

*Time &
Unforeseen
Occurrence*



Jesse Leigh Brackstone

**Time
&
Unforeseen
Occurrence**

A Novel by

Jesse Leigh Brackstone

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Jesse

**'I returned to see under the sun
that the swift do not always have
the race, nor the mighty ones the
battle, nor do the wise also have
the food, nor do the
understanding ones have the
riches, nor do even those having
knowledge have the favor -
because time and unforeseen
occurrence
befalls us all.'**

(Ecclesiastes chapter 9:11)

Chapter One

*The stars fell from Heaven,
The angels wept,
And the pale horse came riding, riding,
Its hooves thundering past her
On its way to take, without mercy,
What only it could.
And God said nothing,
And nothing left a void,
And the dark void,
Formless and waste,
Swallowed her whole,
As the elements hissed,
And the frost moon quivered
In the blinding flash of nothingness,
And her world disappeared....*

On any other day, Jenny would have joyfully kicked her way through the autumn leaves that lay in multicolored heaps along the slate gray city sidewalks, but today she just ambled through them, her thoughts drifting with the wind. It only takes a moment to change a life forever, and we never see it coming; there is nowhere to hide. Change will always find us, cut us deep, and remind us that all we think is permanent can be gone in a blink.

She stared blankly at the passersby, the ones who walked their dogs this early, and the joggers who zipped past her as if she wasn't there. Was she? Why could they not hear the deafening sound of a human heart breaking, find in each silent tear, an ocean,

in every muffled sigh, a scream? The blood in her veins felt cold and black; her body... numb. A strange film clouded both her eyes and everything looked hazy, yet she could not stop the well of tears from streaming down her face, dripping onto her clothing, and on into the street, stepped upon by careless shadows that used to be people, or were they careless people who used to be shadows? She didn't know, or care.

Jenny had left the hospital in the early morning dark and did not know how many miles she had walked since then. It was so hard to leave him there alone in the hands of strangers. Last night he was fine, happily laughing and talking with her, so how did it all suddenly just stop? She kept thinking that maybe it was all a mistake and that if she went back to the hospital, somehow it would be fine, Michael would be fine.... She dared to hope for a moment, to rise from her despair... it didn't last long.

Just yesterday she still had him to tell her secrets to. Today she had no secrets. Mere hours ago he had held her hand as they talked about their hopes, their dreams.... Oh, Michael! I saw you leave, but I can't find you.... God, where did you go? I can't be here without you, there's no air; I can't breathe! Panic overtook her, and Jenny pulled off her scarf, her coat, and was frantically trying to claw her way out of her sweater when she fell to her knees..., dizzy and gasping in the cold fall air.

For a while, a few minutes maybe, she sat there on the pavement by the boardwalk, her senses reeling, but no one stopped to help her or look her way. What does this mean? she wondered. I'm aching and alone on the cold city sidewalk and not a living soul seems to notice, or care.

Her head was swirling with kaleidoscopic images spinning fast and wild, so fast it hurt. Now and then she wondered if she'd dreamed it all, but somehow knew she hadn't, it just seemed so surreal. Michael was in the middle of a sentence, the *middle* of a sentence when he turned pale, tilted his head backward, abruptly stopped breathing, and slumped lifelessly into her arms.

Jenny tried desperately to remember what had happened next. Had she called the nurse? She vaguely recalled the nurse 'call the

code,' and then the ubiquitous flurry of urgent activity as they vainly tried to resuscitate him. He died with his eyes wide open, those vivid blue eyes she loved so much, and no one could tell her why. They didn't know yet... they didn't know. She had never seen anyone die before, let alone have him taken, wrenched from her arms like this.

Only last night they had been laughing at the absurdity of hospital procedures, as Michael tugged and yanked at his flimsy gown, attempting to arrange it in some way that could be marginally comfortable to wear. The more he strained and pulled at the thin, blue-spotted, ridiculous piece of fabric, the more the two of them laughed.

"It's impossible, Jen," he chuckled, "no matter what I do with this thing, I always end up bare-bottomed and freezing. There must be a cold air return vent underneath my bed because I can definitely feel a draft."

Jenny had been sitting beside him on the bed, her right arm curving around the topmost pillow, her fingers gently playing with his hair. She had always loved his golden hair, that thick, unruly mass of curls, which perfectly framed his well-tanned face, and those ever-mischievously dancing, piercing blue eyes. He looked much as he had in kindergarten, she thought, with that intriguing blend of naughty innocence, which made him irresistible as a man, and yet when he was sleeping, still resemble that little boy. She couldn't remember the world without him in it; she had loved him since she was five.

Still laughing, though more quietly now, Michael turned to her and confided, "Hey, Jenny, I wish..." he never finished that sentence, but instead, looked at her with a disquieting, puzzled expression, as his head became heavy on her arm and in her hand.

"Michael? Michael, what's happening?" she asked, thinking for an instant that he was teasing her again, but the look of puzzlement went away and his mouth fell open. The last thing he said to her was with his eyes, a question, a pleading, a reaching, a slow fading, as the light dimmed within them and then just... disappeared.

“Michael! No! No! No! No! Michael!”

Jenny screamed his name but didn't know how many times. She tried to shake him awake, pleading with him, begging him not to leave her. She felt as if her mind had split, “Michael!” Then the chaos started. People wearing green pajama-like outfits rushed over to him, joined by others clad in white uniforms who began swarming around the bed. Carts on wheels screeched to a halt, bringing all kinds of tubes and electrical equipment, the purpose of which she didn't understand. Walls of once-white curtains, now faded into a dirty, grayish yellow, quickly converted the area into a makeshift private room.

An older man moved her to the side, disengaging her hand from Michael's, pulling, dragging her away through the suffocating folds of the fabric walls until she could see him no longer. She never did hear what he said to her, Doctor so and so. All she could take in was the noise... and the silence, the confusion, the hope, and the sheer terror washing over her all at once. She didn't know at which point tears began to flow. She could not remember when she had emotionally let go. Had she? She could still feel the tingling warmth of Michael's hand in hers, and she wanted it back, she wanted him back. As if from some faraway place, she heard herself calling his name over and over, as she sat crying hysterically in the soundproof room into which the doctor had led her. Two ICU nurses were with her now, one on either side of her, each one trying to calm her down while firmly holding her back, preventing her from leaving the room and rushing again to Michael's side. Jenny didn't want to sit there, she didn't want to be there at all, she wanted Michael, Michael....

“Let me go! Let me go! I want to see my husband,” she screamed, as she tried to wriggle free from their unyielding grasp.

One of them attempted to catch her gaze, but she couldn't focus on anyone. She heard her say, “Honey, you have to let him go now, there's nothing more we can do. I'm so sorry, but he's gone, honey; you need to let him go.”

Jenny's mind could not, would not hear her. It simply wasn't possible. The doctors could revive him - he was fine! Rejecting

the words, Jenny's tortured voice cried out through her tears, "He isn't gone, he can't be gone, he was fine! He was fine a minute ago; he was just talking to me. Why won't you let me go to him?" she implored her restrainers, begging them in-between heart-wrenching sobs to please listen to her. They didn't.

Time passed - a long time, she thought. She couldn't guess how many minutes she had been a prisoner in the Family Room, pleading and struggling with the nurses. She didn't know when she had stopped crying, but all was eerily quiet now, and the white-clad sentinels sat silently beside her. Eventually, without glancing up, she calmly asked, "May I see him now? Surely I'm allowed to see him for myself, if only to say goodbye to him, I need to say goodbye, I need to see..."

"Honey, there'll be time for that later, but not right now," said the elder of the two, gently. "Is there someone we can call to come and get you? Do you have any relatives nearby who can take you home?"

"Home? Take me... I'm not going home! I'm not going anywhere without seeing my Michael! He isn't yours; you can't just take him away from me like this!"

"Hon, all I know is that the doctor said to send you home for now. Nobody wants to cause you any more upset, but there must be a reason why the doctor wants you to wait a bit before you see your husband. I'm certain that he'll phone you when it's all right and explain it to you then. So, can we call a friend for you?"

Jenny said nothing, but shook her head slowly, fighting back tears of both anger and anguish that desperately sought release.

Running out of ideas, the nurses glanced at each other. How were they going to persuade her to go home; she seemed so resolute.... To tell her the truth was not an option, as traumatized as she was, to explain that Michael's blood pressure had risen dramatically, causing him to hemorrhage from his eyes, ears, nose, and mouth - in truth, from every orifice, and blood had begun spurting from underneath his fingernails, creating a horrific visual display before his wildly flailing heart eventually stilled, the real reason the doctor had whisked her away from Michael's bedside so

hurriedly. Jenny had thought him dead already, unaware that his internal organs were waging a silent Armageddon, struggling in vain to hang on to the life force that sustained them.

“Um... would you like to speak to a chaplain, Mrs. Richards, would that help?” offered the other nurse, the one with the regular accent. The larger one sounded as if she came from the south somewhere, probably Georgia, Jenny thought. She had been there on assignment many times and knew it well. She remembered how remarkably green it was, how... Dear God! What am I thinking? I have to get back to Michael.

“Mrs. Richards?”

“What is it?” she sighed, weary of inane excuses and the constant barrage of questions.

“Ahem... the chaplain... would you like to speak with him?”

“No.”

“Won’t you let me call you a cab then, honey?” asked the voice from Georgia, hoping that Jenny would agree.

“Well, given that I don’t appear to have a choice, a cab will suffice. I’ll wait downstairs,” she lied.

“You sure you’ll be all right, sugar?” queried the big nurse, putting her arms around Jenny’s shoulders. Jenny cringed, wanting to throw them off, but was aware that if she were going to escape from her captors, she had to at least appear to co-operate.

“I’ll be all right,” she assured her, attempting to feign a smile. “Will you have him come round to the front entrance please?”

The nurse nodded and watched her step into the elevator.

Poor kid, she thought, shaking her head at the unfairness of life. No family either.

What she didn’t know was that Jenny only went down one level and stealthily disembarked at the eighth floor. She was familiar enough with the stairs to 9-ICU. After all, she’d been coming here daily for five months. She wouldn’t have to pass by the nurse’s station and she had to get back to Michael. She didn’t care what the doctors thought she ought not to see. What could be worse than nothingness or more traumatic than this...?

Her eyes were hot and stinging from crying and her face felt swollen and puffy. She hoped that no one would notice lest it give her away. Quickly making her way to the stairs, she sprinted up the two half-flights, and slipped quietly back unobserved onto the ninth floor. Michael's bed was just around the corner, she knew, but after taking a few steps in that direction, she stopped cold in her tracks. The fabric room was completely dismantled, no machines, no tubes, no people, and... no Michael. His bed was stripped bare and impossibly vacant, so soon. Too soon. Jenny wanted to scream, to grab someone, and make them tell her where they had taken him. "Oh, Michael," she choked, and putting her hand over her mouth, she ran for the stairs. She ran all the way down them, down nine floors to the lobby and out into the dark and empty street.

At some point she started aimlessly walking....

Now, in the half-light of the dawning, Jenny realized that only a few hours had passed, not even a day, though it seemed like a lifetime to her.

Slowly, she set about the laborious task of collecting her scattered personals from the pavement, returning makeup, keys, and a now-broken hand mirror to her purse, and putting on her clothes again in a thoughtless, haphazard way. Pulling herself up onto the wooden green painted bench that faced the lake, she wearily sat down, not knowing what else to do. The boardwalk began to get busy, as Toronto awakened from sleep. Jenny longed to wake up too, but to yesterday when things made sense, when she didn't have to wonder if she were sane, and what was real.

Glancing down at her hands, she noticed that they were whitish-blue, except for a smear of dried blood on her palm, which she supposed came from a small cut she must have sustained when she fell, but unable to locate it, she paid it no mind, not realizing that the blood was Michael's. I must be cold, she thought, but if I'm so cold then why don't I feel it? In truth, she didn't feel much of anything - she couldn't, but she reached into her pocket for her

gloves anyway. Michael would have made her get them; he always took care of her that way. She was so forgetful about practical things, especially personal practical things, and it was her nature to often lose herself entirely in the moment, focusing intently on the task at hand. Little things like hunger, thirst, and taking her medication, or becoming cold frequently escaped her notice, but Michael noticed, and prompted her to, if not pay attention then at least acquiesce, and let him bring her a sandwich, some tea, or give her a scheduled dose of meds. He kept the woodstove going in winter, and when she ventured out, he made sure that she put on a needed hat, scarf, or gloves..., practicalities that seldom crossed her mind. Gloves, she mused, looking vacantly at them. What does it matter without Michael? What does anything matter anymore?

For reasons obscure to her, she began slowly stretching the thick woolen material over her long slim fingers and perfectly manicured nails. During the process, her diamond became caught in the loosely woven yarn, so she quickly withdrew her hand, untangled it, and stared for a while at her engagement ring and wedding band. Her mind slipped backward to that beautiful summer, and their wedding day, a little over three years ago. She warmed to the moment and almost smiled... but then last night's memories cruelly, violently came rushing into her consciousness like an angry tide, carrying her out with the undertow into the unforgiving sea. I can't do this! I can't take this! her mind screamed silently, and tears overtook her again. Oh, Michael, I need you so much. Please, God, don't let this be real.... She felt nausea rising in the pit of her stomach, and shaking, she thought she might faint. Instead, she leaned forward, and lowering her head - vomited - her body's rejection of the events of the last thirteen hours.

Jenny soon became aware of the powerful revving of engines, the ever-increasing hum of spinning tires, screeching brakes, and the rustling, clicking sound of people bustling round about her in syncopated time, as they hurriedly went about their daily routines. It has to be around seven o'clock, she said to herself. She never

wore a watch; she didn't even own one. The idea of going through life with time strapped to her wrist was alien to her, a trend that she found distasteful, perhaps because she had always believed that she didn't have much of it left. Right now, whatever the hands of the clocks said, she felt an overwhelming urge to run straight home. The sounds of the morning were distorted and loud and seemed to be coming from a different dimension. The lake, the buildings, and the trees loomed out of the morning mist like gray gaunt giants. Nothing seemed real.

Visibly shaking, she gingerly rose from the bench where she had been sitting staring out at Lake Ontario, having been there at the dawning of the new day, but not present in it. Increasingly, she became aware of a weak sensation in her legs; they felt almost like Jell-O and would not move with the haste she wanted. Cognizant for the first time that her house was a mere few blocks away, she longed to be safe within its confines and the predictable familiarity there.

Had she felt better physically, she would have obeyed the compulsion she had to run, to run home, to run anywhere to escape the dreadful feeling of being pursued by something terrible and dark, something wanting to take her over, to pounce upon her and possess her, but she did not know its name, only that it was more than fear, worse than terror... and she could not evade it, able only to inch her way slowly toward the gleaming white door of their old Victorian beach house, empowered by an unseen strength that she felt was not her own.

Fumbling with unsure hands in the patchwork leather purse, which still hung from her now-drooping shoulders, she quickly found her keys. Mildly surprised that she successfully unlocked the door with relative ease, she stepped inside and thankfully shut it behind her. Leaning her back against it, she closed her eyes for a few moments, grateful to be closeted from the world outside. Without thinking, she flipped on the Intruder Alert System. Kicking off her shoes and trailing her purse behind her, she managed to walk the few remaining steps to the main floor bedroom, where she collapsed onto the unmade bed. She reached

for a pillow without bothering to remove her coat, and curled up tightly, embracing it. She almost began to cry again, but this time tears would not come. Exhausted, helpless, and too tired to fight, or think, or weep, she willingly surrendered, falling swiftly and mercifully into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Chapter Two

*Alone I walk
In shadowed streets
I'm going nowhere
Came from somewhere
Can't remember really
Doesn't matter really
Thinking of you
Every moment
But my thoughts drift
And never reach you
For silence is
What shadows teach you....*

The telephone rang. Jenny stirred. A voice that sounded like distant noise to her, obliquely monotone and shrill, left a name and number on the answering machine, asking that she call it back. A loud beeping sound echoed round the room when the voice disengaged, and the machine said: "Wednesday, September 6th, 8:05 p.m."

Jenny slowly came to herself, and in the dangling foggy moments between wakefulness and dreaming, it occurred to her that the machine had said 'Wednesday.' That can't be right, she thought, mindlessly reaching over for Michael's pillow. I was just at the hospital and it was Tuesday night.... Oh, God! Oh, no! Michael! Reality rushed into the early evening grayness of the bedroom and hit Jenny hard. She felt her insides shatter like broken windowpanes in a loosely suspended window that unexpectedly came crashing down.

Noticing that she was still wearing her coat, a surge of panic gripped her, and she tried to determine approximately how long she had been asleep. “Thirteen hours, wow,” she groaned in a barely audible whisper. She tried to sit up, but could not, and the room began to move in strange ways, not spinning exactly, but more akin to the imagery one experiences inside a hall of mirrors.

“Oh, Lord, help me - please!” she begged. “I forgot to take my medicine. I haven’t taken it for... for twenty-two hours.”

The room’s misshapings quickened and she began to lose her ability to focus. A whiteout overtook her, a symptom peculiar to her illness, and she could only see a translucent white cloud everywhere she looked. Gradually, insubstantial moving shapes became visible, abstract blobs of red, blue, and green hovered over her, while the sensation of spinning, the loss of depth perception, and the distortion of light and sound continued. Head pain commenced in earnest now, as did nausea. Her heart began racing menacingly, and then skipping, and finally pounding so hard that she feared it might leap out of her chest, either that or stop beating entirely. The dying sensation that always accompanied her panic attacks particularly distressed her. Too many missed doses, too many catecholamines, too many reasons not to make it this time....

