

Pinetree, Colorado — Friday, August 12

Death stalked Michael Chambers for twenty four years before finally catching up with him at the close of a summer day.

The clock stood at twenty minutes past nine as Michael Chambers walked into his law office on the outskirts of Pinetree on the last morning of his life. Kathleen looked up from the copy machine where she was standing, holding a mug from which drifted the odor of freshly brewed coffee. Next to her, on a small wooden table, stood a small carton of yogurt, a teaspoon protruding from its mouth. She smiled at him. Not for the first time, Michael wished that he was twenty four instead of forty four.

“Good morning, Michael,” his secretary greeted him, glancing at the clock on the wall.

“Good morning, Kathleen. The first appointment is Jeremy Walters, at nine thirty, concerning a codicil to his will, isn’t it?”

“Yes, and then there’s the minister at the Episcopal church, Reverend Allbright, at ten o’clock.”

“Ah, yes,” Michael nodded. “He wants my advice so he can inform his flock of the myriad ways they can give to the church without pain. Well, that should take until noon, I imagine.”

“Then there’s Rotary until two and just a couple of house closings this afternoon. One at Sutton and Dwight’s at two fifteen with the Cavaliers, and one at Bolton and Smith’s at three fifteen with the Allens.”

“Thanks, Kathleen.” He grinned mischievously. “So that’s my day nicely planned for me. And what do you have planned? Anything special?”

Kathleen returned the grin. She was lucky, and both she and her employer knew it. She lived in a beautiful town, worked for an undemanding man who paid a more

than fair salary, and had a boyfriend who thought the world of her. Life could be a lot worse. “Not really. I thought I might do a bit of typing, you know, just for form’s sake; answer the phone, things like that, for which my vastly expensive education trained me.”

“Sounds fine to me. Let me know if it gets too much for you.” Michael disappeared into his office, closing the door partway behind him so that he could prepare himself for the arrival of Mr. Walters. As expected, Kathleen, for all the persiflage a remarkably efficient secretary-cum-receptionist, had placed Mr. Walters’ file on his desk ready for perusal. His “In” basket contained the files that he would need later in the day. He draped his jacket over the rear of his chair, loosened his tie, and opened the file labeled “Mr. Jeremy Walters.”

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Michael Chambers’ last day was unremarkable, an entirely typical day apparently no different from any other. Until its end.

He returned to his office from Bolton and Smith as the clock in the reception area moved past four o’clock. Kathleen was seated at her desk, taking a telephone call as he entered the building.

He waited by her desk until the call was completed. Kathleen looked up as she replaced the telephone and handed her employer a note. “That was Mrs. Healy, calling to ask if you’d be willing to endorse her husband for mayor this time around and reminding you about supper this evening. I told her you were out and you’d get back to her when you were available.”

A momentary frown creased Michael’s face as he accepted the piece of paper.

“OK, I’ll deal with it,” he said, a little gruffly. His face cleared. “Now, Kathleen. It’s past four o’clock on a beautiful summer day. What’s more, it’s a Friday. And to clinch the matter, your boyfriend will be in town

within a couple of hours. Why don't you take the rest of the afternoon off? Just switch on the answering machine and get out of here. I have to be at the Healy's early and I need to go home first and get changed, so I'll be leaving in a couple of minutes myself. Have a nice weekend, and I'll see you nicely rested on Monday morning."

Kathleen scrutinized her boss. Presumably his comment about being "nicely rested" was a joke? But his face betrayed no sign of emotion, so she froze the laugh which had been about to form, and transformed it instead into a smile. She thanked Michael and began to tidy her papers. He strode into his office and glanced around the room to ensure that there was nothing requiring his attention before the weekend. A minute later, the two of them left the building together.

Michael drove back to his mountain hideaway with the window down, letting the breeze impinge itself on the side of his face. Already the sun was beginning to fall towards the mountains; in another hour there would be parts of the town already thrust into an early evening shadow. His Cherokee turned off the road and he changed down to begin the climb up the long dirt driveway towards his home.

