

Martha and Michael

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October 15, 2014

Michael and Martha

A Journey Under Construction

Chapter 1.

Michael David Fuller, actually Michael Fuller, M.D., grinned as he disengaged his arm from his beaming mother, Alexa, and eased his way across the room to step out onto the balcony to escape the noisy celebration in the hotel suite. He simply needed a moment to catch his breath.

It was a joyous celebration of his graduation from med school at Stanford. The congratulations were effusive from his dad's family and even more so from the Sellech clan, his mother's family, of which he was the youngest.

There had been two very tender moments, one, when his granddad, David, entered, pushing in a wheelchair that carried his great grandma Sara Sellech. He had been unable to hold back the tears that rolled down his cheeks onto his shirt front, especially as he felt the firm grip around his neck when he bent to receive her kiss. He had not expected her presence.

The other moment had come later, when he had presumed that all the guests were present. He happened to be looking in the direction of the door when it opened slowly, revealing a beautiful woman. He caught himself staring at this striking, tall female, whose face and bared arms were a patina of light brown loveliness. He dropped the hand of his girlfriend, Dana, and dashed for the door. He gathered the woman into his arms as they both burst into laughter.

She covered his face with kisses before he finally placed her on her feet. Everyone in the room, except Dana Gramma, rushed forward to welcome the newcomer

In the midst of the noisy reception, Gramma Sara's voice erupted. "Open a path so I can see this vision." A minute later she was saying, "As I expected, you have grown into a beauty. You are a sight for these dimming peepers of mine. Dear child, I am so delighted that you were able to make it."

Anna Peters dropped to her knees, taking Grandma Sara's hand in hers and placing her lips firmly on the gnarled fingers of her adopted great grandma. In that minute of silence, Michael felt tears rising. His heart was filled with his feeling of oneness with his friend who had come to share this special time with him

Soon, she was caught up in the greetings from the rest of the family. He looked around to find Dana, realizing that she must be feeling out of sorts at this sudden turn of events. He could not find her, so he headed for the bedroom. Her light wrap was missing. "She must have left in a huff, misinterpreting the scene of reunion with my childhood friend," he thought.

He began to reach for his cell phone but an arm grabbed his, pulling him into the crowded room for pictures and the opening of the champagne. Soon, Dana was forgotten and he was engulfed in the celebration until he felt the need for a moment alone.

He slipped out the door to the balcony, his mind drifting back to the days when he and Anna were young. A myriad of pictures of their past flashed through the screen of his mind.

He didn't hear the door open, but he felt that glow of warmth as someone approached.

In the moment before he felt her arms encircled his body, he recognized her scent. She laid her head on the back of his shoulder whispering, "Congratulations, Mike. I just had to join in this celebration. There have been so many times during the last two years that I had wished you were there for one of our chats."

He did not move. Her nearness reminded him of all those eighteen years of being bound together, starting with the week when she had arrived from the Middle East His mother had told him that Aunt Diane had adopted a little girl while she was in some country called Jordan. "We have to accept her like family. I hope you will make her feel welcome."

His mind travelled back to those early days when he held her hand while walking to school, teaching her to throw a baseball, building a fort in his back yard.

She interrupted his mental meanderings with a question. "What's next? Are you coming east for an internship? I hope so."

He turned, taking her hands in his and led her to a settee. "I'm afraid not. I will be at UCSF starting July first. That is the University of California hospital in San Francisco. Beyond that I am hoping for a residency either at St. Jude's or one of the Shriners hospitals. I've decided that I would like to make the grade as a pediatric surgeon."

"Oh, Mike. That is exciting. I can tell you that working with children is a rewarding life."

He smiled, saying, "I need to hear all about that and so much more. Is this your final year as a resident at Yale in New Haven? How long will you be here?"

"I am taking the red eye tomorrow evening. Sorry it can't be longer. I have a friend covering for me through noon of the day I arrive. I will be participating in two major eye surgeries later this week."

"That is so short a time. I hope you have a little on your schedule for me."

"I'm all yours except for a few hours with my folks. We recently had a good visit in New Haven and we do talk often on the phone."

He said, "Excuse me a moment. I need to square things with Dana before we make plans." Anna gave him a warm smile of understanding as he reached for his cell phone. He walked across the balcony as the phone at the other end began to ring. After a series of rings, her voice came on. "This is Dana. Please leave a message."

He knew that she had caller ID and would have known it was he. “She is undoubtedly pissed at me and is pouting enough to give me a bad time.”

He left a message. “Please call, Dana. I need to explain. Anna is my childhood friend who is here for a day before returning to New Haven.”

He decided that, if Dana wanted to stay silent, he had to accept that. He walked back to Anna. “Do you think your folks will excuse you so that we can spend the evening having dinner and catching up?”

Anna laughed. “I already arranged that, telling them I would lasso you for the evening. They smiled and agreed that they had already figured that out. After all, our moms spent all those years nurturing our friendship to emulate their own deep regard for each other. Now, we had better rejoin the families.”

The evening was magnificent, more than either had expected. The suite was cleared and set for dinner while they took a stroll on the campus and settled on a bench that faced the front of the glittering facade of the Stanford Memorial Church.

Those minutes were filled with stories of what had transpired since Anna had left for the east coast. Much of that conversation was also focused on their work and studies. Michael was all ears as she described her serving as an intern and the transition to residency. That was the path that he was just beginning to travel.

They rose and walked slowly to the parking lot while Anna described her dream as a pediatric ophthalmologist. “I will find a way to serve the young people in the refugee camps in Jordan. As you know, it was there in a Palestinian refugee camp where Mama found me. You remember the story of how she and Dad, with the help of the queen of Jordan, Mama’s close friend, eased the way for my adoption.”

He smiled. “I remember. I think you told me that story at least three times a year for all the years we grew up together.” Anna squeezed his hand as a way of saying thanks.

It was after dinner that the fun and laughter began. Their reminiscences brought forth shouts of laughter as Anna recalled her determination to hit a softball with utter failure. She teased Michael about his first love, Linda, age 8, blond and blue eyed a full contrast to Anna's very delicate light chocolate skin and dark eyes.

She thought Michael’s eyes darkened just a bit before he joined in the laughter when she reminded him of the day they decide to play doctor at the age of eleven. They had both been aware of the fact that they were crossing some undefined line but had continued to undress each other while they examined every crevice and every protrusion of each other’s bodies.

He was thinking to himself, “I didn’t know what it was at that moment, but that was when I began to fall in love with my closest friend.” His eyes lit up and joined in her laughter.

It was that same year that the teachers and Anna's folks agreed that she was more than precocious, probably bordering on genius. As a result, Anna was moved a grade higher in school. Both their voices choked a little as they described their feelings of that day of separation ever so many years ago.

Michael said, "I felt as though I was losing a part of me during those hours of separation."

"Yes, that's true but we still spent hours studying together even if the subject matter was different."

He continued "I know but it was never as intimate and close as the years that had preceded the change."

"True, but there were new and different ways in which you supported me. I recall how you listened and held me the evening that I came to you after Jack Smythe tried to force me to have sex. Specifically I remember the conversation with other girls who told me how you whipped Jack one afternoon on the deserted school yard. You were my hero as well as my closest friend."

Michael grinned. "I loved the way you repaid me by inviting me, a sophomore, to be your Senior Prom date. Fortunately, I wasn't a shrimp so that I was tall enough to be invited to dance with a couple of those senior girls."

She laughed. "I remember when Alice asked me to introduce you so that she could invite you to dance. You were too modest to notice how so many girls wanted your attention. You, even as a sophomore, were the star quarterback on a football team that went to the Northern California championships and later to the State finals."

Michael said, "I guess so, but that night I came to realize that major shifts were coming in our relationship. In September you would be heading for Stanford while I still had two more years of high school. I didn't have the words to describe my feelings, but I was aware that, despite our similar ages, you were moving into adulthood while I was still an adolescent."

She said, "I was the youngest freshman in my class and worked hard to be like my sisters in the Sorority. You were pretty hip. Remember Sally, the girl I brought with me to hear your valedictory speech?"

She started to laugh. "After the family party, I saw the two of you head out together. I'll bet you made out like a bandit with that college sophomore."

Michael blushed and turned silent. A full two minutes of silence followed Anna's comments. Both seemed to be deep in thought trying to sort out how that separation affected their friendship. Michael felt a tear developing behind his eyelash. He had fallen in love with his childhood friend but felt unable or, at least, unwilling to share his feelings with Anna. He feared that any such avowal would destroy their friendship.

Anna broke the silence. "I never thought that being two years ahead in school made any difference in our friendship. Despite my wider and deeper knowledge of math, history and the sciences, I never thought that I was superior to you."

Michael thought about that for a moment. "I'm sure you didn't, but as I remember, your visits home from Stanford started with the love and fun of previous years but often was interspersed with longer moments of silence, as though we were struggling to find a common topic. That was only natural, but I resented it and knew we were drifting farther and farther apart."

"That's true, Michael. We both knew there was no escaping the inevitability. And, as my studies demanded more focus and reading, my visits became less frequent. There were moments when I acknowledged that and wondered if it might be stopped, but life was pulling me deeper into my preparation for a medical career."

Michael, head bowed, unwilling to let Anna to see his teary eyes, said "I had hopes that we might see each other when I started med school, but you had finished early and had your M.D. It was then that I knew that I should be grateful for the friendship we had for all those years. Your brilliant mind was demanding that you move quickly, faster than most, on your career path."

What he could not say was, "I knew that my love for you had to be buried."

Anna sensed the something had shifted inside Michael. She hastened to change the subject. "Tell me about your decision to concentrate on pediatric surgery."

"In recent years, during conversations and emails you mentioned your idea of working with children. I kept thinking about the myriad of kids displaced from their homes, either because of military action or large natural disasters. Even here in the States, there are thousands of children who lack the resources to find the medical help they need, thus limiting their mobility and opportunities for a full life. Besides, your mom, Diane kept me fascinated with her stories of life in the seamy side of Cairo and Turkey."

"I love it, Mike. As you know, that is my dream. Perhaps at some time in the future, we can join up, working together in some faraway corner of the world."

"That is more than I dare dream about, Anna." He desperately wanted to know if Anna had another man in her life but he feared the answer. He could not stand working side by side while she had another lifetime partner

The next morning at ten thirty, Anna pulled up in front of Michael's parent's home. She was driving her folk's Buick with a picnic basket in the trunk, a basket loaded with goodies for their picnic at the beach, a favorite spot north of Davenport. They were certain it would not be crowded.

They planned to continue their conversation as they picnicked and watched the waves crashing against the rocks, bringing back memories from their youth. Afterwards, they planned to spend an hour at the boardwalk at Santa Cruz, ending with a few rides on the merry-go-round.

Anna was giggling when she said, “I hope they still have the brass ring for the occasional winner that gives you a free ride.”

The day worked out just as they planned. Anna sensed the bit of melancholy in Michael as they drove to the beach. She decided to keep the conversation light, concentrating on the fun times of their life together.

“Remember when Gramma Sellech packed those enormous picnic baskets for the two of us when we insisted on moving down the beach from the family during those reunions at Pacific Grove?”

Michael chortled. “She always hid two Hershey bars for me and two Snickers for you.”

“Mike, you built the most wonderful sand castles on the days when you were sure that the tide would not come in high enough to destroy it. I remember you always made me look up the high and low tides before each trip.”

“I also recall how you made me hurry because you wanted to rejoin the gang in time for the volley ball game.”

“Especially during our teen years when I was the star of Red Team. I was determined each time that we could beat you but no one on our team could match your high jump at the net. I was sure each time that we could beat you but that never happened.”

Michael grinned. “Oh, yes. I was competitive! I also remember how you cheered me on during football and basketball seasons, my greatest fan.”

Anna said, “We had some serious moments when you were building the castles. We created a few castles in the air with dreams of our future. You know that it was during the reunion of the year I graduated high school that we talked seriously about choosing medicine.”

Michael replied, “I remember. I had a long talk with Mom and Dad the next day and then with Grampa David, getting strong support from all of them.”

They’d had enough sun and sand by four, drove south to Santa Cruz and boardwalk. They had one ride on the rollercoaster and moved to the merry-go-round where Anna took the outside horse, catching the brass ring with every try.

They arrived home about six thirty, feeling gritty but still energized. The two families were hosting a dinner for a temporary farewell to their children, who now no longer nested in their old spaces.

At the end of the security check line in the airport, Michael and Anna stood quietly for a few moments. Then without a word, Michael wrapped Anna in his arms and planted a brotherly kiss on her cheek, but he could not hold back the tears that spilled over onto her cheeks.

He quickly turned and headed away, not stopping or turning for a final wave. “She mustn’t know how I feel.”

Anna was stunned at the strange parting, but was pushed ahead by the impatient man behind her.

Chapter 2.

The next morning, Michael's dad drove him to the hospital in San Francisco, helping to unload the last of his possessions. He was now ensconced in his new home for the next year. He was aware that, as an intern there would only be rare times when he was not inside the walls of his new home.

Michael had picked Anna's brains regarding the first year of being an intern. He knew of the long hours, the lack of sleep that faced him, but he was looking forward to the opportunities promised by UCSF. He knew it was important to experience a variety of sectors and functions so he could choose his career path.

He also knew it was important to work with interdisciplinary, cross-functional teams and professionals to build connections.

He was most excited about experiencing firsthand roles and functions in careers of choice, to understand the impact of and gain skills needed to succeed in his chosen field.

The hospital met most of his expectations, including the long hours, sleepless nights and the chance to learn hands-on treatment of a variety of diseases and conditions.

His first six weeks found him working with the hospitalist, an internal medicine doctor on duty in the hospital without regular patients of his own. He performed a miscellany of duties in any and all departments, feeling as though he was an errand boy, not a physician. He rotated through a series of departments, including dermatology, surgery, cardiology, radiology, orthopedics and ophthalmology.

The year was slipping by rapidly. Dana became a part of his history, never really believing his story of Anna being his childhood buddy. In the one conversation they had had, she said, “You are in love with her, Mike. A woman can tell.”

He had no time for romance, although Robin, an operating room nurse, found her way into his bed about once a week.

He was always tired and wondered if any of his learning would stick after his departure. His brain seemed to be exploding with information. It was during the last months, when he was assigned full time to the pediatric surgery unit, that he felt as though a burden had been lifted. He loved every moment of the assignment, glorying in the days when he was serving as assistant to the surgeon during an appendectomy on a five year old and on the occasions when he was assigned to sew up after a hernia operation on an infant.

He managed to visit his family during three weekends when he had forty eight consecutive hours of freedom. It was on those weekends that he managed to drop in at the home of Anna’s parents, hoping for news. The information was that she was in good health and her work was going well.

He came home for a visit in June a few weeks before completing his internship. During dinner that evening his mom mentioned seeing her friend, Aunt Diane, that afternoon. “She says that Anna is taking a position in Washington D.C. She says it is an important position and hoped you would send a congratulatory message. She gave me an email address in the event you wanted to reach Anna. I have it in my purse and will get it for you right after dinner.”

He nodded his head but continued eating without saying a word. A minute later he asked, “Mother, are you still planning on changing my room to a large home office for your law practice? I hope you are.”

“Dad and I have talked about it, but we thought it would be nice for you when you do come home.”

Speaking in a gentle voice, “Mom, as hard as it is for you, this is no longer my home. I am packing the last of my things, either for storage or for a trip to the Goodwill store. I plan to visit as often as possible. When I do, I can definitely use the guest room.”

His Dad said, "I'm glad you said that, Michael. I have been trying to say the same thing for weeks."

Michael could see a few tear drops moving down his Mom's cheeks. He reached across the table to cover her hands as Dad stood to wipe away the tears. After a brief interlude, she said, "I know, but it is hard to accept that we are completely empty nesters." She gave a short laugh, freed her hand to dab at her face with her napkin.

Later in his room, Michael and his dad loaded a few cardboard boxes with items for discarding. Now, sitting alone with some mementos and a few envelopes with snap shots that gave him a look at his personal history, he let his mind dwell on moments of that history.

He picked up a snap shot of a ride on a merry-go-round, sitting on a brown horse next to Anna on a white horse. He remembered that the trip to Santa Cruz came about the first weekend after Anna arrived. Like a flash, the moment of their first meeting came to mind.

He was thinking. "I was 6 years old, sitting at Gramma Sara's kitchen table eating cereal when Aunt Diane led Anna through the kitchen door the morning after her arrival. My eyes opened wide and I grinned

Here was my new cousin, who had come from some strange place called Palestine.

She was sort of skinny, tall, but not as tall as I was, pretty in a mysterious kind of way. I had never seen a girl with such beautiful shiny darkish skin and deep dark eyes. The word that came to mind was "gypsy." I remembered a picture of a gypsy girl in a book that mom had read to me once.

Anna let go of her mom's hand and walked to the table saying, "You were at the house when we arrived, but you disappeared. Did you leave early?"

In a quiet and shy voice, I said, "No. There was all that grown up talk and everyone was interested in your arrival, so I went to my room."

"Oh."

"I wanted to talk to you, but I never got the chance."

She changed the subject. "Is Gramma taking care of you today? If so, we can play together. I don't have any friends here and I am scared."

"Oh, don't be scared. I'll be your friend."

That was how it began. On the first day of school, I recall taking her hand in mine as we started up the walk with Diane and Alexa walking behind. I heard Aunt Diane saying later, "The two of us were beaming at this friendship that both of us hoped would be as close as theirs had been."

At the first recess period I introduced her to three friends who had been in his kindergarten class, Susan, Jackson and Kathleen. They taught her to play tag and hopscotch. Jake and I taught her to catch and throw.

The events of those first days were as clear to Michael as though it had all been just a week ago.

He let his mind take over, recalling subsequent events. It so happened that we four new friends were the brightest students in the first grade and probably belonged in the second grade. At the midterm parent conference, the teacher and the school counselor suggested that Diane and Ben consider moving Anna to the second grade.

Ben asked the counselor, "In consideration of her personal being, is it wise to separate her from her new dear friends?"

"We considered that factor and are planning to make the same recommendations to the parents of three of his closest friends, Michael, Susan and Jackson."

At that moment his reminiscing was interrupted. His Mom called, "Dessert and coffee are ready."

He called back, "Give me five minutes to finish. He packed the papers and photos in his brief case, placed the brief case alongside his suitcase and went down to join his folks in a farewell gathering.

Chapter 3.

Michael was aware that a long road lay ahead. Two residencies and a fellowship could take a minimum of another three years. Becoming a pediatric surgeon requires completion of one of the longest training journeys in the medical system.

He had to complete a residency program to achieve board certification in general surgery, in pediatric surgery and a fellowship exclusively devoted to children's surgery.

His research also had revealed that he had to pass two certifications administered by the American Board of Surgery, one in general surgery and one in pediatric surgery.

In the midst of his decision making, he received a letter from his Dad in which he learned that Anna was the Chief of Ophthalmology in the pediatric unit at the Children's Hospital in Washington. He wondered if a residency in surgery at that hospital might be a good idea.

After just a brief consideration, he cast aside the thought. He would not want to be so close to her and yet not be in a close relationship with Anna. It would be too painful. She obviously did not see him in her future.

Earlier in the year he had initiated the process for applying for a residency at the Shriner's hospital in Philadelphia. He mentioned the fact during a lunch break with his friend, Pete Stark, a senior resident who had interned at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

Pete said, "Mike, are you aware that CHOP is considered to be the finest of all children's hospitals for pediatric surgery. I loved my internship but was not accepted for a residency in general surgery. I'm sure you would be accepted if you applied."

"I thought about that but figured I would be shooting too high."

"Don't underrate yourself, Mike. You stand head and shoulders above every other intern in this hospital. I will give you the highest recommendation possible as your resident surgeon. In fact, I can go a step farther. With your permission I can call a personal friend on the surgical staff."

"Did you really mean that about rating me tops among the interims?"

"I sure as hell did. You are, and even without your permission I am going to call Philadelphia."

At the same time, although he knew nothing about the call, one of his current teaching doctors who were on the lookout for top potential residency candidates had called the Boston Children's Hospital. The day after his conversation with Pete, he received a letter from Boston inviting him to apply for a residency in general surgery.

In the end he opted for Philadelphia and had five days to get settled, to go through a general orientation before beginning his duties. Because of the long hours involved he would be living in the hospital.

Because of a severe shortage of beds in two other general hospitals, CHOP had dedicated part of one wing to admit senior citizens. Michael's residency would focus on the surgeries for these seniors and any and all patients being admitted to Emergency.

He had a discussion with Pete about the life of a resident and found what he suspected, that the hours were not much better than those of an intern.

Reading through the paper work he noted that residents were limited to no more than 80 hours of work in a week, averaged over 4 weeks. Clinical duties were limited to no more than 24 hours at a stretch, with an additional 6 hours for transferring patient care and educational requirement being on-call for surgery residents is limited to one day in three.

He chuckled when he read the information, since he had been informed by a number of residents "that while on paper this has decreased hours, he might find no decrease in his work hours, only a decrease in hours recorded. The implication was that he might be encouraged to hide his work hours to appear to comply with the 80 hour limits.

He thought to himself, "So it is a small price to pay to achieve what I want."

He found himself running just two minutes after the orientation lecture. Dr. Bowman invited him to make rounds in the ICU where three of his patients were under close observation instead of in the recovery ward. Bowman was a cardiac surgeon and a damned good teacher, taking Michael for a cup of coffee in order to give him a full picture of the three surgeries. Before the conversation was completed, he heard his name on the intercom. "Dr. Fuller, report to OR seven, stat!"

An OR nurse pointed to the prep room. "Scrub. I'll get your gown and cap. You are assisting Dr. Gentile, who is performing an appendectomy. As he stepped into the OR, the surgeon said, "Introduce yourself and meet the team before we have our chat."

Michael was certain he would forget all the names while he tried to recall what he had learned about this procedure and what had occurred during the last time he had assisted while at UCSF.

He needn't have worried. It was like riding a bicycle. A cyclist never forgets how to ride, no matter the time lapse between rides.

Afterward, he stopped by the cafeteria for a premade sandwich, which he took to the ready room, where he was to hang out until paged. , Two minutes after opening the sandwich wrapper, he was paged again. "Dr. Fuller, report to amphitheater eleven."

He was one the earliest to arrive, but within minutes almost every set was taken by residents, interns and nurses, among others. The intercom announced, "I'm Dr. Fox. I am about to initiate a bypass, perhaps even a triple bypass. The patient arrived by ambulance within the hour. Each of you is be involved in this procedure at some future time. Therefore we deemed it important to have you present for observation and learning."

Michael was totally absorbed, and not only followed, but mentally was leading the surgeon through the operation based on what he had studied and recalled from his one and only past heart operation observation.

At the end of the procedure, the doctor who assisted remained to answer questions from the observers. Michael said to himself, "What a great start to my residency!"

The rest of the day was filled with errands, a lecture on pulmonary surgery that included slides and a professional video. When he returned to what he called the ready room, he found a note informing him to scrub for a seven A.M. hernia repair.

Just before the dinner hour, he went to ICU to check on Dr. Bowman's three patients. If all was well, a brief report was to be put into Dr. Bowman's email electronic box. If, in his opinion, he was unsure, he was to page the doctor.

He felt no anxiety about the first two patients, but Mrs. Zivic's pulse seemed a little slower than the chart showed for the previous three readings. He used the stethoscope to listen to the lungs. He chatted with the nurse's aide about her previous visit. She indicated that she had double checked the pulse rate because it was a borderline reading.

After checking her lungs again, Michael didn't hesitate to page Dr. Bowman, who arrived within five minutes. After checking the pulse, the blood pressure and listening to the patient's heart and lungs, he said, "Good call, Fuller, although there is no immediate danger."

He turned to the aide. "Please take your reading every fifteen minutes for the next two hours. If there is any significant change from these last reading, page Dr. Fuller. "He handed her a prescription. "Ask for a rush."

He motioned for Michael to follow him to the elevator. On the way he said, "You are to be on standby for the next two hours. If you sense a serious problem, page the duty cardiologist. I will inform your supervisor that you are not to be given any other assignment that might make you unavailable. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"We opened up two arteries for Mrs. Zivic but she may be subject to some weakness with a valve. Given her overall condition we did not want to do an invasive procedure unless the situation becomes urgent."

"I understand."

"Good."

Michael decided to have his dinner at the cafeteria. While eating he mentally reviewed his knowledge of heart valve problems. When he finished, he decided to spend the balance of the two hours in the ICU area, just to be closer if needed. He had no reason to be elsewhere. His supervisor agreed.

Michael took some reading material and found a seat in the large nurse's station in the middle of the ICU area. The supervising nurse introduced herself and asked Michael for his opinion of the patient's condition. They were interrupted by the aide who came running. "Mrs. Z is having slight pains and her heart beat seems irregular."

Michael and Mary Jo, the nurse, dashed to the patient's side. After a half minute examination, Michael asked the aide to page the duty cardiologist. He and Mary Jo called for the oxygen cart. She began taking a pulse reading while Michael used his stethoscope to get another heart reading. Mary Jo pointed to the blood pressure monitor, bringing a deep frown to both faces. Michael turned on the oxygen and placed the mask over the patient's face.

The duty cardiologist arrived a bit out of breath and asked Michael to step aside while he and Mary Jo worked together. Within two minutes, he turned to Michael. "Call OR to set up a team. Get a message to Bowman. Have the orderlies bring in one of the gurneys. You can scrub. I want you to serve as part of the team. You deserve the opportunity. Good work. By the way, what is your name?"

"Fuller, sir."

Michael assisted Dr. Franken, a senior third year resident whose fingers moved with precision and speed as he performed a repair on the weakened valve. At the conclusion he expected to be

asked to close but was surprised. Franked smiled, “Great work for a greenie, Fuller. Now, why don’t you take the good news to the family? Let your first be good news, because not all messages in the future will be good news.” He turned to finish the work on the table.

Dr. Bowman, who arrived late, had scrubbed and observed from just behind Michael. He walked out with Michael and complimented him for being alert and nearby in order to save Mrs. Zivic’s life.

“I’ll stand by while you deliver the news to Mr. Zivic, who will be accompanied by his daughter, Olga. You deserve the opportunity to deliver the good news.”

Fred Zivic was a handsome, gray haired double amputee in a wheel chair. His companion was a twentyish blond beauty. Both had taut bodies and drawn facial expressions. Their grim faces melted into smiles as Michael walked toward them with his smile beaming the good news that needed no words to interpret the meaning. Olga, without any hesitation, moved forward and gave Michael a long and warm hug, then pulled away blushing. “Sorry. Perhaps that was inappropriate, but I saw the news in your smile.”

Mr. Zivic stuck out his hand for a handshake, letting tears of happiness flow as he thanked Michael. Michael explained that he was only the assistant, but Dr. Bowman related to him the story of what happened that brought her to the OR.

Olga said, “I didn’t get your name.”

“It’s Michael Fuller.”

“Thank you again, Dr. Fuller. You are a hero in our family. An attendant told us the story while we were waiting nervously for the news.

Michael nodded and turned to leave while Dr. Bowman stayed to answer questions from the Zivics.

During the next several days, Michael assisted during three angioplasty procedures, two heart patients and one with a blocked left femoral artery. Friday, to his surprise, he was assigned to perform a femoral artery angioplasty, with Dr. Bowman serving as his assistant.

He was tense and had sweaty palms as he began to scrub. He began mentally to rehearse the procedure but was interrupted as Dr. Bowman joined him at wash basin. “Nervous, Dr. Fuller?”

“I was, just prior to doing a mental rehearsal of the procedure.”

“Good. Why don’t you recite the steps as we finish scrubbing and donning our gowns and caps?”

He did and got thumbs up from Dr. Bowman.

It helped a great deal, so that Michael entered the OR completely confident. The entire procedure went without a hitch. He now had his own patient in recovery. As a result of the week’s

assignments, he was given evening rounds on behalf of the surgeons whom he had assisted. He loved the day. By nine thirty, the visitors had departed and the recovery floor and ICU were quiet.