She groped frantically on the floor for her purse, knowing that she had some meds in there since she always took a supply with her wherever she went. Sobbing now, and experiencing air hunger, Jenny prayed to God to please help her find it. About to give in to despair and release the agonizing cry that was building in her throat, her right hand found the shoulder strap of her purse. Summoning all the strength she could, she pulled it up onto the bed, and quickly unzipping the middle compartment, she grasped the vitamin bottle, the camouflage she used to hide the prescription medication, lest anyone should suspect that she needed to take benzodiazepines. Experience had taught her that the world was cruel and judgmental and only too eager to label people like her as some kind of crazy, so she was determined not to supply the ignorant with that kind of ammunition; too many rounds on the carousel had taught her that lesson well.

Jenny kept two different kinds of meds in her bottle. Since she could not see what she was taking, her trembling fingers felt for the oval shape of Alprazolam, and finding them, she swallowed, without any water, six peach tablets - twice her normal dose. She then took six little round sublingual Lorazepam tablets, also twice her normal dose. She had missed six doses, and while she knew that to take this much at once was to risk her blood pressure bottoming out, she was just scared enough and desperate enough to risk it. So dreadful did she feel that even Michael didn't cross her mind for well over an hour. Until she stabilized at least somewhat, survival ruled the day.

Jenny closed her eyes and lay motionless in the ever-darkening room. It was hard to know about time. She couldn't stop the steady stream of tears that seemed endless and had neither the will nor the energy to try. With her arms wrapped around her pillow, she concentrated on separating her mind from the savage attack that ravaged her body like a pack of hungry wolves. She had been here before, before medication was available to help control this heartless disease, before they even had a name for it, and certainly before she became chronic and could not resist accepting chemical help any longer. A decade of making the rounds of all the doctors from internists to psychiatrists, all of who had told her various versions of 'It's all in your head' - nonsense, of course, but she hadn't known that then, and so suffered through ten years of secretly questioning whether or not they might be right and she really was going crazy, ten years of wondering when she would die, which she felt she surely must soon.

She had no idea how long she'd lain there, waiting for the tempest to abate, but noticed that she could now make out the real shapes and colors in her pastel yellow and white bedroom. Her heart was slowing down now and her pressure had come down too. The other symptoms, while not gone entirely, had diminished appreciably, but she was exhausted, as always after an attack. All this was predictable, even familiar and expected, but she sensed that more was wrong with her than merely a weary body this time. Maybe not having eaten in two days could have something to do

with it, she mused. The thought of eating repulsed her though and left her doubting that she could keep anything solid down. Perhaps some orange juice, she deliberated.

Her legs still felt decidedly wobbly, and quavered unsteadily, as she made her way to the refrigerator. She found it necessary to brace herself by holding on to the dappled gray granite countertop, while pouring the golden nectar into a large, smoke-gray, leaded crystal glass.

The cold felt good against her hand, and after taking a few sips of the juice she instinctively put the glass up to her forehead, and the last remnants of her headache were gratifyingly soothed by the gelid sensation.

Squinting at the octagonal oak and brass kitchen clock, Jenny could see that it was quarter past ten. “Two hours or so this time, and if I’m not careful there’ll be a repeat performance soon,” she groaned.

Realizing that she didn’t have enough medication in her system to stabilize her for long, she decided to try to hold out until midnight, when her next dose was due. I suppose I’m in for a rough few days physiologically, she thought, but given the circumstances, I imagine I’d feel lousy even if I were well.

After draining the last drops of orange juice from the exquisite glass, she poured herself another; she needed it.

Wiping away yet another runaway tear, she started back toward the bedroom, her muscles still weak and aching. Slowly she began to remove her coat and the rest of her clothes, carelessly letting them fall to the floor, unusual for her, but understandable. Lazily, she procured a clean flannel nightgown from her closet, blue, with little white clouds on it. The fresh scent of the outdoors was still faintly discernable from it, just enough to pleasantly stir her senses. Jenny loved flannel, it was always so warm, and soft, and snuggly - not sexy maybe, but deliciously comfortable, and Michael never cared about sexy clothing in any case, he just liked her.

Noticing the red light on the answering machine blinking, indicating that at least one message had been left there, Jenny decided to ignore it. I’ll deal with the voice in the morning, she

told herself, I'm not up to it right now; I don't want to talk to anyone about anything. The weary thought was still dangling in her mind when a loud knock on the front door startled her. Grabbing her long, green, terry robe from the back of the white wicker chair, she reluctantly hurried to the door. Who on earth could it be at this hour? she wondered.

"Hello? Who's there please?" she asked without opening the door.

"It's Officer Parker - Metro Toronto Police Department, Ma'am. Are you Jennifer Richards?"

She opened the door a crack, leaving the chain on, and peeked out onto her front gallery. Sure enough, the gentleman was dressed in a police uniform, and was driving a cruiser. Still, she wasn't comfortable....

"May I see some identification, Officer, if you don't mind?"

"Uh... yes, Ma'am," said the young policeman, reaching for his badge. "I'm sorry about the hour, but the hospital has been trying to contact you all day, unsuccessfully, and they're pretty concerned about your welfare. They called and asked us to check on you. May I come in for a moment?"

Well, the badge looked authentic, and he did sound sincere, even knowing about the hospital.... Jenny decided to let him in.

Officer Parker observed that Jenny's face was noticeably swollen, most likely from having been crying, he suspected. He had no way of knowing what else she'd had to deal with, but politely, he made no mention of it.

Without a word she led him into the timeless old country kitchen, with its warm, reclaimed brick interior walls, and oak and brass trimmed cupboards with their crisscross leaded glass doors, and the gray granite countertop. Simply saying, "Please..." she motioned for him to sit down at the long, beautifully crafted, antique oak table, which comfortably seated twelve. He did so, choosing a chair to the right of the head of the table. She silently sat down beside him wondering what this was all about.

“May I get you some juice, or perhaps some coffee, Officer? I have to get some orange juice for myself anyway, so it’s really no trouble.”

“Um... no, no thank you, I’m good, but it’s nice of you to offer, Mrs. Richards.”

Jenny nodded, grateful that she didn’t have to stand up for too long, and managed to aim a faint smile in his direction, as she returned to the table with her juice. What is he doing here at this time of night? she wondered. Clearly I’m all right, so why is he still here?

“You haven’t said why you’re here, Officer. I assume it must be urgent for you to call at such a late hour, so what can I do for you?”

“Oh, right!” he said. “I’m sorry to have to bring this up, Ma’am, but has your telephone been out of order?”

“No, why?” she asked, remembering the shrill voice on the answering machine.

“Well, the hospital has been trying to reach you but no one answered the phone, so...”

Jenny blushed and nodded. “Mmm... I’m sorry; I guess I must have been sleeping soundly. I don’t hear much when.... Well, the nurse did say that they’d likely call me. I imagine they’ll try again in the morning.”

“Um... I don’t believe they want to leave it that long, Mrs. Richards, which is why I’m here.”

“Leave what?” she frowned, “I’m afraid I don’t understand. They said that they’d...”

“They need you to come down to the morgue to formally identify your husband’s body and sign the directive for his... autopsy.”

“Identify his body? Autopsy?”

Jenny thought she might be sick.

“But... but Michael has a living will, and he has stated in it that he doesn’t want an autopsy under any circumstances, and why would...? I don’t understand... why would I need to identify his body?”

“Um... Mrs. Richards, I don’t know how to tell you this because I’m still trying to figure out how it happened myself, but it seems that either they’ve lost your husband, or they have your husband and somehow the ID bracelets from his wrists have been... well, misplaced.”

“Lost my husband?” she whispered, horrified. “*Lost* him? How is that possible?”

“I don’t know, Ma’am,” Officer Parker offered, shaking his head in honest disbelief. “His chart seems to be missing too, so they now need you to come down and formally identify him.”

“But... I still don’t understand. Why would someone want to remove his ID bracelets, and how could they possibly lose his chart? He’s been a patient at that hospital for over five months! And what do you mean they want to perform an autopsy? They already know that Michael’s will expressly forbids it.”

“Mrs. Richards, I have no clue what happened with the ID mix up, but I do know that when someone dies and the cause is unknown, the law requires that an autopsy be done to rule out foul play... amongst other things. Unless you have objections on religious grounds then I’m afraid they’ll insist on performing an autopsy on your late husband.”

Late husband, late husband, she thought. It sounds so... impossible. She could feel the room beginning to lose its angularity again and could see that her hands were visibly trembling. Fearful of another attack so soon, she excused herself, retreated to the bedroom, and took her regular dose of pills an hour early. All the while, she kept hearing the words reverberating in her brain. Lost my husband, autopsy, autopsy....

Returning to the kitchen, she asked the officer, “When am I supposed to do all this? I mean identify Michael, assuming it is Michael, and sign this paper? I’d like to check with our lawyer first because this is something that Michael feels... I’m s... sorry - I mean felt strongly about.”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Richards, but unless you can call your attorney now, we’ll have to proceed without the consultation. I’m supposed

to bring you down to the hospital with me right away, if you have no objections.”

“No objections? Are you joking? I just told you that my husband had strong objections and vehemently did not want an autopsy. Call it religious grounds if you like. I don’t have a denominational label to give you, but his belief system was such that it ruled out autopsies.”

“I wish that were enough, Ma’am. Religious objections are only applicable when an established church has a written creed forbidding the practice, and even then you have to prove that you’re an active member of the organization.”

Jenny didn’t know whether she was incredulous, incensed, or both.

“That’s ridiculous! Why are my husband’s beliefs less valid than a sect of some religion or other?”

“Well, between you and me, I don’t think they should be, but I don’t get to make that call. If I could execute your preferences, I would. As it is, I was sent here by my superiors at the hospital’s request. It’s been twenty-four hours already and the administration there needs the paperwork completed. This must all seem incredibly insensitive to you, but hospitals are busy places, too busy. There just isn’t the space to hold people for long, and that includes those who are sick, but I’m sure you’re aware of how congested our healthcare system has become. It sounds like a production line affair, and in many ways it is. Unfortunately, the world doesn’t stop the way we inherently feel it should when someone we love becomes sick, or dies. It isn’t that people don’t care, most do, and it’s an eventuality awaiting all of us, I’m afraid.”

He looked at her apologetically, hoping that she would understand.

“I... I never thought about it like that, but even so, how can they justify losing Michael? You’re not going to tell me that it’s legal for bodies to disappear, I hope. Y’can’t lose a person! It’s not as if he could have left of his own volition. They wouldn’t let me have one moment alone with him when he... died, and now

they've lost him? What if they can't find him; am I supposed to sit here quietly and learn to live with that?"

"I don't believe it'll come to that, Mrs. Richards, and no, it wouldn't be legal to lose a human body. I think the most likely worst-case scenario is a couple of IDs may have been mixed up while the bodies were being washed in the morgue. I don't know, but I'm sure that if you'll come to the hospital with me, we can sort it out quickly."

"Washed in the mor... ugh! Do I have to go there now, in the middle of the night?"

"Well, yes, Ma'am; that's what I was sent to do, to personally escort you down there, assuming you're willing to come."

"And if I'm not?"

Officer Parker sighed. "A court order will be issued as soon as we can wake up a judge and then you'll have to come with me anyway."

"This isn't fair!" Jenny said accusingly.

"No, it's not, I won't disagree, but it is the law, so you have no choice in the matter."

"Officer... I'm sorry; I've forgotten your name."

"It's Officer Parker, but if Jim is easier, I don't mind."

"Thank you, my name is Jenny, but... you already know that, don't you?"

Jim nodded. "I do, and I hate to be the one to have to put you through this. I'm so sorry for your loss. Would it help you to know that I've been right where you are now?"

Jenny was stunned by his statement. Somehow, at that moment, she felt that she alone had ever suffered like this. To think that others did too, or had in the past lost what she had lost had not yet crossed her mind.

"Y... you mean your wife died?"

"No, not my wife, my little daughter. She was only four... leukemia took her. It was a little over three years ago, but at times like this it feels as if it's happening all over again."

Jenny started to cry.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry about your little girl. Did she have to have an autopsy? Did they cut her up into pieces and hand her back to you in a box? I can’t bear the thought of them doing that to Michael. Oh! Oh, God, help me please! I don’t think I can do this... and... what if it isn’t Michael?”

For the briefest of moments she once more allowed herself to hope that this had all been a terrible mistake, and that Michael was fine - that they had been able to pull him through... but she knew that it was a vain hope, born out of heartbreak and longing. She had seen him die herself - leave even... the life force dimming within his eyes.

“I don’t know what to say to you, I wish I did. There really aren’t any words, y’know. You’re right that you shouldn’t have to go through this, but they have to be sure, we all do. Look, I’ll stay with you, Mrs. Richards - if you want me to.”

This was one of those nights when Jim wished that he had stayed in architecture. Death is hard enough, losing someone you love is hard enough, and to have to go through all these additional painful procedures, even if they are necessary for the keeping of proper records, or whatever other reason, seemed to him somehow lacking in humanity.

Jenny didn’t want him to stay, she wanted him to go, leave, and never come back. She definitely did not want to go with him. Rising to go to the sink, she had only taken a few steps when her juice glass slipped through her trembling fingers and shattered on the hard slate floor, sending shards of glass just... everywhere. Embarrassed, she bent down to clean it up, but instead found herself vomiting for the second time in sixteen hours. Officer Parker rushed to her side and supported her wispy frame so that she wouldn’t fall - a good thing too because she was about to. Her body felt so weak that she didn’t think she could go with the officer by any means - legalities regardless.

“Must I do this tonight? Can’t it wait until morning?” she groaned, hoping to be able to crawl back into bed.

“If you can gather strength enough to come, I know it will be appreciated, Mrs. Richards. Perhaps if you sit down for a little while longer...?”

Jenny sank gratefully into the ample chair at the head of the table, and folding her arms to cushion herself, put her head down upon it. Jim sat down beside her again and neither one said a thing, Jim because he didn't know what to say, and Jenny, beyond exhaustion, simply had nothing to say at all.

When she felt sufficiently composed, she coyly excused herself, went into the bedroom, made a halfhearted attempt to clean herself up, and slowly dressed to go with the officer to the hospital. She didn't bother to pick out something coordinated to wear, but instead just grabbed a sweater and a pair of track pants. She couldn't have cared less if they matched, which was most unlike her. Her mind was much too hazy to formulate coherent thoughts and she was still feeling weak from her earlier panic attack. Venturing out into the middle of the night to identify Michael's dead body, and signing papers that she didn't want to sign was a little too much for her to take, let alone take in.

Passing through the spacious kitchen, she was surprised to find that Officer Parker had cleaned up, not only the glass and the juice, but the vomit as well. Frowning, she shot him a somewhat embarrassed but quizzical look.

“You cleaned this up? You shouldn't... I mean, it was my mess. This can't be a part of your job description.”

Her eyes met his, and she saw in them a helplessness, a deep-seated need or want to do something to help her. She lowered her gaze, and in a demure voice offered, “What I mean to say is... thank you.”

“Think nothing of it, Ma'am; it's the least I can do. Shall we?”

He motioned to the front door with an outstretched arm and then led the way. Without saying anything, she followed him out onto the porch, locking the door behind her, and caching the key in her pocket.

The cold night air felt good as it brushed against her face, and the wind tossed her long auburn hair around wildly. The blizzards

of autumn had always pleased Jenny, the leaves dancing in never-ending pirouettes, twirling and swirling, while the sound of the waves thundered onto the bleak, rocky shore. She found herself smiling right out loud, and then just as quickly wondered how she could. It was only a smile, and only a moment, but she felt so strange, so... guilty for smiling at all. Her emerald green eyes had flashed brightly with a familiar inner joy, one she used to share with Michael. She couldn't bear to think about that tonight, laughter and joy she had shared with him.... If she were going to survive this ordeal, she dared not think of anything. She tucked her long, thick hair inside her coat and quietly stepped into the police car.

The ten-minute drive to the hospital was uneventful. Little happened on these streets at night that an untrained observer would notice. To the experienced eye of her companion, however, Toronto was busily engaged in the darkest side of commerce and trade, and like any other big city of late, it never slept. They rode in silence.

Officer Parker pulled up at an obscure side entrance on the first level of the underground parking area at *Toronto General Hospital*. Jenny had never entered the building that way before, nor did she know one could. She was scared, and queasy, and wanted to see Michael badly, yet was dreadfully afraid of what she would find. Would he still look like her Michael? Would it be him after all? And how could she sign a paper releasing his body for an autopsy when she knew categorically that Michael didn't want it? Too many questions were crowding her head, too much to decide so fast, too fast.

She and Jim entered a long, white, sterile-looking corridor that appeared to go on forever. Jenny's thoughts drifted from the unpleasant task before her to reflect that this would make an excellent parallelex picture. Her mind was all over the place, anything to keep from focusing on this moment that she did not want to be in, a moment that shouldn't be happening - a mistake. It looks as if more mistakes are about to be made by me now, she thought, and felt stupid, and manipulated, and scared.

As they approached the stainless steel door to the morgue, Jenny took one long look heavenward through the tons upon tons of concrete and steel above her head. She didn't know what to say to God, or how, but fervently hoped that He was listening.