Within a few seconds, the openness of the valley was replaced by the packed boskage of the pine-studded slopes. Driving now in shadow, he was momentarily chilled by the sudden coolness, and shivered. He wound the window partway up and moved slightly in his seat, retreating from the air entering the vehicle through the gap above the window. Ninety seconds later, he pulled to a halt inside his garage. He discovered that he was whistling.

He showered, changed and recovered a bottle of wine from the refrigerator where it had lain for the past two days. As he had done several times earlier in the day, he exercised his right arm to make sure that there was

still no pain from the shoulder where he had injured it playing racketball the day before. There was a slight twinge, nothing more; the anti-inflammatory was performing exactly as Dr. Taylor had advertised.

He checked himself in the mirror on the landing one last time. Now that he had discarded his working suit and replaced it with a long sleeved cotton Oxford shirt and slacks, he looked every bit as relaxed as he felt. He checked his watch, performed a quick calculation, decided that he would arrive just about at the right time, and descended once more to the garage.

Michael drove unhurriedly along the through Pine-tree. Halfway through town, a quarter of a mile beyond his office, the sun suddenly ducked behind a mountain and he immediately wound up his window in a reaction to the instant drop in temperature. He arrived at the Healys', a smile on his face and the bottle in his hand, at five minutes to five.

Lucinda Healy greeted him at the door, with her husband hovering uncertainly behind her. Lucinda, almost the same age as Michael, shared the same happy characteristic of looking roughly ten years younger than her chronological age. Lucinda's hair, undyed and as firmly brunette as ever, hung past her shoulders as she held her head at its characteristic, tipped angle. Her eyes shone with life, and the only lines on her face were placed there by the smile that she wore in greeting. She gave Michael a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek.

"Good evening, Michael. Glad you could make it."

She looked into his eyes a moment longer than was strictly appropriate to the occasion, and Michael struggled to keep embarrassment from showing in his face, fully aware that her husband was watching.

Lucinda stepped backwards, and Michael took the opportunity to interpose the bottle between them, holding it out in offering. "It's been in the refrigerator all day. It should be just about right after the drive over."

Lucinda took both the hint and the bottle, and turned away in the direction of the kitchen. Michael stepped into the house and was greeted in turn by Lucinda's husband.

Bill Healy was quite unlike his wife. Short and balding, he looked every day of his forty five years, and then some. He wore an open-necked shirt, exposing a mass of graying hairs on the upper part of his chest.

Despite his unattractive appearance, Bill Healy possessed a forceful personality that had carried him far in local politics, culminating in his position as mayor of Pinetree, which he had held for the past four years. His reelection as council member and mayor this coming November was a foregone conclusion in the community. Even Michael intended to vote for him, although for reasons that had nothing to do with politics in the usual sense of the word.

Healy spoke. His voice, emaciated and whining, annoyed Michael as much as his appearance, although he was careful never to let it show. "Do come in, Michael. I'm awfully sorry that we have to eat at such an ungodly hour, but Lucinda insisted that it had been much too long since we had you over and, as you know, she is going back east for three weeks tomorrow. What with that and my work on the council and for Rotary, this was about the only time that we could fit you in."

"That's all right, don't apologize. I'm always happy to come over to sample Lucinda's cooking. Makes a change from the usual bachelor fare."

"Well, I just hope you don't mind the early hour. The council meets at seven thirty, and I have to leave by seven, and it's the only way we could fit you in, you see."

"No, it's all right, really. Don't worry about it."

"OK, well let me get you a drink, then. What'll it be? Vodka and orange for the first one and plain o.j. after that, isn't it?"

“Yes, thank you. That would be fine.”

They walked towards the kitchen. Michael hung back dutifully at the entrance to the room, hesitating to enter the hostess’s domain. He watched while Healy crossed to the refrigerator, extracted a nearly empty pitcher of juice and a glass, and emptied the pitcher into the glass. Lucinda was putting the finishing touches to the salad. She looked up. “You two go sit at the table, and we’ll be ready to start in a few minutes. Oh, Bill, give me the pitcher; I’ll make up some more juice for Michael.”