He visited with the three patients for whom he had assisted before stopping by for a visit with Mrs. Zivic. She was in a private ICU room, darkened to allow her to sleep. As he stepped into the room he heard the rustle of clothing. He was startled, having expected no one except the sleeping patient. He peered into the darkness, seeing the shape of a small woman rising from a chair on the far side.

As the form rounded the foot of the bed, she said “Sorry I startled you, doctor. Mother had a hard time going to sleep, so the head nurse gave me permission to stay with her. She finally fell asleep a few minutes ago.”

“That was thoughtful of both of you. I am afraid she will waken again as I do a little probing. Anything you want to tell me?”

“Nothing special. Her chart will tell you that as well as the monitor. Her temperature is a bit high as you would expect and her pulse is strong. She awakened an hour ago and was having trouble getting back to sleep.”

As he turned on the wall lamp on low, she saw him smiling. She hastened to say, “I am a recent graduate of the university nursing school and hope to start my duties here at the end of the month.”

“That sounds great.” He decided that there was more to this woman than her appearance projected. On the spur of the moment he asked, “If you’re free perhaps you can tell me more over a cup of coffee. I’m due for a rest period as soon as I complete my exam of your mother.”

This time it was she who was surprised. She recovered quickly, saying “That would be nice and I hope it includes a piece of pie. I haven’t eaten since noon.” He laughed. “Better than that, you can share my dinner. I haven’t eaten since two this afternoon.”

Ten minutes after starting the meal, Michael said “Olga, your food is getting cold.” She had been telling him of her desire to serve in times of major disasters. She grinned but attacked her food like it was going out of style.

Michael asked, “Why are you going to work in pediatrics instead of attending the special disaster school?”

She held her fork in midair saying, “Because I want to focus on the needs of children in any disaster in which I can serve. I figure there will be plenty of people to tell me how to maneuver in a disaster scene.”

“You’re probably right. I’m still not sure where I want to serve, but after tis residency, I am applying for a pediatric surgery residency. Like you, I want to spend my career helping children grow without physical limitations to hinder their maturing and give them a chance at happiness.”

She asked “Do you get to operate on any children during this residency?”

“Perhaps in the right circumstance I may participate in a surgery on some youth, but I am sure not on a young child. That will come during my next residency.”

The meal was interrupted when he heard his name on the intercom.” Dr. Fuller, report to emergency. Stat. Dr. Fuller to emergency.”

“Olga, I’d like to continue this conversation at some time. May I have your phone number? I get an occasional day off. Perhaps we can grab a bite together. ”

She pulled out a pen, scribbled a few swipes on a napkin and handed it to Michael before he dashed for the exit. “I’d like that, Michael.”

He gave her a wide smile and waved goodbye.

Chapter 4

A few days later, Michael was walking through the visitors’ lounge when he noticed Olga entertaining two preschool age girls. She was using some string to show them how to play cat-in-the-cradle. The girls were giggling and saying, “more!” as Olga was putting the string in her purse.

He heard her say. “How about if I read you a story? Each of you can find your favorite book on the shelf. Marie, I will read yours first.”

Michael walked toward her as the children ran to the book shelf. “Good morning, Olga. Nice to see you. Are you having trouble getting to see your mother?”

She flashed him a warm smile. “The staff are bathing mother in preparation for sending her home, so I said I would wait here. I like to be available to nervous families awaiting news from surgery. To my delight, Marie and Marge needed a bit of attention. It suited me just fine. I love children.”

He smiled. “That was obvious. You were bubbly and kind. I am sure that their parents are grateful.”

Her face moved from a smile to a more sober countenance. “I told their aunt I would take care of them while she visited their mother, who is in intensive care. Their father is in Afghanistan, or on his way home.”

He looked at his wrist watch. “I’m running late. You are an angel. I still plan to call you for that conversation.”

The emergency room administrator introduced herself. "I'm Sue Williams, the admin. We started one short and now a second surgeon has developed a temperature so we called for help. It's one of those days. Three hours until the next shift. We have six injured coming in from a two car crash on the expressway."

"Point the way, so I can begin to scrub. To whom do I report?"

"Bill Gogol will be there waiting."

After brief introductions, Bill asked, "Any experience setting bones?"

"Only by observation. My surgeries so far have been limited to the torso and heart procedures, although I have assisted in setting broken legs while interning."

"Okay. During triage, look for dislocations and clean fractures. Offer yourself accordingly. I will keep an eye on you and move you if necessary."

Michael's first case was a young teenager who was the least injured, suffering a dislocated shoulder and elbow in addition to cuts and bruises, none of which were too serious. In order to reduce her fears and help her relax, he asked her for some general information. She told him, "I'm a high school grad and will be attending Temple Universality. Do you know if my friend Jimmy is okay?"

"I don't know, but I will ask my aide to find out while I take care of you. What's his last name?"

"Johnston."

Twenty minutes later he was saying. "Jimmy is in no danger. He has a broken arm and some serious cuts and some bruises. In fact, he is my next patient. I will tell him you are doing well."

He reset the shoulder and elbow, administering some pain killer and sedative. He taped the right shoulder and ordered a sling for her left arm. She was sleeping as he finished.

He left, going to change his gown and gloves. A matronly nurse helped him change. She said, "I'm Rosie Patterno, an old warhorse operating room nurse. I've seen and nursed every known fracture in the dictionary. Bill thought I will be helpful since fractures are not part of your experience."

Michael grinned. "Great! I expect you can teach me a lot and I will be your obedient student." She burst into a loud guffaw, leading the way to the operating room.

On the way, she said "The protocol in emergency is slightly different when we are jammed. As you can see, you will not have an M.D. to assist. I will serve as your assistant, while one of my most experienced aides will serve as the OR nurse. What do you remember about the procedure for treating an open fracture?"

They were entering the OR. She said "The young man is heavily sedated so we are free to talk."

"I think I can quote the book." "When bones have punctured the skin, surgery is usually required. Because of the increased risk for infection, we have to perform surgery immediately."

Our patient has been given antibiotics intravenously in the emergency room and probably received a tetanus shot. "

"First we will have to make certain the cuts from the injury are thoroughly cleaned out. We will have to fix each broken bone separately. Since we probably have to use plates and screws, I presume they are already available."

Rosie chuckled. "You presume correctly. I took personal charge of setting up the surgery. You're doing great for a greenie."

He grinned. "Thank you, teacher," then continued. "The bone fragments will be repositioned, what you refer to as reduced, into their normal alignment. We then will use the special screws and metal plates to attach to the outer surface of the bone in order to hold everything together."

"Okay, let's see how nimble fingers execute the plan."

While he was sure that Rosie would be needed to help with replacing the fragments, she only helped once and watched his fingers move magically through the entire procedure. She said, "Beautiful work, Michael." In all my years I have only once seen anyone with what I call "magic fingers."

"Now, let's clean up and have some hot cocoa from my thermos in the locker room. Then it's time for you to hit the sack. It's well past your quota of hours for the day and you probably have a six o'clock call."

"Sounds great. I thank you for all your help, especially the little comments and you rooting me on during the procedure."

"That was a cake walk, Michael. You practically quoted the book, and even greater was your ability to perform precisely as the book required while under stress. I predict great things in your future, Michael."

"Thanks, Rosie. I hope you are right."

The first few weeks were not much different from those months as an intern. He did have more exposure to the OR and its procedures because this was his specialty. He found himself providing direct patient care and participating in ongoing educational activities, including teaching rounds, taking medical histories, performing physical examinations, ordering and interpreting diagnostic studies.

Much of his learning and work came during rounds. There were physicians and other members of the health care team along with the residents moving from patient to patient in order to assess progress. The team was looking for response to treatment, diagnostic developments, and testing alternate treatment plans if recommended.

He was asked to perform diagnostic or treatment procedures and conferred with consultants.

He had numerous assignments to the Emergency Room as well the main ward, a special care unit, or in the operating room.

As the year progressed he spent much more time prepping patients for surgery, observing intricate procedures as part of his education and assisting during a variety of surgeries.

Some of his most satisfying experience came when he performed surgeries on patients admitted into Emergency. Dr. Bill Gogol was more than pleased with Michael's performance on that first occasion. If the ER was extremely busy, he made it a point to request Michael's presence, sometimes to have Michel assist in complex and/or life threatening situations

The hours were long but invigorating. There was excitement with the learning of each new skill, excitement that he was moving one step closer to his ultimate goal of qualifying as a pediatric surgeon.

Six weeks had elapsed since those few minutes he had enjoyed with Olga Zivic. He had thought of her on numerous occasions but didn't call, knowing he could not depend on any day during which he could promise to see her.

One Thursday afternoon, while napping on his cot, his cell phone buzzed. He bounced out of bed, knowing that someone was asking for his service. "This is Janice from HR. Is this Dr. Fuller?"

"Yes."

"Doctor. You are ordered to take forty eight hours off duty. We are out of compliance with rules and regulations regarding your working hours. Your various supervisors have been notified that starting at midnight on this Friday; you are unavailable until 0800 on Monday morning."

"Thank you, Janice. You are an angel, a herald of good news, the most surprising news I have received since reporting for duty."

He heard her laughing as she said, "Have a great weekend."

Two minutes later he heard a soft voice responding to his phone call. "This is Olga."

"Hi, Olga. This is Mike Fuller. I'm not sure you remember me." He started to say "We met__," but was interrupted with, "I remember." He thought the soft voice turned flat, perhaps a bit cool but he was not deterred. "I have just been offered some free time for the first time since we last saw each other and I hope you still meant the invitation to call."

There was silence on the other end. He said "I do apologize but it is true that I haven't had a day off in six weeks."

Her voice seemed to soften. "I think I understand. I've had periods like that during my training days."

He pushed ahead. "I am free all day Saturday. If you are free, would you be willing to show me a few sights in this City of Brotherly Love? I can rent a car."

She seemed to hesitate, making Michael feel that he was being turned down. But she said, "I have a set of wheels. Why don't I pick you up about eleven at the front portico of the hospital? In the meantime, I can work on a plan. I presume you would like to see some of the historical sites. Am I right?"

He laughed. "Yes, of course, but mostly I want to spend some time following up on our conversation."

She laughed. "All right. How about we start at ten and miss the crowds at those locations. We can have a late lunch and continue our chat."

"That sounds good to me. I'll be waiting at ten."

He was startled when a dark blue open convertible slid to a stop in front of him. He didn't recognize this bandana covered, vision in a yellow sleeveless summer dress but when she flashed a warm smile, his heart jumped a mite. "Looking for a ride, big boy?"

He grinned, "If you are going my way?"

She laughed, "If you get in, you will be at my mercy."

"I guess I'll take that risk." Michael felt good. He was making a correct assumption. She had forgiven him for the weeks of neglect.

She said, "I think I will give you the traditional tour first." She started with the Thirtieth Street Penn Station after driving through the University campus. As they drove by the Franklin Institute she said "If we stop here, you will want to spend the entire day here. Let's save this for another day."

He liked the sound of that statement. She took him by the old and then the New City Hall, the National Convention Center. All through the ride she gave him the tour guide spiel while recalling a few anecdotal stories.

They stopped and spent some time at the recently installed Living Memorial Flame. Ten minutes later they were parked just outside Liberty Center. It was here that a more sober tone was sounded. The next two hours were impressive, as they entered the Liberty Area, starting with a walk through the Historical Park then a visit to see the Liberty Bell and finally Independence Hall.

Back at the parking garage, she opened the trunk, took out a few packages. When they were seated, she said, "You must be starved. Have some potato chips and pretzels. Lunch will be served a little later."

Within minutes she was driving on the expressway. He said "Dare I ask?"

"Nope. It's a surprise"

“They chomped on their food since conversation in an open convertible at seventy mile per hour is a near impossibility. She said, “There is a thermos of iced tea under your seat. Pour some for me, if you will.”

Michael finally discovered the surprise when he saw a sign, “Valley Forge, 3 Miles.”

“He laughed. “You sure know how to treat a greenie tourist. This is wonderful, but is there a restaurant nearby?”

She avoided the question but said, “Your hunger will be vanquished in time.”

Fifteen minutes later he was lugging a heavy food cooler to a spot in a small glade of elms. She was carrying a blanket, a tote bag with tablecloth, napkins, glasses and stainless steel implements.

Michael could not wipe the grin off his face, being so pleased that Olga had gone to such lengths on his behalf. She was smiling inward, totally aware of his pleasure.

“Michael, why don’t you spread the tablecloth on the picnic table and set the table while I sort out the food.”

Three minutes later, she hand him a corkscrew and a bottle of Sonoma County chardonnay. “I thought that a Californian might help give you a touch of home. Thus the chardonnay.”

Before opening the bottle, he took her face in his hands, planting a nice gentle kiss on her lips. “Woman, you are very special. I am deeply moved.”

Blushing, she replied, “It is just a small thank you for being there for my mom. By the way, she is doing well. My widowed aunt is staying with my folks. She is a retired nurse and daddy’s favorite sister she called before mom was released from the hospital. She said, “Olga, you should not be forced to move back in with your folks. Besides, your dad and mom have a great relationship. They actually initiated the call and I want to come, if it’s okay with you.

“Naturally, I agreed. Otherwise I would have been putting my career on hold. Now, take a sip of the wine to see if you approve of my choice.”

He did, nodding his head in approval. “First class,” mentally saying to him “That cost a pretty penny.”

After a delicious lunch of cold chicken, homemade potato salad, biscuits and Honey and wine, they cleared the table, spread the blanket on the ground and lay back, allowing the food to digest.

They were on a small knoll, overlooking a large quiet meadow. Michael was reminded of that well known painting by Andrew Wyeth, the Pennsylvania realist artist.

His mind was dawn back when he heard, “Michael, my middle name is Martha. My friend’s use that name and I would be pleased to include you as a friend

“All right. Martha it is. I wonder if you feel free to tell me about your dad. A double amputee implies military service.”

“Actually, not military. He was first responder at the towers on 911. He was a fireman. He was trapped by a steel beam as he was returning from carrying a woman out of the debris. There had been a slight pause in movement of the building before resuming its crumbling. Despite almost immediate help from his brother firemen, it was too late to save his legs.”

Michael was unable to speak as his heart went out to her. She continued. “I was crushed. He was the love of my life. I was probably a spoiled kid since I was an only child and the apple of his eye. As far back as I can remember he took me on picnics, fun days on Coney Island, building sand castles, riding the merry-go-round and afternoon visits to the Metropolitan Museum. He taught me to play checkers and chess as well as play hide and seek indoors on rainy days.”

Michael heard her voice break. He reached with his right hand to find her left hand.”

Michael said, “Seeing your dad in the hospital must have been traumatic for a little girl and must have been devastating.”

“Yes, to an extent, but as soon as he was able, we began our chess games in the hospital. He began to inspire me to read more widely by choosing books for me to read to him. We played games that included history and geography. It was during those long visits in the hospital that I became close to two nurses, who would take me for walks and tell me about the work they did.”

Michael said, “If I am guessing right, the hospital experience and your dad’s injuries in a catastrophe moved you to choose this career path?”

“Yes. As I researched the details of 911, I became interested in reading of the many annual disasters that occur and the number of children affected. There are the dead, but even more those who are disabled, because of the length of time that it takes so few doctors to treat the injuries to the children.”

“I know what you are talking about, Olga, I mean Martha.” They both laughed at his stumbling change from Olga to Martha. “I know a couple of men my age who are physically crippled because they did not get proper treatment after injuries during their youth. Both are brilliant but handicapped because of physical appearance. It’s a damned shame.”

Martha squeezed his hand, saying, “How about a walk to loosen up. When we come back, I want to hear something about you so I can figure out why you crossed my path.”

They strolled about, reading various plaques. Martha realized that Michael was holding her hand and gently massaging her knuckle. It felt so personal. She liked it.

She asked, “How did you come across my path?”

The question was a trigger. In an instant he was remembering his last conversation, at his party in

California, with Anna who had asked about his hopes for the future. He quickly shut down the picture of the two of them alone on that balcony, but he remembered most of the answer he gave. He said to Martha, "In recent years, I had a few conversations and emails with a friend who had this idea of working with children. That got me to thinking about the myriad of kids displaced from their homes, either because of military action or large natural disasters. We all know that, here in the States, there are thousands of children who lack the resources to find the medical help they need, thus limiting their mobility and opportunities for a full life."

As he said the words, he remembered Anna saying, "I love it, Michael. As you know, that is my dream. Perhaps at some time in the future, we can join up, working together in some faraway corner of the world. His heart had jumped but he had said "That is more than I dare dream about, Anna."

His mind stayed on the memory until Martha said "Come back, Michael, from wherever you went a minute ago. Besides you are squeezing my fingers."

"I'm sorry, Martha. I was remembering a conversation when someone else asked me that same question previously."

Martha teased, "She must have been special to keep you nailed to that memory."

"She was. We grew up together starting about age six."

Martha was intrigued but decided that discretion was better than curiosity. "Do you have something specific in mind for your career?"

"Nope. There will a dozen major disasters before I get my license."

How did you choose Philadelphia for your residency?"

"I had a hard time choosing between here and several other invitations, but the fact that I could do my general surgery residency in a children's hospital offered the possibility of doing some work with children even in this first year, possibly hastening my qualifying for my boards. The shortage of beds in the city and CHOP making a ward available for seniors was a stroke of luck for me. That made it possible to do my general surgery residency here."

In a serious tone she said, "And a stroke of luck for me and my family. Do you come from a family of doctors?"

"Oh no. My great grandparents were entrepreneurs, although Grampa was also a lawyer. My maternal grandfather is an engineer and Grandma is a lawyer. Dad is a doctor and Mother has a small personal law practice. What is special is that all of them, at one time or another, gave a boost up to young people either as volunteers or in their professions."

"Wow. I would like to know people like that. Until I went to the university, I lived with blue collar folks. At the university I knew some kids like you, but not a personal basis."

He said, "They are just regular people, living and caring as many people do all over the world. My folks and their closest friends are coming east for a visit. I want you to meet them. You

will love my aunt, Diane. She spent years working for the Office of Naval Intelligence in the Middle East and is loaded with fascinating stories.”

Martha tried to let that sink in, saying to herself “I just heard Michael implying more than a day’s picnic. I would like that. He is so real, truly humble and caring. I hope he means what he said.”

Aloud, she said, “That sounds like fun. She must have a lot of stories to tell. I’d love to hear them if I have a chance.” She glanced at her watch. “I hate to mention this but we should consider starting back.”

“Martha, this has been marvelous, the most restful day of my life in Philadelphia.”

“Thank you for calling and for the idea of a tour. I feel relaxed. You are such easy company I feel as though we’ve known each other for more than a few hours.”

“I do, too, and I wish we could go on. I’m in no hurry. I’m off until Monday morning. I would like to take you out to dinner. I heard of a great sea food house called Devon’s.”

Martha said, “I feel the same about continuing. Since you seem to like sea food do you like oysters, Michael?”

“I love them.”

“Devon’s is too expensive. If you don’t consider this a bold suggestion, why don’t we stop to buy some oysters, two pieces of Shad, some Shad roe and some Cole slaw for a dinner at my apartment. Cissy, my roomie, is away for a couple of weeks. I love to cook.

“We have a small balcony from which we can view some of the city lights as evening approaches. We will have a full moon rising, with a great view from the balcony.”

It didn’t take long for Michael to agree. They bundled their possessions and headed for the car. Instead of taking the interstate, Martha opted for a slower drive home, giving him a chance to see some of the communities on the Main Line. She drove through Bryn Mawr, Ardmore and Haverford, and then wended her way through Radnor, Villanova and others.

When they crossed the city line Michael said, “I have never seen so many large and beautiful homes in community after community. Thank you for that.”

During dinner, Martha responded to Michael’s inquiry. “Care to tell me about yourself to date?”

For a long minute she went through a mental debate. “Short and sweet or the real story?”

She decided. “I like him and if this is going someplace, he needs to know the real me.”

“I will, although some of it was not really beautiful. If I do, I need a full response from you.”

Michael nodded. "I promise."

"I grew up in Brooklyn. Dad was a fireman, working in Manhattan. I had three older brothers, powerfully built, who were determined to defend and protect my honor and did so until Mother, Dad and I moved to Philadelphia. They are firemen, following in Dad's footsteps.

I was a pretty good kid, smart and a top student, graduating as the salutatorian of my class. Each time I was on the verge of running around with the wrong kids, Fred, my oldest brother, managed to save my skin.

I never had a steady boyfriend while in high school, so I went wild during my freshman year at Penn. I was on my own, while my folks were preparing to move to Philadelphia.

I was an easy prey for the upper classman who seduced me. Sure enough, I got pregnant. It turned out fine, although the event was traumatic. Bobby's folks paid all the expenses of my visits to the Planned Parenthood for counseling. My mom came down to be with me as I tried to decide my future.

"She and I met with Bobby and his folks. One thing was apparent, neither Bobby nor I wanted to get married. My mother and his folks agreed. There was no basis for a good marriage."

The three of us, the counselor, Mom and I finally opted for an abortion while Bobby's mother arranged for all the expenses. I also got the impression that his dad made a large gift to the organization."

"I will admit that for that brief period I experienced a lot of angst. I hardly slept, thinking about a potential life in my belly that might become a joy but also would limit my options for a future. It was only when I clearly understood that I would be able to have children in the future that I had a choice. I would not wish that emotional struggle for any woman. Although because of it, I believe I am a stronger person."

"After that experience I righted the ship and had smooth sailing during my years at Penn, especially when I decided to study nursing. I believe I am in a good place and ready for work at the hospital."

A fairly long silence ensued. Michael reached for her hand, cradling it in his own, hoping that Martha was receiving his silent empathy.

"She thought, "That was thoughtful and very nice."

He told her about his growing up, including his close friendship with Anna, his prowess on the football field and the popularity that accompanied his feats. She felt a sense of envy when he told of the great family gatherings of four generations. When he talked of his great grandmother, Sara, she felt like this was a woman she had to meet.

She had a sense that he was holding something back, but she figured that, if there was a future with Michael, even that secret would be revealed.

The magnificent day was coming to an end. After jointly clearing the table and doing the dishes, the two of them had moved to the settee on the balcony, watching the auto traffic moving at a snail's pace, five stories below, listening to the sounds of horns and police whistles. The lights of the city dwellers were beginning to flicker. They were waiting for her promised moonrise.

Michael had found her hand lying on his own, rousing a tender feeling emanating from her touch. They were sitting, watching and listening, each deep in their respective thoughts. A silence had developed during those few minutes. Michael asked, "A penny for your thoughts?"

Martha did not respond immediately but Michael kept waiting. She started, stammered and finally said. "I was hoping you would kiss me."

The response was a kiss that seemed to go on forever, until she finally pushed gently on his chest. "I need to catch my breath, Michael." Another silence ensued and was broken when Martha asked, her voice almost breathless, "Michael would you like to stay with me tonight?"

"God. I would love that but are you sure? I have been on the verge of asking several times."

"I don't know about being sure, but I don't want this to end now. I'm not very experienced, but I have this feeling that making love with you will be as deeply moving as sharing our thoughts has been today. Everything about you is tender and caring."

"That is a wonderful compliment. I am sure we will find deep pleasure making love to and with each other." He pulled her close to his body as the first sliver of the moon appeared on the horizon

His mind was whirling with memories of this day. Something magic had transpired. In less than a dozen hours, this lovely human being had opened herself to him. He was responding to her humble but direct personality, her willingness to please him, even going the extra mile. He nestled his lips into her soft hair as the moon rose. Just as it reached the level of the highest level of the skyscrapers, he lifted her into his arms, placing his lips on hers as he moved indoors.

Michael was awakened by the aroma of hot coffee. He opened his eyes to the marvelous sight of Martha holding out a steaming mug for him while placing a glass of orange juice on the side table. "As soon as I shower, I will start the biscuits and the omelet."

He sighed, a big grin smiling his thanks.

A swallow of coffee and two sips of orange juice took only a minute before he shed the light blanket and headed for the shower. Martha gasped with surprise that turned to delight as Michael slipped into the smallish cubicle. The first minute was awkward for Martha. This was a strangely new but exciting experience. Not knowing what to expect, she handed Michael the soap, turned and said. "It's so nice to have someone wash my back,"

He took the soap, saying, "You are even more beautiful when you blush." She was tingling with trepidation as his hand moved, so gently massaging her back. Her skin began to raise goose bumps

as his hands circled around and caressed her breast and his lips were moving to that sweet spot behind her left ear. She remembered when that had happened last evening, a new and special experience. She was now aware of the nearness and state of his body and she turned, placing her arms around his neck. “Oh, Michael, I presume it is fine that breakfast will be a little late?”

She dressed in shorts and t-shirts. They drove to a small business area where Michael purchased some shorts and t-shirts. After he changed, they walked the neighborhood and settled down on the balcony to read the Sunday papers, the Philadelphia Inquirer and the New York Times. In the background, the radio was playing the Philadelphia Orchestra’s Sunday concert in the park. Martha was humming along a section of the Tchaikovsky sixth symphony. Michael could not remember any day in his life as beautiful as this.

Martha whipped up waffles and sausage for dinner. Conversation moved to their activities of the morning. Martha said, “I report for orientation at ten tomorrow morning. I begin my duties on Wednesday.”

Michael said, “I am scheduled to perform two tonsillectomies, starting at eleven after observing a gall bladder procedure at eight. In the afternoon I am scheduled to replace a surgeon in Emergency. He had to take leave because of a family situation. If events are as usual, I will have some special surgical challenges during this five day stretch.”

Martha interrupted, “Did you read the article in the Times about the earthquake in Peru and the school building that was crushed, injuring or killing about three hundred children. Oh, how I wish were there!”

“I had the same feeling but I know I am not yet skilled enough to be a trusted doctor on that scene.”

“I know, but I was so moved. I found myself crying quietly.”

“I noticed.” He thought to him, “That is another trait that makes her special.”

Out of the blue, “Michael, are you spending the night? This has been one of the most wonderful weekends of my life. In fact, it is the most wonderful. I don’t want it to ever end.”

He said, “I was hoping for the invitation but I must be at the hospital before eight tomorrow morning.”

“I know. I will drive you. I’ll be wide awake thinking about the tender way you made love to me a some time during the night.” So it was.

As he scrubbed in preparation for his observation in the OR for the gall bladder removal, he thought, “This is the first time that I can recall that I have gone forty eight hours without thinking about Anna. Is it possible that Martha may be the first woman to help me get past thinking that I need Anna to be in my future?”

His thought was interrupted when Dr. Jensen said, “Time to go, Fuller.”

An hour later he was thanking Dr. Jensen for the chance to observe and also thanking him for the comments during the procedure that helped Michael to understand some of details more clearly. At that point the intercom squawked, “Dr. Fuller, to Emergency. Stat! Dr. Fuller, Emergency. Stat!”

He wanted to shout, “I’m scheduled to operate,” but he dashed to Emergency. Dr. Gogol met him, explaining, “I asked for you. Someone else is taking your tonsillectomies. School bus crashed, bringing us loads of kids. The first will arrive in twenty minutes. We’ve had early notice. Ambulances are still on their way. You may be handling one or two cases, for which you will have no hands-on experience, but you will have Rose Patterno, who has seen and worked with every known situation under the sun. She is waiting for you.

“We still have no information, so I asked Rose to give you an outline of the kind of injuries to expect.”

Rose was scrubbing. Michael joined her. She started with, “You probably know all of the following, but it is standard practice to mention this to new staff coming into Emergency.

“There are several classes of injuries for which we need to be prepared. First, we may face head injuries. In an accident, one of the most common injuries suffered by drivers and passengers is a closed head injury, which can range from a mild concussion to a brain injury. We call it TB even when there is no physical sign of trauma, because the brain is at risk of being moved inside the skull resulting from the impact of a crash.”