Misplacing patients wasn't an everyday occurrence, so more witnesses were on hand than was usual. The pathologist and the attending physician were there, as was Officer Parker. She thought she saw a tear in his eye but couldn't be sure. Trying hard not to let go of her own emotions again, she couldn't spare the effort to analyze anyone else's. The room was practically all white, including the ceiling and the walls streaming down to the gray-speckled, marble floor. One wall shimmered in the fluorescent light and it looked like stainless steel. Jenny counted sixteen large drawers in it, each one containing the cold slab on which they place dead bodies in a quasi-attempt to decelerate decomposition.

Officer Parker led her gently by the arm to approximately the middle of the shiny metal wall, and the pathologist opened a drawer that was level with Jenny's waist. A white plastic body bag, obviously occupied, lay motionless on the slab that all eyes in the room were now fixed upon. It looks heavy, Jenny thought, knowing that there was a person in there, a person who not long ago had been alive, warm, and breathing. Somebody's loved one - somebody's... but was it hers? Was it Michael? Then she saw it, the harsh white adhesive label stuck in a haphazard fashion to the top of the bag, which stated in black capital letters 'MICHAEL DAVID RICHARDS.'

"Are you ready, Mrs. Richards?"

She hesitated for only an instant, and then turning her gaze from the shocking, stark, bold letters, she slowly nodded in answer to the pathologist, and whispered a barely discernible, "Yes."

He proceeded to unzip the smothering thick plastic bag from the head of the body down almost to the waist, spreading it apart so she could properly view the occupant. Jenny's eyes opened wide, and darted to and fro over the body, back and forth. Startled, she tried to speak, but words wouldn't come. She couldn't believe what she was seeing and could not conceive of it. She didn't know

what she had expected but it wasn't... *this!* Why had no one prepared her? It was Michael all right, but why was he...? Why were his eyes bruised, and why was he so... blue?

Aghast, Jenny cried, "What happened to his eyes? Why is his face blue in the front and almost... almost black at the back? What have you done to him?"

"Dear God, you should have explained to her what she would see!" Jim exclaimed, focusing an angry glare on the doctor.

The three men were rapidly realizing that she was in no way ready for this experience, and Jim Parker instinctively rushed to her side once again. His intuition served him well, as Jenny was suddenly overcome by a rapid sinking sensation, and the sterile room began to fade to dark, and then... nothing.

She woke up lying on a hospital bed in the emergency room, minutes later. Hemmed in on three sides by blue and white striped curtains, with a solid white wall at her back, she was surrounded by strangers who were taking her pulse, blood pressure, and temperature. The head nurse told her that she had only fainted and that there was no need to be alarmed. Still, with all that she had been through during the past couple of days, they wanted to run an EKG to make certain. Jenny didn't protest. She felt as if she had finally stepped through the looking glass. This was no longer a world she knew.

Drifting backward, her mind reawakened to the events in the morgue.

"Oh, no," she moaned, "I really wanted to see him, to spend some time with him, to say... to say... goodbye."

Crying softly now, she felt utterly lost. If it was awful leaving Michael in the hospital the night he died, it was far worse seeing him as a day-old corpse. He really is dead, she told herself repeatedly, really dead.

A little while later, not long, she thought, a doctor came to see her to explain the legalities of, and the necessity for an autopsy being performed on Michael's body. Jenny had plenty of questions. How could they have lost Michael? What happened to his chart and his ID bracelets? She wanted to ask them all but

couldn't formulate the words. She did tell the doctor about Michael's living will, and how he had stipulated that he did not want an autopsy. Dr. Marks explained that even though they strongly suspected a massive stroke, they couldn't confirm it, and no death certificate could be issued until the cause of death had been definitively determined.

Death certificate, Jenny thought, now that's something people will want to frame and put on their gallery wall. She didn't need a certificate to tell her that Michael had graduated from the school of life. He was dead, so why did the hospital care what had killed him?

"I understand that this is difficult, and I hear that you had a rather traumatic experience down at the morgue. I can't tell you how sorry I am; it should never have happened."

The doctor lowered his eyes, struggling to find that thin line that separates transference from objectivity, but he genuinely felt for this young woman, her obvious pain, her life altered beyond comprehension, and in his heart he didn't care about transference tonight. He pulled up a chair beside Jenny's bed so that his eyes were level with hers.

"Mrs. Richards, don't you want to know why your husband died? All we know at the moment is that he died on Tuesday, September 5th, 2000, at 10:22 p.m. There's no apparent reason why it happened, so we're somewhat nonplussed here."

Jenny was impressed. In her experience, doctors didn't appear to know how to say 'I don't know' in any form.

"He was admitted for leg pains and had some anomalies in his blood," Dr. Marks continued, "and we were running a battery of tests to rule out possible DVT, or deep vein thrombosis, and a variety of cancers, and that's all we know. I want you to be aware that I couldn't be sorrier about the administrative blunders here, the ID bracelets... the charts, and the insensitivity at the morgue. We still haven't pieced together what happened, or how it could have, but I promise you this - we will find out."

Jenny had heard more than enough apologies, they didn't change anything, and finding someone to blame for administrative blunders wouldn't bring Michael back.

"Does it matter?" she sighed. "What I want to know is why he was taken at twenty-six years old, but the physical reasons for that don't make any difference to me. Knowing what killed him won't bring him back to me, and it won't help anyone else either, will it?"

"It could," said Dr. Marks. "We're in the business of saving lives, Mrs. Richards, and when something happens such as what happened to your husband, we want to know why we didn't see it coming. We hope we'll learn something that'll help us to look for warning signs in other patients who have the same symptoms as he had. An autopsy will help, and just maybe we'll learn enough to be able to make a difference at a crucial moment. We couldn't save Michael, but we'd like to do our best to make sure that whatever happened, we can come to understand it and hopefully prevent it in the future."

Jenny listened attentively. If they'd had this knowledge earlier, it might have saved Michael, she mused. It's not about pieces of paper after all, it's about learning, learning enough to one day ensure that this doesn't happen to anyone else.... She felt her perspective slowly changing.

"So... understanding Michael's death may save someone else from losing her husband?" she asked, wanting to be clear on this point.

"It's entirely possible, Mrs. Richards, and perhaps even someone's mother, or someone's child. A life is a life."

Dr. Marks had such a kind and gentle manner, a warm and endearing way about him that engendered so much trust. She didn't want to go against Michael's wishes, not that she had a choice, but Dr. Marks made her feel that this act, this procedure, could be of some help to the living, and she believed that Michael would have wanted to help - a final altruistic gesture. Armed with the same information, he would have agreed to it in a second, and in her heart she knew it. This wasn't what he had planned, but

then he didn't think he would die at twenty-six years old either. Jenny ceased believing that she was betraying Michael's trust by agreeing to sign the release for the autopsy. If she hadn't felt so bad inside, she may even have felt good about being able to do one last good thing.

Dr. Marks returned a few minutes later, bringing the papers for her to sign. While she was looking them over, he asked her who was taking care of the rest of the arrangements. Jenny was confused... there was more to attend to?

"Arrangements? What arrangements?"

"The funeral arrangements, will there be someone from your family helping you with those?"

Yet another stark reality she was unprepared for jolted her consciousness. She hadn't thought of burying Michael, of having him placed in a box under seven feet of earth - forever, and her skin crawled at the intellection.

"No. I... I mean Michael's parents were both killed in a boating accident when he was seven, and my father is dead too, so there's only my mother and she doesn't speak to me... besides, she lives 4,000 miles away, and across an ocean, so I guess we won't be having much of a funeral to speak of. I'm sure there are some who'll come and pay their respects, but when you're a writer, a novelist as Michael is, I mean he isn't... he wasn't by anyone's yardstick what one would call a party animal. Our closest friends live some distance away and I haven't told them yet, and I'm not in the best of health myself, so I've been sleeping pretty much since I went home. We don't have any close friends nearby, so it didn't occur to me to call anyone, and I haven't felt up to it anyway. I... I don't think I've wanted to believe it... do you know what I mean? I'm not sure I'd know what to say. I don't think I'm up for answering questions.... Am I making any sense, Doctor?" she said, searching his face for some sign that she was communicating coherently. It didn't feel like it, as all her thoughts were foreign and disjointed, so how could he possibly understand when she didn't...?

“Unfortunately, yes. For whatever it’s worth, your social situation isn’t as unusual as you might think, and what you’re feeling is perfectly normal under the circumstances.”

“Michael has a brother in medical school in Australia,” she continued, half-dazed, “but that’s a long way to come. I guess I’ll just ask someone to say something appropriate at the cemetery. I suppose we know quite a few people in our neighborhood, but as acquaintances only. We don’t belong to a church or any social clubs so... Well, I think you must be getting the picture by now.”

“I get the picture, Mrs. Richards. If there’s anything I can do to help, please don’t hesitate to let me know.”

Dr. Robert John Marks, Jenny thought him one of the kindest and best of men. When he turned the corner in the emergency room it was the last time she saw him. He did send a lovely arrangement of flowers to the funeral parlor, all pink, white, and green. It was beautiful.

Eventually, after what seemed like hours, the head nurse came by and told Jenny that she could go home, if she felt well enough to make the trip. Her EKG was within the boundaries of normal, betraying some benign signs of stress, which was understandable considering all that she’d weathered emotionally, but fundamentally her heart was strong and healthy.

“You’ll probably outlive us all,” smiled the nurse.

Jenny thought that decidedly unlikely but kept her opinion to herself. She was going to ask them to call her a cab, but just as she was getting ready to exit her ER cubicle, Officer Parker came by and told her that he would be happy to take her home. He said something about her having been through enough for one night, and then offered her door-to-door service so that she wouldn’t have to face the Thursday morning rush-hour traffic. She was grateful and in rather a hurry to get back home, as she had forgotten to bring her meds with her, and it was almost five o’clock. Her next dose was due in an hour, and she was acutely aware of how many she had missed. Feeling jittery, and experiencing several different spells, not the least of which was the loss of depth perception, walking properly was especially difficult. Thinking that she must

visually resemble a drunkard, she thankfully accepted the support of Officer Parker's arm, and wasn't too shy to hold on tightly, as he escorted her to the police car. She knew that it would take her a few days to accumulate enough medication in her bloodstream to keep her at a steady level, or at least a manageable one.

They arrived back at The Old Victorian within minutes. Jenny thanked Jim profusely and then hurriedly retreated into the house. She couldn't explain it, but she always felt safe there. Even when nothing was wrong, it was always wonderful to come back home... even now, although she personally felt far from wonderful. She was so overwhelmed that she couldn't begin to sort out her feelings; she only knew that she had never felt so alone.

Some people name their houses and most people in the Beaches area subscribed to the notion. Ever since she was a little girl, and farther back than she could remember, everyone had called her house 'The Old Victorian.' It was appropriate, but more than that, for her it symbolized timelessness in a fast-paced, disposable everything, just-in-time world. The hundred-year-old house stood majestically looking out over the murky waters of Lake Ontario, surrounded by seven giant oaks that had matured along with it. It had been in Michael's family since it was built by his great-grandfather. The old paint had become tired and faded, so much so that the yellow had mellowed to a light cream color, and the white had yellowed to the extent that the house was almost uniform in appearance, color and trim bleeding into each other over a century of weather and time. When Jenny and Michael renovated it, just before she left to go to photography school in New York, they restored its original primrose yellow exterior, complete with gleaming white shutters, gutters, and trim. Jenny liked everything about it and had poured herself happily into redecorating each of the ten rooms. She had sculpted the landscaping of the grounds and exterior down to the minutest detail, and it had been a labor of love which now served as her sanctuary.

Just after nine o'clock she called *William's Funeral Home* and asked them to please pick up Michael's body from the hospital morgue. She told them that she would appreciate it if they could direct her to their website, as she wanted to pick out a casket online. Not feeling up to facing the public, Jenny was grateful that in the new technological era, she could orchestrate all of the necessary arrangements via phone, fax, and the Net. For a small fee, the funeral director would select suitable flowers for her in peaches and creams with a profusion of greenery, and cream lilies as the dominant blossom, as they were Michael's favorite. She decided to have two standing bouquets in cream-colored wicker baskets, and one large, heart-shaped arrangement centered atop the coffin.

She found it particularly difficult to pick out a gravestone, but eventually settled on a natural looking, roughly hewn, black granite monument with a glossy surface, and had the inscription say:

Here lies

**MICHAEL DAVID
RICHARDS**

**Aug 24th, 1974 - September 5th,
2000**

**Beloved husband, brother,
and son.**

SOMEWHERE MY LOVE....

Jenny thought for hours about what to inscribe on the bottom of the marker, as Michael had never chosen an epitaph. Strange for a writer, she thought. However, since she couldn't decide if she believed that people went straight to Heaven when they died, or simply went to sleep in the ground awaiting resurrection on some distant future day, she just wrote the most honest thing she could. She knew that Michael was 'somewhere,' she had watched him go, and it seemed to her that he was going somewhere specific, but she didn't know where. Just somewhere....

Calling Gideon in Australia was the hardest thing of all. Two years younger than Michael and in his third year of medical school, Gideon's shock at hearing about Michael's death rivaled her own. He wouldn't be able to make the funeral but murmured something about maybe coming home during the Christmas break. It sounded as if he were vacantly thinking aloud and trying to make sense of it all. Jenny, by now, was well acquainted with the feeling, so she simply acknowledged that she had heard him, not wanting to hold him to promises he might later find hard to keep.

"Cairns is a long way from Toronto," she said, "and December's a long way from now."

They said their stilted goodbyes and she was relieved when the call was over. She had no idea where she was getting the presence of mind to effect all this, no idea whatsoever. She felt as if she were operating on autopilot most of the time, not really living life, but going through the motions of it systematically, not thinking, and not feeling, just doing. The details of the funeral kept her mind occupied enough to avert most overwhelming thoughts. Even taking the easy route, and employing the Internet, she was still encumbered with a significant 'to do' list. Keeping mentally busy, she felt, was the only thing keeping her sane and able to prohibit unwanted emotion.

She had to wake up to take her meds at specific intervals, and with Michael not home to give them to her, as he customarily did, she had gone in search of anything that could pull her out of sleep

mode - not an easy thing to do in her case. Alarms didn't usually wake her and she needed a foolproof system. Even the telephone didn't rouse her, so when it became evident that Michael would have to remain in the hospital for longer than they had anticipated, she bought four Little Ben clocks, hoping that they would work. They did. For five months she'd relied upon them and they hadn't once let her down. As long as she remembered to wind them up, they were faithful to alert her to take her scheduled doses on time.

After attending to all the details of the mini-funeral, Jenny slept, and slept, and slept, waking only to go to the bathroom and to force down the odd glass of juice now and then. Even so, from Thursday morning until Sunday, time seemed to crawl.

Jenny arranged for the limousine from the funeral home to pick her up on Sunday, September 10th, at 10 a.m. She wanted to spend some time alone with Michael's body before the minister arrived at noon. She was pleased with the red cherry wood casket she had chosen, it was Michael's favorite wood, and it looked as good as it could considering that it was fashioned into a coffin. It was satin lined and had all the usual visually engaging decorations, designed, she supposed, to keep one's mind from dwelling on what its true function was. Still, she had kept it relatively simple with nothing too excessive, as Michael wouldn't have approved of that. Initially, she had thought that the casket would be closed. After what she had witnessed in the morgue, she didn't see how anyone could be put on display looking like that, not that anyone other than she would see him. To her amazement, Michael's body looked inexplicably good; leaning a little toward a character in *Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum* perhaps, but overall Michael looked as if he were only sleeping.

His golden curls were clean and shiny and softly framed his face. The undertaker had even managed to restore his perennial tan, not too difficult an accomplishment once the dark, congealed blood had been drained from his body. Jenny began to contemplate that, but the thought sickened her so profoundly that she dismissed it quickly and struggled to focus on the present moment instead. Looking at him, she half-expected him to open

his eyes and talk to her.... Glancing over her shoulder to make sure that she was alone, Jenny nervously extended her arm out to touch Michael's hands. They were folded casually across his torso, resting one atop the other on his navy blue suit, and she wanted to, needed to touch him one last time. She put her hands on his, the hands that had held hers for the past twenty-one years, the hands that had lovingly caressed every inch of her body, often endlessly on long, dark nights, the hands that had brushed her hair from her face a thousand times, had wiped away her tears now and then and thrown snowballs at her in the park, the warm hands she loved so much now lay as cold as ice. Jenny shivered and withdrew her own. She heard the undertaker coming along the upstairs corridor and wanted to protest, No, not yet, not yet! Just a little while longer. She would not say it though, and reaching out for what she knew would be the last time, she once more ran her fingers lightly over Michael's hair, unable to arrest the tears that came too easily when she was alone.

"Goodbye, my darling," she sobbed, slowly lowering the lid of the coffin. "Goodbye."

When the limo pulled up to the cemetery, Jenny was astonished. A number of people were gathered around Michael's casket, probably thirty or more. They must have all brought or sent flowers, for the gravesite looked like a garden. Around the cloth-covered, gaping hole in the earth that would serve as his grave, flowers of every imaginable sort were neatly arranged, and were in such abundance that they appeared to be everywhere. The people from the fruit shop where they bought their veggies and fresh foods came, as did a few people from the hospital, friendly souls whom Michael had met and befriended during his extended stay there. The baker came, and the mailman, and a few acquaintances from the Friday night jamming sessions where they used to sing and play together. Curiously, several people from the neighborhood who had rarely spoken to her before, people who had given a nod or a reserved acknowledgment when chance

brought them nearby, private people who didn't mingle, not unlike Michael and Jenny in that regard, people who didn't show up for anything social, showed up for this. Strange what brings people together, she reflected. Even the hairdresser came, and to her surprise, Officer Jim Parker was present with his wife and three little children - two boys and a girl, all of them under five. What a thoughtful and loving gesture, Michael would have been pleased.

