Michal had feared and he knew it would take more than a few days of analysis to determine whether the company was worth taking on as a client. Shortly after lunch, he assembled the scattered remnants of the documents and returned them to its folder. *Time for the dreaded doctor's appointment . . .*

Michal scooped up his jacket from the back of his chair, then quickly made his way out of the large office building.

Dr. Gardner's clinic was only a half-dozen blocks away, yet with his face to the wind, the walk took much longer than he had expected.

When he arrived, he was greatly relieved to find the waiting room almost empty. He dropped into a chair and was absently flipping through the pages of a local newspaper when a woman's voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Mr. Paterson?"

Michal looked up. A young woman in a bright green medical gown was standing in front of him. "Could you come with me, please."

Michal followed her down the hall and into a large room with bookshelves completely covering the far wall. It seemed more like a library than anything else, and perhaps for that reason, Michal felt a renewed sense of unease. Barely had he settled into his chair when Dr. Gardner entered, looking intently down at the clipboard in his hand. He then slipped behind his

desk and began leafing through a thick file folder. So absorbed was he in his reading, that he was almost surprised when he looked up to see his patient sitting in front of him.

Michal cleared his throat awkwardly as the physician peered at him over his glasses.

“How are you feeling, Mr. Paterson?”

Michal shrugged. “I’ve been feeling a bit drowsy, but nothing too serious.”

Dr. Gardner’s gaze returned to the file in his hand and he lapsed back into silence. Finally he leaned back in his chair and sighed. “I don't think there's any easy way to say this, Michal, but I'm afraid the test results weren't good.” He paused for a moment, allowing the information to sink in. “The CT Scan that we ran on you last week revealed what seems to be a fair-sized mass on the occipital lobe of your brain.” Once again the doctor paused, frowning intently at his patient. “I'm sorry to say that past experience has revealed that most of the tumors in this location are almost always malignant, but we have to do a biopsy to determine that for certain.”

Michal could feel every nerve in his body constrict all at once. A myriad of questions spun frantically through his mind, yet all he could do was stare helplessly at the man across from him. He tried desperately to think of an appropriate question to ask, licking his suddenly-parched lips ... Finally he swallowed hard and managed to pull himself together. “Is there anything that can be done . . . if you discover that the tumor is indeed malignant?”

“Well, I don't want to set any unreasonable expectations at this point, however there are a number of beneficial procedures that we'd like to schedule as soon as possible. If the biopsy reveals a malignancy we should start you on radiation and chemotherapy treatments.”

“The biopsy - how risky is that kind of surgery?” Michal asked.

“In this day and age, it's fairly common. The procedure involves making a small incision

in the base of your skull, and removing a small piece of the tumor. Although there are minor risks to such an operation, I can assure you that you'll be in good hands. We have some of the most talented surgeons in the country who are on staff at this hospital."

Michal exhaled loudly and leaned forward in his chair. "Well, if there's a chance you think these procedures will help, then let's get on with it."

"I realize you're anxious to get started so we'll start these procedures as soon as possible," Dr Gardner said. "However, I'm sure you have a lot of questions on your mind, so why don't you take some time to let this sink in and we can talk again soon. The nurse will notify you in the next day or two - when we have all the details worked out. How does that sound?"

Michal nodded absently.

"Do you have any more questions for me?" the doctor asked.

"I'm sure I do," Michal said, "I just can't think of any at the moment."

Dr. Gardner got to his feet and extended his hand. "Well, if you think of any questions, please feel free to call me anytime and I'll do my best to answer them. In the meantime I'll keep you updated on any new developments, and try to remember, Michal, that a positive outlook is one of the strongest weapons that someone in your position can have. There have been many cases where the patient has overcome similar obstacles, thanks in part to the support they receive from family and friends. If we work together on this, we might be able to beat this thing, however it's important that you conserve your strength and not push yourself too hard."

Michal swallowed. "Thank you, Doctor."

As Michal exited the doctor's office he felt as if he was moving through a different phase of time – almost as if nothing at that moment mattered to him. The faces of the people he passed

seemed to blend together as he made his way out of the building and through the busy downtown center. More than an hour had passed before he finally turned down a narrow side street, where various shops and cafes sprawled carelessly out onto the sidewalk. A small pub on the corner caught his attention. He quickly turned and entered through the large double-oak doors.

Like many such establishments, the interior was dark and depressing and almost devoid of patrons. A long mahogany bar stretched down the wall to his right, and scattered about the remainder of the room were several wooden tables and chairs. A man standing behind the bar nodded a brief welcome as Michal crossed the room and sat down hard on one of the stools.

“What can I get you?” The man asked.

Michal cupped his hands together on the bar, inhaling a long ragged breath. “Something that will strip the enamel from your teeth,” he said with an awkward smile.

The bartender chuckled softly as he poured a drink into a glass and then filled it with ice. “How does this suit you?”

“That’ll do,” Michal said, taking a long sip.

The bartender eyed Michal inquisitively. “Had a rough day?”

Michal handed the man a bill. “You could say that.”

“Well, I suppose that’s the sort of thing that brings a lot of folks in here.” The bartender pulled a cloth from his apron and started to wipe the counter.

“Sometimes it’s nice to be able to put your feet up and forget your troubles,” the man said, sitting down on a nearby stool. “We all need to take a break once in a while.” He picked up a newspaper and began reading the front page.

Michal rose from the stool with his drink in hand, and crossed the room to a dimly lit

corner. It was only then that he noticed an older man sitting by himself, slumped forward, oblivious to everything around him. Michal sat down hard on one of the wooden chairs. It was several moments before he became aware that the other man was now staring intently in his direction. He sensed that the man was building up his nerve to come over to his table, but the last thing Michal wanted was getting into a long conversation. Especially with some drunk in a pub.

Eyes still fixed on his glass, Michal frowned as he heard the man's chair scrape across the floor and the sound of approaching footsteps. Reluctantly, he glanced up. The man was short and stout, with a long, tobacco-stained beard and receding hairline.

"Don't I know you?" the man asked abruptly, sitting down across from Michal.

"I don't think so."

"Is your name Peterson?" the man asked.

"Paterson." Michal replied.

"That's right. You're one of the big-wigs who works at *Feinstein Communications*," the man said, taking a long drink from his beer mug. "That's where I know you from. I used to clean your office - that is until they fired me a few months ago."

Michal studied the man more carefully. "Ah, yes. You didn't have a beard then."

The man grunted. "Wasn't it you who got me fired?"

"I don't think so." Michal said with a puzzled expression.

"I think it was!" The man scowled. "You told my supervisor that I got garbage all over the floor of your office, and I got canned the next day!"

Michal looked up at the old man, staring intently into his eyes. "Now that you mention it, I did put in a complaint to your department about the garbage on my office floor, but you can

hardly blame me for pointing out the obvious. The room was a mess.”

“Mess or not, It's because of you that I lost my job!” the man shouted.

“Give me a break,” Michal said. “I'm pretty sure that your supervisor didn't fire you because of *one* isolated incident. As a matter of fact, I heard a few stories about your work around the office over the years. Wasn't it you who stole from one of the board members?”

“So what if I did?” The man said, “It was only a few dollars that was left on someone's desk. I thought it was a tip!” The man gave Michal a wry smile.

“You're not exactly making a compelling case for yourself,” Michal said unsympathetically. “If I were your supervisor I would have done the same thing.”

“That's your opinion,” the man muttered.

“Apparently it was also your supervisor's opinion,” Michal said bluntly.

“Oh, so you're Mr. Perfect I suppose,” the man said with a sneer.

“No,” Michal admitted. “But I admit it when I've done something wrong.”

“Oh, you do, do you?” the man said. “Have you always come clean on every lie you've ever told? I'm sure a weasel like you has told plenty of lies to get where you are!”

“There's a big difference between lying and stealing,” Michal replied.

“If you think there's a difference between the two, then you're a bigger fool than I am.”

The older man got abruptly to his feet, swallowed the rest of his drink and then slammed his mug down on Michal's table. “Truth be told, you're no different than me,” he said, making his way unsteadily to the door. “The only difference I see is that you wear a suit.”

Chapter Nine

The piercing wail of a police siren brought Michal back to consciousness. When he opened his eyes the first thing he saw was a huge willow tree towering high above him. His back ached and his head was pounding so hard that he thought he would be sick. Slowly he brought himself into a sitting position and looked cautiously around him. He was lying on a park bench not far from his apartment building. He shook his head violently. This was a new low – sleeping off an all-night binge at the local park with all the other bums and derelicts.

He got to his feet, the effort making him queasy, then slowly walked the few remaining blocks to his apartment. He decided to take the stairs since he was in no mood for exchanging pleasantries with the other tenants. Letting himself into his apartment, he walked clumsily across the room and sagged onto the couch. The message light was flashing on his answering machine so he leaned over and pushed down on the *play* button. Eva's voice brought him to attention.

“Hi, Michal. Why didn't you call me last night after your appointment? Where have you been all night? I stopped by to see you at work earlier this morning but they said you didn't show up. Could you give me a call when you get the message, please?”

He groaned, knowing he wasn't ready to face a conversation with Eva. His whole body ached. His head was pounding and his mouth felt like the inside of an old rubber boot. His clothes were badly wrinkled and he knew that he smelled like the dingy bar where he had spent most of the night drinking. It was then that the memory of the bad news he had received at his doctor's appointment brought his mind back into focus.

Slowly he struggled to his feet and made his way into the kitchen, where he poured himself a tall glass of water. He glanced down absently at his watch. 9:30 am. *I'd better call the*

office to apologize and let them know that I won't be coming in today.

Retracing his steps to the bedroom, he picked up the phone. Drawing in a deep breath he dialed the number of his office.

A woman's voice answered on the other end. "Good morning, *Feinstein Communications*. Gail speaking, how may I direct your call?"

"Hi, Gail. This is Michal Paterson. I'm sorry that I didn't call you earlier but I have an emergency that needs tending to at home."

"Are you alright, Michal?" Gail asked.

"I'm fine," he replied. "Something just came up suddenly that I have to deal with."

"Alright, Michal. I'll pass on the message to Mr. Stevenson."

"Thanks, Gail. I'll see you tomorrow."

With that, Michal hung up the phone, and stepped out onto his apartment balcony. The center courtyard was lonely and deserted in the cool morning air, but the slight breeze felt good against his face. He slipped inside, put his shoes back on and exited the apartment.

The smell of flowers and shrubs surrounding the courtyard renewed a sense of peace within him. He knew that he had to find some way to keep himself from being consumed by the events that had overtaken his life over the last several days.

Taking a seat on a small stone bench near the entrance of the courtyard, he leaned forward and once again filled his lungs with the crisp autumn air. The colorful gardens spanning the property were breath-taking, even for this time of year. The beauty and innocence of such a morning made it difficult to understand how his life could turn upside down so quickly.

A sudden movement near the main gate woke him from his reverie. He glanced up to

find Eva standing there, a puzzled expression lining her face.

“Michal?” She asked in surprise.

He straightened and tried to collect himself, forcing a smile as she walked towards him.

“I tried calling you at work,” she said, taking a seat next to him. “What are you doing here?”

Michal stared at the ground in silence, trying desperately to think of the right words to say. “I called in sick today.”

“Does this have anything to do with your appointment?” she finally asked.

“You could say that,” Michal said, attempting to avoid direct eye contact. “Apparently the tests they ran last week showed a few *abnormalities*.”

Eva moved closer to Michal. “What do you mean, *abnormalities*?”

“Well,” Michal said, swallowing hard. “According to the doctor, there's a large tumour located near the base of my skull.”

He glanced back at Eva to gauge her expression. He could see the look of concern in her eyes as they began swelling with tears. “I don't know what to say, Michal.”

He took Eva's hand, holding it tightly. “Everything will be fine,” he said reassuringly. “The doctor said there were a number of treatments worth considering, so if all goes well, there's an excellent chance that I'll be able to make a full recovery.”

“That is good news.” She said with a sigh of relief. “So what's the next step?”

“They're going to start with a biopsy, which means that I'll be going in for a minor procedure in next few days,” Michal responded. “Nothing serious.”