“Another common form of injury from an accident is neck injuries, which can occur in more mild forms such as whiplash and neck strain, but it may be cervical radiculopathy or disc injury.”

“Car crashes can cause back sprain, strain, fracture, disc injury, thoracic spine injury, lumbar radiculopathy, and lumbar spine injury.

“Some serious back injuries may take some time to show up after an accident.

“In an auto accident, injuries to the face can be caused by almost anything including a steering wheel, dashboard, airbag, windshield, shattered glass. These injuries range in severity from scrapes and bruises, to laceration and fractures, or worse.”

“We also need to be on the lookout for psychological damage, especially after serious car accidents involving severe injuries. If you have contact with ambulance personnel, it is good practice to ask if they noticed unusual type of behavior.

“We need to look for signs of emotional distress.” She was interrupted by the buzz of her cell phone. She responded, “Thanks. We’re on our way.”

To Michael, “Our first patient is a sixteen year old female with multiple abrasions, bruises and at least two broken ribs. She may also have a cracked femur, a hairline fracture at least. I figure that this case may be only an introduction, a sort of test for you.”

As they entered the OR, Michael realized that they were in OR11, the amphitheater. He glanced upward, noticing a group of young faces, recognizing one of them immediately. “That’s Martha. This must be her orientation class.”

He turned his attention to the patient. Dr. Allen, the anesthesiologist, said, “All under control.” Michael looked around for a staff doctor but saw only a fellow resident who, apparently, was to be his assistant.

For a moment, Michael felt a sense of panic. “Where is my mentor? God, Am I on my own?”

Rose must have seen the question mark on his face. She said. “You’re it Michael. Let’s go.”

He gave his attention to the chest of the young woman, coming to the conclusion after his examination and a look at the x-ray that both broken ribs were fractured but presenting no danger of puncturing the lung. He said, “Rose, before we deal with her femur, we’ll tape her torso to hold the ribs in place until they heal themselves.”

Rose smiled, gave him thumbs up and handed him the e-ray of the femur.

She read the report from the emergency personnel at the scene of the crash. “The victim was not driving. She was wearing a seat belt. The auto was traveling at approximately sixty mph. The patient was conscious. She is in excellent physical condition, running about two miles daily. She says no allergies, no medications and claims to be in extremely good health.”

Michael studied the x-ray, and then turned to the leg for examination. As he studied closely, he was saying aloud, “Transverse fracture in the middle of the femur. Clean break, closed. I don’t see any break in the skin. Any one sees an opening that I may have missed?”

He heard a muffled set of "Noes." He continued his comments. “She is a lucky young woman. I see no need for operating. I see no obvious deformity, the thigh has no unusual angle, twisting, or shortening of the leg.”

Meanwhile the other nurse had started treating the cuts and bruises on the patient’s face, arms and torso.

Rose made a phone call, hung up, saying “Another team will take over here, Michael, placing her in traction and ascertaining that the bone parts are lined up, then arrange for a cast. We are wanted in OR7, after a fifteen minute break.”

Rose had preceded him into the OR. She had looked at the chart. Noticing his approach, she said “We have a switch. Dr.Gogol was to handle this case but is not ready, so we have been assigned. The major problem is a punctured lung.”

Michael could almost hear his gut churn. His mind was racing to recall all he remembered about the lung during his studies in med school and a little exposure as an intern. “A fractured femur is one thing but a punctured lung could mean a matter of life or death.”

He looked at Rose, who gave him another thumbs up, saying, “A piece of cake, Michael.” He wished he felt the same way.

“Our patient is a sixteen year old male with multiple bruises and surface wounds, but the major concern is a punctured lung. The lung puncture leaves a traumatic pneumothorax. The ambulance crew, having noticed the collection of air between the lung tissue and the chest cavity, have patched the punctures with bandages and petroleum jelly. They’ve done a good job but a lot of time has passed, making this critical, time wise...”

“As you can see, the patient is receiving supplemental oxygen.”

Michael nodded. “Good. This oxygen will help accelerate a faster decrease in air between the lung and the chest cavity.”

After a brief consultation with his assistant surgeon and a joint examination, they agreed with Rose on the need for immediate surgery. Michael said to himself, not realizing he was speaking aloud “Any delay in treating at this puncture can lead to complications like the lung not re-inflating properly.”

Rose said, “I agree. We certainly want to avoid the possibility of infection.”

Michael inserted a small-bore needle between the second and third ribs into the air that had filled in between the lung and chest cavity. One side of the needle was attached to a syringe and the syringe began to remove air from the chest space. This continued until more than 3 liters of air had been removed. At that point, Michael asked his assistant to insert a tube in the lung.

The tube was attached to a suction device that slowly removed the remaining air. Rose handed Michael the antibiotic to be administered to prevent infection.

Michael kept speaking his thought process aloud.

“Since the lung issue cannot repair itself, we will have to do that. I know it is preferable to repair the lung tissue by going through tubes placed down the throat into the bronchial airways, but in this case I should approach through the area where some object already pierced the skin. Besides, we will need the a tube to remove the remaining air and maybe suction out any blood cells or other fluids in the pleural space.”

Probably because he was unconsciously seeking agreement, he looked toward Rose who was nodding her approval. He glanced questioningly toward the assistant who said, “From what little I know, it seems your better option.”

At that moment, the anesthesiologist said “BP is dropping.” Michael realized that it was possible that another blood vessel was leaking. He turned to Rose. “Scalpel.” He worked for two hours and marveled at the team work that supported him every step of the way. When the last stitch had been made and the procedure completed, he turned to thank the team. As he turned, he saw the back of a very tall male moving through the exit. He had been unaware of the presence of anyone except his team.

By two o’clock that afternoon, all the critical cases had been processed. Michael had served as Dr. Bill Gogol’s assistant on a spinal injury case that was non-life threatening but could have put

the patient at risk of losing his mobility. Bill had let Michael do all the hands-on work while he closely supervised. Michael felt like every ounce of perspiration had soaked his underclothes as well as the protective garment. He lost count of the number of times that someone had wiped his brow.

In the end, Bill congratulated him with, "I wish I had your fingers, Michael. That was extremely fine work, especially working in areas that you had never explored previously."

Rose pulled Dr. Gogol aside for some conversation. Michael headed for the showers. Twenty minutes later, dressed in fresh greens, he was ready to report to his coordinator.

When he arrived, his coordinator, Jenny, said, "Hi Michael. At Dr. Gogol's request, you're free until eight A.M. the day after tomorrow. I hear you did great work. The nurses are all abuzz after hearing from Rose."

Michael's face broke into a wide grin. "Thanks, Jenny." He headed for his room in order to change into civvies, dialing Martha's cell. He had to leave a message. Just as he finished dressing, her call came through. He asked, "Are you still at the hospital?"

"Yes. I have one more lecture."

"I'd like to take you to dinner and, if you are willing, I would love to spend the evening."

She was silent for half a minute. "It's a date. Since you are available, bring your overnight bag."

At Martha's insistence, they had dinner at her apartment, after stopping by the sea food market and the produce market. On the way Michael asked "Will I meet Cissy, your roomie?"

Martha laughed. "What you are really asking is whether we will have some privacy tonight?"

Before a stunned Michael could answer, she said "Cissy called to say that she was not returning, asking if I would mail her some personal items until she can arrange for the removal of her other possessions. She will continue paying the rent. It will be about six months before she moves out totally. At that point I will need to find a new roommate."

The day had been hot and humid and, as usual, so was the evening and night. They had dinner in the air conditioned apartment after a late afternoon of love making.

As they were loading the dish washer, Martha said, "Michael, thank you for a beautiful pre-dinner course in the bedroom. I practically floated ever since, thanks to the way you make me feel, but I have some sad news. Just a few minutes ago, I started my period. When I hesitated on the phone, it was because I knew I was due."

"Don't apologize. I would have insisted on a date even if. I love being with you, being challenged and responding to your ideas. I like the feel of your hands in mine. I simply love being with you."

“Thank you for that, Michael. You honor me and I love that. I wouldn’t have thought any man might feel that way about a woman. I like the way you challenge my biases.”

The weather was perfect for breakfast on the balcony. Michael poured the last of the coffee into Martha’s cup, asking, “Shall we do another round of the museums today? We hardly touched the surface on that first visit.”

“I like the idea of a day of art but I have another idea. Would you like a surprise?”

“Absolutely.”

A half hour later, he was trying to guess their destination. From his memory of the map of greater Philadelphia he guessed they were headed toward Westchester. “I don’t remember any special museums in Westchester.”

“You’re absolutely right.”

“This isn’t the best route to Gettysburg.”

She laughed. “Keep guessing. A dollar to a dime you will never guess.”

They were bypassing Westchester. About five minutes later he saw a sign, “Chads Ford.”

“Got it! Brandywine Creek. Wyeth’s farm. What a beautiful surprise.”

Twenty minutes later they were on a guided tour. Afterwards they took time to study more closely some of the Wyeth paintings as well as the still life paintings and landscapes of a half dozen other artists.

An hour later, Michael was carrying a heavy picnic basket, looking for the right spot. They located a remote area on the bank of the creek and feasted on ham, potato salad, shrimp cocktail and a California chardonnay.

With hunger more than satisfied, they sat on the bank, dangling their feet in the cool creek, holding hands and discussing the continuing efforts to rescue or find bodies in the midst of the rubble in Peru.

“Michael, if I weren’t committed to the hospital, I would be on my way. They are so short of medical personnel. Just the thought of those victims is breaking my heart.”

Michael heard the catch in her voice and looked to see tears streaming down her cheeks. He put his arm around her shoulder, bringing her head to his chest. Her tears wet his shirt clear to the skin, and he held her for a very long period of time. All he could say was, “Our time will come, Dear.”

When it was time to leave, she insisted that Michael drive home. She found it difficult to engage in any conversation, her responses to Michael short, but not terse in any way. She laid her hand on his thigh as a way of communicating while she was unable to use words.

Michael awoke in the night to feel Martha leaving the bed. He waited for some time before he rose, walking to the balcony to find her staring at the city lights.

He sat next to her on the settee, put his arms around her. "I just couldn't sleep and I didn't want to awaken you."

Without a word, he lay back pulling her to lie beside him on the settee. He cradled her within his arms, her head on his chest. He hadn't said a word, but his caring reached her with his body communicating his sensitivity to her mood.

In a matter of minutes, he could feel her even breathing and her body relaxing. He remembered that it was still dark when he had fallen asleep.

He snapped awake, looked at his wrist watch, then relaxed. It was early. He had plenty of time before leaving for the hospital.

Martha stirred, and then bolted upright. "What time is it? I'm due at eight." She suddenly became aware of the situation. "Michael, you wonderful man. You cuddled me for most of the night, giving me rest and retreat from a befuddled mind." She put her arms around his neck; pulling him atop her while she smothered him with kisses.

Martha's first assignment was as an assistant to the day shift head nurse in ICU, the intensive care unit for pediatric patients.

Jenny, Michael's coordinator, told him, "Hold off on changing clothes. You are on standby for a meeting that begins approximately at 8:30. You can go to the cafeteria. The meeting will be somewhere near there. You will be paged and, no, I have no idea what this is about. Now skedaddle."

The hospital intercom blared, "Dr. Fuller, to conference room 3. Dr. Fuller, conference room 3."

Michael tried to make a quick assessment as he entered, seeing two familiar faces and a sharp looking woman, about fortyish. She gave him a warm smile, asking him to take a seat at the table. She said, "You may relax. You already know Dr. Bowman and Dr. Gogol. I'm Dr. Marcia Castle, Chief Medical Officer of pediatrics at CHOP."

She then surprised him by rising, going to the side table and pouring cup of coffee for Michael. "I understand you like it strong, black and no sugar."

Dr. Bowman initiated the formal discussion after Michael responded to Dr. Castle's request to tell her a bit of his family background and earlier school years. He said. "Michael, you have been privileged to participate in a number of surgeries, more so than most first year residents, and you have performed with excellence. Dr. Gogol says that your work in Emergency has been equal to any of the doctors on his staff. Those words are high praise from one of the toughest doctors on staff."

Dr. Gogol interrupted, "Michael, your performance for me was superb. Your demeanor was that of a veteran. Dr. Jansen, who observed your work on the young man's lung, was just as impressed. He is a special consultant to the surgery department."

Dr. Bowman said, "I happened to be dining with Dr. Finch, chair of the surgery department, and Dr. Castle when Dr. Jansen joined us. He took a seat next to Marcia and said, "I think I have an interim solution to your problem."

Michael's mind was racing, attempting to understand where this conversation was leading. He was jerked back to conversation when Dr. Castle said, "As a result of his advice I want you to consider our proposal."

Michael wondered, "What possible proposal will I hear that affects my work here?"

Dr. Castle continued. "The offer is unusual. You are aware that your chosen specialty of pediatric surgery requires a second year of residency, that is, a residency in the pediatric unit. Most residents usually choose to move to another hospital for the second year. We understand that you were hoping to continue here at CHOP. Are we correct in that assumption?"

"Yes. That is definitely my hope."

Dr. Castle smiled. "With counsel from these gentlemen and the specific recommendation from Dr. Jansen, we would like to offer you a contract with my department. We are offering you a residency in pediatrics, beginning immediately."

Michael was stunned. His mind was filled with questions, but before he spoke, Dr. Castle said, "I don't need a definite "yes" at the moment. If you are interested, we can get together tomorrow morning to answer all your questions and work out details. There are some extra duties involved."

His voice was a bit husky as he said, "The answer is "Yes." I am very interested."

Bill was the first to offer congratulations. Dr. Bowman elbowed Bill aside. "Fuller. I was impressed on that very first day when you worked with me, particularly in the Zivic matter."

"Thank you, both. You have given me opportunities that some of my fellow residents will not have for months, if I understand correctly."

Dr. Castle offered a warm grip. "Shall we say eight tomorrow morning in my office?"

Michael smiled. "I'll be there with a million questions."

He decided to hold off a call to Martha until the matter had been completely settled. He did call his folks; sure that he needed advice from his dad, a doctor and his mom, the attorney. He called at six, Pacific Time and had four pages of notes when he hung up two hours later.

Michael expected Dr. Castle to be flanked by her administrator, but she was alone, laying out some sweet rolls. She flashed a warm welcome and moved to pour the coffee. “Dig in, Dr. Fuller. I’m on my third cup. Do you mind if I call you Michael?”

“Michael or Mike is fine.”

“Great. Except for formal situations, I hope will feel free to call me Maggie. I stand on formality only when necessary. My grown sons call me Maggie, as do some of the doctors closest to me.”

The meeting went on for three hours. The biggest surprise was the fact that, while he kept a room in the hospital, he was given a housing allowance.

Dr. Castle was able to answer every question he posed, in fact providing information that was not on his list. The terms of the proposed contract were acceptable, and Maggie insisted he make a note of the agreements so that his attorney could check the contract before he signed. “I suggest you find an attorney and have him call Max, our attorney. Here is Max’s card.”

The special duties he would have to take on were that of assisting the Chief Medical Resident. Maggie outlined the problem. “You may not be aware that I am new at this job. This department was in a shambles, so bad that the board actually fired my predecessor for unbecoming behavior.”

“Several of our finest surgeons had offered their resignations when the board responded too slowly to their complaints. Fortunately, I have talked two of the five into returning, but we still are shorthanded.”

“The current crop of residents is not up to my personal standard and my chief resident is being worked to his bones. We would like you to serve as his assistant for special areas of responsibilities, specifically administering the educational program and the care team.”

Michael immediately deduced that he would be adding a few extra hours to his heavy schedule. He lost track of her comments for a moment but played catch up as Maggie continued, “More hours but we hope to compensate by reducing some hours on call. We are also offering a housing allowance so you can have some real rest. That will provide a quiet place to work while you arrange the educational lectures and conferences with all the constructing going on. We don’t have the room for an office here.”

Maggie smiled as she interpreted the grin on his face. “Have I got you on the hook, yet?”

Michael laughed. “I guess I’m not much of a poker player. You are close to reeling me in.”

“Let’s see if I can add some additional interest. Frankly, we can use your medical skill and knowledge because of the shortage of staff.”

Bill says you have magical fingers. Based on his recommendation, we hope to provide you with the opportunities during the residency that are usually offered only during fellowships. If you are willing to sign a two and half year contract, I can assure you that you will be ready for your boards. That should save you from six to eighteen months preparation for your license.”

Michal swallowed and almost gasped. “I’m in, all the way, Dr. Castle.”

She laughed. “Remember, it’s Maggie. Great, I’ll hand you the list of agreements to be included but only if you promise to call me Maggie.”

She rose, as did Michael. Maggie came around the desk to shake his hand. “I t may be a bit premature but welcome aboard. I know you will fill a good part of the void in our staff. More than that, I predict a great future for you. Now go find an attorney. Here is a list of firms both large and two small organizations that specialize in contracts.”

He was waiting next to her apartment when Martha arrived home at five thirty. “Michael, what a nice surprise. I figured you would be on call.”

He poured the wine while she found some chips and a cheese dip. She asked, “Are we celebrating?
That is an expensive bottle of wine.”

“We are.” When they were seated on the sofa, he said, “I received the surprise of my life this morning.”

Her excitement grew with his as the story unfolded. He gave her every detail except the offer of a housing allowance. He had a special way that the he wanted to introduce the subject. What pleased him most was her excitement for him.

Fortunately he had put down his glass of wine just before she jumped onto his lap and wrapped her arms around his neck and planting a deep kiss on his lips. When she finally pulled back, she said, “What a marvelous turn of events. I know what gift I would like to offer you but this is the wrong time as we discovered the other evening, but I give you a promissory note that will be paid with interest at your demand.”

He laughed and pulled her close for another display of his feelings for her. Later, she slipped off his lap, lay down, placing her head in his lap. “Is there any small detail that you may have forgotten?”

“There is something more but I just saved it for the last surprise. Martha, would you be okay with my becoming your new roommate?”

She gasped, “Are you asking me if it is okay for us to live together? If so, the answer is a big 'Yes!' Tell me more.”

An hour later they had a plan. Martha would buy her roommate’s queen size bed for their use, rearrange the other bedroom as an office for Michael and agree on his share of the rent.

Afterwards, they walked around the corner to the English pub for a light meal before Michael left. He had to find his new room in the pediatrics department and then move his personal effects.

All of sudden, he was thinking of Anna. Memories of their teen years appeared on his mental screen. For a moment he was reliving a scene when he felt heartbroken because she going off to the university, while he still had two more years of high school. His love was leaving him.

“I’m having trouble letting Anna go. As much as I like Martha, is it fair to her. She may read more into our living together than I am ready to admit. Damn.”

His first six weeks were very demanding. He began with a month-long rotation in neonatology and colorectal. He had a week serving as the pediatric surgeon for Emergency. That was followed by a two-week rotation in pediatric urology.

During that seven week stretch he managed only two Sundays at the apartment with Martha, although he had a six hour overnight during which Martha met the demands of the promissory note.

The two Sundays provided real rest after six days and roughly eighty hours of intense mental and physical focus. After a leisurely breakfast, they spent a couple of hours digesting the papers, particularly the New York Times. That was followed with a long walk, ending up in a bistro for a light lunch. The afternoon found them tuned in to the New York Philharmonic matinee, while both heads were buried in books. Martha surprised him with her devotion to the classics or German philosophers, while he escaped with English mystery writers.

During the late afternoon, Michael went into his new office, concentrating on plans for the coming week that included working over the list of potential leaders for his educational programs.

Over the next six weeks he arranged for two lectures and three training films for the residents. In each case, whatever the subject, he spent hours researching the subject, feeling that he should be the most informed student in the class.

After two presentations on heart operations for infants, and one on lung operations, he decided on a seminar on lung operations.

The seminar included nurses as well as residents and interns. He made arrangements for creating a video for use by those who were unable to attend this specific session.

The guest leader for the seminar was Dr. Felix Schmidt from Rutgers University. An hour before the scheduled beginning, Michael received the information that Dr. Schmidt had been involved in an auto accident and was not available.

This was panic time. Cancelling was not an option. Forty or more doctors and nurses had rearranged their schedules. Some operations had been rescheduled. Michael knew that there was no one on staff available unless it was Maggie. He called but discovered that she was out of town.

He had no choice but to lead the seminar. As he reflected about that, he thanked God for having prepared himself as usual with concentrated study.

The large conference room was abuzz when he entered the room. A brief look from the attendants was only an interruption to more conversations. They were still waiting for Dr. Schmidt. He made a point of clearing his throat loudly. That got their attention.

He announced, feeling some trepidation, "Our guest speaker has been involved in an accident. Attempts to find a last minute substitute have failed. It seems foolish to waste the time by cancelling, so I hope you will work with me as I attempt to lead us in this seminar."

He was pleased to note general acceptance. No one left the room. "I think that we will start with my asking a few questions. This is an open book seminar. I would ask that a respondent might stand and announce your name and position. Although the acoustics are excellent, please project so all may hear your comments."

Heads were bobbing with agreement as he stated the first case and question. "A young teenage male is involved in a serious auto injury. Along with minor injuries, the patient has broken ribs, one or more of which have penetrated his right lung. What procedures must be followed by the first responder?"

After a brief period of silence, he saw a tall willowy woman standing in the second row. "Dr. Mix, resident." The patient should be immediately placed on oxygen and a heart monitor and an oxygen monitor. The oxygen can be delivered via face mask or possibly nasal cannula."

Michael said, "Good. Anyone wants to say which may be the better choice?"

"Nurse Martha Zivic. Most likely a face mask, as it can deliver a better dose of oxygen and is not as likely to be dislodged."

"Thank you. Now, once in the Emergency Room, let's talk about preparations."

"Mary Johns, Emergency Nurse. A heart monitor shall be in place due to the risk of cardiac arrest secondary to respiratory failure. A crash cart will be in place at all times. Bronchodilator drugs should be administered, often by ultrasonic mist to dilate the alveoli, air sacs within the lungs. A respiratory therapist and a pulmonologist must be close at hand."

Michael interrupted, "Anyone wants to continue this?"

After a brief pause he heard Martha again. "I read that a mask valve respirator should be available at all times if the patient ceases to breathe or if their oxygen saturation reading goes to less than 85%. Drugs may also be administered to relax the airways and allow free passage of air and IV antibiotics are available for the patient to prevent a deadly bacterial or viral pneumonia.

Someone shouted, "There should be an emergency tracheotomy set up, just in case."

Another nurse said, "A blood transfusion may be likely. Saline IV must be administered until the blood tests are completed."

After a break at the end of the first hour, the seminar continued. Michael was delighted with the quick response to every question. Once the discussion centered on procedures some debate occurred. There was heated debate between two second year residents on whether approach to the lung should be through the mouth or through an incision at the breast.

When Michael asked for a brief recap three residents jumped up, eager to respond. Michael allowed all three an opportunity. At the end, the entire class stood for an ovation for his leadership.

That evening, Michael had assumed the duty of one of the other residents, whose parents were in town for a brief visit. During rounds in the ICU, he was delighted to run into Martha. In a low tone, so as not to be heard, he said, "Hi, Honey, I thought you were still on the day shift."

After looking around, she offered her lips for a delicious taste of this man who had crept into her heart. "I am subbing for two friends and will be on until seven in the morning. I agreed as long as I did not have to sit at the master monitor during the second shift. I'm not sure I could stay awake

As he began to say good bye, she asked, "If you're not in a rush, I'm going on break in three minutes. I have a thermos of coffee. The visitor lounge is vacant at this time of night. I could use a little conversation and even a cuddle."

"That's a date. Pour me a cup. I have one stop See you there in five or so."

Sitting hip to hip, her left hand lying on his thigh, she asked, "Any chance of a night off this week?"

"I'm not sure but it would be nice. I need a good back rub and other therapy would be gratefully accepted. "She punched his arm and kiddingly and said, "I might not have the strength for both but I'd be willing to try."

After another brief cuddle, she said, "You better stop that before I invite you to a visit in the linen closet."

He laughed, and then asked, "When did you have time to learn so much about emergency procedures, Honey?"

"I forgot to tell you that I am taking a class, four evenings after work, over a two week period. The subject is, 'Nursing in the OR.' I want to hone my skills so I am ready when I get a chance to serve n OR, specifically in pediatric surgery."

The following afternoon Michael went looking for Rose Patterno, sure he would find her in OR.

She was heading for the showers when he approached. She shrieked and wrapped her huge arms around him, transferring the blood from her gown to his neat greens. She laughed. Everyone will think you've been working."

He chortled. "I have, been but not in OR today."

"Can you hang around for twenty minutes, Michael? I need to clean up but I also need to catch up with the most skillful pupil I ever coached."

Twenty five minutes later, they were in the cafeteria sipping hot coffee. "Bring me up to date and tell me you have found a woman. I do know that you moved from general surgery to pediatric surgery."

She squealed with delight when he told her the story of being recruited to pediatric surgery. "Now tell me about a woman in your life. I know she must be a beauty and likely very smart."

He smiled. "She is both and more, a nurse who is on staff but whom I met before she came to work. She and I spend a lot of time talking about being trained for working in the middle of disasters when I get my license. By the way, my switch gives me a heads up with a chance to get my license a year earlier than most."

"That's great. Your new boss is sharp, recognizing your genius mind. I hear she is doing a great job cleaning up that mess."

"Rosie, how does a nurse like Martha find her way to surgery or emergency? I might find a way to maneuver her into my department but that would not be wise. I would like to help her test her skills in surgery."

Rosie reached across the table, taking his hands in hers. "I have more pulled in surgery than emergency. Give me a few days. Then I want to meet this young woman."

Laughingly he said, "If I need your approval, perhaps you should meet her first."

She guffawed. "Not necessary. You have what it takes between your ears and in your heart."

Chapter 6.

Friday evening, just a bit after dinner, Michael answered his cell which was playing the opening bars of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. He grinned. That was Martha calling. Before he could say "Hello," she was asking, "Are you coming home tonight?" He said "Absolutely. I'll be there by..." Before he could finish she was saying, "Great, I have good news and can hardly wait to share."

"Tell me now."

"Ooh, I can't. Hurry."

Michael smiled. That was another thing he loved about Martha. She had such a young spirit that showed itself at moments like this. Her joy was complete and transparent.

He arrived at ten. After a loving greeting at the door, she led him by the hand to the sofa. On the coffee table was a bottle of his favorite wine and a cheese dip. "We're celebrating my new job, Honey. I can hardly believe it."

He reached for the bottle and poured a glass for each. "Let's toast the good news and then you can explain."

"Starting Monday I begin my new duties in OR. I must have aced the test in my class. I am being tutored and teamed with a Rose Patterno. She wants me to come in on Saturday morning for an orientation. Isn't that exciting?"

"Wow! That's great. Rosie is one of my favorites. She was a big help to me during my earliest days." To himself he thought, "Thank you, Rosie. I owe you big time."

Martha was full of questions about OR as they had their snack. Her excitement accelerated with each answer that Michael gave her. That prompted another question. Finally he scooped her into his arms. The questions ceased as his lips covered hers.

During the ensuing months, Michael spent hours in the OR, working with specialists in orthopedic surgery, pulmonary surgery, urologists, ophthalmologists and cardiac surgery. The cases ranged from two year olds to sixteen year olds.

He arranged for training for the pediatric residents and nurses, with lectures by disaster specialists, and worked with the other departments participating in a city wide disaster mock trial.

Today was the first Monday in December. Michael had logged 391 hours during the month of November. He was tired and had hoped to be on his way to the apartment. Instead, he was headed to

see Dr. Castle, who had called his cell two minutes ago. The door to her office was open, and he could see her setting out some sweets next to the coffee cups. “Come in, Mike. Have a seat next to the goodies. Coffee coming up.”

“Thanks, Maggie.” He plopped into the chair.

“You look like hell, Mike.”

He sighed. “I feel the same way. In fact I was on my way to the apartment, hoping to get eight hours of sack time.”