The minister read Psalm 23, *The Lord is my Shepherd*, and some other passages about the resurrection, and Heaven, and angels singing..., but Jenny couldn't bring herself to focus on the words. She just stared at the still, wooden casket. So still. Even the wind seemed to stand at attention, everything did, as if time were suspended for the ceremony, and barely a leaf stirred.

Two rows of rather insubstantial chairs were lined up on either side of the coffin, but their placement was so temporary that one could hardly expect more. Just like us, she thought, temporary visitors, here for who knows what purpose, or how long. She shed no tears at the funeral, though others did, and she wondered why, it wasn't as if they knew him well. Disappointed that their friends from Barrie and Owen Sound hadn't come, Jenny was glad that Michael would never know and tried to keep resentful thoughts from her mind, but she knew that she would never call them again. Some things you don't miss, she thought, and uncharacteristically made no attempt to excuse or forgive them.

Michael was probably closest to his readers, especially the ones who wrote to him often. Large bags of mail were commonplace at their home, and Jenny wondered what they would think when no one wrote back to them, so she decided to put a copy of Michael's obituary in each of the large city newspapers, and hoped that it would be enough.... As the people cried, she watched them. She had been worried that she herself would fall apart, but instead she felt detached from all but the casket and the body inside it.

When the minister finished speaking, some of the people came up to Jenny to offer kind words and condolences, promising future visits that would never come. Some things you just know. People meant well, and she knew that, and it was enough. The mourners

soon dispersed and went back to their cars and their lives. In synchronicity, as if on cue, the wind picked up again, and Jenny was escorted to her waiting limousine.

After a long, lingering, backward glance at the cherry wood box and the beautiful flowers, Jenny was whisked away in the shiny black car, back to her little Victorian retreat, as she had requested. She had intended to stay inside all day but soon found herself walking along the beach alone, alone with her thoughts and memories... and fears. She wasn't sure who she was without Michael. Her identity had for so long been intertwined with his that she didn't know how to separate herself from him. Longing desperately to have his arms wrapped around her, she ached to feel his skin press gently against her own, and taste his warm, moist lips on hers one more time. How would she live without him? A surge of terror welled up inside her. Suddenly, she felt as if she were the only person left in the Universe, with nothing and no one touching or reaching her, and nothing and no one going to, an island of pain in a sea of indifference.... Wanting, needing to be wrapped in something, anything real and warm, she turned around and hurriedly ran back home.

She thought about the funeral, the minister's words about the Kingdom of Heaven and the Kingdom of God, and wondered if they were the same thing. She remembered the kind words said by some of the mourners, far more than she had expected, and supposed that it was a decent funeral after all.

It was all nicely done, she thought, but Michael isn't in that casket, he's gone, long gone, I watched him go myself five days ago. I saw it in his eyes, the dimming, the dying, the fading of the light. What is that light and where does it go, I wonder. Heaven? Or are our bodies merely crude matter that returns to the dust, and nothing more? I have a strong feeling that the light I saw was on its way to somewhere, but where..., and did it take my Michael with it? I have so many questions, too many, and I don't have any answers, but one thing I do know - there is a truth to all of this... and I am going to find it.

Chapter Three

*Jenny goes to sleep at night
 With all the house lights turned up bright
 And the TV on
 So she won't feel alone
 'Cause it ain't easy
 To sleep
 All alone
 In the dark
 No it ain't easy
 Jenny likes the Late Late Show
 Old movies where you always know
 There's a happy ending
 And she likes pretending
 'Cause it ain't easy
 To be
 All alone
 In the world
 No, it ain't easy....*

Tuesday, September 12th, 2000. One week tonight exactly, Jenny noted, amazed that she had survived this long alone. It wasn't so much the alone part she minded, but rather the absence of Michael's presence in her life. She had been living alone in the house for five-and-a-half months, ever since Michael's admission to the *General*. Without a doubt the longest, strangest week of my life, she thought, and I've had some bizarre ones. A unique exclusivity attends death, she discovered, brimming with unanswerable questions, and inflicting intolerable anguish, which could not be battled, only endured, and she didn't feel equal to the task.

The usually full wine rack spanning the reclaimed brick wall in the old country kitchen had acquired a couple of holes in it. One bottle was removed on Sunday, another on Monday, and now a third was about to be appropriated from the ample supply that Michael liked to keep on hand. He collected wines, rare ones, expensive ones, and they weren't disturbed from their cradles too often. Jenny couldn't bring herself to care about displaced bottles, or holes in walls, or to be attentive to the fact that she wasn't supposed to be drinking at all with the meds she was taking. Alcohol amplified the effect of the powerful tranquilizers. Good, she thought, I could use a little anaesthetizing. She chose a dry white wine that she'd had before and knew she liked. It had a tart but fruity taste, not too little, and not too much. She wasn't the connoisseur that Michael was, but she knew what appealed to her, and popping the cork was getting easier all the time. Probably not a good sign, she silently confessed, but she wasn't ready to do penance yet, nor to let go of her newfound security blanket.

Selecting another delicate smoke-gray glass, and reminding herself that she would have to replace the one that she had earlier let slip and shatter, when she felt up to facing the world again, if she ever did, she picked up her cream-colored afghan, put a CD of Beethoven in loop mode, and assumed her usual position in the corner of the oversized, well-stuffed, L-shaped sofa. Nestled deeply amongst the mound of soft, plump, scatter cushions, Jenny exhaled. She had never paid attention to time before, but now thought of little else, there seemed to be so much of it... Suddenly, taking pictures didn't seem important, not much did, and she wondered what she was supposed to do with the rest of her life. Is this a transient phase? she ruminated. Will anything matter to me, be meaningful again? Disinclined to believe that a future day could hold anything of promise, or that she could be prevailed upon to display a genuine interest in one, she prepared herself to deepen her already intimate acquaintance with the bleak, the barren, the void. She had earlier lit a few candles, for their ambient glow, and watched as their artificial light cast artificial shapes in the form of shifting shadows that licked the walls and

floor of the room. The fire too was softly burning in the large brass-trimmed window of the Pacific Energy woodstove. She had used a couple of those artificial logs that one can get at any supermarket. One of the checkout clerks told her, when she phoned in her order, that they had been known to explode in woodstoves, but Jenny didn't believe her, and was carelessly willing to take the risk even if it were true. There was wood enough chopped in the woodshed to last through the coming winter, but she couldn't be bothered with all the muss and fuss that would entail. A couple of these manmade logs would burn reliably for five or six hours, she had recently learned, by which time, she hoped, she would have drifted off into a long, thoughtless, drug-induced sleep.

Couched in a semi-reclining position, the afghan that she had draped over her legs reached down to adequately cover and warm her toes. She sipped the smooth unsweetened wine and stared at the fire for a while, imagining pictures forming with the changing movement and colors of the flames. She used to like to do the same thing with clouds on sunny summer days, but now she needed something to warm her here at home, and allow her the tranquility to vacantly dream.

She haphazardly traced the deceptively fragile-looking stitching on the yellow, cream, green, and lilac floral design of the sofa. She noticed that several of her normally well kempt nails had acquired tiny white spots on them. Hmm... a calcium deficiency no doubt, she surmised. Well, I haven't eaten much to speak of this past week, so I suppose a little deficiency here and there isn't out of the question. She apathetically poured herself a second glass of wine, and with the remote, changed the CD to Bonnie Raitt. A lone tear trickled down her cheek when *The Dimming of the Day* began to play, but she was so used to wayward tears lately that she all but ignored them.

Somehow the blues, the fire, and the bittersweet taste of the rare vintage wine suited her melancholy mood. Usually up with the dawn to take pictures of the lakeside, the birds, and the visually arresting images of her beautiful city arousing itself from sleep,

Jenny realized that she had regressed into indulging her innate tendency to yield to the twilight, ochereous lifestyle of a nighthawk. She hadn't touched her cameras all week and didn't entertain the slightest notion of getting up at sunrise tomorrow. To her, a day had become a blur of bright light that she had to somehow get through. Nighttime was hollow, long, and infinitely harder. Nights, she felt she had to struggle to survive, as fear stalked her then, and consequently they required more effort. In point, they required the ritual that she was now in the midst of observing.

She had ceased using the bed in favor of the sofa, as it was there that she fell asleep anyway, planned or not. Sleeping alone in that big, beautiful bed was too terrifying to consider, and it hurt knowing that Michael would never come back to share it with her. Jenny poured herself a generous third glass of wine and contemplated the meaning of the word 'never,' it had such a finality to it, coldly reminding her of the thousand things they would never do, and the plans they had made, and dreams they had shared that would never come to fruition.... How is it possible that a human life can end like that? she agonized. A person, a loved one, all trace of them gone in an instant to who knows where, never to return to their former place, never again to utter a word, never to walk upon solid earth, and never again to breathe the breath of life or say 'I love you.' She missed those words, and what they meant, and the shine in Michael's eyes when he whispered them into her ear. That he and the love they had shared could end was... unfathomable to her, but it had ended nevertheless.

The silence in the house was loud and imposing, even with the music playing. She missed his laugh, his buoyant joie de vivre, and longed to see his playful blue eyes dancing, and the impish grin that came so easily to him, and so often. Most of all, she wanted him to hold her, and every part of her body ached for his touch. Cradled in his arms all the world seemed right, safe, warm, and secure. Without them wrapped around her, a dread prescience toyed with her imagination, and she feared that the earth had inexplicably become a huge and unfamiliar place, with no

boundaries, or anything tangible to hold on to. She felt that by sheer force of will she had to fight to stay grounded, to keep herself from drifting off into the cold, dark, emptiness of space.

An impulsive thought sent her to his closet, which was host to approximately twenty-five, one-of-a-kind sweaters, all of them hanging neatly in a row. Michael loved accumulating unique, distinctive sweaters almost as much as building his collection of fine wines, the difference being that he regularly wore the sweaters, whereas he only rarely touched the wines. Jenny leaned forward into the closet, burying her face in two arms full of sweaters. “They still smell like you, my love,” she sighed, her senses drinking in the lingering Old Spice redolence, which when mingled with Michael’s natural scent, reminded her of the ocean they both loved so much. Removing a grayish-white one from its place, she pulled it on overtop of her pajamas. It fit almost like a dress and the sleeves hung long. Instantly she felt better. Oh, the feeling! The warm, familiar smell of Michael all around her, enveloping her, so very nearly an embrace. She could almost feel him holding her... and tenderly caressing her skin. Closing her eyes, she tried to hold on to the sensation, and gently rubbed the side of her face against her shoulder, and the softness of the angora wool now draped there. Crossing her arms over the front of her body, her hands still hidden in the sleeves of the sweater, she unconsciously began swaying gently from side to side, the way she used to do when in his arms. She moved to the rhythm of the blues playing in the living room, yielding blissfully to the fantasy, and for a few precious moments forgot the painful events of the week.

The music stopped in-between songs, and Jenny opened her eyes, returning to the present. Lifting her longer than waist-length hair out from under her collar, she caught sight of herself in the dressing room mirror. The stark reflection staring back at her jerked her mercilessly back into reality, telling her unequivocally that she was unalterably alone. Crying softly, and keenly aware that no one cared or was listening, she couldn’t decide whether this spontaneous act of desperation had made her miss him more, or less. Choosing to keep the sweater on, she retreated to the comfort

of her couch and wine, a little sleepy, and markedly weary, but not quite enough just yet....

Taking the remote, she switched the music back to Beethoven since she didn't anticipate getting up again until morning. She discovered that she could sleep through classical music better than other genres for which she had an affinity, but she could not sleep through the solitude of silence. Jenny poured her fourth glass of wine from the bottle, which she had learned would yield a respectable five.

Cradling her wine glass in her right hand, with her left she twisted small strands of her thick, copper mane around her long, elegant fingers, an unconscious habit she often engaged in when her thoughts were foggy and drifting. She noticed that the fire had burned down low, as evening stealthily morphed into nighttime, and everything everywhere quietly wound down, the clocks, the cars, the crickets, and the birdsong, as if they were afraid to reawaken the day. For an instant, she contemplated adding another pseudo log to the embers, but it wasn't overly cold, and she was comfortable now, physically at any rate. Besides, enshrouded in both Michael's sweater and her oversized afghan, she knew that she wasn't likely to wake up freezing in the middle of the dark of night.

Lying there, from her vantage point on the well-placed couch, she began to notice little things around the room, items she hadn't looked at for some time, pictures she had taken of Michael and framed, and others that they had carefully chosen and hung together; the cheerful log cabin quilt she had made during the first month they were married, which never did fit the bed, so Jenny transformed it into a quaint and colorful wall hanging, and the brass rod running through four later-added sheaths of matching material gave one the impression that it was never meant to be anything else. It looked homey in a cottage kind of way, yet striking against the backdrop of the cedar tongue-in-groove that covered the walls from floor to ceiling in the living room and hall.

The to-scale model of a tall ship that Michael had spent months crafting, sat in front of a south-facing window in perfect light, as

did the ghostly ship in the pale green bottle. He loved boats of all kinds and anything to do with the sea. Compasses, maps, charts, and an odd assortment of treasures he had found while beachcombing, transformed the dusty, rustic old table upon which sat these oddities, into a microcosm of ancient mysteries borrowed for a while from the watery deep.

They had often gone sailing on Lake Ontario, and canoeing just about anywhere that Michael could convince their Ford Explorer to get close enough to access. They paddled, fished, occasionally swam, and of course, Jenny took pictures, hundreds of them, all catalogued and dated in sequential albums. Some people keep journals. If it's true, she thought, that a picture paints a thousand words, I must have created a library by now.

Jenny had always been intrigued by the burnished metal, made-to-scale model of the solar system, which hung suspended from a polished steel tube below the skylight in the centre of the room. Slowly revolving in perpetual motion, it was a true replica of the original, though now laced with a cobweb or two that nobody seemed to either notice or mind. When was the last time she had bothered to look up? She couldn't remember. When had she looked around attentively, for that matter? Amazed by how the everyday, commonplace little things that we so carefully and lovingly introduce into our lives can be overlooked so quickly, and sometimes forgotten altogether, she shuddered. She didn't want to forget a moment of her life with Michael. They had been married and living in the house as man and wife for three years, but Michael grew up there, and she had lived there with him since she was ten. She had known and loved him and the house for almost as far back as she could remember, twenty-one years, why didn't that seem long...?

Both being voracious readers, their substantial built-in bookcase ascended from the heated, gray slate flooring to the top of the vaulted ceiling. One had to employ an attached movable ladder to reach the higher shelves. Jenny scanned the scores of books which Michael had used in researching his novels. Some he had used as tools to help in honing his writing skills, most of those

accumulated when he was starting out. He liked Robert Frost better than Walt Whitman, not understanding anyone who genuinely preferred the streets of Manhattan to a mountainside or lake. He didn't care for Emily Dickinson, Jenny's favorite poet, because he thought her too preoccupied with death and the dark side of life. Woebegone and disconsolate thinking was foreign to Michael. While he admired the style and form of many writers, he tended to gravitate toward those who held to a similar worldview and philosophy as he himself did, and who loved what he loved in life, and he loved so many things, with a good deal more emphasis on the positive than the negative. The only exception was the works of Leonard Cohen whom they both loved without understanding why. Contrasting Michael's choice of reading material with the definitive conspiracy theorist books he wrote, a dichotomy emerged which baffled Jenny, and she secretly suspected that time would change his perspective considerably. She could see him embracing other artists, and even points of view, as his own life experience led him down as yet unfamiliar paths, but then Michael didn't get that time, did he?

Time, she thought, is it merely a trail leading nowhere but to misery? For Michael there wasn't nearly enough, and it seemed to rush by us like a hurricane, and here I am trying to make it through one day, every day, each one feeling as if it were a lifetime, with the hands of the clock mocking me, as they creep from second, to minute, to hour, I can almost hear the scornful laughter in the mechanism.... They say that a day to God is like a thousand years. I heard that once, long ago, as a child, but only now do I understand how God must feel. How, I wonder, can He bear it?

Nearly midnight, and one more glass of wine left in the bottle. Time for medication too, and both were within easy reach of the sofa. Certain that it wasn't wise to be washing down benzos with Chablis, Jenny did it anyway. I don't know how to begin trying to survive losing Michael, she thought, but if I'm going to take a shot at it, I'll need all the help I can get. Then, as an afterthought, she told herself - if this kills me, I won't know it.

She lay there for a while gazing aimlessly around the room. Her head felt heavy and fuzzy and her thought patterns frightened her. The prospect of life without Michael always transported her into the realm of terror. Adrift in cold and uncharted waters, part of her was so tired that it would have been easy to let go and drown. Darkness threatened and tried to overtake her, but other voices beckoned her toward a light that she couldn't define, a light so bright that she could hardly bear to look at it. It seemed far away and yet... all around her, and the sound of glorious voices sang out from the midst of the radiance. She didn't know these voices, she knew only that they ought to be more familiar to her, and wondered why they weren't. Perhaps I heard them as a child, she mused. Closing her eyes, she tried to listen to see if she could make out words, but no words came, only vague images, and sound which does not linger in ordinary ears, but rather lodges itself somewhere in the chambers of the human heart. They stayed all night and sang to her 'til morning.