Eva squeezed his hand gently and stared deeply into his eyes. “I'm so sorry, Michal. I can see this is taking a lot out of you. When was the last time you had a good night's sleep?”

Michal let out a deep sigh as he began to speak. “Well, lately I've been having a hard time turning off my brain at night, so sleep's a bit slow coming. When I am finally able to drift off, I sometimes find it difficult to wake myself from my dreams.”

“How long has this been going on?” She asked.

“About a month or two.”

Eva glanced up at him with a puzzled expression. “You said you were having trouble waking yourself from your dreams. What did you mean by that?”

Michal hesitated for a moment, seeming to gather his thoughts.

“You can tell me,” Eva said, placing her hand reassuringly on his arm.

“Well, over the last several months I've been having a lot of nightmares.”

Eva smiled supportively. “We all have nightmares, Michal.”

“Not like this,” Michal insisted. “These nightmares feel a lot more intense when compared to your average nightmare. They feel so real. So vivid. Almost as if they're actually happening. On top of that, I often begin throwing up immediately afterwards.”

Eva leaned forward curiously. “What are your dreams about?”

“They're all sort of similar,” he said. “It's almost as if they're telling a story.” He paused once more. “Last night I had a dream where I was standing in this long, dark, narrow cavern, not knowing where I was or how I got there. I had that same feeling of deja-vu, like I had been there before, but I knew that I never have. I slowly began moving deeper into the cave, and as I did the walls and ceilings began closing in around me. I immediately felt this tremendous heat radiating through the cave walls, and the earth was shaking beneath my feet. At this point I was beginning to panic, but when I tried to go back, the cave was already blocked behind me. I had no choice

but to move further into the cave, but the ceiling got so low that I finally had to get down on my hands and knees and begin crawling. Eventually I could see an opening about ten feet ahead of me which led into a small room. When I entered the room I saw an object lying in the corner that was wrapped in an old tattered blanket. I quickly realized that it was actually a man lying on the ground. He just lay there, staring up at me with this strange, panicked expression, as if I was the first person he had seen in years. His face was the colour of red hot iron, as if his flesh had been burned all over. I just stood there in silence, unable to move, when suddenly he sat up and began to scream. I'll never forget the look of anguish on his face. He then reached out his hand and grabbed me by the arm – and as he did I could feel my flesh begin to burn.”

Michal paused for a moment, glancing down at Eva, hoping to gauge her reaction to the strange dream that he was describing.

After a moment he turned away and continued his story. “Suddenly, everything around me changed almost instantly. When I looked back down, I could see that the man was now standing, his face so bright that I couldn't even make out his features. He let go of my arm, and ever so slowly disappeared into the light that was now surrounding me. For some reason the burning in my arm began to fade, and when I examined it even closer, I saw that the burns had been completely healed.” Michal looked back at Eva. “When I woke up, I could see the faint imprint of a hand on my forearm, as if someone had actually been holding on to my arm.”

“Do you think it was your own hand that made the impression on your arm?” Eva asked. “Perhaps you were acting out parts of your dream in real life.”

Michal shook his head. “That's what I thought at first, until I realized that the thumb imprint was on the wrong side of my arm, which is physically impossible.”

Eva sat there for a moment, an astonished look on her face. “That’s certainly an amazing dream, Michal! Whenever I have a nightmare I’m not able to remember more than one or two small moments. It certainly is incredible to think that you remembered so much.”

“Up until a few months ago I wasn’t able to remember any of my dreams either, but for some reason over the last few weeks I’ve been able to remember even the smallest details.” Michal hesitated. “I know it sounds strange, but I think God is trying to tell me something.”

Eva got slowly to her feet. “Listen, Michal. Why don’t I take you out of the city for the rest of the afternoon to get your mind off your troubles? An uncle of mine called me last night and asked me if I could drop by to see him later today. Would you be willing to tag along?”

“I think I’d like that,” Michal said, helping her to her feet.

Chapter Ten

Eva pulled the car out of the driveway and onto the narrow, oak-lined street. Michal could tell that she was excited at the prospect of having him meet her favorite uncle, yet she somehow managed to curb her enthusiasm until they were finally turning their car onto the expressway leading out of town.

“I think you’re really going to love Uncle Winston,” she said excitedly. “When I was growing up, my dad was always away on long business trips, so my Uncle Winston and Aunt Judith were practically second parents to me.”

“You never told me about you mother,” Michal said inquisitively.

“Unfortunately she died of cancer when I was only six.” Eva said with a frown.

Michal was quiet for a moment. “I’ll bet you miss her.”

“I do miss her. At least what I can remember. I was so young when she died that I barely remember anything about her. My aunt always told me that my mother’s gracious heart and generous spirit had already begun to rub off on my dad by the time she died.”

Michal smiled. “I’m sure that some of her best characteristics rubbed off on you, as well.”

“Thanks,” Eva said, returning his smile. “I should probably also mention that my Uncle Winston is actually my great uncle – he’s my mother’s uncle.”

“It must be nice to have such a close relationship with your family,” Michal said. “I’m sorry to say that I missed out on that experience.”

“Who do you have left in your family?” Eva asked.

“I still have a brother.” Michal admitted. “My mother also died when I was young. I was only ten years old, so my brother Philip and I went to live with our aunt. My father couldn’t

handle the responsibility. I heard through old friends that he died a few years ago.”

“Do you still keep in touch with your brother?” Eva asked.

“Phil spends most of his time traveling the world on his yacht. The only contact I have with him anymore is reading a long, bloated Christmas newsletter every year detailing his many recent accomplishments, but he never really discusses anything personal.” He smiled and shrugged. “But that’s okay, we were never really that close to begin with.”

A few miles outside the city Eva turned into the parking lot next to a series of sprawling townhouses. A large green sign read, “Edmison Heights Retirement Home.”

When they stepped inside the building the aroma of potpourri and disinfectant struck Michal with an almost palpable force. He blinked hard several times. “Why do all of these residences smell the same – like a mixture of disinfectant and ammonia!”

Eva laughed quietly to herself as they made their way past the nurses station and down the hall. “I always thought they smelled like mothballs and *Ben-Gay*,” she said with a smile.

“I think you’ll really get a kick out of my uncle,” Eva continued. “He’s quite a character, even though he can be a bit aggressive with his personal views.”

“His personal views?” Michal said playfully, “Is he one of those people that believe that lizard men are being held at *Area 51*?”

She laughed, “No, but I’m sure he thinks there are a few who work in government.”

Eva led the way to an open door leading into a small bedroom. Sitting on a large rattan chair by the room’s only window was an old, gray-haired man, his head resting comfortably on a pillow. An oxygen mask connected to a large silver cylinder covered his mouth and nose.

Michal stepped tentatively into the room. He took in a deep breath as he followed Eva

over to where the old man was sitting.

As they stood there wondering if they should wake him, the old man suddenly jolted upright, and gave a loud shout. “Boo!”

Startled, Michal and Eva took a few startled steps backward.

With a gnarled hand the old man lifted the oxygen mask from his face and laughed excitedly. “Hello Eva.” He said with a apologetic grin. “I hope I didn’t scare you too much. The nurse told me you were coming, so I thought I 'd give you a proper reception!”

“Uncle Winston!” Eva exclaimed. “You shouldn’t be doing that at your age! What would Aunt Judith think of such childish behaviour?”

“She always knew that I couldn't help myself.” Winston replied with a large smile.

Eva sighed “She must have had the patience of a saint!”

Michal and the old man laughed.

“How have you been feeling?” Eva asked

“Not too bad for an old goat,” he said, turning his gaze towards Michal. “And who might this young man be? I must say, he looks a bit like that fellow who played Oliver Cromwell on television the other night. You're not an actor, are you young man?”

“No, Uncle Winston,” Eva said, rolling her eyes. “This is my friend, Michal.”

Michal smiled, extending his hand. “Pleased to meet you, sir.”

Winston shook his hand enthusiastically. “Same here, son.”

“I thought it would be nice to bring someone new for a change.” Eva said.

“I appreciate that, Eva. I have to admit that I haven’t been getting a lot of visitors lately. Although I guess I can’t complain. I’ve still got all my marbles, three square meals a day, and my

bedpan whenever I need it.” His blue eyes twinkled. “So how are you doing, my dear?”

“I’ve been doing alright,” Eva said, being careful to avoid eye contact. “We’re actually here to ask you for a favor Uncle Winston. My friend, Michal, has virtually no family to speak of, so I was wondering if you might consider adopting him as your new grandson?”

Winston smiled as he eyed the younger man opposite him. “I don’t see why not, Eva. As long as I don’t have to change his diapers.”

Michal smiled. “Same goes for me!”

Winston laughed loudly, then turned his attention towards Eva. “I think your Aunt Judith would have approved, Eva. He seems like a very nice boy.”

“Thanks, Uncle Winston,” Eva said with a smile.

Winston fumbled through his pajama pocket for a moment then pulled out a large handkerchief and blew his nose. “Speaking of Aunt Judith, did you get a chance to read that book I gave you during your last visit? It was one of her favorites.”

“I’m almost half way through, Uncle Winston,” Eva replied.

“What do you think of it so far?” Winston asked.

“It certainly is thought-provoking.”

Winston smiled. “Have you been getting out to church lately?”

“Not recently,” she admitted. “I’ve been pretty busy.”

The old man frowned, his eyes now fixed on the floor. “I certainly miss not being able to get out to the services more often,” he said in a defeated tone. “If I was in your position, I would take advantage of every opportunity I had of getting out to the services on Sunday.”

Michal looked at Eva and Winston curiously. *This must have been what Eva meant by her*

uncle's aggressive personal views.

“There are many things in my life that I wish I had made more time for while I still had the chance,” Winston continued, staring intently at Eva. “I know that to a young person like you, being eighty-eight years old is almost inconceivable, but in many ways I still feel like I’m as young as you are – some days even younger. Life goes by far too quickly. ”

Michal swallowed hard at the man's words. “It certainly does.”

“Do you have a church you’re attending, Michal?” Winston asked.

“To be honest, I can’t see myself connecting to any particular religion,” Michal admitted. “But I’m glad that you found something that works for you.”

Winston looked at Michal with a confused expression. “If my faith was merely something that gave me a personal sense of security about the future, then I would just keep it to myself.” He said emphatically. “The Bible makes it clear. It tells us that we're all lost souls, and each of us is in rebellion against God because of our sin.” Winston paused for a moment, seeming to catch his breath. “The Book of Romans says that the only way for our sins to be forgiven by God is to put our faith in the One He sent to die for us. The Saviour of our world, Jesus Christ.”

Michal stirred uncomfortably at the old man’s words.

Winston sat there for a moment staring up at Michal, studying him more carefully. “I guess this isn't exactly the most popular philosophy nowadays, is it?”

“It's not exactly embraced by most of the people of my generation.” Michal responded.

“I'm sorry to say that you're probably right. People tend to perceive the idea of there being only one way to heaven as 'close minded', but I’m only telling you what the Bible says.

For there is only one God and one mediator between God and man – Christ Jesus.”

Eva took hold of Winston's hand. "You're starting to sound more and more like my mother, Uncle Winston. I remember when I was a little girl she would read stories to me from the Bible right before bedtime. It's still one of my favourite memories of her."

Winston smiled. "Your mother had a lot of sense, Eva. It's sad to see the world losing it's common sense. I think it's safe to say that the majority of people in this world believe that all roads lead to the Almighty, as long as you're sincere in what you believe."

Michal nodded awkwardly, unwilling to say the wrong thing and upset the old man or Eva. "I think I would support that idea," he finally admitted.

"Is that right? Winston asked, his eyebrows furrowed. "Perhaps you would permit me to share a brief illustration with you that might help you see why this particular type of logic is so flawed." He paused briefly. "That is if you're willing to listen."

"I'm all ears," Michal replied.