“I realized that, so I caught you just in time. You may like the reason for the delay.”

“My mind is pretty fuzzy. I haven’t slept for twenty hours. I may not even get your message.”

“That is the subject of this short meeting. We all know that some residents push the limits, but you’re pushing too hard, Mike.”

“I guess I am, at least a little.”

“Well, we need to make a course correction.” She paused as she poured the coffee. Michael tried to guess what was coming.

When she replaced the pot, she sat and continued. “I have reviewed your time sheets since you came into the department. We owe you a lot of hours. I knew you were logging more than the minimum but had not realized how many extras.”

“Aside from the hours, your contribution in the OR as well as follow up care has been highly rated by every doctor with whom you have worked. I am impressed with the schedule and contents of the educational programs for our residents and with you including nurses when appropriate.”

She paused to sip some coffee. Michael slipped in a “Thank you, Maggie. I love my work.”

“I know, but it’s not fair to your body or to your young lady. A few more short nights at home would be welcome, I’m sure. My husband tells me so.”

Michael could see the soft smile that said she approved of his living with Martha. She continued. “Rosie tells me she is outstanding, a rarity for a first year nurse, especially in the OR.”

Michael smiled as she went on. “Rosie says she thinks the Ms. Zivic is beautiful, brainy and caring. She was so enthusiastic that I had a look for myself and chatted with a few surgeons. My friend, Donald, says she has a touch with the young ones that he has never witnessed in any nurse. That is high credit from a surgeon who has been here for umpteen years.”

Michal was glowing inside, hearing those words from Maggie. He said, “That doesn’t surprise me, although I haven’t witnessed her working except twice when she worked OR when I was operating.”

She said, “I strayed from the prime purpose of this meeting. Since you have taken no extra time off, I gather that your family never arrived.”

He nodded a "Yes."

“So, this is an order. During the next three weeks you are limited to a hundred and fifty hours, total. Furthermore, you are not to be seen on the premises any time between December 22nd and January 6th. I thought you might want to have enough time to see your family.”

Michael thought his heart jumped. He never expected time off during the Christmas season. Residents usually are filling in for senior staff that has the privilege of choosing.

His mind had been wandering, but he thought he heard Maggie saying, “If you choose to take her with you.”

Mentally he scrambled to fill in what word he had missed. “That had to have been time off for Martha if...”

He knew that he was right when he saw the grin on Maggie’s face. He laughed. “Are you playing matchmaker?”

She chortled, “Not at all. I did say if you choose.”

“Maggie, I love you. Yes, I choose and will get back to you if she agrees.”

“Good. Now that the air is clear, beat it. I have worked to do.”

Michael could hear muffled sounds emanating in the kitchen. He opened his eyes slowly, recognizing the fact that he was in bed. Remembering that he had come home in the morning, he realized that he must have slept seven or eight hours. He arose, slipped on a robe before going to the kitchen. He stood quietly in the doorway, admiring this lovely, caring woman in his life.

Probably sensing his presence, she turned slowly. “Michael, what are you doing?”

“Simply admiring a beautiful woman who is washing the dishes that her tired roommate didn’t wash after a light breakfast.”

“I was being as quiet as possible. I’ve been home for an hour, allowing you to sleep until the last moment. You do need to shower. We are due for dinner at my folk’s house in forty-five minutes.”

“Good Lord! I forgot. I’ll be ready in fifteen. I hope your mom will forgive the light beard.”

“My folks will forgive you for anything. They adore you. In our family, you are the hero, an angel who appeared at the right moment.”

For Michael, Martha was, unfortunately, right. Momma fussed over him and kept insisting that he have more of her favorite dish, stuffed cabbage rolls. After the main meal she insisted he have two pieces of her lemon meringue pie. She also had baked an extra pie for them to take home.

Her dad wheeled himself around with ease. Michael thought, “If you didn’t notice the absence of his legs, you could easily forget his handicap. I think he must forget at some moments. He is so natural; making sure the focus is on something other than his legless body.”

It had been a warm and delightful evening, just as it was during each visit. “The trouble,” Michael thought, “was that they accepted him as family. He didn’t think he was ready for that. It’s too soon to talk marriage. Martha and I have a good relationship. She is all that I have any right to expect, but is she the love of my life. That first date, the historic tour and the picnic at Valley Forge had set his wheels in motion. There was a moment during the picnic when he knew he wanted to make love to her. It had "felt" like a desire for something more than just sex, and it turned out to be more.

Martha wished her mother wouldn’t fuss so much over Michael. She wasn’t sure, but she sensed a bit of embarrassment on his part as a reaction to Momma’s doting. “God. I love him and I don’t want anything to scare him, like her obvious mothering. I like the way our lives are intertwined now.”

She let her mind gather in the memories of these last months with Michael. There had been for her that special moment on the knoll overlooking the meadow at Valley Forge. She had found her hand in his, knowing, somehow, that was how it ought to be. She had been aware of that something special had happened to her. She was hoping that he found her attractive enough to call her for another date.

The past months had been glorious. Everything had fallen into place. She had never dreamed that a man like Michael lived on this earth.

For Michael, that late evening was decision time. While she was driving home, he was planning a way to approach Martha with the idea of spending the holiday with him in California. “It’s time. I will take her to the family lodge at Tahoe, where I will propose during along walk along the trail behind the lodge. She once told me she loved the snow and wished she had more time for skiing.”

She felt his hand move softly over her thigh about two minutes before they arrived. That giddy feeling struck her, as it did each time that Michael initiated a seductive move. She smiled inwardly, ready as usual to be a full partner. She returned his embrace with fervor in the elevator. In the bedroom, as he undressed her, she was thinking, “There is something unique, a special tenderness. I swear my goose bumps are larger than ever. Oh, Michael, you are a love.”

Michael knew from all the past experiences that they would not be ready for sleep, although both were spent and breathless.

They lay in silence holding hands, as was their habit. Michael turned his head toward her, causing her face to move toward his. His soft voice came through with the surprise. She thought, "He does have some kind of a surprise for me."

"Martha, I want you to fly with me to California for Christmas. I want you to join my family for the joyful celebration we have each Christmas."

"Wow! I can't explain it, but somehow I knew this night was unique. I just sensed it, but this is a complete and utter surprise. Are you sure? Some in the family may resent a stranger in their midst at Christmas time."

He pulled her close, speaking softly in her ear. "I can't think of anyone in the family who feel that way. Besides, once they meet you, they will see in you all the things I do."

Martha said nothing. Michael waited. He began to feel a bit of moisture on his chest, realizing that it was tears. He whispered, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you, Darling."

She pulled away, facing him. "Oh, Sweetie, these are tears of joy. I am honored by the invitation, although the idea does scare me. I would love to, simply because, with you at my side, I would face any experience, scary or not. There is a big problem. I am not entitled to take time off, especially during the critical holiday season."

"That has been taken care of. Maggie, that is Dr. Castle, insists I take the time. She seems to know all about us and has promised to use her influence to enable your leave for a couple of weeks."

"Do you mean she knows we're living together? I happened to meet her recently. She is charming and a very warm person. How would she know about us?"

Michael laughed. "That meeting was no accident. She admitted her curiosity about the woman in my life. She has assumed the role of my protector and friend. I'm guessing Rosie told her. I never said anything to Rosie about keeping the information a secret. The entire hospital staff probably knows."

Martha giggled. "I don't care if the whole world knows that I am the luckiest woman alive."

As the non-stop from PHL to SFO taxied to the terminal, Michael said, "I would not have thought of you as a white-knuckled flier, Martha."

He noticed a slight blush rise to her cheeks. "I'm not. I've been concentrating on how things will work out when I meet the family. Michael, I can't help it. This is scary."

He leaned over and gave her a wet kiss. She laughed, wiping her lips with a Kleenex. "Michael, you're a slob. But I love it."

“That was just to loosen you up. Uncle Ben and Aunt Diane are meeting us. I arranged it that way. They are warm and loving and full of stories. You remember what I told you about them, employees of the Office of Naval Intelligence, now retired. She has been Mom’s closest friends since their days at Harvard, even when they were younger. Uncle Ben is a brilliant Internist with Kaiser. He gets more cards and gifts at Christmas time from his patients than does a spoiled single child in a wealthy family. Those patients love him and so will you.”

He continued. “Perhaps I ought to help you understand the how all the names connect. It may help to make things less confusing.”

“Please. I need all the help you can give me. “

In the beginning there is Gramma Sara and Grampa David who is now deceased.

The next generation is Maria, daughter of Sara and David. She is married to a David, who was named for his dad’s best friend, Grampa David.

The next generation is my mother, Alexa, daughter of Maria and David. She married my dad, Michael, Sr.

Not blood relatives but still considered family are Aunt Diane and Uncle “Ben. Diane is my mom’s closest friend and the adopted mother of Anna, my childhood friend.”

Martha found some writing paper and made Michael repeat the information while she constructed a family tree.

Just as Michael had predicted, the meeting was a smashing success. Diane ignored Michael, went directly to Martha, wrapping her with enthusiasm and a big smile. Then it was Ben with his shy smile and loving arms welcoming her. “I have been looking forward to meeting you. I want you to sit up front with me while Diane and her very special adopted nephew renew their love affair.”

The first stop was at great grandmother Sara’s home. Martha had been told by Ben to expect a warm welcome. While she was the grand dame of the clan, she was a down to earth loving grandmother. Martha got exactly that expected welcome. She had lost her own grandparents when she was a babe, didn’t even remember them, and Sara made her feel like one of her own. After the brief visit, Sara said, “I hope you agree with my plan. I asked Alexa, my granddaughter, to have Michael bring you at ten tomorrow for coffee and sweets. It will be just the two of us.”

Martha was glowing on the inside. She felt as though she had been enveloped in a warm blanket of love within the first two hours of landing.

The tightness returned as Martha sat in rear of the car on the way to Michael’s family home. This was the final test, meeting Michael’s parents. All the tautness in her body evaporated the moment she saw the beaming smile on Alexa’s face as she ran forward to greet her, Michael’s girl. There was no doubt that the hug was heartfelt, as was the one from his dad.

She had expected questions and grilling, but it didn't happen. Over drinks and at dinner the conversation covered anecdotes of Michael's growing years, fun and rebellion, school and athletics and victories and defeats.

After dinner Michael offered to help his mom, Alexa, clear the table and stack the dishes. That left Martha in the hands of Michael's dad, David. The subject turned to medicine, the one thing they had in common. Martha was swept away with the devotion and caring that came through his stories of life working within the Kaiser clinics.

After a rousing card game of Hearts, in which Martha was the big loser, Martha commented that she was unlucky in cards. "Dad and Momma constantly leave me at the tail end of three handed card games, especially cutthroat pinochle."

Michael interrupted with, "But she plays a mean game of gin rummy."

That comment was the segue. Michael found himself talking about their apartment, his office and bemoaning the little time that he had to spend there because of the demands of his residency.

Alexa said, "Michael, we know you and Martha are living together, but you never said a word about how you got together. Martha, perhaps you can enlighten us. I'll bet that there is a romantic story there."

Martha could tell by the tone of her voice that the request was an honest desire to know, not a snoopy type of question. In her warm but forthright manner, she told of the first date, the historic tour, the picnic at Valley Forge, her sense of being attracted to this warm man who had saved her mom's life.

When she talked about dinner on the balcony and the approach of night, she said, "I guess a woman knows when a man wants to kiss her, so I offered and he responded. I certainly did not want that day come to an end and neither did Michael."

She was astonished when almost in unison she heard his folks say, "Good for you both."

The relief she felt was enormous. She was glad she had been forthright. "What a day!"

Cuddled in his arms just before falling asleep, Michael asked, "Didn't I tell you not to worry? One special note that will give you a kick. Mom had not let Dana, my steady all through med school; sleep with me when she was an overnight guest. She had to use the guest bedroom. That says a lot about you, Honey."

"Hmmm."

The coffee was hot and strong and the chocolate filled breakfast pastry was delicious. They were having breakfast with Michael's great grandmother, Sara. Sellech. Gramma shoed off the maid.

Martha spent some time responding to Sara's questions about her desire to serve disaster victims. Martha answered questions about nurse training and her current work in OR. She alluded to her meeting Michael in the dark hospital room where her mother was recuperating.

With a twinkle in her eye, Sara asked, “How did you manage to handcuff this youngest of the clan? No girl or woman has had that success before.”

That peeked Martha’s interest. She said, “I’m delighted to share, but only if you promise to tell me what you mean about his 'past'.”

“That’s easy. I am and have been his confidante since he was seven years old. He told me stories of his love life since he was twelve. I say "love life" in jest. The story is that he never committed to any one of them, including Dana, whom he dated for over two years. I always had the sense that there was one who was his hope but was unattainable for some reason. That’s speculation, based on all the rest that he shared with me for more than a decade.”

“That’s interesting. He has told me a lot about his past, including girlfriends. He was quite open with me about Dana. All right, Gramma. Here goes.”

She recounted the story of their meeting at the hospital, his deferred call for a date and the ending of the long day they had spent together. “Gramma, like a dozen of his previous girlfriends, I was completely taken in with this warm and tender human being. I should write a love story about how I fell for him. By the end of the long day, I did not want the experience to end and I knew that he felt the same. I asked for the kiss that I sensed he wanted, and later I asked him to stay the night because we both wanted that to happen.”

Sara burst into laughter. “Since you have been honest with me, I will tell you my story. I was a bit more brazen because, in my time, girls were dependent on the boy being the pursuer.”

Martha’s eyes lit up. She was sure that Michael had never heard the story that she was about to hear.

“By the way, Martha, you are Slovak, aren’t you? I thought so. So am I and by the name you can guess that so was my David. Here goes. My David was a handsome Navy Air Corp cadet about to get his commission. I was an Ensign, a Wave serving in Communications on a training base in Texas. Most mornings we crossed paths while I was on my way to work. He saluted me as was customary but along with the salute he gave me a warm smile. I liked that but had to leave it at that. Officers do not fraternize with cadets or non-commissioned personnel.”

“Another matter you need to understand. At that time in our society, nice girls did not sleep around or in most cases, not even with the engaged fiancés. The emphasis was on the wedding night.

“That changed during the war. Every Wave that I knew slept with some guy, or at least said they did. I got to feeling that I was being left out. Each day, I was hoping for the right guy who might invite me into his bed. I had turned down a few sleazy proposals. I was looking for Mr. Right.”

“One Saturday morning, a few weeks before I was to ship out to Pearl Harbor, quite by accident I ran into David in a coffee shop in town. Since we were not on base, I accepted his offer to take a walk and then to dinner. I was so taken with him that I asked him for a date for the following weekend,

a date that definitely implied a hotel room. I was desperate for the right relationship and Davis, in my opinion, was the first man I wanted to know me biblically.”

“That was a glorious weekend which was a turning point in my life. We were both virgins, very unsure of ourselves but we accepted our naiveté and established a relationship built on trust. Someday I may have a chance to tell you the whole story.”

“I would like that.”

They exchanged other stories and some philosophy for another hour. Sara asked Martha, “It is obvious you are well read. When do you have time to do that?”

With a smile in her voice she said, “First, I need little sleep, so I read late into the night. Unfortunately, Michael has duty on more nights than I would like. That goes with the territory. So I have a lot of evening hours. I prefer reading to the Tube. My interests are eclectic.” She laughed. “Michael says I should apply for a spot on Jeopardy.”

“You know, he may be right. By the way, are you staying through New Year’s day?”

“That’s our plan.”

“Good. We leave for Tahoe, tomorrow. I hope you love skiing. This is a skiing family. Our compound holds four buildings. Three of us couples built the first three almost seventy years ago. We added a fourth to accommodate the expanding generations that followed. As the grandma, the only one of my generation that is still alive, I relive those decades that have slipped by.”

When Martha returned to Michael’s parent’s home, everyone apparently had gone out. She went to the bedroom to lie down for a nap. Sleep never did arrive. She found herself trying to unlock a puzzle. Was Sara right about Michael never making a commitment to any woman? What’s going on with him? He seems preoccupied since we arrive? She found no answers before she heard voices approaching the house.

It was snowing during the last hour of their drive to the lake. It was still light when they arrived. Michael suggested a walk down to the wharf before they unpacked. “It will be too dark if we delay.”

As they made their way, he began recalling stories of the summers that he spent here at the lake. He laughed as he told of some of the stupid tricks they pulled. In almost every story he was talking of Anna, Aunt Diane and Uncle Ben’s adopted daughter. “She was four when they adopted her with help from the Queen of Jordan, Diane’s close friend.”

He spun stories of their learning to water ski together, learning to play golf and tennis. “She was a natural and extremely competitive.”

Martha also heard a kind of yearning for the relationship that was loosening as Anna began skipping grades. “She’s a genius. Just think about it. Someone our age heads a pediatric ophthalmology unit of a hospital in Washington.”

For a brief moment she heard something in his voice that sounded like a cry, but she wasn't sure what it was. She tried desperately to discover from her own experience what emotion he had communicated. She had no success, but the feeling lingered all through dinner that Christmas eve.

There was room for all four generations of the Sellech clan to stay at the Sellech cabin, as it was called. Sara insisted the young ones should take her "master bedroom".

Each bedroom included a fireplace with a huge load of logs and kindling. Long after the festivities and gift exchanges, Martha and Michael retired to their room, which overlooked the lake. The snow had quit falling, the sky, only partly cloudy, occasionally creating a shadow in the moon glow.

The fire was roaring across the room while Martha stood at the window. Her sixth sense was working overtime. While she was being lovingly absorbed into the family, Michael seemed to be moving away. "A shadow has fallen over our love affair, a shadow that has to disappear before we marry and then regret the step we have taken."

She sensed Michael crossing the room to stand behind, then his arms wrapping around her waist. He whispered into her ear. "I love you, Martha. I think you love me. At least, the way you respond to me, hints at that love. Will you do me the honor of saying you will marry me?"

Martha took a deep breath. When Michael first suggested the trip, she wondered if he would be proposing. She knew she was ready to say "Yes." She had been ready for months, but Michael seemed a little removed, not quite remote, since they arrived. It was like some ghost of his past had invaded their space. She thought the ghost had appeared when Michael was reciting his stories of Anna.

Without a word, she turned slowly, put her body close to his, her arms around his neck. "I've been in love with you for all these months and I want to spend the rest of my life with you, Michael, but we need to talk about a few things before I say what I want so much to say."

"I think I understand, Honey. I've been acting a bit strangely since we arrived. It was because of something Diane said to me during the drive from the airport. Allow me to discuss that first. I must get this off my chest."

She nodded her understanding.

He paused and took a deep breath. Martha waited, not quite sure what to expect. She heard him take a deep breath. "It was like a ghost of the past had walked on my back trail. Diane told me that Anna, my friend of so many years, was about to be married to a colleague in Washington. When I was younger, in my early teens, I thought I was in love with Anna. That feeling remained for years."

"Even though our social lives separated, I found I could not commit to a relationship with any other girl or a woman as I passed through and beyond my teen years. Her shadow was always present. That persisted during my years at med school, although she was already finishing her residency and moving onto her career."

“Anna showed up at my med school graduation party. In the moment I saw her, hope sprung up. Maybe we could start over again. We had a dozen hours of reminiscing, but where she made it clear that I was a great friend, but not in a romantic sense. My heart sank.”

“Mentally, I accepted the situation, but the emotion kept hanging around. My girlfriend, Dana, had a snit about the afternoon I spent with Anna. I tried calling her, but not with enthusiasm. I assume she saw what I was trying to deny.”

He paused again. Martha waited. “I knew that you were the one for me before we reached the hospital after the weekend of our first date. Nevertheless, I kept worrying that I might wake up one morning to discover that Anna was still haunting me. Because of that fear, I tried in every way possible to tell you what you meant to me, without ever saying the words that I wanted to say, “I love you.”

Martha softened a bit, conceding, “I noticed, guessing that some ghost of your past was still present.”

Michael picked up his story. “When Maggie made this trip possible and told me that she could arrange vacation time for you, I knew that it was time to say what my heart had been saying for all these months. I felt like a load had lifted off my back.”

“I found a jeweler, who let me have a ring for the proposal, with the option of exchanging it for any one you desire.”

“In one moment in the car, Diane’s comments triggered a change from assurance to doubt. My joy was traded in for worry. I guess that my internal struggle showed up. Of course, you would notice. I’ve been aware of your acute sensitivity to others’ emotions. It is what makes you so good with young patients, in particular. These past few days, as I watched you interact with all the members of the clan and saw their love and appreciation for you, I knew that you are my life and that my ghosts can be permanently dismissed.”

Martha beamed a large joyful smile. She pulled close, wrapped her arms around his waist, resting her head on his chest. “Thank you for the full story, Michael. I believe the ghost is gone, but if not, I will do all I can to blur the memory or its recurrence.”

Michael reached into his shirt pocket for the ring. Martha said, “No kneeling, please. I am willing to be your partner, not the object of your love. I want us to continue traveling on our journey just the way we have up to now, eye to eye, lip to lip

She gasped at the brilliance that was reflecting the firelight. “It’s a perfect fit and there will be no exchange. Your taste in rings is as good as your taste n women!” They were still laughing when they headed for their favorite piece of furniture.

Chapter 7.

Martha had set the timer on the coffee percolator. They were aroused at seven thirty by the aroma emanating from the kitchen. Martha said, “Of course, I didn’t get my sleep but I feel so refreshed. I shall never forget this night. You are so loving and yet so passionate. In addition there was the serious discussion in which we again exchanged ideas for our future, the books we want to read together. In the still of the night I was free to tell you of my fantasies, my fears and the dumb behavior of a young girl who wanted to escape the protective arms of her brothers.”

She moved in close using her lips to stop any vocal response. After a long moment, she said, “It’s time to shower and dress since we are joining the family to attend worship. I am looking forward to a new experience. I have never entered a protestant church. You will have to guide my behavior, Michael.”

“You are not to worry. You won’t feel as strange as you fear.”

While they were dressing, someone knocked gently on the door. His mom, Alexa, announced, “Hot sweet rolls and orange juice for the young lovers.”

Martha dashed to the door to let Alexa enter with the goodies. “The cars will be leaving in thirty minutes.” She set the down the tray and left quickly.

Alexa suggested that just the four of them stop for lunch at her favorite coffee shop. “We’ve had so little time for the just the four of us .We agreed last night that we need to hear more about your life at the present and learn what plans you have. I see a ring on your left finger, Martha, a ring that was not there yesterday.”

Martha blushed and his folks burst into laughter as she stammered, “We were going to invite you to lunch and announce our engagement. Michael proposed last night and I accepted with great enthusiasm.” Hugs and back slaps and hand-shakes and tears of joy were exchanged before they headed for the coffee shop.

As any mother would do, Alexa pressed for details and Martha, as usual, gave them a full account, after seeking Michael’s approval with a questioning eyebrow. Alexa couldn’t believe what she was hearing about Michael’s feelings for Anna.

“She reached across the table to take Michael’s hands in hers. “Oh, Michael, I am sorry to hear of the pain that you have undergone through all those years.”

Martha was looking at his dad, who sat silently but letting a tear escape. She thought she could sense the empathy between a dad and his son. Her heart went out to him, with a vow to get to know him better during her stay.

Alexa turned to Martha. “Any specific plans?”

Michael answered. “We are hoping for an early date. What we talked about last night was getting married over the line in Nevada by a justice of the peace and having a reception later for both families.”

Martha added, “Perhaps we can have two receptions, one here and one for my family in the east. I do have three married brothers as well as an aunt who takes care of Dad and Mom.”

Alexa let that sink in. Martha could see Alexa’s mind looking for an alternate solution. She was right. Alexa said, “If you don’t mind, Martha, I want to suggest a slight change. I am sure my mother and Gramma Sara want to be present when Michael gets married.”

“I’d like to call the Presbyterian pastor at the north shore on the Nevada side. If you will be married this week, we can gather the clan and other families in our conclave to celebrate with us.

Michael was excited, but Martha seemed to be mulling over the idea. She eventually said, “I think my brother James, who might be okay with a civil ceremony, may have trouble with my being married in a Protestant church. I love the idea and Jimmy will just have to be big about it. Too bad Momma and Dad aren’t here.”

Michael, Sr. said, “I can arrange that very easily. Would your mother and father be willing to accept a gift from your future father-in-law?”

Martha took in a deep breath. “I presume you are offering a plane trip for them.” She hesitated before saying, “Neither has ever flown and my dad is in a wheel chair; he has no legs.”

She watched the change on his face as his smile darkened to a frown of sympathy. Then he said, “I can arrange for all the physical help they need if they are willing.”

He pulled out a cellphone, handed it to Martha. “Why not call. It might turn out to be a great Christmas gift. This is our engagement gift to you.”

Martha was totally choked up. Such spontaneous generosity, such acceptance of her into the family. It was almost too much. She accepted the phone, but she had to hold on for almost three minutes before she could compose her enough to make the call. She rose from the table, walked outside for some privacy. This might take some convincing.

It did. She was on the phone for fifteen minutes. Michael, aware of the resistance she might be receiving, brought her a mug of coffee to sip while she patiently brought her folks to an agreement.

When the announcement was made at dinner, the rush to embrace both of them was utter chaos. Michael’s grandfather went to the cellar to retrieve the champagne. After the toast, Gramma Sara asked Martha to come sit next to her.

She said, “I am sure you worked hard to convince them to come, didn’t you?” Martha nodded.

“I am sure they are worried about feeling out of place. Your mother will worry about having the right clothes. Your dad is thinking that he might be the subject of pity or that he can’t speak fluently enough to engage “highbrows” adequately.”

Martha was astounded. It was like Sara had been listening to her phone call. She nodded.

Sara continued. “My granddaughter, Alexa, will feel she should take charge, but you do it on behalf of your mother. I will make one suggestion. This should not be formal in anyway. No tuxedos or gowns. Business suits for the men and informal dresses for the women would be best. It will make everything easier for your folks. Does that make sense?”

“Gramma Sara, you are so perceptive! Thank you.”

Sara handed her a tight wad of folding money. This is my engagement gift. You can take Momma and your dad on a shopping trip to Reno, if you wish.”

Martha was moved to tears. The love and generosity of this family was overwhelming. Sara saw a series of emotions sweeping through Martha. She reached out for Martha’s hands, taking them in her own, transmitting her love and welcome to the clan.

On her way back to her place at the table, she felt someone reaching for her hand. It was her gorgeous, grandmother -to-be, Maria.

They had hardly spoken with each other during these first hectic days. Maria was beautiful, olive skinned, dark piercing eyes with warm lines around the mouth. “Martha, we have hardly spoken to each other. I want you and Michael to have lunch with us tomorrow. Is that possible?”

“I am sure it is. We don’t have to leave for the airport until three.”

“That’s wonderful. Why don’t we pick you up and eleven forty-five? We’ll drive into Brockway.”

Maria and Martha sat in the rear while Michael sat with his granddad, David who never took his eyes off the road while he responded with enthusiasm to several of Michael’s stories of surgery on children. It was obvious that he was proud of his grandson.

Maria said, “David is, in his own way, partially responsible for Michael’s surgical skills. The two were inseparable until Michael turned thirteen and switched his interest to football.”

“I don’t quite understand.”

“David is an engineer, like his father was. I believe Michael was about three when David taught him how to create Lego structures. By the time he was four, David had him taking a pocket watch apart and reassembling it. David had Michael focus on miniature gadgets, creating nimble and agile fingers working on the tiniest of objects.

“He also taught Michael how to whittle and then to create small wooden teak gifts for family and friends. I have a beautiful walnut jewel case that he made me for his tenth Christmas. In his teen years it was always a debate as to whether he would be a surgeon or an engineer like his granddad.”

Martha was impressed with this knowledge. She was pleased to discover another road travelled by Michael to reach this point in his life.

While sipping from glasses of light wine before lunch, Maria led the conversation toward family history. “I don’t know how much Michael has spoken of family but Michael and I will be pleased to answer questions that you may have about Michael’s family background.”