The birds began their own songs while it was still dark-thirty, and this time Jenny didn't sleep through them. Groggy and barely wakened yet, she wondered why. It seemed to her that she had closed her eyes only moments ago, and the thoughts from the night before still tarried with her. Beethoven was still faithfully performing for her alone, but Jenny found the music irritating. Perhaps *Ode to Joy* wasn't what she wanted to hear, even if she needed to.

Upon standing, she felt an abstruse pounding in her head. Chalking it up to either a severe bout of vertigo, or more likely, an excess of wine, she stumbled over to the CD player and silenced Ludwig abruptly. Desperately needing to crystallize the jumbled confusion in her aching brain, she instinctively reached for her guitar. Something was laboring deep within her spirit, causing her head to throb in its effort to be born. It wasn't a poem, for she heard more than words, and recognized that there was more substance to this nascent form. Glad that the capo was still locked onto the second fret, Jenny now fumbled around in the roll top desk for some score paper and a pen. Frustrated, after a few

minutes of not finding any unused paper, she picked up a blank tape from the willow basket by the cassette player, clumsily inserted it into the tape deck, and pressed 'Record.'

Mindlessly, she began picking a rhythmic meditation on her old guitar, in two-four time, which by itself consoled her. After some minutes, words began stringing together randomly, as her mind released them to her one by one. Merging with the music they overcame the silence, sadness, and confusion that surrounded her, and somewhere in the darkness she found this song:

Without You

*A stranger to myself am I
 Can't seem to find my way
 Too tired to fight
 Too sad to cry
 With nothing left to say
 My heart it seems
 No longer dreams
 Just tries to make it through
 An endless haze
 Of countless days
 Without you
 Without you*

*I'm going nowhere
 Came from somewhere
 I really can't recall
 A heart in pieces
 Doesn't feel
 The sameness of it all
 And so I try
 Once more to fly
 On featherless wings
 But from now on I'll be a single rose
 A solo violin
 Yes from now on I'll be a single rose
 A solo violin*

*Things that should be black and white
 Have somehow turned to gray
 And all my meanings
 Disappear
 In the lonely midnight haze
 If I should die
 Alone tonight
 At least I wouldn't have to face my fears
 Maybe that would
 Be all right
 There would be no more tears
 Yeah maybe that would be all right
 I would cry no more tears*

*A stranger to myself am I
 Can't seem to find my way
 Too tired to fight
 Too sad to cry
 With nothing left to say
 My heart it seems
 No longer dreams
 Just tries to make it through
 An endless haze of countless days
 Without you
 Without you
 Without you
 Without you....*

The early morning sun began to filter through the lustrous white shutters, bathing the room in the softness of diffused light. Jenny felt that her head had been emptied of a dullness she had carried since the funeral. She had somehow, astoundingly, written down precisely how she felt, and the music had a melancholy, dirge-like quality that lent itself well to the theme. She read it over a few times and felt her lower lip tremble. Unprepared and unready to live life without him, though she fought it, she was soon in tears once more, and leaving her guitar propped up on the chair by the

tape deck, she moaned loudly and threw herself onto the couch. It wasn't long before sleep found her, and still sobbing audibly well into her dreams, Jenny prayed for the mercy of oblivion..., but it didn't come.

Chapter Four

*The fog is thick
The lighthouse beams
Revolving light
To passing boats
Sailing blind
Upon the sea
The captains pray
That hope still floats
And so wait in the steel gray shroud
For dawn
And one more chance allowed....*

The noontime chorus of four strategically placed clocks sounding their alarms, abruptly aroused Jenny from her slumber. She mentally tried to silence them, not ready yet to move from her warm cocoon. Deciding not to bother, she reached above her head for her medicine bottle and fished out what she needed. No guesswork involved in the familiar routine, her nimble fingers knew precisely what to do. I don't have to wake up for this, she thought, as the clocks wound steadily down, first one, then another, and finally the last two stopped simultaneously. Whoever invented alarm clocks, she wondered? Who in their right mind wants to be alarmed first thing in the morning? Certainly not me. There simply has to be a better way of waking up. Personally, she preferred waking naturally, and usually did, but her need for medication and the absence of Michael these past few months had denied her that luxury. Michael used to give her the pills without stirring her, and while still asleep, she robotically drank a mouthful of water to wash them down, yet upon surfacing she seldom had any recollection of either the gift, or the giver.

Having been alone in the house for close to six months, she was almost used to getting the wretched pills for herself, though she still needed the four alarm clocks to wake her. She generally slept better than the residents of cemeteries, wouldn't hear the doorbell, and even the smoke detector went unnoticed if the batteries ran low, and it automatically and repeatedly buzzed its objections loudly. There must be something in the frequency or pitch of these clocks, she concluded. However much she disliked them, she was as relieved as she was surprised to have found something, anything that worked, not that she had expected to need them permanently.

Jenny stretched and yawned, annoyed that she had inadvertently begun the process of thinking, instead of drifting back to sleep. She blinked her eyes several times in an effort to focus, reluctantly sat up well enough to reach for the clocks, and began the tedious task of rewinding them one by one. Setting them for six o'clock, when her next dose was due, she placed them in a crescent moon shape on the table beside her makeshift bed. Irritated by the inconvenience of winding up mechanical clocks four times daily, Jenny wondered how or if she could reach the point where she could discipline herself to observe a lifestyle that would not be dominated by terror. She wasn't afraid of much in life, but her disorder was a formidable adversary, and while her medication would and could control it, it would take a radical behavioral adjustment on her part for her therapy to work, and she was dubious that she would be able to make it. Disorganized, and out of sync with chronos time, her artistic, forgetful nature had provoked regular incidents, and her body could only take so much.... Mindful of her most recent failure and the subsequent trauma it had visited upon her, Jenny was despondent, as she had too often been resolute about gaining mastery over her inability to accurately gauge the passage of time, only to repeatedly fail, and she had no idea what to do about it.

Sighing, she had hoped to lie still and rest for a while, but the churning and gurgling sounds loudly emanating from her stomach, forced her into the kitchen in search of food. Not in the mood to cook or eat, she realized that she had little choice if she wished to

quell the din, and dull the pain that distracted her from her repose. More than a little nausea bothered her this morning, or rather afternoon, and she wondered if or when her appetite would return. Scanning the well-stocked cupboards for something appropriate, she returned to the sofa armed with a large red box of Ritz crackers, and a glass of distilled water enriched with a pinch of powdered Vitamin C. Still feeling a little dizzy, she was grateful to slip back under her cozy blanket. Arranging the oversized cushions just so, she began to nibble on the crackers, taking small sips of water when their saltiness left her mouth too dry.

It crossed her mind to wonder why she was still so tired. Was this normal for grieving, recently bereaved spouses? Was it to be expected? She felt that she could easily go back to sleep again, but abandoned the notion for fear that she would waken in the middle of the night. Why that prospect should be frightening was a mystery to her, one of many that had befuddled her in recent weeks.

What does one do on a Wednesday afternoon when one is not working? she asked herself. Not that she had much choice in the matter, as she barely had the energy to get off the couch, never mind go to work. She hadn't missed a day of work while Michael was hospitalized, as she expected him to return home 'Any day now,' and never dreamed that he was in for a long-term stay. Because she worked from dawn 'til dusk and expected him home shortly, she only visited him in the evenings for the couple of hours that the hospital allowed, and she didn't feel alone then, as he wasn't gone or missing, and when her thoughts turned to him during the day, she would always smile. He was still with her and she knew where to find him, and he had insisted that she keep on working, repeatedly assuring her that he would be home 'Soon,' so she didn't worry because Michael appeared well, although she couldn't understand why the diagnostic tests were taking so long.... Now, however, she wasn't working and had cleared her schedule for the rest of the year, for the remainder of September through December, as she felt she needed time to come to terms with Michael's death. After hearing herself utter those words to her

three principal clients, she said aloud, “And how do I do that exactly?” So, unemployed, alone, and at a loss as to what to do, she had to find some way to fill the empty hours, but she didn’t want to listen to music, and didn’t think she’d be able to keep her mind on a book, and for the first time in her life she didn’t want to take pictures. Glancing over at her guitar, still nestled in the big green chair, she remembered how easily the music had flowed from her last night, when she felt as if she had poured herself out completely.

Later that day, *Vogue* sent a voluminous arrangement of dozens of fresh cut flowers in an exquisite vase that looked as if it belonged in a museum, along with a card, signed by everyone on the editing staff, that said, ‘Take your time, Jenny, our thoughts and prayers are with you.’ Jenny was both surprised and moved, as her first thought was that they might write her off for taking more than the customary three days granted for bereavement. Two hours later, just before five, the floral truck delivered two more arrangements to The Old Victorian. *Elle Magazine* sent a similar floral arrangement to *Vogue’s*, and *W Magazine* sent a variety of perennial plants in a four-foot-high, oriental, ceramic planter that came in two pieces, the opulent, ornate stand, and the one-foot-deep circular planter. All three cards expressed the same sentiment, and if Jenny had previously thought the fashion world cutthroat and cold, she didn’t now.

Another week passed, and Jenny became good at hanging out in her pajamas, and doing nothing but organizing and filing proofs that she hadn’t had time to catalogue previously. Normally, at this time of day, she would be processing the morning’s photographs in the darkroom, leaving Michael the solitude he needed in order to write. She loved Michael’s writing style and thought him the finest writer she had read. Her favorite book was still *Snow Falling on Cedars* by David Guterson, but other than that she liked Michael’s writing best. Always fiction with an historical background, Michael’s work was as varied as were her

photographs. The novel in his study was three-quarters finished... almost a whole year's work. Countless hours of meticulous research and exquisitely crafted words, which no one but her would ever read.... If only I could finish it for him, she sighed wistfully, and then quickly dismissed the thought. She knew his style better than anyone did, and loved to write her songs and poetry, but didn't believe that she could do his novel justice. Better to let it lie, she thought, but hated the waste of nine months of his short life. Michael had six novels published, and all had done equally well, so well that to his surprise and delight, he had developed a loyal following. Not bad at all for a man aged twenty-six, she thought, and wished again that she could find a way to deliver his last book to his public....

Slumping down lower into the cushions that cradled her slender form, she buried her face in the sleeve of Michael's sweater. Soon soaked through with copious involuntary tears, she moved it out of the way and lay her cheek on the velvet cushion, wrapping her arms around it. Her eyes felt hot and stinging, and her eyelids heavy, wanting to close. Too tired to fight the sensation, she surrendered.

The next sound she was cognizant of was the quadruple alarm. "Time to take another few sleeping pills," she sighed. Of course, they didn't have that effect on her physiology, and she needed them to keep her body from abiding in a state akin to that of being on continuous fast forward. She woke up with a terrible headache, her eyes still burning, her mouth and throat were hot and dry, and she thought that she might be succumbing to a cold or flu, though she fervently hoped not.

Arising slowly, she aimed for the bathroom where the mirror reflected bloodshot, swollen eyes, with alarmingly dark discoloration beneath them. Jenny took a clean, white washcloth and ran some cool water into the sink, bathing her face, eyes, and neck in the moist, thick cotton. Feeling refreshed, she applied a few drops of Visine to her eyes to alleviate the stinging. She then cleaned her teeth and gargled with some Bushmills 1608 Irish whisky, which soothed the discomfort in her throat. Conscious

that she needed to drink more water, she resolved to do just that, and remedy yet another thing she had let slide lately. She brushed and deftly put up her hair, which helped to make her feel a little more human. She would have loved to have taken a long, slow shower, but was still experiencing dizziness, so thought it better to wait until she was steadier on her feet. I must have a touch of the flu, she reasoned, I feel awful.

Coming out of the bedroom and into the living room area, she noticed that the floral arrangements people had sent from the funeral home, the ones her neighbors and friends had brought, were looking much like she felt, wilting, and faded. The thought of having to watch them wither and die, understandably didn't appeal to her. Some of the vases, she now observed, were extraordinarily beautiful, and she wondered why she hadn't noticed them before. I guess I never looked at them properly until now, she reflected. A few thoughtful people had brought plants instead of flowers, and it dawned on her that she had given them no water, and it had been ten days since the funeral. A little bothered by the thought that she had neglected to nurture any living thing, she pressed her middle finger lightly on the soil in each of the five planters. To her relief, she found them all still moist, and every one was remarkably healthy looking. An unexpected sluice of pleasure warmed her. Nurturing is a good thing, she thought, perhaps one of the best of things, and was surprised by the realization that she was grateful to have them. That she was capable of experiencing gratitude and pleasure, told her that she wasn't as dead inside as she had thought, and she couldn't decide whether to feel good or guilty about it.

Still, the cut flower arrangements had to go, so fetching an orange garbage bag from under the kitchen sink, she began to empty the vases one by one. After depositing the once radiant blossoms and foliage into the bag, she went out the back door and into the garden, and upending the giant plastic bag, she dumped them onto the compost pile.

"So many leaves... it's such a mess out here," she said aloud, as she fashioned a few small mounds out of the red, golden, brown,

and yellow carpet of them that now entirely obscured the rest of the yard. Placing a few rakes full on top of the discarded flowers, she determined to gather the rest up later when she regained her strength, which wouldn't be today, so she returned to the house. She had never let the garden get away from her and run wild before. Then again, the past few weeks were unlike any she had lived through. Forgiving herself for neglecting the yard and even the housework was easy. Tasks that she had once thought important seemed inconsequential to her now, and she wondered if they always would....

The early evening air had a good chill in it, and although she was still dressed only in her pajamas and Michael's sweater, she felt better for having breathed in some of its freshness. She still couldn't shake the weird, dizzy, flulike feeling, and so promised herself that if she didn't feel substantially better by morning, she would yield and give the doctor a call. She was sure that it was nothing serious, probably sheer exhaustion from the physical, mental, and emotional strain that she had been under for the past fifteen days. Only fifteen days, unbelievable, she thought. They say that God made the world in less than half that time. She wondered how long it would take to *re*-make a world, re-invent a life, discover an identity..., and find a reason for being, if that were possible, and if it was, she was sure that it must take a long, long time, and she was equally certain that the dull, gnawing, empty sensation pulsating in the vicinity of her heart was there to stay. There are no happy endings, she thought, endings are awful.

Jenny arranged her newly acquired plants on an old antique table she had put together in the summertime. The top consisted of a square piece of wood, a mysterious sign that she had fished out of the lake as it washed ashore with the incoming tide one evening. Weathered and ancient looking, it had whitish paint randomly splashed upon it here and there, and it bore the words COFFEE SHOPPE hand carved deeply into its topside. Jenny bleached it with Javex for a few days to kill any lurking germs and then let it

thoroughly dry in the afternoon sun. She was delighted with her new find and curious about its history. What distant harbor or quaint little village had cast her new tabletop into the lake, and did it find its way there by chance or hurricane? Did the *Coffee Shoppe* still exist and boast a new sign now, serving mochas, and lattes, and perhaps a pastry or two? Michael had laughed at how easy she was to please... and how odd the material treasures that engaged her.

A few hollow, fifty-pound concrete blocks left over from the building of their new retaining wall had not yet been disposed of, so Jenny extracted three of them from the pile, and happily set about painting them Mexican yellow. Upon these renovated bricks, she placed the tabletop squarely, with two supports in the front, one on each side, and one in a centered position at the rear. She then had a bona fide artifact, albeit self-created, and wouldn't have traded it for a table of solid gold.

The five new planters fit perfectly upon it, and Jenny felt the abiding warmth of genuine satisfaction in finding a suitable use for her masterpiece. The planters were as varied as the plants, and Jenny liked them all. One was green, and in the shape of a hollowed out frog, while another resembled a kind of deep, white birdbath. The others were more abstract in form, but interesting to look at, sporting unusual color combinations and patterns that complimented the general décor of the house. She only knew the names of three of the plants and was anxious to find out about the others, including a couple from *W Magazine's* oriental planter. She identified a spider plant, Venetian ivy, and a philodendron, but the remaining four were a mystery to her, and one she intended to solve as soon as possible in case they needed special care. It was the first undertaking that had interested her all week.

Tired now, she went to fetch a cup of hot water and honey. She would have preferred wine, but still not feeling well, she thought better of it. Just as she reached the kitchen the telephone rang, startling her since it was slightly after eleven o'clock, and her phone had been eerily silent since the funeral. Wondering who

could be calling at such a late hour, she picked up the receiver, and as was her custom at this time of day said, "Evening!"

A rather gruff, but kind voice answered her.

"I apologize for calling so late, Mrs. Richards, but I just flew in from L.A., and this is the first chance I've had to call since I heard the news about Michael."

"You know... I mean, you knew Michael?"

"Yes, I'm sorry; I should have made that clear. My name is Sam Kellerman and I'm your husband's attorney, and coincidentally his godfather."

"You are?" she said, raising her perfectly arched, auburn eyebrows skeptically since she had never heard of Sam Kellerman, and she and Michael didn't keep secrets from one another, or so she believed.

"Yes, Mrs. Richards, I was originally retained by Michael's parents. I administer the trust funds they arranged for Michael and Gideon."

"Oh, I see," she said. She had heard about the trust funds, an inheritance Michael and Gideon were due to receive years from now. Michael had handled their finances and she hadn't been inquisitive. She had always had what she needed, simple as those needs were, but beyond that, money matters didn't interest her. Why was this man calling now that Michael's trust fund wasn't an issue? Perplexed, Jenny ventured, "What can I do for you, Sir?"

"Mrs. Richards, I'm here because there are some things in my charge that concern you, and I would like to meet with you to discuss them as soon as possible, if that would be amenable to you."