"Well," Winston continued. "Imagine that you're driving through an unfamiliar town, and you're looking for a hotel where you'll be spending the night. You come to a four-way stop street, but since you have no way of knowing where the hotel is located, the only chance you have at finding it is to ask someone for directions. Luckily you see four people standing on the street corner who are able to give you directions. But soon you're faced with another problem. When you ask where the hotel is located, each of the four individuals are bent on sending you in a completely different direction. You're certain that they all can't lead to your destination, so which direction should you take in order to make it to the hotel?"

Michal scratched his head thoughtfully. "You've got a point there. They couldn't all be right. I suppose the only option I have left is to find a map."

“That's right,” Winston said good naturedly. “And the map God gave us is the Bible. The Bible tells us not only who we are, but where we're going. Unfortunately most people don't take advantage of what this amazing book has to offer. Most people stumble through life not knowing where they're going and not realizing where they'll end up.” Winston picked up his Bible from his night stand and held it up for Michal to see. “Most importantly this book helps lost people find their way. In fact, the Bible says that God came to seek and to save those who are lost.”

Michal smiled uncomfortably and glanced over at Eva. “That certainly is food for thought,” he said diplomatically. “I appreciate the advice.”

For the next twenty minutes Michal listened politely as Eva's uncle masterfully turned every facet of their conversation back in the direction of God, and other spiritual matters. Finally Eva leaned forward and kissed the old man's forehead.

“You've given us both a lot to think about, Uncle Winston,” she said. “But I'm afraid we'll have to continue this conversation during our next visit.”

“I realize that I've been monopolizing most of the conversation,” Uncle Winston said sheepishly. “But I also know that I don't have a lot of time left, and I want to make sure that my family hears the truth. It was sure nice to see you again, Eva, and to meet you, Michal.”

“It's been a pleasure.” Michal said, shaking the old man's hand one last time.

Both Michal and Eva were unusually quiet as they started the drive back to the city. Their visit seemed to leave them both buried deep in thought.

“Your uncle certainly has some interesting beliefs,” Michal finally said.

“His religious views might be a bit old-fashioned,” Eva admitted. “But his faith helps to keep him alive, no matter how grim the circumstances. It must be difficult when one's life can be

measured in days rather than years.” She hesitated, blushing slightly. “I’m sorry, Michal ...”

“That’s okay.” Michal interrupted. “It's something I might have to get used to.”

Eva squirmed uncomfortably in her seat. “I have to admit that the idea of going to a better place when we die is a comforting notion,” she said thoughtfully, “But I still don't know how anyone can really know for sure what happens to us when we die.”

Michal nodded. “When you’re young, you feel so invincible. I guess you don’t really need to think about things like this very often. That is unless you’re forced into it.”

Eva looked over at Michal. “Well, I think if you’re a good person, then you'll probably make it into heaven, wouldn't you agree?”

“I suppose so,” Michal replied doubtfully. “Although, the question that bothers me the most is; *how do you know if you are good enough to get into heaven?*”

Chapter Eleven

Michal picked up the receiver of his phone and dialed Eva's number. Dropping down onto the couch he pressed the phone anxiously against his ear.

"Hello?"

The sound of her voice gave his heart a little jump.

"Hi Eva, it's Michal.

"Hi Michal," Eva said excitedly. "What's up?"

"I was just calling to let you know that I'll be leaving town early this morning on a business trip, so I won't see you until Friday."

"I see." Eva said, pausing for a moment. "Before you go, would you mind meeting me for a quick coffee at Piccolo's? I was hoping to pass on to you a book that I just finished reading. It's actually the book my Uncle Winston gave me a few weeks ago, the one he mentioned during our visit. I've been thinking a lot about the conversation we had with him yesterday, and this book really helped to answer a lot of tough questions for me . . ." her voice trailed off.

"Sure, Eva. Although I'm not sure if I'll have a lot of time to read anything in the next few days," Michal said. "Do you want to meet at the café in an hour?"

"That would be perfect," Eva replied. "I'll see you then."

Michal hung up the phone, took a quick shower before getting dressed, then collected his briefcase and overnight bag and headed out the door. After a brief stop for some gas and a local map of the area north of the city, he continued on his way to the café.

He was just pulling his rental car into the café's parking lot when he saw Eva hurrying towards him, waving her hands.

“Michal! I’ve been called into work today so I won’t have time for that coffee with you after all, but here’s the book that I mentioned on the phone.”

She handed him a book entitled, *Understanding Salvation*.

He frowned, turning it over. “Interesting title,” he said, staring down at the pleasant face of the author on the back cover.

“A question you asked yesterday really peaked my interest,” Eva said. “You asked; *how do we know when we’re good enough to get to heaven?* For the rest of the evening that question haunted me, and I wanted to know the answer. It turns out that we were asking the wrong question. The Bible says that none of us are good enough to get to heaven on our own, that’s why we need to rely on faith ...” She hesitated. “I think this writer can explain it better than I can.”

She glanced down at her watch. “I’d better get going anyway, Michal, but I’ll see you again on Friday when you get back from your trip. Could you call me as soon as you’re back in the city?” She leaned forward and kissed him. “And drive carefully.”

After watching her car disappear into traffic Michal entered the café and ordered a coffee to go. When he returned to his car, he tossed Eva’s book onto the seat beside him, the smell of the vehicle’s newness wafting over him. He took a long sip of the coffee, turned the ignition, and pulled into traffic, beginning what he suspected would be his last trip out of town for some time.

* * * * *

The highway east of the city wound through rolling hills, hairpin turns, and an intriguing variety of picturesque country villages. Road trips like these were a lot simpler than life at home, and for the first few miles Michal found it quite exhilarating to be out on the road, and by the time he finally passed the sign marking the end of his journey, his body was aching all over.

When he finally pulled into a gas station on the edge of town, he was almost desperate to get out and stretch his legs. Carefully he parked next to one of the pumps, and began refilling his tank, watching absently as a large, half-ton truck pulled in front of the kiosk.

With the gas tank filled, Michal replaced the gas cap and made his way into the service station. A stocky, middle-aged man in a dirty bush jacket brushed by him at the door, intent on the pack of cigarettes that he had just purchased.

As Michal's order was being processed he poured himself another cup of coffee. Outside the service station the sound of an engine roared to life. Michal and the attendant both looked out the window at the same time. The truck's driver had reversed his vehicle and in a spray of gravel wheeled it back towards the pumps. In the same instant Michal heard a distinct *crunch*.

"I think he hit my car!" Michal shouted.

With his coffee still in hand, he raced out the door just in time to see the driver of the truck disappear down the highway. Michal approached his car in disbelief. A long deep scratch ran across the front-side of his vehicle.

For a brief moment he considered chasing after the man, dragging him from his truck and giving him the beating of his life. It was only when he reminded himself that he was driving a rental car that he stopped to catch his breath.

"How can anyone in their right mind just drive away after hitting another person's car?" he exclaimed as the service station attendant joined him.

"There are a lot of careless drivers on the highways nowadays," the station attendant remarked, leaning over Michal's shoulder to inspect the damage. "Driving seems to bring out the worst in some people. I guess they call it *road rage* for a reason. The fellow who did this has

stopped at this station a few times before. I'm pretty sure he works for a trucking company called 'Distance Hauling'. He should be easy enough to track down."

Michal jotted down the information and filed it away in his top pocket. He then paid the attendant and climbed back into his car, still shaking his head in disbelief. *I suppose this is what Eva's Uncle Winston was referring to when he described the sinful nature of man.* He quickly set his coffee in the cup holder beside him and maneuvered back into traffic.

Michal knew that a rather expensive room had been reserved for him at a local hotel called the *Huntington Arms Resort*, but the recent episode at the service station seemed to have dampened his enthusiasm. When he finally approached his hotel, he could see that the resort was something of an architectural wonder. Constructed of pure white stone that looked like marble, it stood nearly six stories high and was capped with a red peaked roof.

"Unbelievable!" Michal said as he pulled into the circular driveway. "Someone at the agency must have really splurged this time."

A tall, thin-framed concierge stepped out from the hotel's front entrance and approached the car. Michal exited, picking up the book from the front seat. He popped open the trunk and handed the keys to the concierge. "I can handle carrying my own bags if you don't mind parking the car." He slipped the man a bill from his pocket. "Thanks for the help."

After a few more moments spent registering at the front desk, Michal made his way up the elevator to his fourth floor suite.

The accommodations offered by the *Huntington Arms Resort* were second to none: two large sprawling sofas, big screen television, and a long bank of sliding glass doors opening onto a balcony with a terrific view. He flopped onto one of the room's comfortable sofas, exhausted.

He knew the importance of this business trip, for the city housed the headquarters of his new potential client. The dull ache in his head and shoulders began to subside. Perhaps a shower would help him unwind. He pushed himself to his feet and made his way into the washroom. It took only a few minutes under the near-scalding water before he could feel the tension easing in his body, and the dread of the next few of days fading into obscurity.

An early supper might be just what the doctor ordered.

He dressed, checked himself in the bathroom mirror, and then exited his hotel room, making his way down the luxurious hallway to the elevator. He was thinking about where he might find a good restaurant for dinner, when a large sign posted on the wall of the elevator caught his attention. It advertised the hotel dining room menu. *That should do nicely.*

The dining room was bustling with patrons. A rather austere maître d' seated Michal at a table near the entrance, then handed him a menu accompanied by a thin-lipped smile. Michal watched as the man turned to an older couple waiting at the entrance. "I'm so sorry," he said. "But the last table has just been taken. All we can offer you is a table for five on the patio."

Michal cleared his throat and caught the attention of the maître d' with a slight wave. "Excuse me, I'm more than willing to move – I have no special plans, so I don't mind eating outside. You can let the couple have my table." He got to his feet.

The man standing by the entrance shook his head firmly. "No, no. We wouldn't think of putting you out like that. Besides, it's such a beautiful evening for a relaxing dinner on the patio. As a matter of fact, why don't you join my wife and I for dinner outside?"

His wife smiled her approval. "We would be delighted to have you! Besides, we should have called ahead to book a reservation in the first place."

“That’s alright. I’d hate to be a third wheel.” Michal said with a polite smile.

“Nonsense,” the woman said. “Elliot and I love getting to know new people, as long as you don’t mind sharing your evening with a couple of strangers.”

Michal could feel his resistance dissolve under the smiles of the two diners. “I suppose the company would be nice. I appreciate the offer.”

Elliot placed his hand on Michal’s shoulder. “Then it's settled.”

Grateful to see the issue resolved, the maître d’ led the trio through the busy dining room to the large, double-glassed doors leading outside, then pushed his way onto a well-lit patio overlooking the lake. Michal took his seat across from the couple.

“The waiter will return for your orders shortly,” the maître d’ said, placing three large menus before them.

The older man leaned across the table. “I don’t think we’ve been formally introduced. I’m Elliot Redding, and this is my wife, Libby.”

“Michal Paterson.” He shook their hands.

“What brings you here?” Libby asked.

“I’m here on a business trip,” Michal said. “And a short holiday as well, I suppose.”

“That’s a bit unusual,” Elliot said. “Most people normally enjoy separating their business from their pleasure. I take it you're a workaholic?”

Michal chuckled. “I think those days are behind me.”

Elliot and Libby smiled politely as they continued eying their menus.

“Do you come here often?” Michal asked.

“As a matter of fact we come here every year to celebrate our anniversary.” Elliot said.

“This is where Libby and I had our first date.”

Michal leaned back slowly in his seat. “It's your anniversary?”

“Our twentieth anniversary to be exact,” Libby answered, reaching over and squeezing her husband's hand.

“Now I really do feel terrible,” Michal said. “I certainly didn't mean to break into your anniversary dinner. Especially your twentieth anniversary.”

“Oh, don't worry about that,” Libby said with a smile. “We're more than happy to share the evening with you. You only live once, am I right?”

Elliot looked over at Libby, a smile creasing his face. “Besides, it's good deeds like this that earn us favor with *The Man Upstairs!*”

Michal raised his eyebrows. “I guess so.”

Elliot smiled. “As close as I can figure, if we can all do at least one good deed each day, it will make for a much better case when we're standing at the pearly gates.”