“I know a little, mostly about his folks, a little about Sara and some from Sara, but very little about either of you. I must say I see many of your features in my handsome man, but not the coloring. I can’t help but be intrigued.”

Maria laughed loud enough to turn heads. “I love your forthrightness, even as you put it so delicately.”

“We do know that I have no Eastern European blood like my parents. Sara and David adopted me at age three. I grew up in a household with what today would be called a part time nanny, two entrepreneurial but loving parents and an adopted grandfather, the admiral. I never knew my dad and have only distant memories of my mother.”

David cut in. “My dad was a business partner with Sara and David. Our two families were close and lived nearby. My folks named me for David. As far back as I can remember, even as a tyke, Maria was my girl and still is.” He was beaming as he related that bit of history.

“Even as a child I adored this beautiful little girl, the new daughter of my adorable Aunt Sara. Who can tell when friendship turned to love? We were inseparable then as now.”

Martha saw Maria’s hand move to rest on David’s arm and a loving smile creep across her face. She said, “We decided to try life apart by going to separate universities, but that couldn’t keep us apart. I think I was in love with David when I eight. I still remember a kiss he gave me on my eighth birthday. Now, where were we?”

“Oh, yes. Just as David grew up knowing he wanted to be an engineer like his dad, I always knew I wanted to be an attorney like my dad.”

Martha said, “Thank you for another block of family history. One doesn’t usually attach tenderness and caring to personalities with the brains that creates engineers and attorneys, but Michael has an abundance of that. It was his soft side that drew me to him during our first time together.”

David gave her a warm smile. “All of us owe that to Sara. She had that charm and caring attitude despite her business talent, and she did her best to inculcate that spirit with each of her offspring and their friends.”

After a delicious meal, Maria picked up on something Martha had said earlier. . “Michael says you are versed in classic literature and philosophy, that you both enjoy many of the same authors. I can tell you that are an ingredient that makes for a great partnership. As grandparents, we did what we could to encourage Michael. How about languages? Are you bilingual?”

Apologetically, Martha said “Only enough to communist with my family. Dad did very little to encourage me but mother insisted that I should be able to speak another language. In fact she tried to push me to study Russian.”

“Unfortunately, neither Sara nor David encouraged my studying other languages. I had to wait until college, where I studied Russian, Czech and Slovak. I spent one summer in Prague and Bratislava to learn speaks idiomatically as brilliant as Sara and David. They did not understand my need to be multilingual.”

Maria asked, “Martha, have you had time to spend with Michael Senior? If you can get him into a one-on-one, you may discover more of the tenderness side of your Michael. Alexa was a spoiled brat, whom we thought of as wild, and she surprised us by bringing into the family one the world’s beautiful human beings.”

Martha was beginning to think that she was learning more than she needed at the moment. Even as the thought hit her, Maria was saying, “Don’t be over impressed with all this information. At the bottom line, we are a large family with disparate traits and levels of education, but we are loving human beings loaded with faults and always in need of forgiveness. Underneath all that you see or learn there is an abundance of love.”

Martha grinned. "It's a lot to digest. This openness has surprised me. I was expecting a bit of "best foot forward" on behalf of the youngest in the clan."

Martha prepared for the trip to the small Tahoe airport. She was sure that she needn't have worried a whit about her folks. Sara would be welcoming them speaking in their own native language.

Martha noticed that Sara had dressed down so that her family would not feel outclassed or out of place. The meeting was warm and joyous. She could see that her parents were much at ease by the time that Michael and his dad had stored the suitcases and the wheelchair in the car trunk.

Her folks settled into the guest room in the lodge. As they finished unpacking, Momma said, "Martha, I was afraid of feeling out of place among such wealthy folks, but Sara made me realize that money has not made her into some unapproachable society lady."

Dad laughed. "She is just old shoe, absolutely comfortable to be with. She sure knows a lot about you, sure that you and Michael are right for each other."

The next morning Sara took Momma shopping, while Michael and his dad took Dad to find a blue blazer, shirt and tie. Martha had slipped some cash into Momma's hands to pay for the items.

The wedding took place in the church at One P.M., after which the entire clan with friends returned to the compound for the celebration. Hours later, the newlyweds slipped out, driving to San Francisco's Fairmont Hotel for a few days alone.

Three days later, on the limo ride to the airport, Martha snuggled to Michael, saying not a word for the first five insinuates. Michael heard her long sigh. He teased her with, "That sounded like a woman rousing from afternoon nap."

She pushed her body closer. "It feels sort of like that. I am just rousing from this dream of having sex with some Adonis who swept me off my feet and kidnapped me for three whole days. Lordy, what a man. Oh, Michael, it was heavenly. I wondered what could be special about a honeymoon after we had been sleeping together for months. Well, I found out. If any doubt was hidden in the back of my mind it vanished during those three days."

You made sure I never missed any sight worth seeing. You gave me feasts at the wharf, at Jacks Restaurant, The Top of the Mark and at the Fairmont dining room. Above all, it was the tender moments of the night when I felt as though I had been absorbed completely inside you. There is truth to the expression "out of this world."

There was nothing for him to say. He pulled her closer, burying his face in her hair.

Chapter 8.

Shortly before landing in Philadelphia on the return flight, Martha turned toward Michael. “This has been like a dream. For two weeks I have been enveloped in a cocoon of love and given attention by three generations of family. I feel as though I have known them for years. Above all that, I am married to this human loving machine. Kiss me so I know I am not dreaming.”

A moment later, every passenger in first class was standing and clapping. The flight attendant was opening a bottle of champagne. “Compliments of a friend who sent enough bottles aboard to serve each passenger on the flight to toast the newlyweds.”

In response to Michael’s raised eyebrow, she said, “I really have no idea. The iced tub was aboard even before I arrived with a typed note of instructions.”

The fellow passengers nearby drank a toast to the couple. When everyone settled back, Martha giggled, saying, “Too bad my folks are not here to see that. Dad would be beaming, saying to Momma, “That’s our daughter.”

Michael said, “Gramma Sara insisted they needed a good visit even though California is not at its best in the winter months. They will be her guests. She told me they will visit the city, its great views, some museums, the Golden Gate Bridge, the wine country and, if the weather holds, they will drive

to Yosemite. I'm glad for your folks. It may be their one great outdoor experience, given dad's limitations."

"Michael, there is no way I can thank you enough for the love you show for my parents. They adore you just as I do. Speaking of love, when the taxi drops us at the apartment, I expect my lover to carry me across the threshold, not stopping until he drops me on the bed and falls down next to me." She knew she was blushing but she also knew she would never have enough of her life partner.

She decided to change the subject. "As soon as you know which will be your first weekend off duty, we can tell my brothers so they can book the hotel room for the reception they want to host for the two of us. They must be dying to meet the guy I married before they had a chance to offer their judgment. Let's talk about it during the cab ride."

Five minutes into the cab ride, Martha noticed that Michael was slumped down. She spoke loudly, "Michael." There was no response. She put her hand on his. No response. She tried to shake his shoulder and got no response.

She began to panic. "God, don't take him from me so soon. We've had so little time together. I have so much I want to say to him and so much to show him. I want him to know what a difference he has made in my life."

She stopped in the middle of that thought, "What am I doing. This is not helpful. She said to herself. "Stay calm. What is my best action?"

She called to the cabbie. "Change address. "My husband is ill. Children's Hospital. Emergency. Hurry please."

She began to feel nauseous. "No time for that, Martha. Stay cool. What happened?" She thought back. He had been teasing her about the agenda upon reaching home. She remembered his getting into the cab beside her and calling out the address to the cabbie. She was checking her purse to be sure she had the key to the apartment. She remembered calling out to Michael and getting no response.

She looked out the window and noticed they were stopped. She couldn't remember how long that had been "What's the problem, driver?"

"Looks like a truck spilled some produce. Hold on." He drove up onto the sidewalk to cut the corner onto a side street. "Five or six minutes, Miss. Sorry, Mrs."

The hospital was in sight when she heard a siren. She was certain the cab would be pulled over for speeding, which he was. The cabbie ignored the siren and sped toward the emergency doors. When he stopped, the police car pulled alongside. Martha dashed inside, heading for the reception area. She flashed her ID as a nurse. "My husband is unconscious in a cab outside Please get some attendants, stat."

She had to admit that the young woman moved with dispatch. Martha then asked, "Is Dr. Gogol on duty?"

A nod of the head said "yes." The receptionist did not wait. She began dialing, spoke a few words. Thirty seconds later, Bill was moving toward her. He listened as she recounted precisely the events leading to Michael's unresponsiveness.

When she finished, he said, "Thanks for the excellent report. Now, come with me to my office. I will get Dr. Benak, our neurologist into the cubicle with Michael and no, you may not go there until Dr. Josh Stevens says so."

She was afraid he would say that. "Will you or someone else tell me what the process for dealing with Michael's blackout is? I'm scared, Bill. Not knowing just makes it worse."

"I was going off duty. I will stay with you for a bit and tell you what I expect to happen."

That calmed her a bit, although the speculation in her mind would not cease, searching her little knowledge as she tried to explain his unconsciousness.

Bill said, "Just in case you don't recall the process, here is what I believe Dr. Benak will be doing. First, Josh and Jack will do a physical exam to see if the cause may be related to a physical injury."

"Bill, I told you, nothing happened."

"I know but they will take nothing for granted. Next he will send a resident to question you about any recent history that may help in the diagnosis. You should be prepared to give his parents phone number for any additional information."

Martha said, "He has a little black book in his jacket pocket."

"Good."

He continued. "If Jack determines there is a seizure, then he will order a MRI. Meanwhile he will look at the blood test to read the hemoglobin count.

He may order an ECG which may identify conditions such as atrial fibrillation, heart block, or a new or old heart attack, although it typically does not provide a definite diagnosis for the underlying cause for fainting."

He will be put on a monitor, of course, to provide a better understanding of the heart's activity."

Jack or his assistant will use external stimuli to determine if there is any response. That may even include some probes that cause minor pain."

Martha interrupted, "If none of that works, they will assume that he is in a coma."

Bill nodded. "If Michael shows no activity for a few hours, usually six or more, he is considered to be in a coma, by a medical definition."

At that point, Martha broke down completely, tears rolling down her cheeks, her sobs deep and she began hyperventilating. Bill swept her into his arms, placing his lips at her ears, whispering

soothing comments. “We’ll find the problem, Martha. Have faith. Jack is one of the greatest in the country.”

Two minutes of Martha trying to catch her breath seemed like a life time, but Bill continued comforting her until she had control of her emotions. When she quit trembling, Bill had her lie down on the small couch in his office.

“Martha, this may take a while. I want to give you a light sedative. It is not a sleeping pill but may make you drowsy. You know from your training that this is the right treatment for you. You need to be strong while you leave the problem in Jack’s hands.”

“All right, Bill. Someone should notify Maggie that he may not be fit for duty tomorrow.”

“Done. My secretary called about ten minutes ago.” At that moment, someone knocked on the door and entered. Maggie Castle walked directly to Martha. “Please do not try to rise. I’ve come to keep you company. Bill has to leave in order to get some rest.”

Martha could not keep the tears from arising as she thought, “I can’t believe how caring Michael’s colleagues are.”

Maggie sat on the edge of the bed. “You know that Michael calls me Maggie. I hope you will feel free to do the same. Now, is there anything you need besides this sedative?”

“I should call his parents.”

“Dr. Benak has done that. He needed any medical history that they could provide. His dad is leaving on the next flight, although the doctor did suggest he wait a few hours.”

Martha was beginning to feel drowsy. She managed, “His dad is a brilliant Internist with Kaiser Permanente.”

“That’s good to know. Now rest. I will be here for the next several hours and will awaken you as soon as there is any news.”

When she awakened, Martha looked for Maggie but instead saw Rosie, her friend and nurse but more importantly, Michael’s friend. “Hi, Rosie.” She looked at her watch. It was two A.M. “Wow. I slept for five hours.”

Her heart sank as she realized that there had been no news from Dr. Benak. “Any news, Rosie?”

A shake of the head said no. “I have a thermos of hot coffee, Martha. Care for some?”

An affirmative nod brought a steaming cup to her hands as she sat up on the couch. Rosie said, “Dr. Benak says that Michael is in a coma but resting peacefully. He believes that they know the reason for the coma and assured me that Michael is in no immediate danger. Jack has gone home for few hours rest but will be back at six. Meanwhile we need to get you into some quarters.”

“Where is Michael?”

“He’s in ICU, hooked up to monitors as a precaution. Jack will make a recommendation later. Now, let’s go up so you can be with him for a bit. At Maggie’s request, housekeeping has tidied up Michael’s room here at the hospital. That will be your temporary home. The hospital is full, which means that none of the suites are available.”

Rosie had not been totally truthful with Martha. Dr. Benak had told Dr. Castle that had suffered an embolic stroke. Surgery was scheduled for seven. Rosie had decided that informing Martha could wait until Dr. Benak arrived. He wanted to explain to Martha his findings and the procedure for dealing with the embolism.

Martha sat with Michael until three in the morning. She remembered that Michael might be able to hear even if he was not responding to other stimuli.

“Oh, darling, I pray you are not in pain. It has been such a wonderful two weeks, being the focus of love from all your family, watching Sara absolutely envelope Momma and Dad, the beautiful wedding and the special love making at the Fairmont.”

“Remember the rides on the cable cars, eating crab on Fishermen’s Wharf with our fingers. Thank you for dinner at the Top of the Mark, as well as the Fairmont. Darling, I love you. I shall have marvelous memories of that short honeymoon, but I want to share those memories with you. Please come back to me.”

She let the tears roll. There was no one to see or hear her until the technician came in to take more blood. She lay her head on the bed and fell asleep. A nurse’s aide found her asleep, awakened her and accompanied her to Michael’s room.

An aide awakened her at six thirty. “Dr. Benak is preparing for surgery. He would like to talk with you before proceeding.”

That had an ominous ring for Martha, but she hastened to dress, throw some water on her face and rinse her mouth with a wash.

The doctor was seated in the small conference room outside OR17. “Please have a seat, Nurse Fuller. Meet Dr. Frankel, chief of Neurosurgery at Jefferson. I was lucky to reach him about midnight. After a series of exams and tests, we, separately and jointly decided that your husband suffered an embolic stroke.”

Martha felt her insides squirm and then cramp “Scary news!”

He continued, “From your own studies you know that an embolism is a traveling particle or debris in the arterial bloodstream originating from elsewhere. An embolus is most frequently a thrombus, but it can also be a number of other substances. I won’t go into detail, but we believe we have identified the location in his brain and are about to initiate the procedure. Since you are the next of kin, I need your approval to proceed.”

She reached for the pen, knowing she had no other option. Her mouth was so dry that the words were hard to understand. “Will he awaken as a result of the operation or will he remain comatose, even if you save his life?”

“We are both confident that he will awaken, although we cannot predict if there will be any limitations in regard to mobility and motor skills.”

A deeply saddened Martha signed the papers and walked to the chapel. On her knees, she began saying prayers. “Dear Lord, Be with Michael through this ordeal. I know it is selfish of me, but bring him to me to care for and love. He is my life. Even more, allow him to live his dream of helping others. Please don’t let him slip away. So many children will miss his love, his compassion and his tenderness. I know this may be a foolish request but I want and need the chance to prove my worthiness as his life companion.”

She was in no mood for food but opted for coffee at the cafeteria. She strolled around the campus, keeping her mind on whatever positive thoughts she could find. She experienced tears of joy as she reminisced of the first days of their affair and then her growing love. A picture of the picnic on Brandywine Creek arose in her mental screen, another of the tender times with her love.

She realized that she was getting cold, having lost track of time. She scurried back into the building and headed for the waiting room. Someone stuck a head through the narrow opening of the door into the surgery unit. Two minutes later, Rosie was walking toward her with her thermos of coffee and a breakfast roll.

“Good morning, Martha. I just looked down from the seats in the amphitheater. Dr., Frankel seemed to be smiling as he headed for the exit. It won’t be long before he shows up.”

“Oh, Rosie, I’m frightened. I’m sure they’ve done a great job but I know about strokes. There is, at least in my mind, the possibility that Michael may have to give up his dream of surgery.”

“Don’t be such a pessimist, Martha. Dr. Frankel is a wizard with a worldwide reputation.”

“Maybe you’re right, but my guts are telling me a different story.”

Ten minutes later both doctors came through the doors. They were smiling. Dr. Frankel said, “Mrs. Fuller, we both agree that the operation was a success. The embolism was some dirt from another part of the arterial tree. It was nearly but not totally blocking the blood flow to right side of the brain.”

Dr. Benak said, “From my position as the observer, there is no doubt that the problem has been eradicated. The brain is a beautiful creation. Michael’s brain simply went to sleep to make less of a demand on the brain

Martha asked, “May I see him?”

Dr. Frankel said, “Just a quick peek. He will not be over the anesthesia for about two hours. Furthermore, he may not waken for another few hours. Please understand that full awareness could be hours away.” He looked at his watch. “The anesthetic should be worn off by one o’clock. After a short peek, I suggest you have some lunch. The nurse will let you in at one. The wait may be short or long and requires patience.”

Martha rapped lightly on the door of the recovery room at precisely one o'clock. The nurse led her to the chair next to the bed. Martha reached for Michael's left hand, covering it with both of hers.

She began silently thanking God for saving her Michael. She knew what a close call he had had. A traveling embolism could have totally blocked flow of blood and taken his life.

When she finished her prayer, she began whispering to Michael. "I love you, dear. I thank you for the love you have shown me. I need you and a world of children needs you. You need to come back whole for the sake of those children someplace in our future."

It seemed she was repeating the message over and over although in different words. She must have fallen asleep. She wakened looked at her watch. It was five thirty. She felt a panic attack starting but gave herself a pep talk. "The doctors said it could be hours."

The nurse walked in. "You had a nice nap, Mrs. Fuller. You slept through both of my visits. I had to come in and do a few exercises with his arm and hand. Movement is crucial during these early times.

Martha rose in order to stretch her legs. She went to the bathroom and returned. No change. She took her seat, closing her eyes. "Martha, where are we. Are we home yet? Of course we are since I'm in bed."

She broke into tears, leaned over to put her head on his chest. She was trembling, unable to control herself. He asked, "What is it, darling? Why are you crying?"

She couldn't speak. She lifted her head, moved to plant a kiss on his lips but never stopped the tears. Michael suddenly realized he was not at home. "Where am I, Martha? Oh, this feels like a hospital bed? What happened to me?" His body stiffened, panic seemed to be setting in. "Are you crying because I'm seriously ill?"

Finally able to respond, Martha said, "You are in no danger, Dear, but you did have surgery and just awakened."

At that moment, the door opened. Martha turned to see the senior Dr. Michael Fuller walk through the door. Michael and Martha both said, "Dad."

He smiled. "Yes. It took a while because of the weather in the Midwest but here I am, a bit tired but delighted to see both of you. Martha, I do believe you have been crying," He pulled out a white handkerchief and handed it to her.

Michael said, "Dad, I just discovered that I am in the hospital. I think I was about to find out the reason when you walked in."

They turned toward the sound of the door opening again. In walked Dr. Benak, the neurologist. He walked directly toward them and reached for Dad's hand. "You must be Dr. Fuller. Your reputation precedes you. I've read all your papers in the Journal. I am pleased to meet you."

"Thank you. I spoke with you yesterday, didn't I?"

“Yes. I am glad you made it. I hear the weather in Chicago has been fierce.”

Dad gave me a rueful smile. “Long delay in landing and then waiting for the weather to clear after another storm arrived.”

“Just in time. I was checking to see if Michael was awake and here I find good news and a happy gathering. Let me have a quick look and I will get out of your way.”

Three minutes later he asked, “Dr. Fuller, if you are free, I will be in my office for another hour. I can fill you in with all the medical details.”

“Thank you. I will plan to see you.”

When the doctor left, Dad said, “Martha, I guess it’s up to you. Why don’t you tell Michael why he is here? I will listen in order to get caught up.”

Martha invited Dad to stand with her and reached to take his hand in her left while she took Michael’s right hand. “Darling, you fainted or so I thought, shortly after the cabbie started for home. When I couldn’t get you to respond, I asked the cabbie to bring you to emergency.”

Lucky for me that Bill Gogol was still here. He called for Dr. Benak who is a neurologist. I gather that you were showing no sign of awakening, so the call went out for Dr. Frankel from Jefferson Hospital. He is a personal friend of Dr. Benak and world renowned.

“You had developed a partially blocked artery in the brain from an embolism. Sometime in the night they came to the decision that the blockage was not a hundred percent. They initiated the procedure at seven. I came into recovery at one, just as you were emerging from the anesthesia. You awakened a moment before Dad walked in.” She gave a long sigh and sat down.

Dad said, “That was very clear and concise.” He turned to Michael. In his gentle voice, “How are you feeling, son?”

“I just realized that I have a slight headache. Otherwise I feel well. Martha, you must have felt it was serious to have called Dad.”

“Yes. I was planning to call but the Dr. needed more medical history than I could provide, so he called Dad.” She felt Michael’s hand gently squeezing hers. It felt so special to have his hand over hers at this moment. She was taking strength from Michael.

They chatted for another twenty minutes before Dad said, “I will check in with Dr. Benak. Martha, since the doctor will now want Michael to rest, why don’t we have dinner?” By the look of you, some sleep should be on your agenda. I know that Michael needs a good night rest.”

“All right, Dad. I’ll be ready when you return.”

Martha took Michael’s dad to a 24 hour diner, one of her favorite places. She knew that they could get a corner booth. She was sure Dad would enjoy one of their famous Philly cheese steaks. “He must be famished.”

As soon as they were seated, Dad reached for his iPhone. "I need to find a room."

Martha put her hand on his arm. "Dad, why not stay at our apartment? Michael's boss has arranged for me to stay in Michael's room at the hospital."

"Thank you, dear. That is very thoughtful, but I don't want to inconvenience you."

"Dad, it's no problem. We called in our cleaning woman two days before leaving. There is more room for you. The computer is yours. I will give you the key to my car, if you don't mind a convertible, and directions to and from the hospital. Please."

He reached across the table, took her hands in his. "Martha, you are so right for Michael. He has bloomed into a warm person, not the moody cool guy that we saw these past few years. Now, tell me. How are you holding up?"

She felt his hand give her a little squeeze of being truly present. "After an initial attack of panic in the cab, I settled down and let my training take over. Although my mind kept speculating about Michael's future, Dr. Gogol, head of Emergency and a personal friend of ours, calmed me by letting me know what was happening. I really calmed down when I found out that Michael's boss, Dr. Castle, was in the loop."

"I surprised myself with my behavior. I would have predicted a greater emotional, self-pity type of response. That is not to say that I am not worried. I needed time in the chapel for prayer and some meditation. His being alive is the most wonderful thing but what is in store for Michael?"

He said, "As you know, my job as an Internist requires my being able to read my patients. In this case, I see you as a sort of patient, a very personal patient, my loving new daughter. I read you very much as you describe yourself and that is excellent."

"Thanks, Dad. I try to be as honest with myself as possible. What can you tell me of your conversation with Dr. Benak?"

"He is pleased with the results as far as he can see, but tomorrow he will start a series of tests to see if there are any residual effects. I noticed your scanning what little you could see of Michael's body. I did, too. All looked normal to me. No slurring of speech as far as I could tell."

She said, "Yes, I was trying not to be obvious. I noticed nothing of concern."

Dad continued. "Dr. Benak gave me the run-down of what he will be looking for during his exam. He will look for weakness or paralysis that may affect one whole side of the body, or just an arm or leg. The weakness or paralysis will be on the side of the body opposite the side of the brain injured by the stroke. This could lead to problems with balance or coordination, because the weight of the weak side pulls against the strong side. That could affect standing, sitting or walking even if his muscles are strong enough to perform these activities."

It seems that he will not have trouble understanding speech, but he will check to see about writing. At the same time, he will double check that Michael can understand and be able to think of the right words to speak or write."

Often, stroke survivors, because of vision and perception problems, will not turn to look toward their weakened side. Strokes often cause problems with memory, thinking, attention, learning, and other mental activities. I'm sure you have thought about whether Michael may have trouble with several of these, or just a few. He may also be unaware of some of the effects of the stroke, and show poor judgment by trying to do things that are no longer safe."

Before the doctor arrives, Michael will have been served some food and the attendant will have been asked to observe if he has problems swallowing."

Lastly, careful attention will be given to determining whether there is any problem with bowel or bladder control."

Martha listened with rapt attention, knowing that if the first tests show no abnormalities, the symptoms might show up a little later.

"That sounds comprehensive."

"Yes. I have sat in on a number of such tests with our neurologists. Dr. Benak suggested we defer our first visit until after lunch."

Martha said with just a touch of humor in her voice, "I don't know if I should be happy for the thoroughness or worried because of the long list of possible effects."

"It's time to head for the sack. I think I will accept the offer of the apartment, but you should let me take a cab. An address and a key will suffice. Meanwhile, here are some sleeping pills that Doc gave me. He wants us both to sleep soundly and long."

They rose together. He walked around the table; put his arms around her shoulders. She laid her head against his chest, whispering, "I am so glad you are with me. Your love for the two of us gives me great strength, Dad."

Chapter 9.

Martha called Dad at eleven. "I'll pick you up at noon. We can have brunch before going to see Michael."

"I just peeked into the fridge. Looks like your cleaning woman stacked the makings of a good breakfast. I'll have a huge breakfast meal ready when you walk in."

"You, Dad, are everything Maria said about you and even more. I am bringing my appetite."

When they were seated and ready to dig in, he asked, "Mind if I say grace? I feel we owe much to our God, not only for Michael but for all the gifts that have come our way, including you, Martha."

A few minutes later he said, "Mom, that's we call Alexa, has made arrangements for someone to handle her current cases. She will fly in tomorrow evening. She has booked a suite at the Ritz Carlton. By the time she arrives, we should have a clearer picture of Michael's future."

Unbeknown to them, the receptionist called Dr. Benak when she spied them arriving. He was walking from the opposite direction toward Michael's room as they were arriving. "Good afternoon. I hoped to catch you before we entered. Almost without exception, Michael's test was positive. I haven't talked with him, holding back until you were present. I presume you would like to be there when I present m findings. Is that acceptable?"

Dad was nodding approval, but Martha's imagination was in full gear. "Even the slightest limitation may affect his dream of being a surgeon."

Dad saw the flicker of emotion cross her face. He put his arm around her. "We're ready, doctor."

Michael saw the smiles on two faces, but he wasn't sure how to read Martha's expression. He faced Dr. Benak, hoping for good news. He had enjoyed a light breakfast of soft boiled eggs, light toast and hot herbal tea.

Being familiar in general with patients who had been comatose, he had tried to examine himself, but he knew that was fruitless even though he found no impediments. He wondered if the smile on doctor's face was real or professional.

The neurologist was direct, although soft-spoken. "Michael, we have excellent news. I say excellent, not ideal. You have a fixable impediment.

He saw Michael's face drop into a scowl or even disappointment. A glance at Martha revealed a tear forming behind her lash.

He hurried on. "There is a residual weakness in your left arm and hand but it is a weakness that can be remedied by intense physical therapy. I believe that is good news. We all were the beneficiaries of quick thinking by your wife, who got you to us in time."

The silence was short but deafening. Everyone waited for the question that Michael was going to ask. Almost with a sigh he said, "I guess that puts an end to my career as a surgeon."

Before Dr. Benak answered, Michael's dad spoke up. "Not necessarily, Michael. I have seen cases in which dedication and desire overcame this situation, making it a temporary impediment."

Dr. Benak was nodding affirmatively. Martha put her hand on Michael's arm. "Darling, between us, we can overcome the handicap."

From the expression on Michael's face she could see that he wasn't buying into their optimism. "Darling, you can do this. You need to get completely healed so we can live our dream together."