Jenny frowned. "What things? I'm afraid I don't understand. I hadn't really thought about it, but I guess I just assumed that Michael's trust fund would be a moot issue now, so..."

"Oh, no, far from it, and by the way, I am also the executor of your husband's will."

"His will? What will? Michael had a living will drawn up right here in town not six months ago. I did too and..."

"Yes, I know, Mrs. Richards, I..."

“Please, just call me Jenny.”

“Thank you. Well, you see, Jenny, Irving Storey is a friend of mine, and I referred Michael to him when he wanted to draw up a living will. Of necessity, I require to travel a great deal in my business and Michael didn’t want to wait to do it, so Irving did this for me as a professional courtesy. I’m looking at Michael’s living will as we speak.”

Jenny felt a chill radiate up and down her spine, causing her to shiver. The reality that she had been able to push back a little with the warmth of the plants, and having something normal to do that required her immediate attention, was once again back in full force, as stark and penetrating as a double-edged sword.

“Mrs. Richards?”

“Y... yes, I’m... I’m sorry, but I still don’t understand what good talking about any of this will do now.”

“Michael didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“That I’m the executor of his will?”

“What will? You have a copy of his living will, and his standard will isn’t complicated, so...”

“I also have a copy of his last will and testament, a different document from his living will, and what you’re referring to as his standard will, and...”

“You mean there’s another one? One different from our standard wills and the living wills we had drawn up together?”

Jenny felt dizzy and was thoroughly confused.

“Jenny, I think we had better get together and talk about this in person. The telephone’s inappropriate and it sounds as if there are a number of details of which you are unaware, and I’ll have to explain them to you. I’m staying at the *Harbor Castle Hilton*; do you know where it is?”

“Yes, yes, of course I do.”

“Good, then would you like to meet me here tomorrow for lunch so we can go over the details?”

Jenny hesitated, not wanting to go anywhere, so collecting herself, she asked, “Would you mind terribly if I prevailed upon

you to come here? I haven't been quite myself lately and don't feel up to braving the masses yet."

"Don't think twice about it, I'll be happy to come to you. What time is most convenient for you?"

"Hmm... would around two o'clock fit into your schedule, Mr. Kellerman?"

"Jenny, I flew up here for you. Right now, you *are* my schedule."

"Thank you, Mr. Kellerman; thank you for your understanding."

"Don't mention it, Jenny, and call me Sam... Michael always did."

"Th... thank you, Sam. I'll see you tomorrow around two then?"

"Two it will be, Lord Willing. Bye now."

"Bye," she said, as she heard the characteristic click of the phone disconnecting, and stood there dazed for a minute, lost in a fog of confusion. Who is this Sam, she thought, and why did Michael never mention him? What can he possibly want with me? What is this other will of Michael's all about, and why didn't he tell me that he had a godfather? Does the will Sam has nullify Michael's standard will? Will I lose the house now? She had no answers, only questions, and she couldn't handle any more.

The telephone rudely severed her chain of thought by screeching forth those irritating harsh tones one hears if one leaves it off the hook for any length of time. She didn't realize that she hadn't put it down. She did so quickly, but her legs gave out from under her, and she fell to her knees. Her armor pierced, she wept and wept until she thought she might die from the sheer intensity of her cruel and relentless grief.

"I must have cried a river by now," she sobbed. "How many more tears will it take? How many more...?"

She thought she was finished with surprises, with formalities that persisted in unearthing Michael and making her feel as if she were losing him all over again. New waves just seemed to mercilessly keep on coming with such vengeful force that Jenny felt she surely would drown.

Hardly able to breathe, and devoid of any natural energy, she barely made it over to the couch. Curling up into the fetal position, she pulled her afghan up as far as she could, wanting Michael so badly that she let herself call out his name, but only echoes returned to her, empty, hollow, and void. She couldn't bear to think any more about wills and trust funds, and some mysterious stranger named Sam.

Sleep was her only reprieve from it all, and oh, how she longed for it. Oblivion, escape at last to that dark, quiet nothingness she slipped into like a long, black silk dress. The place without questions where thought dared not enter, the land beyond dreaming, the sweet realm of forgetfulness.

Chapter Five

*I have questions
You have answers
You're standing at my door
You're not what I expected
You seem so much more
What is it that you bring to me?
Secrets and lies
You tell me that it's meant to be
Love in disguise
But I don't understand the reasons
And you can't tell me why
He left without a word to me
When he could have said
Goodbye....*

The four Little Ben alarm clocks kicked into high gear at six on the dot. Jenny had no trouble waking, and before she had time to wonder why, she realized that she had not set the clocks to wake her at midnight.

“Oh, no! I missed my midnight meds,” she moaned loudly. “How not to start your day in one easy lesson,” she moaned again.

Fully aware of what this would mean, she took four pills instead of three, and would have to do the same again at noon and six in the evening to have an even chance of offsetting her blunder. Since she had to shower and somehow try to entertain Sam, she also took her normal dose of Ativan. At least this would give her a reasonable chance of avoiding another major attack, which she could well do without... especially today.

Jenny didn't feel up to playing hostess to anyone, but she was as curious as Sam was insistent about getting to the bottom of what Michael had not told her. That's what bothered her most - Michael had not told her, and a stranger knew something about him that she did not. She had always believed that they told each other everything, and Michael had been adamant about honesty in their relationship, so she couldn't imagine what deep, dark secret he had found it necessary to keep from her. The thought of what it might be chilled her, yet she felt hurt, angry, and betrayed at the same time. If Michael had been alive this would have necessitated a confrontation, for she had no secrets from him and begrudged him his. If Michael were alive she would have... but Michael wasn't alive, and whatever had gone unspoken between them would now be revealed to her by a stranger. She couldn't sort out her emotions well enough to figure out which, if any, was the dominant one, so she suffered them all silently, as she waited impatiently for Mr. Sam Kellerman and his explanations to arrive.

Already her equilibrium was compromised, and she still felt... odd, but not the kind of odd that she was accustomed to feeling when anxiety spells plagued her. She might have worried more if she'd had the time, but a shower always took a couple of hours. It took a lot out of her to have one at all, and then she needed a breather before regaining the energy to dress.

All at once it wasn't all right to have let the housework slide. She hadn't expected company, and so had allowed herself the luxury of permitting her feelings to dictate her routine, or lack of one lately. She now had to try to make the house presentable for Mr. Kellerman. She felt that how she lived still reflected on Michael, and as furious as she was with him, she couldn't let him down. A thick enough layer of dust had accumulated on most of the furniture over the past sixteen days that she was sure potatoes could have been successfully cultivated in it, and she would need a couple of hours to relocate the dirt. She wished now that she hadn't suspended their weekly housecleaning service when Michael had entered the hospital. She didn't think she would need the help since she had originally planned to stay home and spend

her days and evenings visiting Michael, but as with most plans, they didn't turn out quite the way she had anticipated, and the housework had suffered as a consequence, but that was a faux pas too late to remedy prior to her guest's arrival.

Still thirsty from the night before since she never did get her Vitamin C tea, she went into the kitchen to make herself a mug full. Filling up her yellow ceramic kettle, she put it on the stove to boil. It was already seven o'clock, and time can always be relied upon to pass with lightning speed whenever one has a million things to do.

She hurried to the bathroom, but no sooner did she arrive there than she felt dizzy and nauseous - again. For a few forbidding moments, she was afraid that she might faint, as she had that night at the hospital. She didn't, but she did vomit several times into the toilet bowl, leaving her trembling like an aspen leaf in the early morning breeze, and wondering what on earth could be wrong with her. She lay on the cold ceramic tile floor in the bathroom for what seemed like an eternity. The cool sensation against her skin felt good, too good, as she tried to gauge the possibility that she could have developed a fever. The thermometer in the bathroom cabinet was broken, so she could only guess. Her head didn't feel hot and neither did her extremities, and the situation was thoroughly puzzling and increasingly alarming. Holding on to the walls in order to steady her way to the bed, she lay there for a few minutes trying to organize her thoughts. Should she postpone her meeting with Mr. Kellerman, she wondered? She didn't want to pass on any virus she may have caught.

She was just about to pick up the phone to call him when the smoke alarm sounded a full alert in the kitchen. Hurrying in there as fast as she could, she found that her once yellow kettle had burned nearly black and irreversibly attached itself to the glowing red element on the stove. Now in the process of visibly melting, it was producing a copious, pungent cloud of smoke from the disintegrating enamel, which had triggered the alarm. Wrapping her arm in an available towel, she quickly reached over and turned off the element.

“Will you give me just a small break?” she yelled at the alarm, looking upward at it. She hardly ever yelled, she didn’t like to, but her tolerance limit was in grave danger of being breached, and she had anything but charitable thoughts inside her head at that moment. “My favorite kettle too, Michael bought me that for...” she stopped herself.

“Listen to me! I’ve finally lost it! I’m yelling at a smoke alarm, an inanimate object, when what I really want to do is scream from the rooftops, “Why is my husband dead?””

It seemed to Jenny as if her whole life were unraveling, and she really was going crazy, and all that she had barely managed to plough through since Michael’s death was rapidly becoming beyond her ability to withstand.

She succeeded in climbing up onto one of the kitchen chairs to deactivate the alarm, and was even able to reset it again, as it wasn’t complicated and only took a couple of minutes. Michael had always taken care of the fix-it problems, and smoke alarms were simple for him because he didn’t need a chair to reach the ceiling with his hands. Jenny, being tiny, required a chair or ladder. She opened the window in the kitchen, and then the back door, to let out the toxic fumes and smoke that threatened to permeate the whole house. Since the element and the kettle had fused together, she threw both of them into the overfull rain barrel outside the back door, to cool off before she could dispose of them properly. They were still so hot that an impressive column of white steam shot upward, hissing violently, as they hit the cold water. Jenny stared at the ruined pair of oven gloves that she had quickly put on to deal with the situation. They were a wedding gift that she never liked anyway, so the loss of them didn’t bother her, but her kettle....

Leaving the back door and kitchen window open, she glanced up at the clock.

“It’s five to nine, and I’ve accomplished nothing productive,” she groaned. Mulling over that thought, she noticed that she didn’t feel nauseous anymore. It must be the extra pills I took, she concluded, relieved.

Needing to take advantage of this time-out from feeling physically terrible, she eyed up the shower and walked over to it. She didn't feel confident enough to stand up in it yet, not wanting to risk falling, so after undressing, she sat on the smooth tiled floor in the double shower stall, and poured a generous amount of lavender bath and shower gel onto a sponge. She found it easy to wash her body and hair from a seated position. I should have thought of this a long time ago, she told herself. The worst thing that can happen to me sitting on the floor in here is that I'll lose depth perception and think I'm falling through it, and even I know that's not possible, so it isn't nearly as upsetting as wondering whether I'm going to faint or fall all the time. This just might be my new way of showering. Now I'll get one when I want one and not have to wait until I feel I can manage it. Maybe I should order one of those plastic hospital shower stools from *Sears*, she thought, and made a mental note to do precisely that when she had a minute, but she didn't have a minute to spare this morning.

Gaining a growing affinity for the nicely safe shower room floor, she only stood up long enough to grab her towel, and then sat back down upon the dark green lip of the shower stall, a generously wide, tiled surface. She found drying herself in this position as easy as washing. I'm definitely on to something here, she thought, and even managed to feel victorious. After drying herself off, Jenny cleaned her teeth using a trickle of water from the shower to wet her toothbrush. Combing out her thick, copper hair, which was long enough for her to sit on, she then applied lavender deodorant, moisturizing lotion, body spray, and all the other niceties she liked to use, all from her seated position. Lavender was Jennifer's signature scent, and she abandoned herself to her carnal senses, drinking in the deliciously familiar bouquet. When finished, she blithely walked the few steps to her bedroom to dress, which she also accomplished sitting down - for the most part. She was ready in record time and thrilled with her newfound bathing management system. It's only ten-thirty, she noted, amazed, and I'm ready to meet the day.

It occurred to her that this was the first time since Michael's death that her waking and sleeping hours were aligned with night and day, or as much as they reasonably could be, given the fact that she was, by nature, a creature of the night. Mornings never had been her forté, although she did manage to get up enthusiastically at dawn whenever there was something she had to photograph. She didn't have any photographic engagements today, or in the near future, but she did have an important meeting she needed to be ready for, or as ready as she could be emotionally.

Glancing at her linen-look bedroom calendar, and a still-life depiction of yellow flowers in full bloom, she noticed that it was Thursday morning, September 21st, 2000. Oh, no! Today is Gideon's birthday... he's twenty-four. She had altogether forgotten in the flurry of events of the past few weeks, and so wrote herself a Post-it note and put it by the phone, reminding her to call him later in the day with an apology. Oh, boy, it's not even the 21st in Australia anymore, she frowned, annoyed that she had missed it. Still, she was sure that Gideon would understand and appreciate the gesture, or she hoped he would. She wondered how he was holding up, as Michael had been his only surviving blood relative, and they had been close. It worried her that she hadn't heard anything from him since she had called him to tell him the news. He's probably trying to come to grips with the reality of losing Michael, just as I am, she thought. Hopefully, we can talk a little when I call him later....

Her stomach was audibly empty, so she thought she had better try to eat some dry toast and have a cup of her tea. She didn't own another working kettle, as the extras that she did have, she had fashioned into planters, now home to her favorite plants and herbs, and merrily scattered about the house. Thankfully, she had more pots than she needed, so she filled a small one with distilled water and set it on the stove to boil. She closed the kitchen window and the back door, astounded that there wasn't the slightest lingering evidence of the morning's mishap, other than what was lurking in the depths of the rain barrel outside - and a missing stove element, but she disguised the gaping black hole with a shiny white enamel

cover, the kind that usually hid each of the elements when they weren't in use.

"I knew I should have ordered that stove with the smooth ceramic surface when Michael suggested it," she murmured, wondering where one goes to purchase a new stovetop element.

I'll have to return to work soon to purchase anything, she thought, and wondered how long the royalties from Michael's books would continue, and if she would still have a house to maintain after her meeting with Mr. Kellerman, as she knew nothing of the contents of Michael's last will and testament, and worried that she would have to move to a rented apartment somewhere. Would Michael do that to her...? His \$500,000 life insurance policy wouldn't last her a lifetime, but she would have been able to stay in the house, as it was paid for, and factoring in her own income, she thought that she would be all right. However, if the will she knew about was now null and void, she didn't know what to expect... and it worried her.

She took her time eating her breakfast, not wanting to activate the nausea again, but she didn't feel sick and savored every bite. Since she felt so much better than she had earlier, she took her noontime medicine and rolled up her sleeves. Armed with a clean rag and some homemade sterilizing mixture, she went about the business of cleaning the living room, well... getting the dust out of it anyway. She couldn't manage all the bookshelves, just the lower half of them, and only the front ledge that was clearly visible to all. She couldn't bring herself to alter Michael's nautical table, save to wipe the dust off the ship in the bottle, but the rest of the room looked good. The floors weren't discernibly dirty and could certainly wait a day or two until she could arrange for the cleaners to come back in. She even took a swipe at the cobwebs lacing the model of the solar system, and managed to get them to disappear, although she wasn't quite sure where to. Cobwebs and dust, she thought, and found herself humming the Lightfoot tune of the same name, coincidentally one of her favorite songs. Michael said that her musical taste was 'Retro' since she liked so many of the songs and artists from the seventies. She didn't care what label was

assigned to her preferences, she liked what she liked, and that included everything from the classics to popular music, but she had to admit to having a rather large collection from the seventies, the decade when the singer-songwriter ruled.

Cleaning upstairs wasn't important since they only used that section of the house in the summertime, or when guests came to stay, which didn't happen often. It wasn't necessary in order to receive Mr. Sam Kellerman respectably and that's all she cared about today.

The house was enormous by today's standards, when families don't often have eight or more children, as they did in generations past. Originally, it had six bedrooms and four bathrooms upstairs, but Michael and Jenny had carefully removed the bathroom above the living room area to make a center skylight possible, and it looked great. They both found it peaceful and inspirational to look up at the stars at nighttime through their model solar system, while lying on the floor on nice plump cushions, with perhaps a little music in the background, and some candlelight, and sometimes a glass or two of wine.

As part of the remodeling of the main floor, they had dispensed with the large formal dining room that no human had graced in years, and designed their own master bedroom in its place, complete with a luxurious en suite bathroom. Jenny had always wanted a bidet and a double showering room, and they both wanted a nice big double tub with Jacuzzi jets. Thoughts of bubble baths at midnight and looking up at the moon and stars through the bathroom skylight were just too tempting. Impeccably appointed in *recherché* shades of yellow, gray, green, and white, it complimented the bedroom perfectly. They had spent significantly more on the bathroom than either of them thought prudent, but they reasoned that they rarely went out, didn't smoke, seldom drank, and had yet to go on any kind of real vacation, including a honeymoon. It isn't hard to find ways to justify the things we want to do, she ruminated. I don't know why we feel the need to; we still end up doing what we want to regardless. She spent a bit more thought time wondering who we try to justify our choices to.

Ourselves? Each other? The neighbors? God? Do we perhaps do it to satisfy some kind of built-in cosmic morality that tells us we shouldn't be living in shameless luxury when half the world is starving, much less enjoying it? Cognizant that she was frowning at that unpleasant thought, she summarily dismissed it for a while. Predictably, she then chastened herself for dismissing out of hand topics that she didn't like to think about, or which bothered her conscience. Too tired to philosophize or argue with herself further, Jenny took the liberty of letting the matter go temporarily, and was glad of it.