“That's an interesting thought,” Michal said. “But what if you also did something bad that day? Wouldn't you have to do an extra good deed in order to cancel out your bad deed?”

Elliot looked over at his wife. “I never really thought about it that way. To be honest, there are some days where the bad definitely outweighs the good!” he chuckled. “But *The Big Guy* doesn't really have to know about the bad deeds now does He?”

Michal looked over at Elliot with a puzzled expression. “I thought God was supposed to know everything.” He said with a wry smile. “I mean, if God knows about your good deeds, doesn't it stand to reason that He knows about your bad deeds as well?”

“You certainly have an unnerving way of looking at things, Michal,” Elliot said with a

laugh. "But I suppose you're right about that one."

Just then their waiter appeared with three glasses of water. "Do you need a few more minutes to decide, or are you ready to order?"

Michal buried his face in the menu. "I think I'm all set."

"Me too," Elliot said. "I'll have the swordfish, with a pint of beer."

Libby cleared her throat, still studying the menu. "I think I'll have the chicken stuffed with portobello mushrooms and onions." She glanced at her husband, smiling slightly. "Although you'd better hold the onions for my husband's sake."

"Good choice," the waiter replied. "And to drink?"

"I'll take a glass of your house red."

The waiter turned his attention to Michal, "And for you, sir?"

Michal pointed to a selection on the menu. "I'll have the eight ounce sirloin steak with mashed potatoes - medium rare with chives and *extra* onions." He glanced over at Elliot and Libby. "Don't worry. I'm all by myself tonight."

They laughed.

"And the water you just brought will do for now."

"Very well, Sir," the waiter said, collecting the menus.

"What are your plans for the evening, Michal?" Libby asked.

"Well, I was thinking about heading into town to check out some of the sites," Michal said hiding his true intentions. He instinctively knew that he couldn't let his dinner companions know that he was more interested in staying in for the night, reading the book that Eva had given him ... he wasn't ready to face the conversation on religion which might result.

Elliot and Libby were quiet for a moment.

“I think you can still catch the musical that's playing a few blocks from here,” Libby finally said. “We saw it last week and thought it was wonderful.”

Elliot leaned forward slightly. “If that doesn't interest you, Michal, there's always the gentleman's club just down the road, if you catch my drift!”

Libby smacked Elliot on the shoulder, “You have a one-track mind!”

Michal gave an awkward smile, “Thanks for the tip.”

The remainder of the evening dragged by tediously. Michal could feel himself drifting further from the conversation as his remaining strength drained away. Immediately after eating he politely excused himself from the table and made his way back to his room.

For some reason his conversation with Elliot and Libby had left him with a curious sense of resignation, and he wanted nothing more than to be alone with his thoughts.

He entered his room and dropped into an armchair by the window, his eye catching the book that Eva had given him. Picking it up he turned to the inside cover. There he saw an inscription: *Michal, This book answered a lot of the questions that have been going through my mind lately, and much of the things we talked about. I've made an important decision regarding my faith tonight, and I hope you'll come to the same conclusion that I have. - Love Eva*

He turned to the index, then slowly began paging through the book, reading the chapter titles in order to get a better idea of the author's point of view – one that seemed to deal primarily with important life decisions, Jesus Christ, and most especially, the afterlife.

After a few moments he set the book down on the end table and picked up the phone. Slipping a small piece of paper from his wallet he quickly dialed Eva's number and sagged back

into his chair, the butterflies once again collecting in his stomach. “*It would be good to hear her voice ... and to hear how her day went . . .*” Five rings later, an answering machine clicked on.

“Hi, you've reached Eva Bennett.” Michal smiled at the sound of her voice. “I’m not home right now. Please leave a message after the beep.”

“Hi Eva. I'm just calling to let you know that I arrived at the hotel in one piece. I’ll make sure to give you a call on my way back home. Bye for now.”

He placed the receiver down and slowly got to his feet. He thought once more of his upcoming meeting with the Goldman executives in the morning before settling into bed for the night. There he lay for several long hours until the rhythmic noises of the night lulled him into a deep sleep, whisking him dreamlessly through the night and into morning.

Chapter Twelve

It was mid afternoon before Michal stumbled back into his hotel room and dropped down heavily onto the corner of his bed. The meeting with the Goldman executives had been grueling. Their answers to even the most basic questions had been more evasive and troubling than he had expected, and throughout the entire meeting he felt a strange premonition - a nagging voice that told him *all was not well with this potential client*. By meeting's end the only thing he could think of was getting out of there and driving back home to the comfort of his own familiar surroundings. He knew, however, that when he got back home there was one last job that awaited him - putting together a report summarizing the conclusion of his meeting.

Rather than staying the additional night, which he knew would prove fruitless, Michal decided to drive home a day early. He quickly gathered the remainder of his belongings into his suitcase and made his way down to the lobby where he stopped to check out of the hotel.

In only a few short minutes he was back onto the highway, and on his way home. He removed his tie and tossed it on to the passenger seat, then opened the car window just enough so that he could feel the cool fall air against his face.

He couldn't have asked for more perfect autumn weather. The large maple trees lining the two-lane highway were a clear indication that fall had officially arrived, as they were already turning a fantastic array of bright red, yellow and orange.

The urge to call Eva had been tugging at him ever since his meeting ended, but he knew that he had to get a head start on the traffic before rush hour picked up.

Using the hands-free option on his cell phone he dialed her number, then glanced down impatiently at his watch. *I didn't think she was at work today*. When her answering machine

finally clicked on, he felt a keen sense of disappointment. It was then that a sudden wave of nausea washed over him. He clenched both hands tightly to the steering wheel as the familiar, terrifying sensation overwhelmed him. He shook his head violently, trying to overcome whatever it was that held him firmly in its grasp. The road before him seemed to fade from view as he tried in vain to force his mind back into focus – the trees and bushes lining the highway melding together into a confusing blur. He was now consumed with the surreal sensation that everything around him was decelerating, like some kind of slow motion movie. Then ... as abruptly as it all began, the hypnotic dance ended and his world suddenly snapped back into focus.

Michal shook his head once more, blinking hard several times. He was suddenly aware that his car had come to a stop in the middle of the westbound lane. He glanced into the rear-view mirror to see if any other cars were coming, but none were in sight. He must have instinctively hit the brake when he began feeling disoriented, preventing a serious accident.

He quickly pulled his car over to the side of the road and waited several long minutes for his nerves to settle before continuing on his journey home.

* * * * *

It was shortly after 7 P.M. when Michal arrived back at his apartment. He placed his keys down onto a nearby coffee table, took out a carton of orange juice from the fridge and tipped it up to his mouth, taking in several long gulps of the refreshing liquid.

The trip had left him completely drained and worn out. He dropped down wearily into an armchair and turned on his answering machine. No messages. *That's odd. I thought for sure that there would be at least one message from Eva waiting for me.*

He sat there in the recliner, letting the exhaustion drain from his body. He closed his eyes,

attempting to relieve some of the stress that had been building in him throughout the day. It was much later that he suddenly awoke with a start, glancing helplessly around the room, unable to remember for a brief moment where he was. The apartment was dark, the moonlight streaming in through the window. He checked his watch. 8:30 P.M.

Michal felt a sudden urge to get outside for some fresh air. Pushing himself back to his feet, he pulled on his jacket and exited the building.

The cool evening air seemed to revive him as he crossed the courtyard and started down a narrow street towards Eva's house. He had only been walking for ten minutes or so when he could see the lights of the inner harbor and the dark waters of the bay stretching far out into the distance. A faint rim of light on the western horizon was the last witness to another spent day.

He stepped up onto the boardwalk and trudged on towards the myriad of lights that dominated the sky before him. He had always considered the harbor to be the most stunning part of his city. How seldom had he appreciated all that his adopted home had to offer ... how seldom had he been thankful for the things that he often took for granted, especially his health.

His stomach rumbled, a reminder that he hadn't eaten anything since breakfast. Perhaps Eva could join him for a late dinner. Michal had really missed spending time with her during the last few days, especially since their relationship had been developing so well.

More than fifteen minutes had passed when Michal finally turned down the narrow roadway leading to the Bennett estate. It was there that the street lamps abruptly ended. The headlights of a slow-moving car roared past him. He could tell that it wasn't Eva car, so he continued on further down the road towards her house.

It seemed like an eternity before he finally stepped up to the edge of her driveway where he

could see the lights shining from every window of her house. Two cars were parked neatly in the driveway, Eva's car, and another unfamiliar one next to it. He hesitated. Eva appeared to be home, but it was obvious that she was not alone. The realization that Eva might not be expecting him back until tomorrow gave him a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Michal approached the front door, hesitating once more, wondering if he should interrupt. Finally, his churning stomach forced his hand to the ringer.

Shoulders back he steeled his nerves as he heard the sound of footsteps approaching – footsteps that sounded much heavier than Eva's. Then, the sound abruptly stopped. Michal frowned. *Why is she taking so long to answer?* He was bringing his hand up to the ringer once again, when the door suddenly creaked open. A man appeared in the entrance-way. An older man, with a full head of snow-white hair stood before him, looking wordlessly out at Michal.

“Can I help you?” the man finally asked.

Michal noted the man's unshaven face, his red, puffy eyes.

“My name's Michal Paterson. I'm here to see Eva.”

The man's face relaxed as he stepped back from the door. “Michal. Eva spoke of you a number of times on the phone. Please come in.”

“Thank you,” Michal replied. “Are you Eva's father?”

“Yes. I'm Edwin Bennett,” he said, extending his hand.

Michal took the older man's hand, his sense of unease growing. “Pleased to meet you.” He looked cautiously around the room for a sign of Eva's presence.

“Why don't you come in for a few minutes so we can have a chat,” Edwin invited, ushering him into the main living room.

Michal took a seat on the nearby couch, placing his hands firmly against his knees. Eva's father sat down across from him.

"Are you here on business?" Michal asked.

"No, I'm afraid not," he said, placing his hands over his face. "I'm afraid I have some bad news for you, Michal." He paused for a moment, seeming to gather his thoughts. "I'm not sure how much Eva told you about herself, but she was diagnosed with a serious heart condition at a very young age." The older man seemed to choke back his emotions, fighting to keep his composure. "The doctors told us that she needed to be careful not to over-exert herself, and take her medications faithfully, but Eva has always been the kind of person that enjoys taking risks, sometimes beyond what was good for her." He paused. "I guess it finally caught up with her."

Michal could feel his heart racing and his mouth begin to dry-up as he took in the man's words. "Where's Eva?" He said, steeling himself, not knowing what to expect.

Mr. Bennett cleared his throat nervously before continuing. "Yesterday Eva went out for her daily run. She was jogging on a nearby trail when it appears she suffered a serious heart attack." The older man swallowed hard before continuing. "Being an otherwise-healthy young woman, the doctors said her chances of survival would have been much better if someone had found her right away, but unfortunately she lay on that trail for several minutes before someone passed by. I'm sorry to say that by the time help arrived, it was too late. She was already gone."

Michal sat on the edge of the chair and looked into the older man's eyes, trying somehow to make the words register. It was almost as if he was floating out of his body, looking down into the brightly lit living room of Eva's house, hearing the words of this stranger, and then trying somehow to piece it all together. *This can't be happening. This must be a dream.*

Both men sat there in silence for what seemed like an eternity, Michal desperately trying to think of something to say. Finally he struggled to his feet.

“I’m sorry that I had to be the one to give you this news, Michal, I know how much Eva meant to you,” Edwin said with a forced smile. “Eva's funeral will be this Thursday at Beacon Hill Funeral Home on the corner of Elm and Main Street at 2 P.M.”

“I don’t know what to say ...” Michal stammered. “I’m sorry. I have to go.”

With his head spinning Michal turned abruptly and made his way to the front door.

He paused at the doorway, surprised to find Eva’s father standing next to him. Edwin hurried past him and opened the door, extending his hand. “I wish we could have met under better circumstances, Son. My daughter spoke very highly of you.”

Michal turned silently from the doorway leading outside, slowly making his way back down the street towards town, his face turning a sickly pale white.