“What’s for dessert?” Michael asked.

“Pavlova. It’s the most fattening thing I could think of,” Lucinda said, a mischievous smile on her face. Her face suddenly became serious. “If that’s all right,” she added, a note of uncertainty in her voice.

“Fine, but I’ll have to be excused for a couple of minutes,” Michael said.

“Be our guest.” Bill Healy waved towards the dining room magnanimously as he added ice and vodka to Michael’s drink and then handed the glass to his guest.

Michael walked to the dining table, placed his drink down, and casually extracted a small device from his pocket. Laying it against the index finger of his left hand, there was a sudden click and he withdrew the device to reveal a maroon drop on the end of his finger. He took a small strip from his pocket and sopped up the blood.

Slowly, he returned to the kitchen, his eyes glancing every few seconds at his watch. He opened the faucet and thrust the strip into the stream of water. Quickly and automatically, he went through the thrice-daily motions, shaking the excess water from the strip, then drying it thoroughly on a towel. Walking back to the dining room, he withdrew a small machine from his pocket and inserted the strip. Within seconds, the liquid crystal display showed “100.”

Bill Healy walked across the room to stand at his shoulder, half-empty glass in his hand. He looked enquiringly at his guest. "Everything all right?"

"Fine. If you'll excuse me, I'll give myself a fix." It was an old, tired joke, but it never ceased to amuse Healy. As always, he grinned with apparently genuine delight as Michael left the room. Michael gathered his insulin supply and syringe kit from his car, then returned and entered the guest bathroom.

He locked the bathroom door behind him and took the opportunity to urinate, then, seating himself on the toilet, he opened his kit.

Extracting two small bottles, he rolled them in turn between his hands to mix the contents thoroughly. Taking a paper square moist with alcohol, he cleaned the tops of both bottles then tossed the paper into the bathroom's small trash can. He retrieved a syringe from the bag, then stopped for a moment to consider the ramifications of the upcoming pavlova.

He rarely varied his dosage, but the high sugar content of tonight's dessert convinced him that this evening it was a reasonable precaution. Holding the syringe up to the light, he withdrew the plunger until it sat against the fiducial mark that signified 33 units, one unit more than his usual dose. He picked up one of the small bottles — as always (his doctors had repeatedly stressed that he should always do things in the same order), the bottle of NPH insulin came first.

His eyes aligned carefully with the syringe, he carefully injected twenty five units of air into the bottle. Then he withdrew the syringe and inserted it into the second bottle, into which he injected the remaining eight units of air. Then, slowly, he reversed the procedure; he turned the bottle upside down and extracted eight units of the regular insulin. Exchanging bottles, he extracted twenty five units of the NPH insulin into the syringe.

He looked down at his left leg, and searched for the last needle mark. There it was: a minute, red dot high on his thigh. He brought the needle so that its point rested against the skin about an inch farther down the leg. As always, he found himself, to his secret annoyance, holding his breath in readiness for the moment of pain to come. Ow! Even after nearly a quarter of a century, the pain was still unpleasant. He doubted that he would ever reach the point where he would not reflexively withdraw mentally, even if not physically, from the needle.

Slowly, he injected the life-sustaining mixture. The job done, he matter-of-factly withdrew the syringe and threw it in the trash can. The other materials he gathered together and replaced in his kit. Hitching his trousers, he flushed the toilet, rinsed his hands under the faucet, then unlocked the door and returned to what he always thought of as the land of the living, his ablutions to his chemical god complete.

The table in the dining room was already set for the meal; he took his usual chair and seated himself, then looked out the mullioned window to the panoramic view of the slopes a mile distant on the far side of the glass. With difficulty, he could just make out the narrow cables and dark chairs of the ski lifts against the sunlit green of the forest background. One lift was operating, gondolas moving slowly up and down the mountainside, providing access to the restaurant atop the mountain. He sipped his drink appreciatively.

“How’s business?” asked Bill Healy as he seated himself, wresting Michael’s attention from the scene on the opposite side of the valley.