The Old Victorian boasted a full basement that was impressively solid and dry, and with the house so close to the lake, one normally wouldn't expect a basement at all, let alone one without a hint of mold or mildew. Built over a century ago, the concrete walls were three-feet-thick, an extravagance almost unheard of in North America, though not uncommon in Scotland from where Michael's family hailed, and where houses were still built to last. Jenny's roots were Scots too, but she was born there, not coming to Toronto until she was almost five. Michael, his parents, and grandparents were all Canadian born. His great-grandparents had immigrated to Canada and built The Old Victorian in 1896. The then pristine Beaches area wasn't built up and was generally considered out of town. The lake water was clean and clear and the locale had a country feel to it, and Jenny had often wished that she had seen it then. Warmed by the stories told by neighboring old folk, who always had time to reminisce from their lakeside benches, she never tired of hearing of life as it was when people took their time, knew each other's names, and a sense of community prevailed... before the world dashed headlong into an all-fired hurry.

Jenny had her photography lab/darkroom and studio in the basement and had no problem with damp or mold of any kind. Michael had wanted to turn a couple of the upstairs rooms into a recording studio, as they still had six, good-sized, unoccupied bedrooms, but he hadn't gotten around to it, feeling that he had plenty of time to orchestrate his project. In the meantime, he had

used the local facilities, as did she, and they were excellent, if ridiculously expensive. She missed singing with him....

Glancing at the clock, she noticed that it read one-thirty, and her mind wandered back to last night's phone conversation with the bewildering Sam Kellerman. Aware that she was growing increasingly upset and apprehensive, she hoped that she would be able to control her emotions in his presence. She couldn't imagine what he had to say to her and didn't want to think about the will that Michael didn't tell her about, the will that could further alter her existence. She still couldn't decide whether to be angry, sad, or just generally upset, as if feelings have brains and one has a say in the matter.

She selected a few dainty teacakes and homemade lemon bars from the freezer, notably well stocked with a variety of treats in case unexpected company should happen by, despite the fact that she and Michael seldom entertained since they both worked from home and it was too much of a hassle. When they ventured out with friends, which wasn't terribly often, they would patronize a familiar restaurant and enjoy a pleasant evening there. With no need to tidy or file away work-related materials at home, and no dirty dishes to deal with at midnight after the fun was over, they considered their plan... perfect.

The few close friends they had were welcome anytime, as far as Jenny was concerned, or they had been until they neglected to show up for Michael's funeral, and nothing had to be cleaned up prior to their visits. None of them lived nearby, so visits were usually preplanned, which was best because Michael didn't like people randomly popping in, as it interrupted his train of thought when he was trying to write, and that frustrated him beyond all reckoning. He was naturally even more of a recluse than she was, and frankly, didn't care for surprises. He wasn't inhospitable though and would do anything for anyone if they authentically needed his help. He just wasn't by nature... social, but neither was Jenny, and she didn't feel that she had nearly as valid a reason for liking her privacy so much. She thought of herself as selfish and spoiled, probably because Michael indulged her shamelessly, he

always had. When she thought about it objectively, she reasoned that being sick made her far less able for company than she might otherwise have been. Still, she felt bad about her attitude, rational or not. She prized hospitality, and in her heart wanted to be more accommodating, but playing hostess wore her out quickly, and that wasn't within her power to change. Michael, conversely, felt no guilt whatsoever regarding his chosen way of life. To him, privacy was a necessity, rather than a luxury, so he never felt self-indulgent about it.

The clock in the hall chimed two, and the doorbell rang while the echo of the grandfather clock's bells still hung in the air. Well, that's one thing we don't have in common, Jenny noted, as she had never been on time for anything in her life.

Still feeling a little anxious about the meeting, Jenny took a deep breath before opening the door. On her front gallery stood, she correctly presumed, Mr. Sam Kellerman, and Jenny tried to mask her surprise. He was younger than she thought he would be, or perhaps he just aged well. His telephone voice had manufactured an image in her mind dramatically different from the one she found on her doorstep. She couldn't have known then that his vocal cords had been strained from being in conference all day, and that his natural voice was gentle, though deliberate and strong. Jenny had expected a short, squat little man in his late sixties, with white hair, a briefcase, and a potbelly trying to squeeze unnoticed into an immaculately tailored three-piece suit. Sam Kellerman was none of those things. He stood about six feet tall, she guessed, and had thick, jet-black, wavy hair that curled nicely just below his neckline, and through which ran the most attractive threads of silver she had seen on anyone. His slate-gray eyes, deep and penetrating, betrayed a serious and pensive soul, but they weren't without a twinkle, which Jenny suspected was for public consumption. Outwardly, he appeared carefree, and sporting an enviable tan he appeared to be one of those people who always look as if they've just come back from a holiday. In addition, he possessed a charming and disarming smile, and like Michael, he used that asset liberally, as she would soon learn. Sam came

casually dressed in a turquoise sweatshirt with tan leather trim, and a mountain motif on the front of it, no doubt bought at some overpriced ski resort, she imagined. He wore formfitting, stonewashed blue jeans and white Nike running shoes, and looked as if he had stepped out of a magazine ad for... something or other. Sam Kellerman, it was fair to say, had a sleek and impressive appearance, and as far as Jenny could tell at first glance, a personality to match it.

“You’d be Jenny?” Sam asked.

“Oh, yes, yes... I’m sorry - please do come in. I guess... I guess I thought you’d be... well, older!” she said, blushing, and unable to look him in the eye for a moment, feeling that she had almost certainly spoken out of turn.

Sam, however, just threw his head back and laughed, saying, “Don’t worry, kiddo, I get that a lot. I hope my casual attire is all right, by the way, I thought coming down to the Beaches in a suit and tie bordered on the ridiculous.”

“You’re fine,” Jenny assured him. “I’m not wearing a suit either.”

Truthfully, she was glad that he wasn’t formally clad. She was uptight enough about this meeting and now a little uneasy that he was so... different from what she had anticipated.

Sam laughed that irrepressible laugh again, nodding to her in appreciation. A master at revealing nothing he didn’t intend to, he was careful not to let her see that he was equally surprised by her own appearance. God, but she’s beautiful, he thought. He hated the circumstances that had brought him to her door and felt as guilty as Judas for wanting to be there.

It hadn’t escaped his notice that she most certainly wasn’t wearing a suit. Understandably thinking that this would be a semi-formal meeting, Jenny had chosen to wear an old favorite of hers, a *Laura Ashley* cream-colored, lacy dress with a fitted bodice that ended at her slender waist. It had long, full sleeves that were puffed up just a little at the shoulders and gathered at the wrist, fastened there with five pearl buttons and satin loops. More pearl buttons accentuated the neckline, maybe a dozen or so, not all

fastened, and leading to the standup, mandarin-style collar. The layered skirt was full and long, reaching to within an inch of the floor. It too was casual, but lacy, and in it she looked more like an angel than anything he had ever seen. Her small bare feet he found pleasantly amusing. So down to earth, he thought, and indescribably sexy at the same time. She looked exquisite.

Catching his glance at her unshod feet, she said, "Oh, I'm afraid I don't care for shoes and avoid wearing them whenever possible. I didn't think you'd mind since we're staying indoors, so..."

"I don't mind at all," he said, "I go barefoot myself at home, unless I'm entertaining formally, and then, well we do what we must."

"Hmm... where's home? You said you flew in from L.A., is that...?"

"I travel a great deal so I have several homes, but none of them are located in Los Angeles. I visit there as infrequently as possible."

"You don't care for the City of Angels?" she teased.

"No," he said quietly, shaking his head.

"Good! That makes two things we have in common," she grinned, "I hate the place."

Sam laughed, as she led him into the nicely freshened up living room, and motioned with a wave of her hand for him to sit wherever he'd like. He chose the dark green leather chair by the side of the sofa, facing the coffee table, meaning that Jenny would have to sit on the L-shaped couch alone. A gentleman, she thought, how refreshing.

"I'll be right back, Mr. Kellerman, I've prepared some refreshments. Would you like a drink? Tea? Coffee? Lemonade perhaps? Wine?"

"A glass of wine would be great; do you have some red?"

"Come see for yourself. I know next to nothing about wines, but Michael was an aficionado."

Jenny arranged the teacakes while Sam perused Michael's collection, closely examining the individual bottles before deciding on one. He raised his thick, bushy eyebrows several times while

walking the walk along Michael's wine wall, which pleased Jenny immensely. She enjoyed watching people discover Michael's hidden talents, probably because most of the time he kept them just that, hidden.

"Your Michael knew his wines surprisingly well."

"Yes, he did," Jenny agreed. "He rarely drank any, but he enjoyed learning about them, and collecting them. What can I tell you? Some people save string."

She tossed her copper mane backward, away from her perfectly oval face, so that it cascaded down her back and dress like a bronze, angel-hair waterfall, soft and flowing, and oh, soooo long. Jenny shot him a glance in anticipation of a response of some kind.

Sam was disarmed completely, which didn't happen often - in truth, no woman had beguiled him... not like this. She was remarkably quick-witted, which he didn't expect, and she didn't just move, she glided. He couldn't remember the last time a woman had so thoroughly engaged his senses. Emerald eyes, she has *emerald* eyes, he marveled. They're not just green, they're like jewels of some sort, almond-shaped, sad, wounded, glistening, enchanting jewels. He had come here so prepared, so sure of being able to put on his usual commanding air of Mr. Cool/responsible/respectability, but Jenny was making that extremely difficult for him, and she didn't even know it.

All he could manage to say to her was, "Indeed."

"Mr. Kellerman, I..."

"Sam, please just call me Sam - everyone does," he said, avoiding making direct eye contact with her.

Hearing her call him 'Mr. Kellerman' made him feel old, and right now he didn't want to feel his fifty-four years. He didn't want to be twenty-eight years older than Jenny. He wanted..., he was ashamed of what he wanted, and of all the thoughts and feelings that had taken over his heart, mind, and body at that moment. He simply wasn't prepared to have Jenny turn out to be... what was she? He couldn't find words to describe her. She was... unique, and all he knew was that Jennifer Abigail Richards had entranced him completely. In an instant, the embodiment of

innocence, this woman-child had captivated him without even the touch of her hand. The touch of her hand.... Sam's imagination was running, no, racing away with him. The sound of her soft, gentle voice pulled him out of his daydream and back into reality... such a bittersweet reality.

"Sam, did you really work for... Sam?"

"Huh? Oh, pardon me! I'm afraid I was lost in my thoughts for a moment; please forgive me. Would you say that again?"

"Did you really work for Michael's parents? You don't seem old enough to have done that."

Sam nodded. "Yeah, I did. Pete and I went to law school together," he said, doing his best to compose himself. He needed to gain control of his emotions rapidly if he was going to do what he came here to do with his usual professionalism.

"Law school?"

"Uh-huh, *Harvard*. If you're going to get into something, get all the way in. If you can't get all the way in then you might as well get all the way out because anything else is a recipe for misery... or failure, and I personally believe the two go hand in hand."

"So, according to your belief system, success must equal happiness?" Jenny countered, challenging Sam's philosophy head on and obviously expecting an answer.

Sam wasn't accustomed to being challenged on any level, but Jenny, apparently, either didn't know that or didn't care. In any case she made him think. He had grown used to being in command of most conversations in which he engaged, steering them in the direction he wanted them to go. Clearly, Jenny wasn't going to let him get away with that.

"I'd say so, wouldn't you?" Sam stalled.

"Oh, I don't know," she reflected. "I suppose it depends on what success connotes for you personally. You seem to be successful - at least professionally, Sam. Are you happy?"

"I'll take the fifth on that one and respectfully request a change of subject. My, but you are quick, aren't you?"

“Am I? I suppose I think of myself as merely practical most of the time, or maybe just logical. I tend to see things rather simply in life, but they do have to make sense to me.”

“Touché.”

“So, Mr. I... I mean, Sam, Michael’s dad was a lawyer?” she said, wondering why they had never been told, as it didn’t seem like much of a secret.

Sam nodded. “Yep, one of the best. I consider myself fortunate in that I never had to face off with him in a courtroom, he was... a natural.”

Jenny’s eyes grew wide; she hadn’t realized that Michael’s father had been a lawyer. Michael had few memories of his parents, and what he could remember didn’t include occupation, so the subject never came up. They died when Michael was barely seven, and he and Gideon, then just five, were raised by their nanny, as per the wishes of their parents, and she never talked about the past, ever, not even when directly questioned. Michael had always thought that there was a secret or two behind that, but then he had a suspicious mind and believed that secrets abounded, particularly in places where they ought not.

“I never knew that, and I don’t think Michael did either. He had few memories of his parents, but the doctors said that wasn’t uncommon and was caused by the shock of losing them so suddenly, and so young. The general theory is that it’s part of the human survival instinct, blotting out memories that are too painful or overwhelming to deal with.”

“Really?” Sam asked, surprised. “I assumed that both the boys knew. I’d gladly have told them if they’d asked. Didn’t Michael ever wonder?”

“Hmm... in the early years, perhaps, but he didn’t talk about it often, and then later on it didn’t seem to matter to him. He was busy with his own life - you must know how that goes. Michael changed radically after his parents’ death. He went from being the class clown and the center of attention, to a quiet kid who kept to himself and thought seriously about everything. He didn’t lose his

sense of humor, or his smile, but he was selective about whom he'd let know him well enough to discern that."

"You knew him then?"

Jenny nodded. "Mm-hmm, I've known him since we were both in kindergarten, and we were seldom apart. If we don't count the two years that I spent in New York at photography school, we spent every day together. As kids, we were best friends, and then..." She shrugged, finding the topic difficult to discuss.

"I wasn't aware of that, I'm sorry. I thought that Michael met you later, when you came to live in this house. Pete never said anything, so..."

Jenny shrugged. "Why would he? Two five-year-olds playing together in the schoolyard? We weren't what you'd call front-page news. Was he a trial lawyer? You did say 'Courtroom.'"

"Yes, he was."

"Are you?"

"I was, Jenny. I do... different work in other areas now, but I still handle the odd trial now and then. Being a dedicated trial lawyer is much more than a full-time job."

"But you administer trust funds too, don't you?"

"Just one, Jenny, just the one."

"Oh, I see... I think," she frowned.

Seeing her befuddled expression, Sam decided to elucidate.

"Pete Richards was my best friend in the world, Jenny, and we had an arrangement, a mutual promise made many years ago, but we never expected that we would require to address the issue so soon. I promised him that if anything happened to him, I'd take care of his family, and he made the same promise to me. Unfortunately, he was taken unbelievably early, and I never thought about the possibility of something happening to Maggie simultaneously. I should have thought of it, but I didn't."

"May I ask you a question, Sam?"

"Sure, ask away."

"Why were Michael and Gideon, I mean, if you're their godfather, why did they never know you? Why were you not present in their lives? Don't you think it might have helped them

to know more about their parents? They remember little about their lives before that day so a godfather might have come in handy.”

Sam lowered his head and gently rolled the stem of his glass between his palms. He wasn't at all sure that he wanted to give this beautiful woman the answers she was looking for. He never talked about himself in anything more than a superficial way, he kept his life private, guarded even, and there were reasons for that. He maintained a healthy emotional distance from just about everyone, a man at the top of his game needs that edge - or that's what he told himself. Many thought him cold because of it and oftentimes he was. Inside though, buried deep in the shadows where no man could probe, Samuel Isaac Kellerman was a man with many secrets.

“Sam?”

He looked up at her, at the pain in her eyes, the pleading, and the longing for answers, any answers. He knew then that it didn't matter what he wanted, he was going to have to tell her the truth - not an exercise he was terribly fond of, nor practiced in. He took a deep breath.

“Well, Jenny, I didn't know Maggie all that long. Pete... he was this really stable kind of guy, y'know, live in one place, have six kids, be... honorable,” Sam said, staring into his wine glass.

“And you, Sam?” Jenny whispered.

Still gazing into the wineglass, the master of secrecy struggled to maintain his professional distance, but one look at Jenny and he could feel the walls inside crumbling, and he couldn't keep silent any longer. Exhaling, he set his glass down upon the antique coffee table. Leaning forward, he purposely put his elbows on his knees, and resting his chin in his clasped hands, he locked eyes with her.

“I never did marry. As I told you, I travel all the time, and I don't have any kids - now. I did have a little girl once, in another lifetime, but...”

Sam's voice trailed off into silence and he couldn't speak any more. Picking up his wine glass again, he returned to staring

vacantly into its depths, gently maneuvering the blood-red liquid until it swirled slowly around.

“Sam? What happened?”

The air in the room felt as if it had stopped moving, and Jenny began to dread his answer.

Visibly uncomfortable, Sam shifted his weight in the chair, as deep lines formed in his brow.

“I guess more or less the usual thing that happens to men like me,” he sighed. “I met a beautiful, wonderful woman, much too good for me, of course. Her name was Sophie and we were... in love, I suppose. She had the softest, most beautiful raven-black hair, which she wore a little longer than shoulder length. Her people were from the States, but we met in Sri Lanka where we were lovers for a while... almost six years, I think. She wanted more and I... couldn’t. I was young enough and foolish enough to believe that I had a good reason at the time, although I can’t remember now what it was, and we... she... anyway, we named her Rachel.”