Only vaguely was he aware of the approaching city lights - the sound of his footsteps, or the cars quickly passing him by in the night. Several blocks from home he paused for several long minutes. He couldn’t return to his apartment – not now. He knew that in the shelter and warmth of his familiar surroundings, despair would inevitably overwhelm him.

He turned back down a darkened side street, having absolutely no idea where it might lead. There seemed to be a kind of force within him, driving him – pushing him further into the darkness . . . away from the safety of the lights in the city. He wished that somehow the night could swallow him up, consume him entirely, especially the pain that was devastating him.

The outline of a small bridge emerged from the shadows. Michal knew that he had been this way before, and had even watched people fishing in the waters of the river. He walked

slowly out to the middle of the great structure and leaned against the large steel railing. A truck rolled slowly behind him, headlights illuminating the darkness for a few brief seconds.

'How ironic was it that Eva had just started to turn to the Bible for answers - and now this happened! Eva, the one bright spot in my life . . . How could a so-called loving God take her away from me - put me through this - on top of everything that I've been through!'

He stood there motionless as the night pressed in around him. No more cars interrupted the silence, nothing to intrude on the memories now flashing through his mind. *"In no more than a few short days everything that I've worked so hard for has gone up in a puff of smoke."*

Michal took in several deep breaths and then pulled himself up onto the first rung of the railing, clutching tightly at the support beam to maintain his balance. Below him he could see the faint, black ripples of the slow-moving waters of the river. The lower parts of his legs pressed hard against the railing as he balanced himself precariously thirty feet or more above the water. He knew that the fall wouldn't kill him, but when he hit the water he wanted nothing more than to keep sinking down – right to the bottom of the river, and stay there forever.

He leaned forward, shifting his feet towards the edge. The hard reality of all his recent disasters seemed to completely shatter what was left of his resolve.

Michal released his grip on the beam and leaned forward over the railing, adjusting his balance. Then, just as he pushed himself away from the structure, he suddenly knew in his heart the mistake he was making. Frantically he reached back for the beam, his fingers clutching the darkness futilely. He felt his body pitch sideways, and in the same instant his head slamming painfully against one of the hard metal girders, and he dropped the remainder of the way, plunging into the cold river below. The frigid waters sent a shock wave through his body. He

fought his way back to the surface as his senses gradually returned. He then made his way slowly over to the sandy shoreline of the narrow river, his head now throbbing painfully.

Exhausted, Michal sprawled out on the shore for several long minutes, one arm stretched out beside him, the other arm gripping the side of his head, tears streaming down his face. The silence of the night eventually dissipated as Michal climbed back to his feet, and made his way up the steep embankment to the road on the other side of the bridge.

By the time he reached the highway leading back into town he could feel his head beginning to clear, and his thoughts coming into focus. Reaching his hand up, he dabbed a handkerchief against his temple. He was almost certain that his head was still bleeding as a result of the fall, although he wasn't able to tell in the darkness of the night.

The sudden blast of a horn from a passing truck tore Michal back from his reverie. He quickly moved from the edge of the road to the sidewalk, then sat down hard on a nearby guardrail, his soaking wet clothes immediately forming a small puddle at his feet. Thoughts of Eva came over him in a rush. Bowing his head, Michal placed his hands firmly on his face and began sobbing. He knew that his life, however short or long, would never be the same.

Chapter Thirteen

It was the worst night Michal had ever experienced. No sleep. No nightmares. He just lay there with his eyes wide open, alone, in the darkness of his bedroom.

Nothing seemed to matter to him anymore. Even his doctor's appointment the following morning now seemed pointless, but his throbbing head told him otherwise. Perhaps going through the motions of life would help return things to a semblance of normality.

A quick shower and half a glass of instant breakfast did little to revive his spirits as he made his way to the hospital. He had barely checked into the facility when he was whisked into a room with a myriad of medical equipment. He lay face up on the gurney, staring absently into the bright lights, while the bump on his head was carefully examined.

"You're going to feel a small pinprick in your arm," a nurse advised him. Administering the shot, she then adjusted a monitor that was connected by a long cord to his arm. "You've been through quite a lot, young man," the nurse said. "The needle I gave you should ease your headache and help you to relax. Your family physician will be with you shortly."

His bandaged head throbbed painfully, especially now that he was in a prone position. He closed his eyes as the nurse continued to fuss around his bedside. After a few minutes he heard the click of a light switch as the nurse made her exit.

When he opened his eyes, the room was much darker, only the light from his bathroom remained. Outside in the hall he could hear the sounds of the busy facility. As he lay there, he could feel himself drifting into semi-consciousness, a complete array of faintly coherent thoughts flickering through his mind, likely dulled by the injection that he had just received.

As quickly as he drifted off to sleep, he was jarred back to reality by a sudden flash of

lights and a loud noise by his bedside. When he looked up, Dr. Gardner was standing over him.

“Good evening, Michal,” the doctor said cheerfully, “It looks like you finally got yourself some well-deserved rest.”

“Is it evening already?” Michal asked. “How long have I been asleep?”

Dr Gardner smiled warmly. “For quite some time. As it turns out, that bump on your head caused some significant swelling, resulting in additional pressure on your brain.” He paused, lowering the clipboard. “How did you get that bump anyway?”

Michal turned his head, avoiding the gaze of the doctor. “I slipped in the shower this morning. I was feeling a little dizzy from my medication.”

“I see,” Dr. Gardiner said with a puzzled expression. “At any rate, the severity of the injury was picked up by one of the tests we took yesterday morning ...”

“Yesterday morning?” Michal interrupted.

“Don't panic,” the doctor said in a calming tone. “We had to sedate you for the remainder of the day in order to give your brain a fighting chance to recover from that nasty bump.”

Michal lay there with a blank expression on his face. “I was supposed to be at her funeral this afternoon.” He explained. “I missed it.”

“I'm sorry, Michal,” the doctor said sympathetically, “But you were in no condition to go anywhere for a day or two. Under normal circumstances the injury to the back of your head wouldn't have caused us much concern, but it happened to be in the same area as your tumor. We'll try to keep an eye on things for awhile to make sure no further complications arise.” He attached the blood pressure strap to Michal's arm and took a reading. “How are you feeling?”

“Terrible,” Michal replied bluntly.

“We’ll be releasing you tomorrow morning, Michal, but I want you back in here again on Monday. That’s when we have your biopsy scheduled. In the meantime try not to knock your head on anything else.” He smiled, placing a reassuring hand on Michal’s shoulder. “I’ll be back to check in on you in the morning before you leave. The nurse will stop by in a few minutes to give you something to help ease the pain. I’m sure you’ll be feeling much better in no time at all.” He made his way to the door and clicked off the light on his way out.

* * * * *

The blinds covering the window in Michal’s hospital room did little to keep out the light of the early morning sun. Out in the hallway he could hear the usual bustle of activity long before he rolled over and admitted to himself that he was finally awake. Almost immediately a young nurse appeared at his bedside with a tray of food.

“Good morning, Mr. Paterson. I hope you've got your appetite back.” She set the tray down beside him, then using a remote control attached to his arm rail she moved his bed up into a sitting position. “I also have a bit of a surprise for you,” the nurse exclaimed, “The chaplain is here waiting to meet with you. Are you feeling up for a visit?”

Michal nodded absently, lifting up the plastic lid on his tray which covered a plate of toast, bacon and scrambled eggs. “Sure, you can send him in.”

“Oh, and there's one more thing” the nurse said, turning back from the doorway. “The doctor said you're free to go home after breakfast. So whenever you’re feeling up to it, you can get dressed and check yourself out. Your clothes are in the closet. Just make sure to stop by at the nurses’ station on your way out so we can confirm the time of your surgery on Monday.”

Michal pushed the tray of food away from him, then sagged back onto his pillow, staring

up absently up at the ceiling.

There was a light knock on the door. Michal looked up to see an older man in a gray tweed blazer with dark patches sewn on the elbows, a Bible in hand.

“I hope I’m not intruding,” the chaplain said with a friendly smile.

“I don't believe it,” Michal said in surprise. “It's nice to see you again Lawrence.”

The visitor walked slowly over to a chair by Michal’s bed.

“I’m glad I caught you before you left,” Lawrence said, sitting down beside him. “The nurse told me that you’d be leaving some time this morning.”

Michal nodded. “The only thing holding me back is this delicious breakfast.” He raised his glass of orange juice in mock salute.

Lawrence laughed. “It's good to see you in such high spirits.”

“Thanks.” Michal replied. “So you're the hospital chaplain?”

“You could say that.” Lawrence said.

“You must be a busy man.” Michal continued. “I hear this place is full of sick people.”

Lawrence smiled, “I think you're right about that one,” he said. “As a matter of fact I think that’s one of the prerequisites for membership here. If nothing else, as one of the only chaplains in this city, I can at least give some of the folks around here someone to talk to.”

“Well, I'm glad you came in to see me, Lawrence.” Michal said.

“Do you have any family members who live in the area?” Lawrence asked.

“They'd have to travel quite a long way in order to pay me a visit,” Michal said with a grin. “My mother died in a car accident when I was a child, and my father left the family shortly after she passed. I was raised mostly by an aunt, but she died a few years ago. You’re now

looking at one of the last remaining members of the Paterson family.”

“Well,” The chaplain said, eyeing his friend carefully, “I’m sure if you looked back far enough in your family tree, you’d be surprised at what you’d find.”

“My family history isn’t exactly the kind of mystery that I’ve ever care to unravel.”
Michal replied. “As far as I’m concerned, ignorance is bliss.”

Lawrence smiled, “I always thought mysteries are meant to solved, don’t you?”

Michal looked up at the other man, thinking for a moment. “I’ve never been much for reading mystery novels, if that’s what you mean.”

“Now that you mention it, they’re not exactly my cup of tea either,” Lawrence replied, “But I still find myself fascinated with many of life’s own mysteries. I can’t say that I’ve unwound all of them by any means, but there is one mystery that I *have* solved.”

“I imagine you’re referring to the afterlife?” Michal asked.

“I am. Have you given much thought to the subject?”

“Oddly enough I have,” Michal said, “Lately it seems like everyone I meet has something to say on the subject of religion and the afterlife. I don’t have time to think of anything else.”

“That’s not surprising.” Lawrence said abruptly.

”What do you mean?” Michal asked.

“God is always trying to find a way of getting our attention,” He said with a smile.
“Unfortunately there are a few people who need to be hit over the head with a blunt instrument in order for them to start paying attention to the more important things in life.”

Michal grinned, looking up at the older man. “Like a cancer diagnosis?”

Lawrence frowned. “I’m sorry Michal, I had no idea that you were diagnosed with cancer.

The nurse told me that you were in here as a result of a head injury.”

“That's okay,” Michal replied, glancing down at his wristwatch.

“I think I may have overstayed my welcome,” Lawrence said with an embarrassed smile.

“I realize that you must have a busy day ahead of you. Perhaps we can get together some other time for a chat?” He handed Michal his business card.

“I appreciate you stopping by.” Michal replied.

The chaplain slowly got to his feet and made his way towards the door.

“Lawrence?” Michal said. “I'm sure that you have other patients to see this morning, but I was wondering if you wouldn't mind coming back for a visit before my surgery on Monday? After all, I wouldn't want you to lose your job.”

“It would be a pleasure,” Lawrence replied with a broad smile. “Try to get some rest, and I'll see to you again soon.” With a final wave the chaplain turned and exited the room.

No sooner had Michal's visitor left then the same young nurse who'd brought him his breakfast pushed open the door. “That was nice of Lawrence to drop by for a visit. Normally he makes his rounds in the afternoon, but he made a special trip in this morning because he heard you were being discharged.” She rummaged through the closet and pulled out an armful of Michal's clothes then dropped them on the foot of his bed. “As soon as you're all dressed, we can check you out,” she said. “Do you have a ride home?”

“I will if you call a cab,” Michal responded.

The nurse rolled her eyes. “Alright, I'll call one right away, so you'd better hop to it. We'd like to see you back here on Monday morning, nine o'clock sharp.”