The two chatted noncommittally and unenthusiastically about business and the weather until Lucinda joined them, carrying a large wooden salad bowl filled with a colorful mixture of green, yellow and red vegetables. She laid it down, went back to the kitchen and

returned a moment later with the wine, which she and her husband shared — one alcoholic drink was all that Michael allowed himself.

The meal began.

Lucinda was, as always, the perfect hostess; it was obvious to Michael that she had expended her usual considerable effort on the meal, and he relished it to the full. Even Bill seemed to be on good form, despite his occasional nervous glances towards the clock on the wall. They talked happily of Rotary, of business, of the glorious weather, until the main course was concluded. Then they carried the dishes to the kitchen, where Michael refilled his glass from the newly replenished pitcher of juice. The men returned to the dining room while Lucinda remained in the kitchen, cutting a kiwi to adorn the pavlova.

For some minutes, Michael had been fighting a sudden tiredness which had swept over him. He was finding it more and more difficult to concentrate on Healy's conversation, a fact that he had initially ascribed simply to the entirely plausible possibility that tonight Bill was being even more of a bore than usual. But now he was beginning to wonder if something was seriously wrong. He remained standing by his chair, hoping that the sudden tiredness would pass. Suddenly, he felt himself unequal to the battle and, no longer able to keep his eyes open, he toppled gracelessly to the floor.

He awoke as a sharp pain struck his face. He tried to blink, but was too slow waking up to ward off a second blow from Healy. Michael raised his hand to protect himself from any further slaps, trying to remember how he had arrived in such a ridiculous position, slumped on the floor against his chair. His mind was still foggy, although now clearing quickly, and he could remember nothing after the sudden fatigue had overcome him.

"Are you all right? You took a fall there. You don't look very well." It took Michael a moment to realize

that it was Bill speaking, the same Bill who had been slapping him.

“Unh... I guess I’m OK.” His voice sounded distant and disembodied. He tried to push down against the ground and stand. Bill helped him to his feet. Strength was rapidly returning. His head was sore just behind the hairline; he must have banged it against the table as he fell. He rubbed the soreness, looking confused.

“Here, sit down. You spilt your juice. Lucinda has gone to get you another glass; she’ll be back in a moment.”

Michael nodded by way of response. Seated on his chair, he began to rub his face, to try to clear the fog from his mind.

Lucinda was gone no more than half a minute. She returned with a concerned look on her face, which was replaced with relief when she realized that her guest was no longer unconscious on the floor.

She placed the glass of orange juice on the table in front of him and handed him an ice pack, which he immediately applied to his forehead and wished that he hadn’t. The cold hurt, but it cleared his head rapidly. Lucinda began mopping up the spilt juice from the hardwood floor. After another couple of minutes of concern and confusion over what had happened, he began to feel himself once again.

“Can I get you something from the pharmacy, Michael? It’s only a couple of minutes away. Or do you want me to call Dr. Taylor?” Lucinda asked.

Michael shook his head, which hurt only slightly now. “No. It’s OK. I’ll be fine. Maybe I’ve been working too hard. I think I’ll just rest here for a few minutes and then go home and spend a nice, quiet evening reading.”

Healy laughed, a horrible, grating sound that caused Michael to want to throttle the man, as it did every time that he heard it. “I wish I could spend a quiet evening

reading, but duty calls. I'll have to be leaving shortly. Are you sure there's nothing we can do?"

"No, I'll be fine. Honest." His eyes caught sight of Lucinda, hovering nearby. He remembered the pavlova.

"What I need is a good dose of that dessert of yours, and then I'm sure I'll feel much better." He smiled at her, trying to make light of the situation. She returned his smile, but the smile did little to mask the worry in her eyes.

They ate dessert, but it was not the same group who had eaten the main course only a few minutes before. There was hardly any talk, and Lucinda and Bill kept sneaking glances at their guest, trying to assure themselves that he was not about to expire on them. As soon as the food was finished, and without waiting for coffee, Bill excused himself to change for the evening's council meeting.