Dad had moved to the other side of the bed and taken his son's right hand into his own. "Son, you know there is nothing that I will let stand in the way of your pursuing your dream."

All three of them could see nothing but despondence in his face. He said, "Thank you, all three of you, but I need to be alone now. Please leave me. Please."

Dad remembered earlier times when Michael had made the same plea. He knew that leaving for the moment was the only choice. He nodded to Dr. Benak, walked around the bed, gently removed Martha's hand, then leading her out of the door. He could feel her resistance before she yielded.

Outside he said, "My dear daughter, we need to give him time. I promise that between us, he will agree to travel the right path." He turned to Dr. Benak. "Any comment?"

"I agree with what you are telling Martha. We need to be patient. I can't promise a change of attitude, although my experience says that we have a ninety percent chance of his finally agreeing. That, however, is not a certainty. I'll leave the next visit to you and hope to hear a positive result of that next meeting."

The two of them stopped by at about five thirty, his meal time. Michael seemed to relish the meal, asking the aide for a second cup of tea. His mood did not seem any different. No one brought up the subject of therapy. He accepted the news of his mother's arrival without any sign of pleasure. His response seemed to say that she was doing what was expected of her.

Three hours later, his welcome of her arrival was tepid, showing no particular appreciation of the fact that she had rearranged life to be with him. Before the end of the visit she lost her temper after repeated attempts to get reaction to her comments or answers to her questions. In a huff, she finally said, "Dammit, Michael, show some appreciating for three people who love you and want to help."

In a dull voice he said, "No one can help me. My life is over."

His mother got on her knees, taking his hand in hers. "That is ridiculous. You have a chance at a great life with a loving and brilliant wife by your side. Together, you two can whip the world, if you choose to do so." Martha could hear the ambiguous tone that was commanding and pleading at the same time.

It was after visiting hours. Dad and Mom had left for the evening. She took the elevator to the ICU floor. The head nurse waved as Martha walked by, looking in to her computer screen in order not see Martha enter Michael's room.

It was a minor infraction and easily explained. Martha was a nurse as well as the next of kin. The patient was still in ICU because no bed was available in the other wards. That would change at seven the next morning, according to the schedule posted on her screen.

Martha would be on duty starting at noon tomorrow. She had reported to her supervisor that she was ready. Michael was in no physical danger, although he was to be hospitalized for another four or five days.

She checked her watch. It was a few minutes after ten. The only light in the room was a ray that originated in the outer room. Its glow stopped short of the bed. Martha slipped to the far side, where she took the chair seat next to Michael's left side. He was asleep, his light breath the only sound that she could hear.

She carefully reached for his hand. She did not want to awaken him but she hoped that his unconscious would communicate her presence.

She must have fallen asleep. Michael was whispering, "Is that you, Maxine? It can't be time for my meds. Are you taking my pulse reading?"

Martha stood and leaned over. "It's Martha."

He seemed to be flustered for a moment, and then asked, "Why were you sitting in the dark?"

She patted the back of his hand, and then lightly rubbed his knuckle. "It's after hours. My friend, Cassie, looked the other way when I entered. I needed to be with you. I didn't mean to wake you. I simply wanted to hold your hand and let your dream tell you I love you."

"Oh, Martha. I am so sorry. I treated you shamefully, sending you away earlier. I'm scared and I am not ready to talk about my future, not even about tomorrow."

"I know that now, Honey. That's why I came tonight. I want you to know that I will accept any decision you make. I am yours forever and willing to talk only when you are ready. Your dad feels the same as I do. In his gentle way he is probably telling your mom to pull back. She will, because, in my estimation, she is no match for his gentle persuasion."

Michael gave a low chuckle. "Your right, but if not, I want you to ward off any discussion of what I need to do to get well. Promise me. Mom means well and I do not want another confrontation."

"I promise. I also promise to find moments to see you alone so you can keep telling me how you love me, your very new wife who misses you."

He reached to pull her head down so that lips could talk to each other at close range. A minute later he asked, "When do you go back to work?"

“I start at noon tomorrow. I’ll see you in your new room before I go on duty. In the meantime, I will talk to Dad about your pleasure at seeing family as long as the talk is not about your future.”

“Thank you, Honey. My head is now strong enough to take one of those sexy kisses. That will keep my mind on the important things.”

The overhead light flashed on just as she was getting started, but she did to stop. “Maxine can see what real love looks like.”

She had coffee with the Fullers just after visiting with Michael him next morning. She had talked with Dad on his cell phone a little earlier. They were headed for his room. She said, “Michael is planning to call his grandparents sometime later today, perhaps this evening. Although he did not say so, I got the feeling that he will be talking with Gramma Sara. He wants to tell everyone that the operation was a success.”

Alexa started to ask something but Martha guessed that she intercepted a nudge from Dad. They hugged before she left for the OR.

The visit with his mom was anything but satisfactory. Dad tried to steer the conversation toward a dozen other subjects than Michael’s future but a mother’s concern for her son and his life kept her returning to the subject that Michel wanted to avoid.

He found himself being short with her, cutting off a comment or question that even hinted of the loathed subject. He was relieved when Dad suggested that Michael needed rest.

He was a bit moody, in Martha’s opinion, when she dropped by. She looked at his chart and smiled. “This looks good. Did you have a good visit with Alexa?” Immediately she knew she had made a mistake. His scowl deepened. She asked, “Has the doctor been in?”

He had a terse answer. “Two o’clock.”

She looked at her watch, leaned over, giving him a wet kiss, laughed, saying, and “Gotta run.”

The subject of his near future was not to be avoided with Dr. Benak. After a lengthy examination, the doctor said, “I want you to stay in the hospital for other two or three days, specifically so I can continue running tests.”

“Have you been shifting your body into different positions as I suggested? How about moving your arm and hand frequently? Good.”

“You need to start walking today, two or three short ones this afternoon. Perhaps you will feel strong enough for a longer walk with Martha this evening.”

“The day after tomorrow you begin therapy.”

Michael’s muscles tightened. His face became taut. “What kind of therapy?”

“The first couple of times will be general conditioning, aerobic mostly but also some light leg and arm exercises.”

The doctor tried to read Michael’s reaction but the mask was in place.

The afternoon visit with his folks went smoother than the morning session. He thought, “Dad, who is always more sensitive, must have given Mon the word.” Alexa was full of news about Gramma Sara and his grandparents. “Did you know they are planning a trip to Mongolia, of all places? I swear my mother has more curiosity about the strangest places on earth.”

She was excited as she described two of her current law cases. He was sure that her next subject would be Anna. Just as she started, Michael frowned. Dad interrupted with a comment about their plans for dinner. “I hope I develop the kind of senility he possesses. He reads me like a book.”

Michael spent much of the day either analyzing his situation and his future. He concentrated on moving his left arm and hand. He wanted to scream when he had trouble turning his wrist. “Dammit! Nothing is going to work.”

His mood darkened. He realized he was in state of self-pity, yet he did not want to change his focus. He could hardly wait for Martha’s arrival that evening. He had to confess that he knew now that their dream had vanished.

In some mystical way she became aware of somberness in the room as she crossed the threshold, moving toward Michael’s bed. She tried for a bright tone. “Hi, Honey.” If it was a grunt, she could hardly hear it.

She turned up the lights, seeing at once the tears hanging on his lashes. She leaned over to kiss both eyes followed by a lingering tender kiss on his lips.

When she freed his lips, he cried out, “Darling, Martha. Our dream is gone. I will never be able to operate again. In fact, with this limp arm I will not even be a doctor. That has been my dream even before we created our joint dream of being a disaster team on behalf of children.”

That comment shook Martha to the core of her being. She took a deep breath. Silence filled the room for a whole minute. She asked “Is that what the doctor told you today?”

“Oh, no. He wants me to start therapy, but I know. I have been analyzing my situation all day, also trying various movements with my arm and hand. It just won’t work.”

“How you know that?”

“I just do.” Martha was at a loss for words or suggestions. She waited for him to continue. “I did have two walks today, short ones. Doc thought you and I might try a longer walk this evening.”

She smiled. “I consider that great news. Is this a good time?”

“Yep. Using my right arm, I can sit up. If you pull down the covers, I can scoot around and with a bit of help I can get out of bed.”

During the walk around the ward, Martha asked “How certain are you that therapy won’t work? I talked with Dad today. He has talked with two other neurologists, Dr. Frankel and the neurosurgeon at Kaiser, Santa Clara. Each one of them encouraged him to urge you to give it a shot. He is ready to talk when you are.”

He listened but said nothing. She went on
“I have a hard time believing that you have to give up medicine even if surgery is not your future.”

It wasn’t really a sneer, but his tone was not encouraging. “Like what?”

“There are a jillion specialties and sub specialties in medicine. Why, your love of children offers a dozen opportunities in pediatrics. Let’s have a seat in the lounge and make a list.”

By the time they finished they had a list of more than fifteen sub specialties in pediatrics. The list started with abuse pediatrics and went on to Neonatology, Immunology, Cardiology, Emergency Medicine, Oncology and Rheumatology.

Michael said, “I must have been over analyzing my situation. Most likely it was my fear and disappointment that befuddled my thinking. Nothing could preclude my working in research, for instance.”

She waited for him to continue. He said, “I’ll talk with Dad in the morning, and I will start therapy even though I am sure that surgery will have to become a lost dream.”

They stood close together in warm embrace just before he climbed back into bed. She was beginning to feel that hunger for Michael’s body as his body began speaking to her. “Oh, Michael, hurry home. We need to pick up on our honeymoon activities. Now, I need to leave before I jump into that bed with you.”

For the first time in days, Michael had a truly restful night. It took some time for Martha to fall asleep, thinking about Michael becoming a whole human being again.

Michel called Dad right after breakfast. “Do you think you could send Mom on a shopping trip? I would like to spend some time with you alone.”

Their hours together were filled with stories of Dad’s experience with patients who had suffered strokes. He was seeing those patients as a clinical Internist about illness not related to stroke. In the course of his treatment he managed to get those patients talking about their feelings as handicapped or about their limitations. He told Michael, “You would be surprised at their stories of finding a richer meaning in life, some continuing in their prior vocations and others thankful that the limitation forces them to see new vocations that were highly rewarding.”

A fly on the wall would have heard laughter at one moment followed by tears and sobs in the next. In the end the fly would have said, “Very therapeutic.”

When his mother joined them, she could see that his spirits were raised. She joined in recounting some anecdotes of their past times together and wisely waited to talk with Dad about the change in Michael’s behavior and the positive feeling about the change her husband had seen in Michael.

Other than a visit from an aide or a technician, Michael had a long quiet afternoon. He sat up in the middle of a long contemplative period. “Going home means I am about to face the end of sick leave. I need a conversation with Maggie.”

It was as though his thoughts had been transmitted psychically. Ten minutes later, Maggie walked through the door. “Hello, handsome. Jack called a little while ago to say that you might be receptive to a visit. Is this a good time?”

“Perfect timing, Boss. I was just thinking that my sick leave would be coming to an end, meaning I need to talk with you.”

She pulled up a chair. “Any more head pain?”

“Negative. No memory loss or disorientation. Only this damned left arm and hand. I say only, but as you know, that is big, very big.”

“I know, Mike, but Jack thinks the odds are in your favor, if you choose to believe and work to achieve success.”

“That’s what he says, but I am skeptical.”

“Does that mean you give up?”

“Hell, no” Martha would kill me. She is willing to do anything to keep our dream alive. Dad also agrees with Jack, based on his years of working with folks who had suffered strokes. One of the problems is that neither Dad nor Jack has ever worked with a twenty some year old victim.”

Maggie said, “I’m sure both have reminded you that the young heal fast and better than older people.”

“They have. Now, I need to hear from you. I am not a surgical resident in your department, since I am in no position to perform surgery.”

“I know that only too well. Your absence has put another hole in our surgical staffing. I do have another hole to fill but it may not be to your liking. Felix, the Chief Medical Resident has worked out his contract. He will be leaving in six weeks. He thinks you would make a great replacement. I agree. The job is yours, if that suits you.”

“I never thought of myself as an administrator.”

“I know, but you have a great mind. You handled the job as his assistant on a part time basis and did it with distinction. I also believe it can provide a great opportunity to work in every field of pediatrics. I also have a selfish motive in offering the position to you.”

Michael smiled at the idea that she did anything for a personal reason. , He raised his eyebrows. Maggie said, “As your adopted godmother, I want you to keep in touch with the children during this period of rehab. If you are on my staff, I have every right to stick my nose into your professional business.”

Michael burst out laughing. “That means I will have two women running my life.”

Maggie joined in the laughter. “Yes, but what great women! Any other man would die for those two women to be in his life.”

“Maggie, lean over here so I can give you a strong one handed hug.”

Before leaving, she said, “Since the first week of your therapy will be intense, I suggest you limit yourself to reading the manuals. Felix is ready to give you whatever time you need. I’ll start scanning the resumes of all the residents to hand you a list of candidates to be your assistant. Be strong, Michael.”

Martha was more than pleased with the turn of events. She stopped by Dr. Castle’s office the next day to thank her for coming to the rescue.

Michael leaned on Martha’s arm as they walked to the rehab center. They were greeted immediately. “Dr. Fuller, I’m Mac. This is Sandy.” He turned toward Martha. “Nurse Fuller, I happen to know who you are. Please come in. We want you to sit in on the orientation. Are you available?”

“Yes, I am.”

Sandy began the orientation. “We are your stroke rehabilitation team. Mac is the physical therapist and I am the occupational therapist. We will be recommending a combination and a variety of exercises and other techniques to help your arm recover. Two big goals of stroke rehab are to enhance muscle control and reduce spasticity. This is a constant contraction of muscles that can lead to pain and other problems.

Rehab for your hand and arm includes passive movements or exercises. Some movements will be done with our help and guidance. Other more active exercises you will learn to do with a little help at home with little or no assistance.

This rehabilitation will be tiring. We will remind you that it helps to be active during times of the day when you have more energy.

Stretching is important for reducing spasticity. Stretching should be used not as an alternative to medications, but as a foundation. We have had good success with patients who practice what we preach.”

They all laughed, Mac saying “She would make a great preacher.”

“We will teach you range-of-motion stretches. Like using your other arm to produce the forces needed to move the disabled arm. Called passive exercises, these can help prevent muscle shortening.

Mac will show you that stretching your affected arm with the other arm is the basis of spasticity self-management. You can also use the unaffected hand to stretch the thumb and all the fingers on the affected hand.

Mac will teach you how to do stretch, such as moving the arm through its full range of motion at least three times a day, gently stretching tighter muscles to a point of some discomfort and holding it for a minute.”

Mac took over. "Thanks, Sandy." He looked directly at Michael. "Some of the arm movements will have to be forced and therefore be painful. Two of the exercises at home may require assistance from Mrs.

Fuller. I tell you this because pain to you will translate into sympathy from Mrs. Fuller. Both of you together can support each other so that the exercise is completed regardless of the painful experience.

"Now, questions."

"You haven't said anything about use of the arm or hand."

"Right. We think this is enough to deal with at the moment. That subject comes up after the first few days. Our first concern is spasticity. May I assume you have been keeping your body moving and performing the light arm exercises prescribed by your physician?"

"I have."

"Good. Have you noticed any spasms or other involuntary muscle movements?"

"No."

"Pain?"

"Not that I am aware of."

"Great. Sandy, of course, is your occupational therapist. Her focus will be on teaching you how to perform tasks without the use of the right arm as well using your affected arm to perform some everyday functions. That list will grow as you regain more use of the arm."

Martha could hear the tremor in Michael's voice as he asked. "Do you think I can recover enough to ever perform surgery?"

She listened as Mac's voice softened. "There is no way to predict that, Doctor. I will say that two previous cases of ours are back to working on small mechanical assemblies in the high tech industry. I know their jobs require manual skills similar to those of surgeons."

A flicker of emotions raced across Michael's face as he digested those last words. He had already been wondering if the result was worth all the pain that was implied in Sandy's comments. Now, Mac was saying that the end was only a "maybe" for his dream.

Martha found herself holding her breath until Michael said, "I'm ready for the first session."

It wasn't long before Michael was breathing hard, worn out after the first but rather brief session. There were moments when he wanted to shout "Stop!"

Mac suggested he use a wheel chair to take him back to the room. He took two Tylenol, double strength, to ease the pain, but said to Martha, "This doesn't help much. My whole body feels like hell."

"It takes patience, Honey. You know that. The pain will ease after the Tylenol gets fully into the blood stream. Let me give you a gentle massage. Sandy gave me a demonstration while you were with Mac."

The first three days were the hardest. During the hours that Martha was on duty, a young student therapist came hourly to Michael's room to guide him in the repetitive exercises prescribed.

During the few weeks before he took over as CNR for the pediatrics unit, he was able to go home each day when Martha had completed her shift. She had been instructed to push Michael to do as much for himself as possible. At times, she felt like she was being punished by standing aside as a frustrated Michael cursed and yelled at his inability to complete some simple task

When he had begun therapy using his affected arm to perform certain tasks, as instructed by Sandy, she insisted he start CMT. She was surprised that he didn't rebel. The technique was called constraint-induced movement therapy

In order to initiate this CMT procedure, she placed a mitt over his unaffected hand for a two hour period so that each task that he faced had to be executed with the affected arm and hand.

That evening he confided to Martha. "It has taken me weeks to accept the fact that the staff and the two of us are doing the best we can. I don't know where this will end, but I am now committed to doing what is possible and not trying to force the result."

Martha wrapped her arms around him, holding on for minutes, finally saying, "Darling, I've been waiting for those words and that smile that I see on your face, the first since that fateful day. Welcome back."

He grinned. "I've missed being here. I'm ready to take on the world."

She moved in closer. "Before you take on the world, would you mind taking me on?"

"Honey, I am so ready but you know we need to change sides of the bed and it is you who will have to be patient. My seduction technique is a bit rusty."

She took both his hands in hers, pulling him toward the bedroom. "I have a feeling that neither of us needs worry about seduction at this moment."

Felix, the retiring chief medical resident, moved with dispatch to prep Michael for his new responsibilities.

"Mike, you already know the educational responsibilities, having done a great job as my assistant. You did not have hands on responsibility for teaching but I am sure you picked that up by osmosis.

"You will be responsible for several educational experiences per week for the residents and the medical students. Prepping for morning report conferences, you will select cases to be presented, facilitate the discussion and provide clinical teaching relevant to the case. The other minor responsibilities are listed in the file.

"Work with the Chief of Medicine regarding his weekly visit. For that occasion you will be responsible for identifying and presenting the cases and arranging for all participants in the discussions.

"A large and important component of the job is the ongoing coordination of the residents on the teaching services. You must provide monthly orientation for all rotating residents. Throughout the rotation, you need to provide guidance for struggling residents, serve as a resource for clinical and administrative questions, and arrange sick-coverage. Dad, what is "sick-coverage"?"

“In addition, you will serve as a liaison between medicine and other services to maintain strong relationships and facilitate the residents’ experience on off-service rotations.

“You work closely with the Chief of Medicine to identify needed changes and plan solutions.

“There are a few other less important functions in the manual. Lastly but of great importance, is morale. You will serve as an important resource and provide ongoing support for the residents. From guiding struggling residents to planning morale-boosting events, you need to be intimately involved in the well-being of residents as mentor to many. It is important to incorporate their feedback into future changes within the teaching environment.

“That’s the brief description. As you read the manual, questions will arise that I can help interpret. In between therapy and as you feel able; we will spend time together as I perform my daily tasks.”

“Thanks, Felix. It seems overwhelming.”

Felix smiled. “Having worked with you these past months, I see this as a piece of cake for you. It’s not surgery but it is challenging and rewarding. Meanwhile I hope therapy is successful enough to meet your hopes.”

Michael was surprised to find the extent to which he enjoyed his work. It had its dull moments, but with two part time assistants to handle education and the grunt work of pushing paper and record keeping, he found more time to work one-on-one with residents. As interdepartmental liaison, he broadened his knowledge of the inner workings of a teaching hospital.

Martha’s personality and her touch with young children brought her special attention from staff and pediatric surgeons in private practice. She turned down two invitations to become head surgery nurse for private children’s clinics. Her response was, “I must be near my husband, who is on the pediatric staff and undergoing regular stroke therapy.”

Her reasoning was that, as an employee of the hospital, she had regular hours and could be there every night that Michael was home, serving as his part time therapist, physical, occupational and psychiatric.

Not every day was a good day for Michael. Some days he arrived home physically tired which too often led to despair about what seemed to him to be a lack of progress in his rehab program.

Marta promised herself, “I must be there for him, supporting him in those down moments.”

Her love for Michael was so evident to him that he listened to her almost adoringly. She had a way of pulling him out of dark times. At her suggesting, not urging, he decided to seek help from a psychological therapist. He promised to follow through after their return from the west coast.

She and Michael were headed to California for ten days. Her folks were going with them. Gramma Sara sent the tickets once the dates were settled.

Sara's town car, with Michael Sr. as chauffeur, met them at SFO and headed directly for Lake Tahoe. Michael's mom and her parents came out to greet them when they drove into the compound. Mom was her usual emotional self, weeping with joy, while she worried how to give him a hug. "Its okay, Mom. You can't hurt me. You can only love me as always."

Gramma Sara was waiting for them, seated in a lounge chair. She opened her arms for Martha while Michael was preoccupied with his immediate family. "Dear Martha, welcome. As soon as you're settled, come by. I have a delightful new Chardonnay to help smooth the way for all the news I want to hear."

She turned to welcome Martha's parents. "As I wrote, you will be staying with me. I have planned a special exclusion for later in the week."

Dad carried their bags when Martha left Gramma Sara. Michael was tied up with his mom and grandparents. Martha toted the smaller items.

In the room Dad said, "Thank you for the weekly updates. He seems to be on a steady path to improvement."

"He is, Dad. In fact, after each emotional dip, he appears to be stronger. I meant to tell you in the last email that I suddenly realized that he seems not nearly as upset about the slow progress of physical therapy."

"Has he said anything to make you recognize that he is aware of the change?"

"I don't think so. Jonah, his psychologist, or I, need to probe a bit. I know he loves his temporary work as CMR, but I'm not sure that he sees some alternative to being a surgeon, at least not yet. While Mac won't make a promise, he says nothing to discourage Michael."

Dad heard footsteps. Sounds like Michael."

When Michael walked in he asked, "Dad, are you planning to play some golf while we are here?"

"Ben and I have a tee time tomorrow morning. Want to walk along or maybe take a cart?"

"I was hoping you would invite me. I would like to see if my improved arm and hand are good enough to do some putting."

"Great. I'll throw in Mom's clubs and rent you a cart."

On the practice green, Dad watched Michael fumble around for a bit until he found a way to grasp the club lightly with the left hand. His attempt to putt went awry

Ben walked over to see if Michael would accept any help. Michael saw his raised eyebrow.

“Sure. Help away.”

“Some left handed pros have found success putting with the right hand dominant. Why don’t you try?”

“Why not?”

Ben placed his right hand lower than the left, a change from his usual grip. “Take a very light grip. Now, strong right hand grip. Train your mind to think right hand stroke. Push, not pull.”

The starter called their names. Michael said, “Go ahead. I’ll catch you on the green. I want to try this for just a bit.”

He joined them as they prepared to hit their approach shots to the green on the par five first holes. On the green he brought the putter. When they holed out, he put down two golf balls and practiced his new stroke. Ben and Dad were ecstatic as each ball travelled toward the hole with just about enough length but slightly off distance.

Ben said, “You are a fast learner and certainly have made great progress with the therapist.”

“Thanks, Uncle Ben. I’ll try again on the next green.” He did and had fair success, dropping a ten foot putt on the third green and six footer on the ninth hole. I think I am comfortable with this standard grip pushing with the right hand.”

While Dad and Ben were ordering sandwiches at the turn, Michael walked to the car and retrieved one of his Mom’s clubs, a nine iron. When the others were finished hitting approach shots onto the green, he dropped a ball and tried a chip shot with the nine irons. He managed to get the ball in the air although it skittered far to the right of his target.

Dad could not help but clap while Ben said “Bravo.”

“Son, that was terrific. I love your grit.”

Michael grinned in response to hearing those encouraging words from his dad.

He got back into the golf cart, taking up the sponge and working it with opening, closing and squeezing his left hand until they reached the next green.

On each fairway, he used his left hand to take the ball from the ball rack in the cart and toss it on the grass so he could practice the chip shot. As Mac and Sandy instructed, “use the affected hand as often as possible.”

Because their first meeting had to be postponed, Martha and Sara were sipping lemonade after lunch. At Sara’s request, Martha had given her a complete picture of Michael’s status, his emotional state, his physical progress and his acceptance of his current state.

At the end of her report, Martha said “Gramma, the last time we spoke you said you would tell me the follow up story to your week end with Grampa David. You were shipped to Hawaii while he soon to be commissioned.”

Sara’s face broke into a wide grin. “Remember, this is between us. No one in the clan knows this. David and I kept it as our secret.”

“I promise not to tell.”

“Well, several months later, David was assigned duty at Pearl Harbor as a pilot for Admiral Witty. His quarters were not very far from my own. He found a way to discover my work place and my phone extension. I almost dropped dead when I heard his voice. I gave him directions on the bus line to get to my quarters.”

Sara paused as though she was picturing that day once more in her mind Finally, Martha cleared her voice, bringing Sara back to the present.

"We sat in the visitors’ lounge of the women’s quarters telling each other of events that had transpired in the months since our special weekend.I kept wondering if he was telling me the whole story. “Had he found some other Wave who had seduced him and stolen my lover from me?”

“I tried slyly to find out but with no success. He finally saw through my screen, saying “I’ve been tempted on several occasions, Sara but you have spoiled me. How about you? Have you fallen in love with anyone?”

“I blushed and stammered, “I thought you could read in my letters that I had fallen in love with you, even if I dared not say he words, as we had promised each other.”

“The shadowy wall that had lain between us, shattered. Within in a minute we were in each other’s arms and shortly afterwards moving toward my room.”

“I had fallen in love with David on that second date. David admitted that he too had fallen in love with me. Perhaps because it was in the midst of war but ours was a passionate love affair.”

“He and I wanted to marry, but he was concerned about leaving me to be his widow, which might limit my future chances for a full life. His worries proved to be valid. After we finally married, he came within an inch of losing his life at sea near the end of the war. In the end, David made a full recovery.

"David and I never lost our passion for each other. I have the grandest memories, often spending the evenings reading my diary in order to relive my life with David.”

Martha was sure she saw tears glistening in Sara’s eyes as she turned away to look at something across the room. Both let the silence dominate for a moment or two then Sara surprised Martha with a question. “Does Michael show his appreciation for your role and support?”

Martha wasn't sure how to answer that. After a thoughtful silence she said in her usual forthright manner. "As much as he can. Some days, he comes home tired and worn out, especially if the workloads is heavy and includes a visit to the physical therapy staff."

Sara wasn't about to settle for a nonspecific response. "Does he help with meals, doing the dishes, dusting the furniture? You know what I mean."

Martha admitted. "Not as much as he did earlier, but his work load is heavier."

"That's no excuse. You must work hard in surgery. I am sure it takes its toll on your body and the spirit. In a true partnership, the load may not be shared equally but it is certainly not lopsided. I have the feeling that yours is a little one sided."

Martha answered. "I guess it is, but perhaps it's the maternal side of me that reaches out to make life easier for him."

She was about to ask another question when they heard a vehicle pull into the driveway. Sara looked out the window. "It's Alexa. Remember Dear, insist on balance. Even Michael will appreciate it. He knows that a successful partnership is those in which the partners contribute equally."

Alexa insisted on taking Martha shopping. "I found this tasteful boutique in King's Beach alongside a quaint tea shop with scrumptious scones."

Alexa, using her iPhone, called Mari. "Mom, how about joining Martha and me on a shopping junket in King's Beach?"

Ten minutes later they were on their way.