Michal waited until the nurse left, then climbed out of bed and slowly began dressing. He

was suddenly anxious to leave, yet at the same time he dreaded returning to his empty apartment - to all the loose ends that needed to be tied up in the coming days. And worst of all, he knew that from this day forward he would be going through the rest of his life without Eva Bennett.

Chapter Fourteen

Michal watched as the taxi disappeared down the narrow street, then he turned and looked up wearily at his apartment building. He stood there for a moment gazing up at the large, beige-coloured building, when a well-dressed man hurried past him, bounding up the front steps and quickly disappearing inside. It wasn't so long ago that he had been the one sprinting up those same stairs without a care in the world, always seeming to be in a hurry, yet standing perfectly still. A serious crisis always has a way of bringing things back into perspective, or perhaps pulling everything *out* of perspective. For years he had known that he ought to slow down and enjoy the little things of life. *But what's left that's worth appreciating?*

He pushed open the door to the apartment building and rode the elevator to his floor.

Michal's apartment was still the same familiar and lonely place that he knew it would be, and although he turned on every light, it still seemed strangely gloomy and dark. Numbly he sank into his favorite recliner and flicked on his wide-screen television, aimlessly changing from one channels to another ... sports ... news ... talk shows ... soap operas ... it all seems so trivial and insignificant. He clicked off the set, placed the remote down on the table and leaned back in his chair. How many countless hours had he spent being "entertained" ... peering through virtual windows into the lives of characters that didn't even exist.

Beside him on the end table was the book that Eva had given him. Once again Michal picked it up and turned to Eva's inscription on the inside cover. He then flipped aimlessly through the first several pages of the book, scanning the different topics, until finally settling on the fourth chapter entitled, "*God, the Gulf, and Going In Alone*".

He began reading, making occasional notes in the margins with a pen. At the end of the

chapter he read aloud the final sentence: “If it is sin that separates us from God, then it can only be the work of a *true* Saviour that can bridge this gulf between mankind and his Creator.”

He shut the book and set it on the end table. He’d have to remember to take it with him to the hospital on Monday. There would be plenty of time for reading later.

The sudden and unexpected ringing of his phone startled Michal. Against his better judgment he reluctantly picked up the receiver.

“Hello.”

“Michal!” A voice shouted on the other end. “This is Tom from the office. I’m glad that I finally got a hold of you. How have you been feeling?”

Michal sagged back into his chair. Tom was the manager of promotions; someone he always took great pains to avoid when he was at the office. “I could be feeling better I suppose,” Michal replied, already anxious for the conversation to be over.

“Listen buddy,” Tom said swiftly, “We heard that you were going in for an operation on Monday, so a few of us here at the office would like to get together with you for some lunch. Would you be up for quick bite this afternoon? It’ll be our treat, of course.”

Michal hesitated. “I guess that would be alright.”

“Great, then it’s settled.” Tom replied enthusiastically, “We have to make sure our top salesman is back on his feet as soon as possible.”

* * * * *

An hour later Michal stepped out of his car parked in front of a small restaurant situated on the downtown inner wharf. Inside, he could see several of his co-workers already gathered around a large table in the center of the room.

“Michal, we're glad you could make it!” Tom clasped him by the elbow and led him across the busy restaurant. “It was sure nice of you to come out, old boy.”

Michal recognized most of the people who had gathered in his honour. Gavin Edwards, one of the more objectionable fatheads working in his department was seated next to Tom. “Good afternoon, Michal,” Gavin said in a loud voice. “I'm glad to see that you're still in one piece.” He got to his feet to shake Michal’s hand.

Tom steered Michal to the head of the table.

Right from the beginning, the luncheon was agonizingly uncomfortable for Michal. Conversations were mainly limited to huddled pairs and cliques, consisting mostly of shop talk, and company gossip. It seemed like most of his co-workers were anxious to avoid any serious conversation regarding his upcoming surgery, and he was grateful to avoid the subject altogether. He was relieved when the waitress arrived to take their orders, yet for some reason the last thing he could think about was eating. He had lost his appetite for several days now, and he knew that his prominent cheekbones were testimony to that fact.

Michal met each of his colleagues’ polite queries with bland monosyllabic responses. Even Tom was finally put off by Michal's one-word answers. It bugged Michal to know that most of those around the table were just happy to be out of the office for a couple of hours, and to have a meal at the company’s expense, whatever the occasion.

The loud sound of muddled conversations broke momentarily, as Michal turned his attention towards one of his coworkers. Tom’s voice suddenly rose above the others. “Did you hear about the new girl from Human Resources?”

Michal came to attention. “What about her?”

“Apparently she dropped dead a few days ago from a heart attack.”

Michal could feel his heart racing at the sound of Tom’s words.

“That’s a shame,” Gavin Edwards said, smirking slightly.

Michal stared intently at Gavin, trying to keep his emotions in check.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Gavin continued. “I feel bad that she died and all, but I just wish I had the opportunity to get to know her a little better, if you know what I mean.” He winked playfully at one of the women seated next to him. “I won’t be making that mistake again.”

Michal slammed his hand down hard on the table, then rose suddenly to his feet. “Watch what you say, you inconsiderate jerk!” With his words still reverberating in his ears everybody in the restaurant went suddenly quiet. All eyes turned in Michal’s direction.

Tom reached over and put his hand on Michal’s shoulder. “Calm down, Michal. He didn’t mean anything by it, did you Gavin?”

Gavin swallowed hard before answering. “No, of course I didn’t. I was only kidding around, Michal. Can’t you take a joke?”

“It wasn’t funny, Gavin.” One of his coworkers remarked.

Michal exhaled slowly, attempting to calm his nerves, then stepped back slowly from the table. “I’d better leave before I do something I’ll regret.” He picked up his jacket from behind his chair, and made his way out the door. No one at the table said a word as he exited the restaurant.

As he stepped out onto the sidewalk, Michal felt the first few drops of rain hit his face. He stood there for a long moment, trying to contain his emotions. Ignoring the rain, he slowly began the walk back to his apartment. When he finally arrived he quickly realized the toll that his illness was now taking on him. He sagged wearily into his recliner and thought once more of the

dinner with his coworkers, then he remembered a passage he had read from Eva's book. He picked it up off the coffee table and flipped to the fourth chapter. The highlighted portion marked at the center of the page caught his attention.

“For it is better, if the will of God be so, that ye suffer for well doing, than for evil doing. For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit.” 1 Peter 3:17-18

Michal turned the book over on his lap. *The just for the unjust. It hardly seems fair. Especially considering how someone as amazing as Eva Bennett can die so young, and someone like Gavin Edwards is allowed to continue living.* Gathering his strength he set the book down and pushed himself out of the chair, then slowly made his way to the bedroom. There he began the arduous task of gathering his things together for his upcoming stay in the hospital.

Chapter Fifteen

It took Michal a moment to recognize his surroundings. It was the living room of his family's old home, the house his father had built before he was born.

He was sitting on a plush, green-patterned couch that seemed to swallow him up when he sat back far enough. His feet could barely touch the floor even when he was sitting on the edge of the cushion. His father was standing beside him dressed in a suit, something he rarely wore. In his father's hands was an old cloth cap that he was twisting – wringing the life out of.

Michal looked up into the older man's face, a face that wore a terribly pained expression and Michal immediately knew what had just happened. The memory came rushing back to him so vividly that it felt as though it had just happened to him yesterday. He was only ten years old, and was in the living room of the family home. They had just returned from his mother's funeral. It was then that his father had told him that he and his brother, Philip, were going to live with their Aunt Birgit – except this time his father wasn't saying anything. He was just standing there, wringing that stupid old hat of his, the same one he always wore wherever he went.

Michal looked past his dad to the doorway leading outside. His brother was standing beside Aunt Birgit, both of them looking dreadfully uncomfortable in each other's company.

“Come on, Michal, let's get going.” Aunt Birgit finally said with an impatient wave.

Michal got up from the couch, his eyes still fixed on his dad. Never would he forget the hurt and anguish that he saw in his father's eyes that day. All of the feelings that had been building up within him the last few months of his mother's accident were there for all to see.

Michal continued staring up at the older man, seeing for the first time the great furrows lining his forehead, the strands of gray running across his forehead. Each and every feature

Michal determined to imprint firmly into his brain so that he could pull the memory out whenever he needed it. Somehow he knew that he wouldn't be seeing much more of his father.

Finally, his father turned towards him, and gave him a solemn nod. Michal then walked slowly across the room towards his waiting aunt. With each step he hoped with all his might that his dad would call out to him ... Even if he would give him just one last hug . . . to tell him that he loved him, and everything would be alright. But sadly, he crossed the room in silence.

It seemed like this particular time of his life was marked by nothing but tragedy. The death of his mother, the abandonment from his father ... The move to Aunt Birgit's was especially hard, making it difficult for him to develop friendships with other kids his age. His dad managed to hover in the background for the next few years, but eventually he just faded from his life, as was his gray, silent nature. When Michal turned seventeen his Aunt Birgit died unexpectedly. His dad hadn't shown up for the funeral, but had sent word that Michal and Philip were to attend boarding school. The only flaw to that bold plan had been the absence of funds to set everything in motion. Where the old man expected the money to come from, Michal had no idea. Perhaps his late Aunt Birgit's estate? Immediately after the funeral Birgit's younger sister, Kay, decided to take Michal and Philip in until they graduated from high school, then quite unexpectedly, funded Michal's way through the engineering program at the local university.

Perhaps all of these past tragedies had somehow prepared him for his cancer diagnosis, his inevitable relationship with Eva - and her sudden passing.

What had Eva been like as a little girl?

Much like Michal, she didn't have a lot of time to spend with her mother when she was growing up, but she had certainly come out of things much better than he had. Of course Eva

had her father . . . and a lot of family money to help her along the way.

He pictured how Eva would have looked when she was five, then ten, and then as a teenager. There had been so little time to get to know her, but he treasured every moment he had spent with her during the last few weeks of her life. Perhaps when all of his cancer treatments were over, he could visit Eva's dad, and they could look through some old photo albums.

It seemed odd that Eva had begun to think about God so soon before her death. Could she have had a premonition? A person is probably smart to think of the afterlife if they believe they could be facing death at any moment. If only we knew when it would happen.

Chapter Sixteen

Michal felt exhausted as he lay in the hospital bed staring up at the ceiling. For the past several hours he had been subject to a myriad of tests, and at any moment he knew that he would be wheeled into the OR. He groaned inwardly as Dr. Gardner stepped into his room.

“How are you feeling, Michal?”

Michal shrugged. “Not bad. Under the circumstances.”

“Before we begin the procedure, do you have any questions you would like to ask?”

“Could you tell me again what you’ll be doing during the operation?” Michal asked.

The doctor sat down on the bed next to Michal. “We’ll begin by drilling a small hole into the base of your skull to take a close look at that tumor,” the doctor informed him. “We’ll then send a sample of the tissue to the lab for their prognosis. The procedure usually only takes a few hours. If the lab discovers that the mass is indeed malignant, then we’ll book an additional procedure in order to extract as much of the tumour as possible.”

“I won’t come out of this a vegetable, will I?” Michal asked.

Doctor Gardner let out a deep sigh. “Unfortunately there are always risks during these kinds of operations,” he said bluntly. “But the chances of that happening are minimal, and ultimately the surgery should increase your chances of beating the disease.”

Michal paused for a moment. “And what if it doesn’t take?”

Dr. Gardner removed his glasses and began polishing the lenses with a small cloth.

“There are still a few treatments we can try, but let’s wait and see how the surgery goes first.”

With that the doctor got up from the bed and gave Michal a curt nod. “I’ll see you again in surgery.” The doctor then exited the room, closing the door behind him.

Michal was grateful for this brief time of solitude before the operation. He lay there for several long minutes in silence. Finally he leaned over the edge of his bed and fumbled awkwardly with his overnight bag, unaware that someone had entered the room.

“Do you need a hand, young man?”

Michal turned his head with a start and looked up into the smiling face of Lawrence Buchanan, the hospital chaplain.

“Oh, thanks, Lawrence. I was just trying to reach a book inside my bag,” Michal explained. “Would you mind getting it for me?”