Sam looked up from his glass for what felt like the longest moment, as his eyes met Jenny’s once again. Trying unsuccessfully to arrest the tears that now glistened in them, his voice became broken and strained as he cleared his throat to tell her, “Rachel was the best thing that ever happened to me, and I was young, y’know? I thought I had forever, but she developed some kind of rare bone-marrow cancer, and she didn’t... didn’t even make it to her fifth birthday. I wasn’t there, and I was not... honorable.”

Sam looked away, pretending to focus on a picture on the wall, but knowing well that he wasn’t fooling anyone.

“Oh, Sam... I’m so sorry!”

Jenny reached her hands out to touch his, and her thoughts drifted back to Officer Parker and his little girl, who had died at around the same age of a similar disease. It all seemed so unfair.

“Me too, yeah... me too,” Sam said, disengaging his hands from hers and wiping away tears of regret, of sorrow, of guilt, of shame... of love.

“What about...? Do you keep in touch with...? Do you still see her mother?” Jenny gently probed, hoping.

Sam shook his head slowly. “Sophie died a short time later, but she wouldn’t... I tried to... Well, I wouldn’t have forgiven me either, I... haven’t, I...”

“You lost them both?” Jenny gasped, horrified.

Sam nodded, and whispered, “I didn’t deserve them.”

“Oh, Sam! You can’t believe that. You were young and...”

But Sam held up his hand, halting Jenny in midsentence.

“No, no excuse is good enough, I... Good grief! I’ve never told this to anyone, nor have I shed a tear since then. Do you always go about laying bare the souls of perfect strangers?”

Sam tried his best to feign a smile, as he awkwardly returned his handkerchief to his blue jean pocket. Jenny felt terrible for him. What had she done...? Sam too wondered that.

“I’m sorry, Sam, I didn’t mean to pry. It isn’t usual for me either... conversations like this one. Perhaps it’s because we’ve both lost someone we loved before we could... let’s just say too soon.”

Sam nodded. A strange and powerful bond existed between them, and while neither understood it fully, there was no denying its presence.

“So you see, Jenny,” Sam continued, “circumstances being what they were, and me being as I am, I thought it... not best that I interfere in person with Michael and Gideon. I’ve always kept close tabs on both of them, but from a distance, and to a much larger degree than they suspected. I’ve been kind of an absentee uncle of sorts, finding great pleasure in their achievements, and sharing in their joys... and their sorrows. It was a lousy hand they were dealt, losing both parents the way they did, and I’ve been amazed to see what they made of themselves, the men they became. It’s not true that they didn’t know me though, both knew where to find me, and I them, but I always managed to be busy enough to not be in a position to influence their lives. God knows, I’m not qualified for that. All I really do is make sure they’re

safe... as far as has been possible, and take care of their trust funds.”

Jenny thought he judged himself too harshly, but now didn't seem like the best time to probe deeper into Sam's heart. It was evident that he had shared more than he wanted to already. Aiming for the lighter side, if there was one, she asked, “Until they're thirty, right?”

“For Gideon, yes, please, God! For Michael, well, that now belongs to you.”

“To me?” she gasped. “How is that possible? I didn't think you could do that with trust funds, I thought they weren't transferable.”

Sam shook his head. “That depends on how they're structured, and this is the way Michael wanted it. In his will he specifically stated that all his earthly goods, in whatever form they may be, are to go to you. You were his life, Jenny, that's what he told me.”

“Sam, I've heard nothing of any other will Michael had. We had no secrets, even as children, so why would he have kept this from me? Why would he have kept you from me? Why is it that you and I never met before today? This is alien to me, it's not the way that Michael and I lived together, loved together - secrets and absentee uncles and godfathers, or that's what I always thought. I have to tell you that all of this hurts me, Sam, and I don't understand the reason for any of it.”

Sam sighed. “He only had one secret, Jenny....”

Jenny could feel the blood in her veins turn to ice, as if she somehow knew what Sam was going to say, but that wasn't possible, the doctors, the tests.... She said nothing, but looked imploringly into his eyes, her own overflowing with tears.

“Oh, God, no!”

“He knew, Jenny.”

“No! No! He couldn't have known, he was fine!” she sobbed, trying to grasp the full meaning of what he was telling her.

“He knew, Jenny. He'd known for about... eighteen months, but he thought he had more time, he thought he had a few more

years at worst, but he knew. He was going to tell you when the time was right, but time didn't wait for that, he..."

"Michael was never duplicitous! Why couldn't he tell me, why?" she demanded. "Do you think I care about some stupid little trust fund? I want my husband," she cried. "I didn't even get to tell him goodbye and he owed me that, he owed me that, Sam."

She dried her eyes on her sleeve and went to get some tissues to blow her nose.

"So, what are you doing here? Why did you come? To tell me that I can't have the house? I already figured that! Did he leave it to Gideon?"

Tears were running down Sam's cheeks too now, tears for her, tears for Michael, tears for all of them, tears that had been bottled up for far too long. This woman, this twenty-six-year-old kid had what he had never had, and so had Michael, and Pete... and those they loved suffered so much pain for having loved, as all lovers do in the end. To give all and ask for nothing but love in return.... Dear God, what a mirror is this! Sam thought. I look at them, all of them, and I see their opposite in my own reflection. Why couldn't it have been me? Why? Why Rachel, and Sophie, and Pete, and Maggie, and now Michael... why? he cried out in silent anguish.

"Sam, why did you come here?" Jenny demanded accusingly.

Jolted back to the present, Sam tried to abandon his own thoughts, collecting himself enough to concentrate on Jenny, on her pain, her needs, and her questions.

"Jenny, please sit down, there's quite a bit I have to tell you."

He couldn't even nearly believe what he'd revealed to her already, but there were still things she had to know, just not about him, thank God!

"There's more? What more could there possibly be? Michael didn't just die, he left me long before that, he shut me out and he..."

"He was trying to protect you for as long as possible, and no, he didn't leave the house to Gideon, it's yours - he left you everything. His illness was supposed to be a slow, progressive

disease. The specialists told him that he could expect to live ten years or more, and he did plan to tell you, and that's the truth, Jenny, but he wanted you to be as happy as possible, for as long as possible - those were his words."

"Happy with a lie? Michael could never have believed that."

But somewhere in her heart, in a place she wasn't ready to surrender to yet, she knew that was exactly what Michael would do, anything for her, anything to make her happy for one more year, one more month, one more day....

"Michael didn't want to lie to you, Jenny, he just wanted to hold on to what the two of you had for a while longer, and he did think that he had a while left, a good while. It was the kind of cancer that weakens the veins somehow, and makes them break down slowly, and eventually leads to problems with blood flow, but he believed he had a decade left... at the least."

"Cancer?"

Her mind balked at the word.

"I didn't want this, Sam. I wanted him, all of him, sick or well, together. Together is how it's supposed to be. How could you let him steal that from me, from us?"

"It wasn't mine to decide, Jenny."

She hated the thought, but knew that Sam was right, as it wasn't his place as either a godfather or a lawyer to inform her of things that Michael had chosen not to. She was so angry with Michael, and felt such an acute sense of betrayal that she was quite beside herself, whether it made sense or not.

"I realize that," she conceded. "I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it. Michael has a life insurance policy; do you know about that?"

"Yes, for half-a-million dollars, we bought it when we were married. I haven't contacted the insurance company yet, I haven't felt up to..."

"He has another policy. I take it you're not aware of it?"

Jenny shook her head slowly, the tears - silent now. She was angry, sad, lonely, confused, she felt cheated, and lied to, and she wanted the time back, she just wanted the time....

“He has a policy for \$1million American with you as the beneficiary.”

Jenny’s head was still spinning and she didn’t think she had heard him correctly.

“Pardon? Say again?”

“Michael has a life insurance policy for \$1million American with you as the beneficiary.”

“What? How is that possible? How did he manage that? We don’t have excess money to waste on more insurance premiums, we...”

“He arranged for me to pay the premiums from his trust fund. When he realized that he was ill, he did all this before he went to see any traditional doctors, long before, so it wouldn’t be challenged and you’d be taken care of. He couldn’t do anything to keep himself from dying, Jenny, but he wanted you to live, and to live well enough to be okay.”

“Let me get this straight, Sam. Michael postponed going to the doctor so that I could have a life insurance policy? I don’t believe this! What if he’d gone sooner? Maybe they could have caught it in time and saved his life or extended it somehow.... I just don’t understand why he’d do this.”

“He didn’t go to see any *traditional* doctors, but the one he did see was certain of his diagnosis, and he’s good, Jenny, extremely good, and Michael knew that and trusted him. He told me that he already knew what he had anyway and had extensively read up on it, and he’d been aware for months that there’s no known cure. However, it is supposed to be a slow, progressive illness, as I told you, and no one was more surprised than I when I learned of his death. That’s why I’m here, Jenny. I loved Michael like a son, and what he wanted most in the world was to make sure that I took care of you, assuming you’ll let me. You’re not under any obligation to retain me, but I promised Michael I would do this - if you want me to.”

“But how would Michael know where to look for a nontraditional doctor, and how would he manage to see him without me knowing about it?”

“I arranged it. Michael came to me sixteen months ago and told me that he was sick... and getting worse. I arranged for him to see a friend of mine, a physician in Beijing, a specialist who confirmed what Michael suspected. Michael told me the details of his illness, but as I’ve told you, nobody expected him to die so soon.”

Jenny was incredulous.

“Michael went to China? When? How could he do that without me knowing? How could he *afford* to do it?”

“I believe that you were in Georgia on location at the time - that’s what he told me. I paid for the trip, I wanted to. He had enough in royalties from his books to do as he pleased, but he had me invest every penny he made and made me promise to tell no one.”

“Why? Why would he do that and not tell me? We did okay financially, but...”

“He wanted it invested for you, so that when the time came that he... he wanted to know that you’d be well cared for. As for Beijing, I felt it was the least I could do. If there was any chance at all of his getting well, *The Beijing Institute* was the place to find out, so I did everything I could to get him in there as quickly as possible, so he could undergo a thorough physical examination, which he did.”

“I don’t believe this. Just when I think things can’t get any crazier, they do.”

“I’m so sorry, Jenny, I wish you could know how much, but there wasn’t anything I could have done to change what has happened. Michael came to me in confidence and asked me for a favor, the only one he ever asked of me. How could I refuse him?”

Jenny was quiet for a long time, trying to sort things out in her mind, but her heart wouldn’t let her. When she finally did speak, it was measured and emotionless.

“So, you’re telling me that I have \$1.5million, Sam? That Michael left me \$1.5million altogether?”

She couldn’t imagine that. At least now she understood why he didn’t want an autopsy.

Sam sighed. This hurt.

“Yes and no, Jenny. He left you significantly more than that, but he didn’t know how much more himself. I wasn’t at liberty to tell him until he turned thirty, and I never did.”

“Wh... what do you mean? I don’t understand.”

“Well, Michael thought he was leaving you his two life insurance policies and the royalties and interest that he earned from his books.”

“And he wasn’t?”

Sam shook his head. “No. I mean... yes. Yes, he was, but he left you a good deal more than that.”

“More than \$1.5million and the royalties from his books? What else could he possibly leave me?”

“Well, you know that he also left you his trust fund, right?”

“I do now,” she groaned.

“Well, his trust fund, as of noontime today, is worth \$317million American, give or take.”

Jenny eyed Sam suspiciously.

“That’s not possible, how is that possible, Sam? We were never rich! Okay, so he put away a few dollars in royalty money, but...”

“You were always rich, Jenny, you just didn’t know it. Pete and Maggie had over \$20million American in their estate when they died, and I took care of that money for the boys. I was allowed to pay both Michael and Gideon \$50,000 a year when they became twenty-one, but Michael didn’t need it, as his books sold so well, so he didn’t touch any of it, quite the contrary. He asked me to invest most of the profits from his books too, keeping only what you and he needed for operating expenses, and I invested it all where I invest my own money, as his father asked me to. I’m a lousy human being, Jenny, but I’m an excellent investor, and I’ve been investing and reinvesting that capital at roughly twenty percent annually for nineteen years, and it’s now a considerable amount, as you can see. Gideon can’t know any of these details for another six years, when he becomes thirty - I need your word on this.”

“Sam, you’re not kidding, are you? All else aside, why wait until they’re thirty to let them inherit? I’ve never understood that, it seems weird to me, and a lot of good it did Michael!”

“No, I’m not kidding, and I wish to God that Michael were here to hear this with you. Pete and Maggie wanted the boys to be mature before they were handed millions. They felt that arranging for them to each have an income at age twenty-one, not a huge income, but enough to live comfortably on, was sufficient. They were both churchgoing folks, as you know, and they said that if Jesus wasn’t ready to branch out on His own until He was thirty, then that should be a good age for their sons too. I have no comment on that, but it was their choice, and I can’t change it. Do I have your word with regard to Gideon?”

“Yes, yes of course, although I’ll feel horribly dishonest for the next six years. I’m not a fan of clandestine anything, and I sure hope nothing comes up in conversation any time soon because I won’t lie, Sam. I’ll tell him nothing unless he asks me outright, but if he does....”

“Fair enough, Jenny. I think that’s the most that can be asked of you. You, after all, are not bound by the attorney-client relationship.”

“But Sam, I have no idea what to do with 318... no, 319.5 million dollars!”

“Plus the twelve-million from Michael’s books, Jenny, in total you have in excess of \$330million. If you want me to, I can continue to invest the principal amount, and you can live off all, or a portion of the interest. I can simply continue to do what I would have been doing if Michael were still here, but for you now. The principal will continue to increase over time, of course....”

“I have to decide right now?”

Sam shrugged. “What’s to decide? It’s your money now. You can decide to handle it by yourself if you want to, and it’s okay if you do, but apart from that there’s nothing to figure out.”

“Handle it? I can’t even conceive of it! Look, if I let you look after Michael’s, I mean th... the money, Sam, what about your fees and other expenses? How will I know how much to pay you?”

Where does a person keep that kind of money? What about taxes? Won't the government get most of it? You'll have to forgive me, but I can't begin to fathom how to deal with this. I..."

"This is Pro Deo, Jenny, there is no way I want a penny of that money. This is my promise to my friend, and it's about the only thing in my life that I haven't messed up yet, so please let me help you - you need it. Michael asked me and wanted me to do this, so you only have to decide whether you want to let me.

"Presently, I'm getting a minimum of twenty percent return on my own investments, and yours, and a maximum of twenty-six. Even at ten percent that would give you a minimum of \$33million American to live on each year, and the maximum tax you'll pay on it is four percent. I can make sure that's paid for you too, if you like. I've been doing it for this long. Anything more than ten percent, I'll add to the principal, and keep on investing it for you, just as I've always done."

Jenny laughed somewhat sarcastically.

"Sam, I pay about thirty percent in income tax now, and I don't even make a six figure income, so how on earth can becoming a multimillionaire lower my tax bracket? And twenty-six percent?" She shook her head in disbelief.

"There are ways, Jenny, legal ways. You let me worry about taxes - that is, if you want me to."

Jenny buried her head in the pillow she had been hugging. This was just too much to take in, her head was throbbing, and she was still so angry, so very angry. She sat there rocking back and forth gently for a few minutes, during which time Sam thought it best that he remain silent and let her try to assimilate what he'd told her. When she lifted her head, in a quiet, purposeful tone, she said:

"So, Sam, I lose Michael and inherit \$330million?"

It wasn't really a question; she just had to say it aloud.

"That's the deal."

"It's a lousy deal, Sam."

"I know, kiddo, I know. I loved him too."

"Did you really, Sam?"

"I did, and I'm going to miss him as much as I miss his father."

The two of them sat in silence until shadows filled the room, each one alone with their past, their losses, and their bewilderment. How much time passed? An hour? Two? Did it matter?

Finally Sam whispered, "Will you be all right, Jenny?"

Jenny looked over at this flawed, aching, mess of a man, and told him the only truth she knew.

"I don't know, Sam. I have no idea what to think or do about anything."

Sam sighed. "Well, that's understandable, and even normal, but take it from someone who's been around the block a time or two, things will get better. We can never go back to a time or place, or even a person and have what we had in those moments, except, perhaps, in our memories. But there are other moments, and even if you don't want them now, they are going to come to you. Nobody knows what is waiting to be born with each new dawn, but if we are permitted to see it, and if we allow ourselves to embrace it, even when we don't think it's possible to find happiness again, there will be moments, moments worth waiting for, dreaming about, and getting up in the morning to meet. Do you believe me, Jenny?"

"No, no I don't, but I do have a question."

"Anything?"

"What do I tell Gideon? He's bound to wonder how I'm making a living and keeping the house up, and so on. How do I explain my income? I mean, the house is Michael's - he and Gideon sorted that out a couple of years ago, and it's true that it was long ago paid for and everything, but there are taxes, insurances, and..."

"He can't know about his trust fund until he's thirty, and that's not negotiable. That's his deal. You can tell him about the life insurance policies, if you like, and the royalties from Michael's books. I daresay that'll take care of any awkward questions. It's only a small portion of your financial net worth, but it will afford you the freedom to pursue opportunities and perhaps go to places that you couldn't before. As for the rest, you do understand that you must be silent?"

Jenny quietly listened and then nodded her head slowly, acknowledging her understanding of what Sam had said, and agreeing again to abide by the promise.

“Sam?”

“Yeah?”

“If you could go back and change something, anything in your past - what would it be?”

He thought for only a minute.

“Me. I’d change me. I’d be a husband to Sophie and a father to Rachel. I’d be Pete, and I’d be Michael, and...”

“What, Sam?”

“I’d be you.”