The tea and scones were first on the agenda. Three women, hunger for sweets now satisfied, then strolled the main street of the small community, a street of fifteen or twenty businesses that included a half dozen shops that might have graced the classy business district of Philadelphia.

They strolled through several of the shops and ended up in Anne's boutique. Within three minutes Alexa was carrying three dresses into a changing room.

Maria happened to turn toward her as Martha was holding a stunning cocktail dress to the body, studying the image in the mirror. She heard Maria saying, "Martha that dress is "you." In fact, you are one of only a few women who could wear that dress. You must have it."

"It is beautiful, isn't it? I could wear it to the Founder's Day dinner." She was afraid to look at the price tag.

Maria sounded like a saleswoman. "You should try it on." Maria took the dress from Martha, fiddled with it for a moment, handed to the clerk. "Please take her to a dressing room."

While Martha headed for the room, Maria walked to a woman who seemed to be the owner. “Do you have a tailor handy in case we need a slight alteration?”

The woman gave her a warm smile. “Good afternoon. The answer is "yes." I’m Anne, designer, dressmaker and proprietor. I noticed that your friend liked my design.”

“Yes and so did I. I am going to purchase the dress for her. Since she is returning to the East coast, an alteration will have to be completed within a few days.”

“Rest assured. We can meet that requirement. Look. There she is. I would have thought I had her in mind when I created the dress. From here it would seem as though no fix will be necessary.”

“Gramma, Maria. It is beautiful but I can’t find the price tag. I have a feeling I may not be able to afford the price.”

Maria said, “This is Anne, who created this masterpiece. We just agreed that you wear that dress as though it was created for you.”

“It looks and feels like I am modeling this for Anne at a show.”

“Then the dress is yours. I would be pleased if you allow me to make it a gift. Please say "yes." If you lived nearby our home, I would be taking you shopping every month.”

Martha seemed to be debating the matter for a moment. There was no way to deny Maria the pleasure. “Thank you. I adore it.”

When Martha walked into their room, Michael was sitting on the floor with what seemed to be some pieces of wood. She paid no heed because of her own excitement to model the dress. She began stripping off her clothes. Michael stood, fascinated. When she was down to panties and bra, he scooped her over his right shoulder, heading for the bedroom.

He heard her protesting but paid no attention as he placed her on the bed and began stripping. Martha was about to correct his impression but realized his spontaneous response to make love had been without any planning. It was a first in six months. She pulled of her bra and opened her arms. Michael could have the pleasure of removing her panties.

This misunderstanding turned out to be the greatest of all misunderstandings. Michael seemed to have lost all inhibitions, totally unaware of his handicap. Breathless, but not totally spent, they admired each other's physical attributes, explored each other as if they were meeting for the first time.

Martha said, “It will soon be dinner time.” Michel interpreted her tone as simply making a notation. He did not want this to end. He wanted to continue the exploration until both were driven to yield their bodies to each other again.

He had guessed correctly. Each touch was answered with a like response, leading to the inevitable

In the shower, she said, “Michael that was so spontaneous and marvelous. I feel like I am glowing. If I stepped outside, everyone would know I was the subject of the most passionate lover this side of Eden.”

Michael laughed. “There was no way I could resist your invitation. It reminded me that I had not been the same reckless lover of yore since the blackout.”

Martha began to deny his statement but then said to herself, “why deny a self-evident truth?” She started to tell him about the reason for the strip tease but decided to keep that her own secret.

As they dressed, she said, “We have some OJ in the small fridge, some slightly stale breakfast roll and some coffee left over from this morning.”

“That sounds like enough. I don’t want to share you with anyone tonight. This is the best day of my life since that cab ride from the airport in January.”

When they had polished off the rest of the coffee, Martha asked, “What were you doing on the floor when I walked in?”

“Oh, that. I accidentally knocked over a family picture that was standing on the side table. The glass broke into pieces. I found a small hand vacuum in the closet, cleaned up the pieces so that we would not hurt ourselves.”

“I didn’t see any glass. You did that before I arrived and you were sitting on the floor.

“Oh, yeah. I was gluing the frame together.”

He rose, walked across the room, retrieving the frame. “It’s a little crooked. I couldn’t hold it steady.”

She gawked. “You did this, Michael?”

He suddenly realized what she was asking.

“Michael that requires two hands. I didn’t know you were capable of something like this.” He saw the tears of joy on her cheeks.

“Martha neither did me. Something was broken and I had to fix it. I must have been half way through when I realized what I was doing. I just kept trying, even if I knew I was making a mess of it.”

In the next moment she was on his lap, straddling his body, planting a million kisses as she silently thanked God.

The moon was a super moon, one of the few cycles in the year when it was much closer to earth than normal. Hand in hand they strolled slowly down to the wharf, sat on the edge, dangling their feet.

As usual, he sat on her right so that she could massage his left hand. Several times during the week he had tried with a bit of success to raise his left arm as high as her waist.

They were discussing plans for the first week back. Martha said, "I will be on standby during the midnight shift."

Michael said, "I have to make up some time for Johnson, one of my assistants, who helped make this vacation time extended by a few days. I think I will plan on not coming home for those five days. That will give me time to play catchup."

He sensed a quiver in her body that might have been an attempt to hold back a bit of laughter. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing."

"You can't fool your lover. Come on. Come clean."

"I had a passing thought. I was visualizing coming early one evening for a date in your hospital bedroom. Then I realized I would probably be beginning my period the day after we get home."

"The idea sounds great, not funny."

"What was funny was remembering that unlike some of nurses, I never made love in one of the linen closets."

He laughed. "Neither did me. Perhaps we ought to plan it, just for the record."

"Not likely, but I like the idea of your bed at the hospital. This conversation is doing things to me."

Much later, they were seated in front of the picture window. Martha, absently, but gently, massaging his arm. She was engrossed in the setting moon behind the mountain range. "Look, Michael. The last light of the supermoon is about to fade completely."

There was only silence until she said "There, it's gone. Oh my. I never knew there were so many stars. We never really see the brilliant handiwork of God in the city. Manmade lights dim the brilliance of the universe."

Silence.

She turned. "Michael, why are you staring at me? Do you think I'm crazy talking like this?"

"Dear, no. I was struck with your profile reflecting the dying moonlight. I do believe I was falling in love with you again. I seem to do this often, in special moments."

"Michael Fuller, you're nutty but I love it. You do make me feel so special."

"Maybe, but not often enough. I was reminded of that during a command performance with Gramma Sara yesterday. She was giving me the third degree. As only a great

grandmother can do, she asked very pointed questions about our relationship. Everything from sharing chores when I am home, to how often I thank you for both the physical and the emotional support. In her straightforward manner she wanted to know whether I knew if you were satisfied with our sexual life. Did I think about giving back as much as I received from you?"

"Wow."

"Yes. She had me taking inventory of our life and I discovered that I was coming up short. When I was able to admit that to her she said, "Equal partnerships last longer and are more joyful throughout the journey."

In the silence that followed, Martha recalled Sara's words that amounted to the same message. She had realized that she was doing too much of the giving without allowing Michael to respond properly. "Mea culpa."

Her thinking was interrupted as she heard Michael saying, "Since my discovery I made a decision. I would like to have us talk more about every one of those issues and the multitude of others."

He could see her excitement as he heard her words. "Let's do our own inventory, rising as many issues as we can, then try to grade ourselves."

She heard it in his voice, his pleasure and his excitement. "Honey, I love you and know how deeply you love me. No matter where either of us has fallen short, there is plenty of time for a midflight correction."

Chapter 10

There were days when the demands of his job combined with time in the PT (physical therapy) were grueling. On some days, it seemed that five minutes after falling in bed in his hospital room, his cell phone was doing an S.O.S. from one of the interns or residents.

As the year progressed, the crisis calls decreased. The length of the working days shortened. The feedback from his charges grew more positive. He was able to spend more time with Martha.

The conversation with Gramma Sara about his partnership with Martha spurred him to pay close attention to Martha's needs as well as his own. That part of his life was smooth sailing for the most part.

While the physical therapy became more routine and less painful, working with Sandy, his occupational therapist, was emotionally draining. The first few months had been challenging but he persisted, learning how to button a shirt, zip up his trousers and perform other personal functions. Eventually he managed to learn those and worked on more intricate maneuvers. He found himself doing the same at the hospital without always asking for help.

Nevertheless, his frustration level hit new highs on occasion. He was now working with Sandy, learning to use his stronger hand and arm to perform the functions that he had prior to the stroke. Despite his disappointment at the many failures, Sandy supported him with an honest evaluation and strong challenges when his determination seemed to flag.

When he railed while working on the exercises with Martha at home, she waited patiently until he calmed down and then help him to begin the task again and again until he met his goal.

One morning, just as he awakened, he was remembering a dream that stimulated a renewed approach to attaining his goal. The dream was the usual crazy setting that anyone experiences and the characters were playing roles that were a farce.

The fans were screaming. The noise from the stadium could be heard a dozen blocks away.

Martha was the head cheerleader, dressed in bright sweater, emphasizing her boobs, and a mini, mini skirt that displayed all flesh except for a thong. It was so unlike his Martha.

Dr. Benak was the quarter back of the football team at Stanford, dressed in red from shoes to helmet.

Bill Gogol was the bandleader. His baton was an extra-large lancet which he twirled like a drum major.

Dr. Castle, Mac and Sandy were cheer leaders,

He, himself, was the football, a mere toy in the hands of an All American quarterback.

The head cheerleader was yelling "Throw it to me, Jack!" while the other cheer leaders were yelling "To Marty." The band leader was pointing his baton at Marty.

He sat up on the edge of the bed, his mind trying to decode the meaning of the dream. Was Martha calling for a closer connection?" That can't be it. I've never felt closer to her."

"Am I unconsciously resisting or even hating Jack for pushing me so hard? Certainly Mac and Sandy are following his instructions."

"That's stupid. It's just a dream. Or is it? Maybe I should take a hint and plunge full steam ahead. The exam for the surgical boards is due in only two months. And I am going to be ready!"

By the end of the week Mac was telling Sandy "Something has happened to our patient. I would say his entrance is almost dashing. His demeanor is determined rather than dutiful."

Sandy said, "I noticed. He must be reading ahead in our manual. Today he performed two tasks that I haven't even mentioned yet."

When he and Martha arrived home, he said, "Honey, since you had a hard day and look bushed, take a nap. I'll have a drink and scramble some eggs for an Omelet."

"You're a sweetheart. Give me a five minute notice so I can freshen up before dinner."

She looked at the clock by the bed when Michael's kiss awakened her. "Honey, you let me sleep for two hours."

"I tried to waken you gently an hour ago but you were having none of that. Now I am about to heat the skillet."

As she sat at the table she exclaimed, "Michael, what a lovely spread. It looks delicious. A Denver omelet with a side of hash browns to go with hot lattes. Where did you get the Mums?"

"I know that our neighbor, Mrs. Rosenberg, usually brings flowers home on grocery shopping days. I wanted to borrow a few but she insisted on my taking the entire bouquet."

"They are beautiful. You, dear, are the most wonderfully romantic man on this earth. I owe you big time."

“Honey, you have been paying forward for a very long time. I’m just playing catch up.”

They were on their second latte. Martha looked at Michael with a question mark written on her face.

He asked “What?”

“You know what. The Rubik cube. Who was here while I slept?”

He was grinning like a Cheshire cat. “No one was here. I thought I’d try while you were asleep. I was lucky and lined up all the colors.”

“She gasped. “That feat requires two good hands. Oh, Michael, you made it. The hard work has paid off.” She rose, sat on his lap, wrapped her arms around him and put her wet face on his chest. Michael, I am so happy for you.”

They clung to each other for a long minutes, neither able to say anything. After the long interlude, he said, “Thanks to lots of people, especially you, I am close. Not quite ready for surgery, but definitely coming close.”

The rest of the evening was soft, warm and loving. Together, they cleared the table. He rinsed the dishes while she stacked them in the dishwasher.

He lay on the sofa, his head in her lap, listening to background music being broadcast by the Philadelphia orchestra. Martha was lightly massaging his left hand. Occasionally she dropped her head low enough to plant a gentle kiss on his lips.

In between kisses, they shared the events of their work days, she of the six hours in the OR and he of his evaluation conference with Maggie. He laughed when he said, “You, Dear, are the wife of the kid who got all stars on his report card. Don’t forget. You promised me a dollar for every star.”

She joined in on the jovial game. “I have your gifts in the other room. I’ll give them to you before we go to sleep. Now, if you ‘ll allow me, I’ll make us some hot fudge sundaes as a prize for my star pupil.” Surprises, omelets, sundaes, gold stars and love made for a wonderful evening.

Friday evening at about six, Michael, having the night off, was driving Martha’s car, headed for her parents’ home. They had just entered the stream of traffic on the Schuylkill expressway when Martha screamed.” A red convertible was crashing through the meridian barrier from the other side of the roadway.

The streak of red was headed on a slant directly at the car in the left lane, two lanes to the left and a car length ahead of their own. Michael hit the brakes, his tires squealing as he made a slight turn to the right, moving off the lane to the safety area. He heard Martha let out a sigh and heard his voice saying, “Whew that was close!”

He must have heard the original crash but wasn't sure since his mind was focused on avoiding danger. They both heard the multiple numbers of cars crashing into the rear of cars ahead that had braked for sudden stops. Michael remembers reading an article recently referring to this stretch of highway as the "Surekill Expressway."

"Martha, call 911. Bring my bag." He ran forward to the scene of the head on crash on the two inside lanes. Two crumpled up cars, crushed, with engines pushed into the riders' compartments.

A look at the red car told him that the engine sitting in the lap of the driver was really bad news.

He heard a cry coming from the rear seat of the sedan that had been ahead of him in the traffic.

A giant of a man suddenly was alongside Michael, who was looking for a way to open the rear door that was partly unhinged. "Allow me, sir." He was carrying what looked like a crow bar. It took about five minutes to pry the door open, although to Michael it seemed like an hour.

Off in the distance they could hear the sound of sirens, slowly trying to weave their way through the damaged vehicles scattered across the lanes of the expressway. Michael was examining the teenage girl.

Martha was now alongside the two men. She heard Michael say, "It's safe to move her, now." When the girl was prone on the ground, Michael asked his companion, "Do you know how check a pulse?" Before he finished, his companion was crawling into the car to see if any others were still alive.

He had completed his exam and was saying to Martha, "Multiple fracture and bruises but no apparent internal injuries. Here, put my jacket over her."

He heard the man call out. "All bad news in here." He climbed out to join Michael, who was moving to a black SUV. The driver was draped over the air bag and steering wheel. He opened the door, asking "Are you conscious?"

The response was a grunt. Michael started to examine the right leg which was bleeding. The pant leg was torn, allowing Michael to see the wound, a jagged tear in the calf. He reached for his handkerchief in order to make a compress, calling back, "Martha, a compress."

Within seconds a hand came around in front of him, holding the compress. He snatched the cloth, placing it over his own, hoping to stem the blood flow. He was thinking, "This poor man may have internal injuries but I don't see how we can help. Moving him may cause more damage. Damn."

He heard a voice from behind. "Thank you, doctor. We'll take it from here. There are now twenty emergency attendants on the scene."

Michael stepped back. "How did you know I was a doctor?" The ET laughed. "I made the deduction, seeing the stethoscope hanging down from your neck. By the way, were you the one who rescued the teenager?"

“Yes, with the help of....” He looked around, but the huge helper was nowhere in sight.

“Good job.”

“Is there anything I can do? My car is fine, but I won’t be able to move for hours.”

“Which is your vehicle?”

Michael pointed.

“Why don’t you wait in the vehicle? I’ll come for you if we need more help.”

Martha and he sat in the car, holding hands, both wondering how many serious injuries had occurred. “Michael, what was the extent of the girl’s injuries?”

“A dislocated elbow, one simple fracture and three compound fractures. I reset the elbow and one simple fracture. That poor girl will be in pain when she comes to. At least, being unconscious, she can feel no pain.”

Martha was holding his right hand, lightly caressing his knuckles. “The emergency people thanked me for offering but refused my help, saying they had plenty of personnel. Michael, I believe we just witnessed two miracles. The first is that we were just far enough away to avoid being in the midst of that crash.

The second is that you worked as though you had no limitations with your left arm and hand.”

In a very sober tone, he said, “You’re right about both. This was similar to the other evening. I was using my left arm and hand as though it was the natural thing to do. I had a little trouble but forced the action anyhow.”

“Damn these bucket seats. I’d love to kiss my love, my hero, the gutsiest person I know in a proper manner! That’s another miracle that you were on duty that night that Momma almost died.”

Michael smiled at her, saying, “That was the luckiest night of my life.” He felt a tight squeeze of his hand in acknowledgement.

Arriving home five hours later, they were in no mood for dinner that evening. Each had a glass of wine and a bit of cheese. They headed for bed, where they slept, seeking safety wrapped in each other’s arms until the sounds of traffic awakened them.

Michael, believing Martha was asleep, started to ease his body off the bed. He felt her hand slide across his thigh. “I need you, Honey, to hold me tight. I woke out of a dream about disaster.”

Michael moved his body, reaching for her and recognized large goose bumps on her thighs. He pulled her close and sensed her trembling. He enveloped her so that his body heat would warm her, offering refuge from her fear.

It was more than an hour later that she said. “Thank you for saving this damsel in distress.”

Sixteen days later, Michael was pacing the living room. He wasn't interested in TV. He didn't feel like reading, fiction or otherwise. Martha was sitting on the sofa, a radio tuned in to the local classical station. Michael recognized the selection as a Beethoven piano sonata.

"Michael, come lie down and rest your head on my lap. A few kisses and my ruffling your hair is the only cure for calming nerves. We have had a lot of experience that proves the point."

He hesitated. She raised the level of her tone, saying, "Michael, let's talk."

He gave in, kicked off his shoes and became the obedient patient to her ministrations. The music, combined with her soft touch and lips, had him asleep in fifteen minutes. At nine o'clock, she led him to bed where they slept until six.

The gathering for the event was set for eight. Michael was nervous because of the import of the findings. That part was no surprise. He wanted, almost more than anything in the world, to hear a positive report.

He would be receiving the opinions of VIP's regarding his future. Dr. Benak, his neurologist led the procession that included the Chief of Surgery, the Chief of Physical and Occupational Therapy, Mac, Sandy and finally Maggie.

Michael tried to read their faces, hoping to notice even the smallest smile. Each face was a mask. In his opinion that was not good news.

Without any preliminaries, Dr. Benak suggested that the Chief of Surgery begin. "Dr. Fuller, watching you assists in three operations this week, I have to say you are very close to ideal, but I still would be hesitant to offer you a procedure dealing with a life threatening situation. That statement is my opinion. You may still proceed to take the exam for the boards, but I believe you should wait for the next go around in six months."

Michael felt as though he had been kicked by a mule. His mind began to deal with a vague picture of the future when he was brought back to the present by another voice.

The Chief of Therapy had nodded to Sandy who said, "Mac gives you a hundred percent but I, reluctantly, still have you at ninety eight percent. It may be just a tad of lack of confidence, but I think you need a little more time."

By this time, Michael was beginning to feel a bit nauseous. This was not the message he wanted to hear, but it was what had given him doubts the night before.

The neurologist said, "Sandy may have hit the nail on the head. I was considering giving you a clean bill of health. Perhaps in six months, Michael."

Silence followed his statement. The ball was in his court. He turned to Sandy. He had to swallow before he asked, "What are the odds that I will be ready in another six months, Sandy?"

“As I said at the beginning there are no guarantees but from the recent rate of your progress I can predict almost perfect skills. The confidence factor is out of my hands. That, I believe, is only inside you.”

“Thank you, all for your support and honest evaluation. I need some time to ponder.”

Maggie asked, “Might I offer some help at the moment, Mike?”

“In my mood, Dr. Castle, that may be just the right medicine.”

She pulled out her cell phone, spoke little word and hung up. They walked slowly toward the elevators. When they were leaving the elevator, Maggie said, “I know it is a hard moment. If you want to yell and scream, we can lock the doors of my office. If you just want to let off steam in any verbal way, I am all ears. If you want to discuss options, I am ready to help if that is what you want or need.”

He mulled over her statement as they settled in the office. The side table was set with orange juice, sweet rolls and a coffee pot. She, however, went to her desk, opened the bottom right drawer. She held up a bottom of scotch. “I highly recommend a shot of this medicine before you do anything else.”

He agreed. In fact, he had two.

A few minutes later, as usual, Maggie played the hostess, pouring him a glass of juice and a cup of steaming coffee. The aroma of the Columbian beans reminded him that he had had no breakfast.

His head was twirling just a bit. He was relaxed in the company of a woman with whom he could be honest. She was more than just his boss. She had become his confidante. He knew that he could expose his real feelings of the moment, but something inside was saying, “Hold on until you’re with Martha.”

He was jerked back to reality as he heard Maggie saying, “Mike, you know that extending your residency and the CMR position is your choice. In fact, if it were possible, I would hire you permanently by creating a special position.”

He could sense the slur in his voice, “Maggie, you are a doll. If you weren’t my boss I’d kiss you.”

She laughed. “My husband might not like that, which is the only reason it won’t happen. What has been going on in your mind or in conversation with Martha? Certainly, you have known that this might happen now or at some future date.”

“We have discussed the possibility but never decided on another option, mostly because I was afraid.”

She said, “With all your exposure, to every unit in our department, you can probably qualify for any number of sub specialties within six months. You could qualify tomorrow if you chose general pediatric practice.”

He was still glum, despite her upbeat comments. "I guess so. Perhaps I should look outside pediatrics."

"That doesn't sound practical, given all your experience in this department, as well as your love of children."

"I know. Martha's and my dream has been pediatric surgery and nursing, hoping for opportunities to use our skills in disaster zones."

Maggie poured more coffee and insisted he take another sweet roll. "Mike, you know I am here for you. I will help in any way that you ask. I owe you big time. If you just need to talk or hash over an idea, my door is open to you."

He rose, walked to her to get a real hug and left. An hour later, Martha, on her break, caught him at his desk. One look told her volumes. She put her arms around him, her head on his chest while she shed her tears of compassion.

The ride home that afternoon was a bit of silent mourning. Just inside the apartment, as she shut the door, she heard what sounded like a sob. She turned to see Michael trying to hold back the tears. She moved close, put her arms around his waist. "Let it out, Honey. Here it is only the two of us."

She led him to the sofa and pulled him to lie with her. They lay in silence until the sniffles signaled the end of his tears. Her blouse was soaked, as was Michael's shirt from her tears.

She rose, went to the kitchen and poured two large glasses of chardonnay. By the end of the hour after another large glass and no food, they both were sloshed and giddy. In the spirit of partnership, they decide to jointly prepare an omelet for dinner.

They giggled when the omelet turned out to be scrambled eggs and the toast a bit overdone. The coffee was just right.

"Michael, do you realize that this is the first time I have seen you tipsy."

"No, I didn't realize that, but it does ease the pain a bit,"

"The condition also sets one up for doing crazy things. Do you realize that we could have set the apartment on fire when you added when you decide to add bourbon to the omelet and poured it on the burner?"

"Naw, that wouldn't happen, but what I don't know is why I thought it would add some special and wonderfully exotic taste."

"It was awful, wasn't it?"

"Ugh. It tasted just like the whole day felt."

Martha rose and slipped onto his lap. He said, "I just couldn't hold my feelings any longer. I put up a decent front all day. I am sorry about the tears. Your blouse is probably ruined."

She put her index finger on his lips. “Hush. No apologies. One of the many things that remind me why I love you is your transparency with me. You noticed that I reacted with tears of my own. That kind of openness with each other has been a foundation of our love affair.”

He nodded, unable to say a word.

Martha decided to introduce a more serious note into the conversation. “Have you decided to continue on the same path for the six months and then try for the boards again?”

“I did a little thinking, but I still need to give it some thought. Let’s do the dishes.”

“I have a better idea. You’re still tipsy and may drop a dish or glass. Take a nap on the sofa while I cleanup. Tomorrow you can do the cleanup including the dishes.”

An hour later, he opened his eyes, cleared his head and went to the bathroom to refresh. Returning, he said, “You are a very smart lady and kind as well.”

She was sitting on the sofa. “Hey, doctor, your head is requested her on my lap. She said, “Let’s talk career paths.”

Michael said, “Okay. Maybe it was my tipsy state but just before I fell asleep I had this flash. More often than not, dreams do not come true.”

“I would agree. I once read that life is what happens to thwart your best laid plans.”

“What would you say if I suggested we agree that life just presented an obstacle? Circumventing an obstacle often requires taking a detour?”

Martha took time to digest the statement. “A detour means taking another road but still going for the same objective. Are you saying that working as a team to help children in times of disaster is still your hope but the means may not be surgery?”

“Honey, as usual, you are a quick study. Suppose I choose Emergency Medicine while you continue OR surgery. We could still be a team, ready to move to disaster areas, if we have the right contract with a mutual employer.”

“What are the chances that could work?”

“I’m not sure, but I know some people who can tell us.”

“Honey, I’m all for it. We’re still young. We can try a few paths. Failure on one simply allows one to return to the starting line. I do believe that God is always ready to offer another chance, what the church calls grace.”

She leaned over to drop a tender kiss to seal the new beginning. In that moment tenderness mutated to passion.

During a ten minute break on Monday morning, he walked to Emergency to see Bill Gogol. Bill greeted him with a warm welcome? “Coffee?”

“Not at the moment. I stopped by to invite you to lunch.”

“I’d love to but I can’t leave the floor. If you want to bring me a turkey and ham sandwich, we can eat and chat here.”

“I’ll do that. See you about twelve fifteen. You hear any word about my conference last week?”

“Ye and I am so sorry.”

“Since the odds are not in my favor, I would like to discuss a change of plans. Please give it some thought if you have time.”

While munching on the sandwich, Bill listened to Michael’s thinking with his ears, and heart, looking for any signals from body language or facial expressions. Then he asked, “Do I understand you correctly, that Martha is a hundred percent with this thinking?”

“Absolutely. We sealed it with a tender kiss after a long discussion.”

“Okay. Now what are you asking me? Whatever it is, I will do my darndest. You know that.”

“Do you think I am a good candidate for Emergency Medicine? If so, what will I need in the way of additional study and training? For what length of time?”

Bill’s response stunned him. “I hope you don’t think I was prying. I called Maggie to ask if I could read your file. She gave me the password to read her file on your performance. I was more than impressed.”

“Thanks, Bill, but what does that mean for my idea?”

“I will be pleased to take you under my wing. Standing regular shifts in Emergency and taking two or three specialty courses, I believe will prepare you for the boards next July.”

Michael could feel the excitement in his body, the quickening of his pulse. “Are you serious, Bill?”

“Absolutely. You will make a great Emergency doctor and, with the training in management that you have garnered as CMR, you will be months ahead of your classmates.”

“Wow. That is great news! I can hardly wait to talk with Martha.”

Bill interrupted this enthusiastic response. “There is some red tape to wade through. Before you see Martha, I recommend seeing Maggie for two reasons. First, because it is protocol, but just as importantly, because she has been your guardian angel and will want to know the results of this conversation.”

Maggie’s welcome was warm as usual. “Your eyes and body language tell me you have made a decision, and that I am not going to be a fully happy camper. Dear Mike, I am going to miss you. .How much time do I have?”

“As your CMR, I am available until you replace me. I will arrange for a smooth transition on other responsibilities as well as my CMR replacement. Bill will send you the paper work to initiate the transfer.”

She walked toward him with arms open wide. Her voice was choking as she hugged him, saying, “Please don’t be a stranger. That door is always open to you, and I have a personal need to know how your professional and private life is progressing. Ask Martha to stop in. You two are a match made in heaven and, I like love stories.”

Michael could feel his throat tightening and his attempt to swallow was not easy. He knew that their paths were diverging. She had been his anchor and more from those early days.

Chapter 11.