“Sure.” Lawrence said, walking around to the other side of the bed. He carefully pulled the book out of his bag and examined the cover. “What do we have here?” he said with a smile. “This is a real classic. I actually heard the author speak at a conference a few years ago. This is a man who has a firm understanding of what true faith is all about.”

Michal turned the book over in his hand. “A friend gave it to me recently, I think this book may have helped her with her own faith before she died.”

“I heard about your loss. I can't tell you how sorry I am to hear about your friend's passing,” the older man said sympathetically. He paused briefly to gauge Michal's reaction. “I actually stopped by to give you some reading material myself.” He reached into the pocket of his sports jacket and pulled out a small Bible and a colourful booklet, handing them to Michal.

Michal took the two items, first reading the title on the small booklet. “*The Crossroads Of The Afterlife – Which Road Are You On?*”

Lawrence took a seat in the chair next to the bed. “This pamphlet talks about some of the same things as your book,” he explained. “It focuses on how our sin separates us from God, and

how we're only able to overcome this obstacle through the sacrifice that Jesus Christ made on the cross." The Chaplain pointed to the book in Michal's hand. "The Bible says that we have all sinned against God, and it provides the solution for overcoming the consequences of our sin."

Michal flipped through the small Bible in his hands. "I can't say that I've ever owned a Bible before, Lawrence. I appreciate the gift."

"You're welcome," Lawrence replied. "I was also hoping to share a few thoughts with you before they take you down to the operating room for your surgery."

Michal shrugged indifferently. "I guess that's part of your job, right?"

Lawrence nodded. "I probably should have told you this during our last visit, but I'm not actually an official chaplain. I'm just a retired antique dealer. I got into the habit of visiting others in the hospital when my sister was here for her cancer treatments ten years ago. I suppose the rest of the hospital staff liked the idea of me visiting some of the patients, since so many of them didn't have many visitors. Eventually the staff started to refer to me as *the chaplain*."

Michal grinned as he stared up at the other man.

"You know, Michal," Lawrence continued. "When I was a young man I went through a rough patch in my life that's quite similar to the trials that you've been going through. He swallowed hard before continuing. "Almost thirty years ago my wife and I moved to a small country in West Africa to work on the mission field. Unfortunately we had only been living in the country for a few months when Janet died unexpectedly of cholera. We were only married for a little over four years. We didn't even have the chance to start a family ..."

"You lost your wife?" Michal said in surprise.

Lawrence nodded. "That was the hardest time of my life. It actually caused me to

question whether God really loved me or not. I wasn't really sure what to do with my life after that. I have to admit, I went through a rather serious spell of depression for quite some time after she passed.” The chaplain paused, sensing that Michal had a question.

“How were you able to recover?” Michal asked.

“Well, that’s the interesting part. Just about then a family from one of the local villages went through a similar situation. Two of their children had died of typhus and the parents shortly after. All that was left of the family were two young children. What really touched my heart, despite what I had been through, was the fact that it happened to be the family that Janet had taken a special interest in, especially the young mother. It made me feel even more compelled to lend a helping hand - for Janet’s sake. It was only when I tried to comfort those two children, that I finally began to recover from my own grief, and the feeling of being abandoned by God. That being said, it's natural for us to go through a grieving process after the loss of a loved one, but if there's one thing I learned from that experience it was the importance of keeping my faith in God secure, because without Him I would have never made it to where I am today.” He nodded at the Bible in Michal’s hand. “God's word is a powerful, comforting tool during times of struggle.”

Michal forced a tight-lipped smile. “What if you don't have faith?”

Lawrence frowned. “I think that's exactly where you'll need to start.”

“It’s not as easy as that,” Michal said bluntly.

“Perhaps you're right,” Lawrence continued, “but try to remember that there are often times in our lives when we need to take a long, hard look at ourselves in order to see what God is trying to tell us. We all have an important decision to make about the road ahead.

Michal looked up at him inquisitively. “I don’t remember making the decision to have

cancer, or even making the decision to end Eva's life. How can I trust in a God that would allow such terrible things to happen to me? To allow such pain and misery to exist in our world?"

"I see where you're coming from, Michal," Lawrence Replied. "Some tragedies are just dropped onto our laps, aren't they? It's hard to figure out how anything good can come from them. Yet even though God often allows bad things to happen, He still has the ability to rebuild our lives into something greater. Remember, despite what we might think, God loves us so much, that He gave His only Son to suffer and die on the cross for our sins. It was through this heroic act that God defeated the chains of death, so that we can be set free."

Michal looked up at Lawrence with a puzzled expression. "Why would Jesus need to die for me anyway? As far as I'm concerned I'm a pretty good person."

"I believe you *are* a good person, Michal, but you're still missing an important point. The Bible is quite emphatic about the fact that we are all born separated from God because of our sin. Since the beginning of time man made the decision to rebel against God, to go *our* own way, and now we are suffering the consequences of that decision. The Bible says in the book of John, that "*Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*" The result of our sinful nature and rebellion against God leads us to one destination – a place the Bible calls Hell."

"I'm not sure if I see it that way," Michal said hesitantly, "I still consider myself to be a good person. I'm certainly not deserving of Hell. I've always been kind to people and try to do what's right. I find it hard to believe that God would send me to Hell for what I have or haven't done in my life. If we're all children of God, then why would He send His children to Hell?"

Lawrence leaned forward in his chair. "I hate to tell you this, Michal, but the Bible says that we're *not* children of God until we're born again. As a matter of fact the Bible says in John

8:44-47 that we're all born as children of *wrath* and our father is the Devil. Remember that even our good deeds are seen as filthy rags to God because of our sinful nature.”

“I understand that we all have sin in our lives,” Michal interrupted, “but I've never really done anything terrible in my life like murder someone.”

“Have you ever hated someone?” Lawrence asked.

“I'm sure everyone has hated someone at one time or another.” Michal said, trying hard to push the images of his father out of his mind.

“I think I would agree with you about that, Michal, everyone has at one time or another hated someone, and the Bible tells us that whoever hates his brother *is a murderer at heart*, and that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. The Bible says that all liars will have their part in the lake of fire, and no thief or adulterer or fornicator will inherit the Kingdom of God.”

“I thought the Bible says that God created us in *His* own image,” Michal said.

“That's true,” Lawrence responded.

“Well, if God created us in His own image, then why do we have a sinful nature?”

Lawrence smiled, “That's a great question, Michal. The Bible says that in the beginning God created us *without* sin, but He also gave us a free will to make our own decisions. Mankind was given the opportunity to live in perfect peace with God, but we ultimately chose to disobey Him. As a result of this decision, we were separated from God as a result of our sin.”

“Well, I certainly didn't *choose* to be born a sinner,” Michal said.

“Nevertheless, you do sin, don't you? The Bible says that we are all sinners because it's in our nature to sin against God as a result of mankind's rebellion in the Garden of Eden. Much like our own earthly justice system, when we stand before a judge convicted of a crime, the law

demands that we pay the price for what we've done. Knowing this, God came to earth in the form of man so that He could take on the punishment for our sins on Himself. He did this so that our case can be dismissed when we stand before Him on the day of judgment. In a sense, God paid the *fine* for the laws *we* have broken. The Bible makes it clear that the only way to satisfy God's wrath against us is through the death of a perfect sacrifice. That sacrifice was Jesus Christ."

Michal looked up at the chaplain, smirking slightly.

Lawrence paused for a moment before continuing. "I realize, Michal, that many people believe that the Bible is nothing more than a book of old stories and superstitions, but our God-given conscience, along with His Word, reminds us of how serious sin is to God. You know as well as I do that our time on Earth is short. The most important thing we can do while we still have breath in our lungs is to make sure that our eternal lives are secure. There's no guarantee that we'll get to see another day, and there are no second chances once we're gone."

Michal stared blankly out the window beside his bed. He felt Lawrence rest his hand on his arm. "I can see that you're facing some uncertainty regarding your operation today, Michal. Would you mind if I said a quick prayer for you?"

Michal shrugged. "I guess it wouldn't hurt."

As Lawrence bowed his head to pray, Michal could feel a whisper of anxiety pass through him. He knew that his life was resting in the hands of a few people that he hardly knew, unfamiliar names and faces, and he felt an overwhelming sense of helplessness.

Chapter Seventeen

Michal lay motionless on the gurney as he watched the lights flicker by above him. He could hear the squeaking of the gurney's wheels, and the low conversation of the two porters delivering him to the operating room. To Michal, everything seemed strangely remote and distant - the lights, voices, even the wheels that squeaked beneath him. He knew that the sedative he was given must have been the cause of his disorientation, yet it still left him feeling uneasy.

Finally he was pushed into a large room with a high-ceiling and a bright bank of overhead lights shining down upon the center of the room. Gingerly, he was assisted from the gurney and onto the hard, flat surface of the operating table.

He closed his eyes for a moment and when he finally opened them, a nurse was bent over him. A needle attached to a long plastic hose was pushed firmly into the back of his hand. Almost instantly Michal could feel the medication take effect, as the lights around him began to dim. He closed his eyes once again as the nurse prepared a large bag of hydration fluid hanging from a pole next to him. He could see that she was speaking to him, but he wasn't able to make out her words, and before he knew it, his mind slipped into complete darkness.

* * * * *

Several hours later the faint voices of a few nurses gradually came back into focus. It almost sounded as if they were having a conversation just outside his room.

“What were the results of the surgery?” one of the nurses asked.

“As well as could be expected, under the circumstances,” the nurse responded.

“Unfortunately the surgeon said that they won't be able to get it all.”

I think they're talking about me. Michal drew in a deep breath and tried to will himself

back to full consciousness, but before he knew it . . . he found himself drifting off again.

At times he would wake up when the room was dark, and other times when it was light. He faded into a semi-consciousness state for what seemed like an eternity before finally waking completely. Almost immediately Michal felt once more like his old self. His eyes slowly came back into focus as he turned on his side and then started in surprise. Sitting on a chair next to his bed was Lawrence, watching him with a concerned look etched on his tired face.

“I’m glad to see that you’re finally awake,” the older man said with a relieved sigh. “Well, at least this means I won’t have to put up with your snoring anymore.” With a broad smile Lawrence reached out his hand, placing it firmly on Michal’s arm.

“Was I snoring?” Michal asked.

The sound of Michal’s weakened voice took Lawrence by surprise. “No. I was only kidding,” he said. “How are you feeling, Son?”

“Tired,” Michal said.

“Would you like me to get the nurse?” Lawrence asked.

“No, I’ll be alright. I must be loaded up with enough pain killers to take down a horse.” Michal stared intently at Lawrence. “You know, the strangest thing happened to me during my surgery . . . I can’t explain it, but I actually remember dreaming.”

Lawrence laughed. “I’ve never heard of anyone dreaming while they were under an anesthetic,” he said doubtfully. “Are you sure it happened during your operation?”

“I’m fairly certain.” Michal insisted.

“Well, what was your dream about?” Lawrence asked.

Michal furrowed his brow, forcing the dream back to the surface of his memory. “I was

hiking up one of the local mountains with Eva, Mount Schoen. We were walking along one of the large trails leading to the summit. It was a spectacular trail, nice and wide and as smooth as a city sidewalk. At one point in my dream, I suddenly realized that Eva was no longer walking on the path next to me. When I looked out over the mountainside I could see her walking off in the distance. She had mistakenly taken the narrow path that we had passed a few minutes prior.

Michal paused for a moment, seeming to gather his thoughts. “I didn’t want to retrace my steps all the way back to where we were separated, since I had already gone so far, so I decided to stay on the wider trail, to see if it met up with Eva’s. Unfortunately, that wasn’t the case. The trail quickly become crowded with swarms of other hikers, who had gathered all around me. I continued walking along the path, until I eventually came to an stop at the end of the trail.”

Michal paused for a moment, glancing over at Lawrence. The chaplain’s brow was wrinkled and Michal knew that he was deep in thought.