Michael looked at Lucinda. "That was stupid of me. I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. But I really do think that I'd best be going too, and make an easy evening of it. You probably need to finish your packing, anyway."

Lucinda nodded. "All right. But you take care of yourself, do you hear? I might just give you a call when I arrive, to make sure that you're OK."

He tried to sound more positive than he felt. "All right, if you like. But I'll be fine. It was probably just hard work taking its toll, that's all."

Michael stood, using the chair back to hold himself steady. He was still trembling. The idea of an evening relaxing at home was becoming more appealing by the minute. "Say goodnight to Bill for me, won't you? Tell him he has my vote."

"I will. Just you take good care of yourself, d'you hear?"

"I will. And thanks for the meal. It was great, as always."

“You’re welcome. Any time.”

She hugged him with conspicuous gentleness and gave him a peck of a kiss. She escorted him to the front door. “See you in three weeks, Michael. And I’ll call when I arrive.”

“See you. Have a safe trip.”

He turned and made his way slowly to his car. Once inside, he sat and forced himself to take five slow, deep breaths. What had come over him? That had never happened before.

When he felt better, he started the vehicle, turned it around on the graveled area in front of the garage, and drove slowly away from the house and down the hill towards town.

By the time that he reached his own home, he had stopped shaking, but he had developed the grandfather of all headaches. He walked up the wide stairway from the garage, every step causing his head to pound. Making straight for the bathroom, he swallowed a pair of extra-strength painkillers, then he lay down on the bed and closed his eyes. Within seconds, he was asleep.

When he awoke, he felt much better, the headache nearly gone. The clock on the bedside table said 8:30. Half the evening had gone, but at least he was feeling like he was going to survive, which was a distinct improvement over how he had felt earlier.

He stood up, and was surprised to find that the action made him feel light-headed. He noticed that his hands were shaking slightly but uncontrollably. For the first time, he began to feel concerned. Maybe there was something seriously wrong with him after all. He made his way slowly out of the bedroom and into the living room.

Unsteadily, he crossed the room to where a chess set, a game in progress, adorned a coffee table. He needed to check his next move before ten o’clock. He was due to call Henry Clarence before then to give him the move.

He looked at the board, trying to concentrate. Yes, rook to queen's knight four, the move he had planned to make, looked just fine. He had Henry Clarence on the run this time.

The board swam before his eyes. He really did feel awful; perhaps he should call Dr. Taylor. He held out an arm and tried to steady himself against a chair. It worked, for a few seconds; but then he began to see dark spots before his eyes; he felt hot, sweaty and nauseous; he was going to throw up. His lips tingled. He swallowed hard to keep from regurgitating his supper.

It was the tingling lips that warned him. Once before this had happened, twenty four years ago and under supervision in a doctor's office, only a few months after he had been initially diagnosed with adult onset diabetes. That time it had been done on purpose, so that he would be able to recognize the signs should it ever happen again. Twenty four years rolled away, and his heart began to thud violently as he realized what was about to happen: he was about to go into a hypoglycemic coma. Despite the pavlova, his blood sugar level had dropped to a dangerous level. How could that have happened? Surely he had not made a mistake when measuring his insulin dose?

He thrust his hand into his pocket for his roll of glucose candy, kept always within reach for just such moments as this. For a second, he felt around in his pocket frantically. There were his keys, and a handkerchief. But *where were the candies?* For a moment, relief poured over him as his hand closed on a cylinder. But he instantly realized that these were not his candies, they were the anti-inflammatory capsules prescribed by his doctor for his racketball injury. Irrelevantly, he realized that he had forgotten to take one with supper.

In desperation, he felt in his other pocket, but he already knew that there was something seriously amiss.

The candies were always, *always* in his right hand pocket. His left hand dived into a pocket to find nothing but a clean handkerchief. He began to move towards the kitchen. He had to get sugar inside him, and quickly. He wanted desperately to vomit. Dark spots formed before his eyes, expanded, filled his vision. He stopped and closed his eyes to concentrate on the task of keeping food down. For about five seconds he stood there, shaking. Then his legs could support him no more.

They buckled, and he collapsed to the floor.