“When we reached the end of the trail I found myself standing on the edge of a steep cliff,” Michal continued. “I was looking down into the valley below, when I suddenly felt myself being forced off the edge by the other hikers. The more I struggled, the more frantic the people became, until I was thrown off the cliff entirely.” Michal swallowed hard at the memory. “I realize that this sounds strange, but the dream felt so real ... like it was actually happening.”

Michal sat upright, attempting to force the dream from his memory.

Lawrence unbuttoned his jacket and began fumbling frantically through his pockets. He drew a pamphlet and held it in front of Michal. “I see you read the pamphlet that I gave you.”

Michal took the paper from Lawrence. “I haven’t had a chance to read it yet.”

“You didn’t read it?” Lawrence echoed.

“I was a bit preoccupied,” Michal replied with a smile.

“Unbelievable – that really is an amazing coincidence. Although, perhaps you read the title and subconsciously it gave you the idea. Regardless, the premise of the pamphlet is a verse taken from Matthew 7:13-14: “*Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.*” What this verse is telling us is that we all have to make a decision regarding eternity, but unfortunately most people go through life traveling on the broad path, with little thought to where it may lead.”

“Why is it called *the broad way*?” Michal asked.

Lawrence smiled. “Well, I suppose the Bible describes it as *the broad way* because there are so many people who are traveling on the path that leads to destruction. It's the kind of path that appeals to most people because it seems much smoother and easier going, but the people traveling on this path don't seem to be bothered by the thought of where it might lead.”

“What about *the narrow way*?” Michal asked.

“The narrow way,” Lawrence continued. “Is the route chosen by those who put their faith and trust in the one and only Saviour given to all of mankind, Jesus Christ.” The chaplain pulled his chair closer to Michal's bedside. “As I had mentioned before, God created people with a free will, but unfortunately most choose to reject Him. Still, God did not abandon us, he still desires that everyone should come to him in faith. Here's what the Bible says in 2 Peter 3:9: “*The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some men count slackness, but is longsuffering towards us, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.*”

Michal frowned. “I still don't understand why God would want to do any of this for

anyone, after all, the Bible says that we're all nothing but lowly sinners.”

Lawrence shifted in his seat, “We already know that God created mankind in His own perfect image, even though He ultimately knew that we were going to sin. But the Bible also says that God is rich in mercy, and He wants to have mercy on those who come to Him in faith. There remains, however, a death sentence on your life as a result of your sin. In order to receive God's gift of salvation, the Bible says that you must place your faith in Jesus Christ alone.”

Michal drew in a long breath. “I can't say for sure, but I think that near the end of Eva's life she believed in what you're saying, at least that's what I can see from reading her note.”

“You may be right, Michal. Judging from the inscription she wrote in your book, I think it's safe to say that she came to the same understanding of her sinful condition before God, and reached out to Him in faith. But we all need to make *our own* decisions regarding our faith.”

“I can't help but think that it's too late for me,” Michal said.

“It's never too late, Michal. As long as we continue to draw breath, God will hear our cry. He's not willing that anyone should perish, but that all would come to faith in the only begotten Son. The Bible says that now is the time to be saved ... Jesus said it best in this verse taken from the book of Romans: “*Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.*”

Michal smiled warmly at the older man. “As hard as it is for me to say this, Lawrence, you make a lot of good points. I really appreciate everything you've done for me.”

Lawrence got to his feet and began doing up the buttons on his jacket “Remember, Michal, no one knows whether God will give a person anymore time on this earth. Don't miss the opportunity that He has given you.” The chaplain reached out and gently patted Michal's shoulder. “I'll come back another time so we can talk about this some more.”

Michal nodded. "I'd like that."

Lawrence forced a tight smile, and turned to leave the room.

"Thanks again, Lawrence."

"It's my pleasure," he replied.

Michal watched the older man leave, the pain now swelling within him, emanating from the back of his head and radiating through his body. Michal had a brief but vivid sensation that the first of many barriers was crumbling within him. It was going to be a long and daunting recovery, but he was thankful that he had someone who was there to help him through it.

Chapter Eighteen

Michal lifted his legs over the side of his bed and pushed himself into a standing position. The room was dark except for the dim light shining in through the crack at the bottom of the door. He glanced over at his nightstand clock: 4:55 am.

Michal could feel his stomach lurch once again as he crossed the floor to the washroom. Flipping on the overhead light, he dropped down to his knees next to the toilet. It had been like this now for several weeks, ever since he began his cancer treatments. Despite the perpetual haze that Michal found himself in, he was now certain that he would not be returning home.

When Michal's stomach finally began to settle, he slid back into a sitting position on the floor and rested his tired body against the cool porcelain tub.

Events from the last few weeks tumbled relentlessly through his mind. It was hard to fully comprehend the extent of the nightmare that his life had become, how many disasters had overwhelmed the normal, peaceful existence he had carefully carved out for himself. No longer was it even possible for him to think clearly, yet he remembered the ominous words of the doctor, he was terminal. It didn't seem to matter how many more chemo-therapy treatments were performed, there was little expectation that he would recover. *What's the point of spending my last few weeks on earth bent over the toilet every few minutes? It can't end like this.*

In the dim light of the hospital room he waited out the hours until dawn, then began the struggle of wading through each hour of another day until one more week finally came to an end. Yet another valuable week of the precious few he had remaining was now gone.

It was Saturday morning when Dr. Gardner stopped by to see him.

“Good morning, Michal.” The doctor moved over to the head of Michal's bed. “Have you

been feeling any better since we began the treatments?”

Michal averted the Doctors gaze. “Not really.”

Doctor Gardner hesitated momentarily. “I’m afraid the tests we performed earlier this week indicate that there hasn’t been a lot of progress in slowing down the spread of your cancer.” He quickly consulted the clipboard in his hand. “I do have some good news, however. A bed has opened up in the adjoining hospice. I think you’ll find it a lot more comfortable there.”

Michal nodded resignedly. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you about putting an end to my treatments,” he said abruptly. “I want to spend whatever time I have left with a clear mind.”

Dr. Gardner frowned intently at his patient. “Are you sure about that, Michal?” He asked. “I realize that it’s been a rough couple of weeks, but we still have a chance of beating this thing. That is if you’re willing to endure a few more treatments.”

Michal lowered his head. “I don’t think so.”

Doctor Gardner did little else to convince his patient to change his mind. It seemed obvious to him that Michal was only looking for validation. He simply patted his patient encouragingly on the shoulder and then quietly left the room.

It was official, Michal supposed. There were no other options left.

* * * * *

When Michal switched rooms later that day, he found that the quiet atmosphere was a welcome relief to the hustle and bustle of the rest of the hospital. For the most part, he was alone, yet even so, he found himself longing for his visits with the chaplain.

When Lawrence dropped at the beginning of that week, he saw one of the volunteers reading to Michal from Eva’s book. The younger woman smiled broadly at Lawrence and gave

up her chair as he entered the room.

“Thank you, my dear,” Lawrence said as the young woman made her exit.

“Welcome to my new home,” Michal said.

“How are you enjoying your book?” Lawrence asked.

“I'm almost finished reading it.” Michal replied. “It's given me a lot to think about.”

“I'm glad to hear it.” Lawrence said, sitting down in the armchair near Michal's bed.

“Was I correct in hearing that you put a stop to your cancer treatments?”

Michal nodded. “I realized that it was more important for me to be able to think clearly, while I still have the chance. I'm tired of feeling sick. I just want to clear my head. I realize that I don't have a lot of time left and I don't want to spend it bent over a toilet.”

Lawrence nodded. “I understand.”

“I've been thinking a lot of what we've been talking about these last few weeks,” Michal continued “And I know I've had my share of opportunities to get to know God over the years, but I've never actually taken advantage of the offer.” Michal stared blankly out the window for a moment. “I remember when I was a kid my mother took me to Sunday School. My teacher's name was Mrs. White. She would always tell me how much God loved me, which gave me a lot of comfort as a child. Then a few years later when I started high school, I met a new friend named John. He came off as the kind of guy who lived his life in a way that a Christian should. I guess I got used to seeing so many religious hypocrites in the world that I was actually surprised by the way John lived his life, and how he presented himself.”

Lawrence smiled. “God brings many different people into our lives in order to provide more opportunities for us to get to know Him better,” he said. “I realize that I sound like a

broken record, but I feel this is important. God wants everyone to trust Him, before it's too late."

"I still feel like a hypocrite for getting interested in spiritual matters at this point in my life, especially since the cancer diagnosis. Eva, on the other hand, was always so level-headed and sensible about these kind of things. She always seemed to have the ability to examine spiritual matters with a fresh and open mind." Michal's voice choked slightly.

"I wish I had taken a picture of her while she was still alive," he said, tears welling up in his eyes. "Now that I think about it, I never had a picture of my mother either. For some reason, I had a picture of my dad that I used to keep on my desk at work – I'm not sure why ..."

"We all have things that haunt us, Michal." Lawrence interrupted. Even old folks like me, but God takes us as we are. Lost and broken-hearted. Whatever our circumstances He promises to change our troubled hearts from seeking after the empty promises of this world, to following Him. Sometimes He even allows difficult trials to come our way so that we might begin thinking about what's really important in our lives. Overcoming adversity often shapes who we are."

Michal smiled. "How can you be so sure that your faith is the right one?"

"The Bible says that the Holy Spirit speaks to our conscience," Lawrence replied. "The book of Romans says that the law of the Lord is written on our hearts, which leads us to a realization of our sin. When we come to faith in Christ, the Bible says that we're sealed with His Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is a special way for God to remind us that we are under *His* care."

Michal looked up at Lawrence, frowning intently. "Do you think God will forgive me ..."

Lawrence leaned forward in his chair. "Of course He will, Michal. The thief on the cross is a classic example of the mercy and grace that God is willing to give us. The Bible says that as Jesus hung on the cross He began speaking to the criminals that hung next to Him. One of the

criminals began mocking Jesus saying; *If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.* But the second criminal cried out to Jesus, saying: *Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.* Jesus answered him by declaring, *Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.*”

Michal grinned, quickly wiping a tear from his eye.

“Believe it or not, Michal, you’re in a privileged position. Most people couldn’t care less about getting themselves right with God, and they’re ultimately unprepared to meet Him when they pass on from this world to the next. Many people simply go about their lives as if they had all the time in the world to make a decision. Then all of a sudden, *bang*, they find themselves face to face with the almighty eternal God of the universe - their Creator – standing condemned before Him without an excuse. Forgive me if this seems morbid, Michal, but perhaps God has allowed all of these tragedies to happen throughout your life so that you’re able to consider more eternal matters ... before it’s too late. Your cancer may be a greater blessing than you think.”

“That’s putting a positive spin on things,” Michal said with a wry smile. “You know, I still remember the feeling I had from attending Sunday School, it always felt like I was a part of something special, it was sort of like being a part of a family. Mrs. White always reminded me of what it was like to have a grandmother. She was kind and patient with me, and I think I developed a special love for her. I knew that she had something in her life that I didn’t have.”

“Was this around the same time that your mother died?” Lawrence asked.

“It was,” Michal replied.

Lawrence nodded sympathetically. “That’s a hard thing for anyone to go through, especially at such a young age. You’re a very courageous person, Michal.”

Michal sat there in silence for the next several minutes. All he could do was lay there in

his bed, helpless, staring blankly out the window and the picturesque landscape stretching far into the distance. “So you really think God will give me another chance?”

Lawrence smiled warmly. “He's always willing to hear a sinner's call to faith.”

* * * * *

Lawrence returned each day to visit his friend. And with each successive day he watched the young man growing weaker and more pale. A number of times Michal would sleep through his visits entirely, but regardless of whether he was awake or not, Lawrence, in his quiet voice, would read passages from the Bible, faithfully praying over him.

For Michal it was as if he was living in a haze. His sleep was now dreamless, and when awoke, he was weakened to the point where he was only faintly aware of what was going on around him. Rarely was he able to speak. There was, however, one constant, whenever he opened his eyes, the chaplain was by his side, sitting there in the armchair across from him. Once, just as Lawrence was about to leave for the night, Michal's eyes opened and he turned to the other man. For a brief moment, their eyes met, and Michal gave him an appreciative smile.