Six months later, Martha was in his arms. He was swinging her around and around, celebrating the news that he had passed the boards. He was officially a Doctor of Emergency Medicine in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

“Let me read it,” she was yelling, as he held the notice out of her reach. “Besides, I don’t think the baby appreciates the exercise.”

With a free hand she tickled him under the arm. That set the paper floating to the floor, but it required another kiss before he released her to pick up the notice. One would think she was reading a special citation of congratulations rather than a routine notice from the Commonwealth. She was beaming. “I am so dammed proud of you, Michael David Fuller.”

He said, “Thank you, Sweetheart. We have made this journey as true partners. No way would we be celebrating if you had not been with me every step of the way.”

“It has been a pleasure, even in our darkest moments. Your love has been so evident and steady, ever since our first day together when you accepted my invitation to spend the night.”

With a smile on his face, he said, “Remember how you dissuaded me from taking you to dinner at Devon’s that evening. Well, not tonight. I want to see you in that sexy cocktail dress that I love so I can show my girl to the world of Philadelphia.”

She was joyous. Her laughter was hearty and then turned into a sedative smile. “This may be the last time for a while that I will fit into that dress. I am sure that my belly is about to tell the world that I’m pregnant. Anyway, you’re on as long as you promise to end the evening slowly, undressing me in that special way you have that raises goose bumps the size of a dime.”

Naturally, he promised, and delivered. It was a glorious evening. After dinner, they stopped by the Ritz Carlton, where they danced a few numbers played by the “Jazz Quartet.” They cuddled and held hands during the cab ride home and ended the night just as Martha had requested.

Michael had a hearty breakfast while the newly expectant mother was limited to tea and toast. She said, “Momma says this morning thing should last another six weeks at the most. She also said that she suffered with heartburn for a couple of months.”

Michael said, “I am sorry you have this burden while I am of no help.”

She giggled. “You can be the major diaper changer when he arrives.”

“What makes you think we will have a boy?”

“We agreed on two, so I want a boy first, one who can take care of his sister just as my brothers took care of me.”

“That sounds like a plan. Speaking of plans, shall I follow through with the interviews on the West Coast?”

Martha said, “I told my folks about the possibility of our moving to the coast, inviting them to move with us. Dad is reluctant to move so far from the boys. He had a long conversation with Richard and his wife, Elaine. They are buying a home in Queens with an extra small suite consisting of a bedroom and sitting room. Elaine is pressing them to share the home with them. That would put Momma and Dad close to the current crop of grandchildren.”

She continued. “Momma said that she plans to be with me when the baby arrives, no matter where we are located.”

“That’s great. All right. If you agree, I will call both hospitals in the Bay Area.”

Six weeks later they were shedding tears at two going away parties, one with a good many of the staff in OR, the other in Pediatrics.

Martha had been aware of the deep relationship between Michael and Maggie, but even she was surprised to see the way they clung to each other, unable to say the goodbye. It was like a mother seeing her son off to war.

In the end, Michael gently removed Maggie’s arms and walked toward Martha.

Ten days later their furniture, what little they owned, was being moved into the cute little bungalow on the rear of a large lot, behind the home of one of Silicon Valley’s new millionaires. The house was situated on the border of Mountain View and Los Altos, with a Mountain View address. The city was the home of some of the most successful high tech start-ups in recent years.

Martha was supervising the placement of items in the two-bedrooms, one-bath house. Michael had reported for his first day at Valley Regional Hospital in Sunnyvale, a ten minute drive from their new home.

His meeting with the Director of Emergency Medicine had begun with coffee and his choice of donuts or sweet rolls. The first few minutes were devoted to Michael saying that they were settling in after a good flight that had landed in San Jose. Michael was eager to get to the real meat of the meeting.

Dr. Zantel began with a rather long tale of his recent trip to Southeast Asia, saying “The locals have made a great recovery from the damage by the Tsunami.” He continued with some unnecessary detail. Michael was getting edgy, finding the story rather boring.

A dramatic change came over Dr. Zantel. “Too bad you could not have been with us. We spent six weeks in two beach areas, treating a large assortment of injuries and illnesses. It was the experience of a life time.”

The man making that report was a completely different character than the one who had been telling of his vacation. Michael sat in rapt attention as Dr. Zantel told him of three special cases that he covered successfully.

At the end of his story, he said, “I still get emails from two of the teenagers whom I treated.”

“The problem is that I am getting long in the tooth and not strong enough for the kind of work that is demanded in major catastrophes.”

Michael found himself edging forward on his seat. He was in the presence of a doctor who had experienced the kind of work that he still dreamed of.

Suddenly the doctor switched subjects. “If I read correctly, you have great experience in pediatrics. Is that true?”

Michael’s spirit sagged. He was hoping that his new boss was going to suggest something special in the area of disaster medicine. He replied, “Yes, Sir. That is correct.”

Dr. Zantel opened a file. “It says here that you were a top notch administrator, serving as the Chief Medical Resident. That may come in handy.”

Michael didn't know what to make of that statement.

“By the way, the staff calls me Jake. I hope you will do the same. I also read in the file that your wife, who is expecting, has applied for a position to start three months after the arrival of the baby. I understand she will be looking for work that allows her to use her nursing skills in the midst of disaster areas. “Have you been hoping to work together?”

“Yes, sir. I had a full length discussion during all the preliminary interviews. Working with children, whether it be an auto accident or an earthquake is a high priority for both of us.”

“Excellent. This may be the answer to several of my problems. First of all, we are always in need of nurses who can face the kind of injuries that show up in ER. Secondly, I have been hoping to find a physician who does not shy away from executive responsibilities. Do you agree that you fit that description?”

Michael hesitated, not wanting to seem smug or overconfident. “I guess I do.”

“You are pretty young, but from my conversations with Doctors Castle and Gogol, I want to offer a special role that may fit your hopes and my needs.”

Michael was definitely sitting up now. Dr. Zantel continued. “I need a keen and strong deputy director. Your experience and the recommendations of Castle and Gogol make you an excellent candidate. I figure that will take about half your time, maybe a bit more, but leaving plenty of time for duties on the emergency floor.”

Dr. Zantel paused, causing Michael to wonder if that was it. It seemed like an hour but probably was only a minute. “With your management skills, I see you as the chief and coordinator of our traveling disaster team. Do you believe you can and would like to give that a try?”

Michael could hardly believe it. This was a dream job. He could hardly contain himself but tried to mask his emotions. Apparently that did not fool a veteran like his new boss, Jake. He said, “If I trust what I am seeing, we have a deal.”

“Yes, sir. I mean, Yes, Jake.”

Two mornings later, Michael began his first shift in the ER. His first patient was a ten year old boy, Latino, slender build, handsome facial features with his left arm in a homemade sling. He was tight lipped, apparently trying not to show his pain.

Although the paper work gave him the name, he asked, “Care to tell me your name?”

“Fidelio,” he said in a voice not much louder than a whisper.

Michael leaned closer. “I’ll bet you can talk louder than that. Can you?”

Fidelio nodded. Michael waited with a smile on his face. The youngster caught on, saying in a louder voice. “My name is Fidelio but my friends call me Leo, for short.”

“All right, Leo. Some of my close friends call me Mike. Tell me about your pain. How much does it hurt on a scale of one to ten?”

“About five, doctor.”

“Please call me Mike. Are you sure it’s not more?”

“Maybe a little bit more.” Michael could see Leo holding back tears. The nurse handed Michael a small pain killer tablet and a glass of water. Michael nodded a signal to give the pill to Leo.

“That will ease the pain while we get an x-ray. I need to see inside your arm to determine the cause of the pain.” The protocol would be that an aide would accompany Leo to the x-ray room, but Michael decided that he could build on the trust already begun. He summoned a wheelchair, turned to speak to the boy’s mother, who appeared to be anxious about the wheelchair. “We will be gone for about twenty minutes.” She nodded a tentative approval.

“Leo, tell me what happened.”

The boy blushed. “I was showing off on my skateboard for Mia. I misjudged the height of the curb and fell flat on my....you know what. I tried to break the fall with my left arm.”

They were interrupted when the technician said, “We can take him now.”

On the way back, Michael asked, “I am guessing you are left-handed. Am I right?”

Leo bit his lip and nodded.

On a wild guess Michael asked, “Football or baseball?”

“Football. I want to be a quarterback. Is my arm going to be okay?”

Michael said to himself. “Lucky guess.”

“Let’s look at the pictures. He knew Leo would be squirming and worrying while he studied the film. He found a copy of Sports Illustrated for Leo to peruse. “Your mom can turn the pages for you while I study.”

Leo seemed to relax a bit as he took the magazine over to his mother.

Fifteen minutes later, he had Leo back on the edge of the bed and his mother standing close. “Leo, you have a green fracture, a slight crack on the outer edge of the bone that appears to be bent. Fortunately, at your age, the bones are not totally hardened. A splint on the arm will straighten the arm. It will take a few weeks. I recommend a sling for the first two weeks, just to remind you that your arm is still healing.”

That was not enough to completely satisfy Leo. Michael could read it in the boy’s face. He smiled. “I can assure you that you will ready to practice when the coach calls for spring tryouts in your league.

“How can you be sure?”

“Firstly, because I am a doctor and this is not my first time treating a green fracture. Secondly, I was the starting quarterback on my high school team. My best receiver had a green fracture and ended up being all state wide receiver during his senior year.”

“Wow. Where was that?”

“Palo Alto. When you get older, I presume you will be playing for Fremont High in Cupertino.”

“I hope so. They’re the best in their league right now.”

The intercom was announcing his name. “I have to go now, Leo. Have your mom take you to your family doctor in ten days. You must take care of that arm.”

“We can’t afford a doctor of our own. I’ll come back to see you. You’re the greatest.”

Michael walked into their new home around six. Martha had some cheese and crackers and his wine glass ready, while she was already sipping some cranberry juice. She was sitting at the dining table. They were going shopping later, to purchase some living room furniture.

Martha had said. “If you agree, I want to leave our old traditional stuff here in the east. I fell in love with the modern touch at your Grandmother Maria’s home. Those neat lines, that Scandinavian look, yet so comfortable.”

He was all for the change and, besides, he rationalized, and they were saving on the shipping costs.

Through the months, Michael visited the Physical Therapy department on a regular basis. After each of the first several visits he strolled through the occupational unit, hoping to find someone with Sandy’s style.

It was on the third trip that he approached a woman whose teasing manner with teenagers attracted him to her. Twice he stopped by as she worked with a youngster who had lost his left arm and was struggling with his prosthesis. He guessed she was a bit older than he.

She dismissed her patient, turned to face Michael. In a very direct manner coupled with a soft voice, she asked, “Are you some sort of inspector or an auditor?”

He stammered, “No.”

“Is there something I can do for you?”

“I think so. I’ve been observing your style with your patients. I like it and I would like you to work with me, if that is possible.”

“That depends on several things. First, we would have to get permission from my supervisors. Secondly, I would have to examine and test the affected part of the body. Thirdly, I would need a full commitment to a routine and time schedule that we agree upon.”

“I understand.”

“You must also get approval from the business side regarding insurance or an ability to pay the normal fees.”

He smiled. “That is easy. “I’m a physician in the Emergency unit.” He went on. “Michael Fuller.”

She nodded. “Agatha Neal. I don’t get it. You had to pass a stiff physical exam to be admitted to staff. Why would you need occupational therapy?”

“Do you have few minutes to talk?”

“Yes, I’m due for my lunch break. If you have the time, please join me in the cafeteria. I’m intrigued.”

Michael said, “I’m due to be on call in twenty minutes. I’ll let the coordinator know where I am located.”

For fifteen minutes, her food received little attention. She listened with great intention as she explained, meanwhile checking his hands, fingers and wrist for flexibility and strength.

She dropped his hand, returning to her food. “From what I can determine your limitation is so minor, I’ll bet you haven’t encountered an emergency to which you could not wholly respond.”

“That’s true but my original dream had been to be a pediatric surgeon. Currently I see myself on a detour only. I love being an Emergency doctor, but I also want to qualify for the boards in pediatric or general surgery. The exams are coming around in a few months.”

Her face turned bright as she said, “I’d love to play a role in that drama. I’ll mention it to my supervisor, but I believe you will have more influence from your side.”

He realized that a smile was fixed on his face, a smile that would last until he shared the possibility with Martha.

It took only a few days to clear the red tape.

Today was his first day working with Agatha? His left hand was tired. He had spent the first one and half hours with Agatha, testing and then doing a series of exercises with both right and left hand, specifically focusing on the wrist, the thumbs and the index fingers.

“Enough, Agatha. The left hand has nothing left.”

“Three more. The last three are worth more than the first twenty.”

“That’s hard to believe.”

“Perhaps, but you will learn to believe it because I believe it. Right?”

He grinned. “Right.”

He called Martha before leaving work that evening. “Honey, do you have some thread and needles at home?”

“I’m sorry to say that I don’t. I have a hamper full of items for Momma to alter and repair when she arrives. She never taught me, insisting on doing all that for me so I could pursue my education and career. Why do you ask?”

In a mysterious sounding voice he whispered “All will be revealed in due time.”

At six thirty he walked in carrying a large knitting bag, filled with yarn, large and small needles, material and a variety of needles to crochet and do needle point..

The last package had an assortment of sewing needles together with ten thread sizes to go with the various sized needles.

Not waiting for the standard practice of a hug and kiss, she grabbed the bag and began rifling through it. She oohed and aahed with each new item that she drew out, and then asked, “Are expecting me to learn to knit booties for the baby?”

He burst into laughter, thus delaying his response. She asked again. “Well?”

Michael realized her tone was demanding an answer immediately. He decided to keep up the tease. “I thought we both could learn and create a knitted quilt along with booties and a couple of knitted hats to keep his head warm.”

“Seriously, Michael, we will probably get all of that and more at one baby shower. You just pick up the whole shebang and return everything tomorrow morning. Now pack it up while I prepare some snacks. Dinner will be late, since you did not let me know when you were coming home.”

It was tempting for Michael to continue the charade, but he gave in. He stood and intercepted her passage to the kitchen with a lasso around her waist, turning her to face him so he could bestow the kiss that would melt her.

He nuzzled her throat then said in a low voice. "I was just pulling your leg. The material is for my home exercises."

"Have you started occupational therapy? When were you planning on telling me?"

"Right now. I had my first session today. I could hardly drive home with my sore hands and wrists."

As usual, any mention of pain for Michael melted her, bringing apologies for her behavior a few minutes prior.

In between sips of wine and nibbles of cheese, he detailed his session with Agatha and explained the exercises. "She has encouraged me to set a goal for the end of a sixty day period; a goal she says is reachable."

"If you achieve that goal, I will guarantee you a crack at passing the board."

"Those are her words."

"Michael, that is so exciting! As you were talking, I realized that your joshing about my learning was prophetic. We can learn together." She let out a guffaw. "And, if we get too many blankets and hats, we will have a supply of gifts for the showers that I will be attending in the future."

Martha used the internet to learn the technique of making a patch work quilt including the size of threads to be used. She asked a fellow nurse, who knew how to knit, to give her a few lessons. She, in turn, became Michael's teacher.

It was an exuberant experience, learning and creating a quilt for their coming child and a needle point to hang in the baby's room. Michael knew he was making rapid progress as he worked on the quilt, sewing the patches in to place. Despite the difficulty, he managed to knit a blue cap for his son.

The sessions with Agatha were anything but pleasant. She insisted on repetitive use of certain exercises that produced very sore muscles. During the first sessions she witnessed Michael's fighting back the tears of pain as he persistently ground his way through the exercise. Agatha figured she had made a promise that would be fulfilled.

They delayed buying furniture for the baby because they need the room to spread out all the various materials as the projects progressed.

Agatha was so pleased with his progress that she suggested that Michael and her boss discuss with the chief of surgery providing some opportunities for Michael to assist in a few selected procedures. Michael, himself, needed no one to tell him what he knew. His confidence was at high level after the first three opportunities.

Agatha's prediction and his dream came into fruition, three months from the date of their meeting. His parents hosted a party at their home for all the clan and close friends to celebrate the achievement that persistence and help from his loved one made possible.

The workroom was converted to the baby's room. Martha's Momma arrived three days before the expected date. She insisted on sleeping in the baby's room on a comfortable cot as she said, "Martha, you need sleep in between feedings at night. I can sleep during the day when you take care of little David."

David Michael Fuller was seven pounds, three ounces, eighteen inches at the minute of his birth.

Chapter 12.

Eight months had elapsed since the birth of little Donald. If it is possible to spoil a baby during the first eight months of his life, then little Donald had be spoiled. Grandmothers, grandfathers, great grandmothers and great grandfathers, all got into the act. Michael laughingly complained, "I have practically no opportunity to cuddle my own son."

Martha was driving, while Michael was snoozing beside her on the return trip from an overnight in Carmel. Northbound traffic on Route 101 was comparatively light, the time being late Sunday morning. She decided to take the off ramp to Gilroy, about forty miles south of home.

She was in need of some caffeine and a switch of drivers. Michael, sensing the deceleration and the turn onto the ramp stirred. “What’s up, Honey?”

“Caffeine and a change of drivers.”

Michael sat up. “Thank you for the chance to nap. This has been a great get away. We both needed a break after the horrid week in Emergency.”

Martha said, “I agree. My first week on the job turned out to be one of the busiest in months. Three multi-car accidents on the Bay Shore Freeway and an emergency landing that crashed short of the runway at Moffett Field. A lot of overtime stretched the limits of our staff.”

Martha was slowing as they entered the city limits. All of a sudden, the left front of the vehicle rose so high that Martha was looking at blue sky and seconds later the nose was pointing downward and to the right. She hit the brakes, stopping crosswise, covering two lanes of traffic. The vehicle rose and fell once more before settling down.

She nodded when Michael said, “Major earthquake.” She moved the gear shift into forward and pulled off to the side of the road. Michael stepped out, looking for any oncoming traffic. He saw one other vehicle about one hundred yards back, stalled crosswise on the road.

As Martha stepped out, she looked at a small house that seemed to be shifted off its foundation. “Michael, I hear a child screaming. Let’s see if we can help.” They could see two other houses in the same condition, one even in worse condition.

Holding hands they ran toward the house, hearing screams of more than one person. As they approached the front of the building, they saw two pre-teen girls standing and weeping. Martha put her arms around the girls. “Can you tell me if someone is inside?”

The older of the two stammered, “Mama is trying to get baby, Jose.”

“Please stay here away from the house.” She joined Michael who was already moving toward the building. They moved just inside the front door, hesitated. Michael called, “We’re here to help. Where are you?”

He heard a faint voice yelling, “Help us, please.”

Martha was listening to determine the direction of the voice. “Sounds like the first door on the right.” They moved slowly. The floor was on a slant of about twenty degrees. A door to the left was swinging off one hinge.

Michael called, “Where are you?”

The response was from the room that Martha had suspected. “In the front bedroom.” They heard her sobs and the sounds of the baby whimpering.

Together they were able to push the door open after two minutes of pushing and twisting. They saw the mother lying on the floor holding the baby to her breast but unable to move. Her right leg was pinned to the floor by tall wooden dresser that had apparently fallen

over as she was moving from the crib toward the doorway. "Please save my baby. Are my girls safe?"

Martha moved to take the baby saying, "They are safe outside."

The mother said through her tears, "Maria will take the baby. She knows what to do to keep her calm."

Martha gently removed the baby and headed for the outdoors saying, "Michael, this house is unstable. I'll try to find some help to move the weight off her leg. Meanwhile, you should call the hospital and inform them of the seriousness of the quake. From what we saw, it looks like a big one."

She handed the baby to Maria and looked around for help but saw no one. She called out but got no response.

When she returned, Michael was walking from the rear of the house. "There's no one coming to help, Michael."

"I guessed that might be the case. I tried to move the dresser but it is too heavy. We need to find something to use as lever, preferably an iron bar or a two by four five feet or longer. Be careful, it is easy to lose your footing on this slanted floor. There are also some cracks in the flooring, so watch your step. I will go outside to search."

She found nothing that would help Michael, but she was deeply saddened to see the extent of the damage. She could not see a single glass or dinner plate that was whole. The refrigerator was on its side, the door opened and food scattered across the floor.

Michael found a pitch fork with a handle that he thought would be strong enough. He called Martha. "I will use this as a lever, hoping the handle is strong enough to lift the heavy dresser. You need to be ready to pull the mother out as quickly as possible. I have no idea how heavy it is, how long I can hold it or if the handle will last long enough."

They both were trying to ignore the sobbing woman as they focused on the task. Martha knelt down saying "I need to put my hands under your shoulders so I can pull you about a foot or more when my husband lifts the object off your leg. Do you understand?" She got a short nod.

Michael's first attempt failed because the tines bent under the pressure. He replaced the fork with just the wooden handle. He was aware that this would take even more strength.

This time he was able to raise the dresser about an inch, not enough room to free the woman's leg. He had to allow the dresser to ease back on her leg again. She screamed with pain.

Shifting the handle so that he had a bit more length from the dresser, he had more success, levering slowly, the dresser rose about two or three inches.

Martha, seeing space opening above the leg, jerked the body about four inches. Seeing that it was not enough, she took another grip, pulled the woman's body about twelve inches. Michael's strength gave out and the dresser fell with a thump, missing the leg by only a few inches.

Without waiting another minute, Martha dialed the emergency number for their team. “Have someone send an emergency vehicle to pick up a woman. We’re on the south city limit of Gilroy on the east side of the northbound ramp from 101.”

While Michael tended to the woman, Martha took the girls to sit in her car, gave each a drink of water from the thermos. She reached into her purse for the snicker bar, broke it in half and gave half to each girl.

“Maria, if you are comfortable waiting here for more help, I would like to go to your neighbor to see if they need help. My husband is a doctor and is taking care of your mama. Who lives next door?”

“We will wait here, now that mama is safe. An old woman and her son live next door. He works in San Jose. I’m sure he is working today. He usually does every Sunday.”

The front stoop had become separated from the house. The front door was wide open, although still on three hinges. “Hello, anyone home?”

“Si. I need help.”

Martha had to hoist herself up onto the door sill in order to get to the entry way. Her blouse and shorts were pure dirt but she was no longer concerned with cleanliness.

The floor was slanted but not as badly as in the other house. She scooted as well as she could until she found an elderly Mexican woman sprawl on the floor. “Where do you hurt?”

Martha could see her tight lips covering her gritting teeth as she dealt with her pain. She put her hand on her right knee. “Aqui.”

“Are you alone?”

She watched the woman mentally translating and then another, “Si.”

Martha pulled out her cell and dialed a special number, gave a description of the injury and the location.

“I will get a doctor soon.” She looked around for a pillow to place under the woman’s head but did not try to help her move, would not until Michael said so. “Please lie as still as you can.”

She found a glass and filled it with water. She reached into her pocket for the Tylenol she had taken from Michael’s bag. The women needed what little pain relief she could give.

Meanwhile Michael had gone to the car to get his bag and the emergency items he kept in the trunk of the car. He had bandaged the leg and given the mother a strong sedative to help her cope until the ambulance arrived. He was thinking, “She needs a splint but the tight bandage will do temporarily.”

Martha called, “Michael, when you have time, we have an elderly patient with a dislocated knee.”

A few minutes later, Michael arrived, reset the knee and gave the woman a strong sedative.”

Martha took a small pitcher of water to the car along with some crackers she had found. The girls thanked her and carefully drank some water before opening the package of crackers.

A Red Cross team arrived just as Michael finished. Martha went to meet the team, briefed them on the situation, explaining that she had seen no one around the third home on the cul-de-sac.

The team leader sent two of the team to investigate, turned to Martha. “You look beat. How about some coffee and a snack?”

Martha smiled. “You’re an angel. My husband and I were coming off the freeway to have some coffee when the quake hit. He’ll be out shortly.”

Just as they were finishing with the snack, Michael’s cell phone rang. Martha, listening to Michael’s voice, tried to interpret the message but had to await Michael’s report.

“Our team is located in the center of town

The Red Cross driver said, “Let me give you some directions. Certain streets are not useable.”

Martha went to the car, explained to the girls that Cindy of the Red Cross would stay with them and makes arrangements. Maria shifted the baby to one arm, using the other to hug Martha. “Thank you, sweet lady.”

Twenty minutes later, they had zigged and zagged their way to the center of the old business district which appeared to be in utter ruins.

The team worked for the next eleven hours with fifteen breaks every ninety minutes. Michael and Martha worked as a team with the orthopedic surgeon handling bone injuries and dislocations

Medivacs and ambulances carried patients to hospitals as far away as Oakland because of the vast number of serious injuries.

The onsite medical teams worked in special tents planned for just such a catastrophe. Medical teams came from as far away as Petaluma to the north and Fresno to the east and Paso Robles to the south.

Martha was called to work with two neurosurgeons in a tent next to the one where Michael was stationed. She was the only experienced OR nurse on hand, which made her responsible for supervising three excellent nurses with no experience in OR. This, while laying out the equipment in the order that she expected the surgeons to call for.

Just as Michael's supervising orthopedic surgeon started what was to be their last case, the surgeon felt faint and had to withdraw. The patient was on the table, already under general anesthesia. Michael had no choice. He had to undertake surgery for repairing a shattered clavicle. Three small pieces had to be aligned in addition to the piecing together of the major fracture. His mind began reviewing all that he had read and experienced in the past. With sheer concentration and his magical fingers and every ounce of perspiration exiting his pores, he managed a successful operation.

Two very tired parents sort of limped into their home, dropped into easy chairs for a few minutes before shedding their dirty clothes. Michael's grandparents, Maria and David, fixed hot toddies, told them that little David had been a doll all day but had fussed when neither parent was there at bed time.

Both went to the nursery to check on their little loved one and then headed for the shower. Michael's parents arrived to offer whatever helps was needed.

After Michael and Martha had showered, they joined the others in front of the television.

"First estimates indicate a 6.9 quake on the Calaveras fault was centered about seven miles east of Gilroy. Severe damage to buildings extends from Gilroy to Morgan Hill and even as far north as the southern city limits of San Jose."

The picture shifted to show chunks of concrete strewn across an area of a hundred yards. "Sections of Highway 101 are impassable. The Highway Patrol has closed the highway between the north end of Morgan Hill and the south end of Gilroy.

"It is too early to give a report of the number of dead or injured, but it is very good to note that medical responders were reported to be on hand within minutes of the first shock."

A picture of Martha flashed on the screen, obviously a snapshot by one of the Red Cross team members. Michael's mom cried, "Martha, you look like you were injured."

Martha laughed. "No, mom, just not looking my best at that moment. I didn't realize anyone had a camera. I should have insisted they take Michael's photo. He was terrific."

His dad said, "One of my patients from the quake zone is a shop owner in Gilroy. He mentioned your name when he saw my ID, asking if we were related. He was impressed with the care you had for the half dozen persons scattered about the floor of his shop. You were upbeat and encouraging. He was sure that others responded as favorably to you as he did."

Michael said, "I was performing triage and trying to keep the victims calm." He asked, "Dad, were you on duty?"

"No, but I hurried to the hospital as soon as I heard the news. I was performing triage as the vehicles arrived at the emergency entrance. By the way, I need to get some rest. I am due back within five hours."

That was a trigger that sent the others on their way so the fatigued couple could get their rest.

At six thirty in the morning, a sleepy Michael picked up the jangling phone. "Hello."

He listened for a minute. "Are you sure that I am not wanted? Yes. I'll do that."

"Martha, dear, you are asked to report for duty at eight while I am free until noon."

"Lucky you. Oh, Oh. I hear a little boy's voice calling. You can play nurse maid to David."

He enjoyed the next hour and a half, changing the baby, giving him a bottle while cuddled in his arms and then bathing him in the bassinette. He reluctantly yielded David to the nanny when she arrived.

Michael arrived home a bit after nine that evening. He was too late to play with little Donald but he read a bit of Winnie the Pu until the babe was asleep.

When he returned to the living room, Martha was seated in the corner of the sofa. Her smile invited him to take his reserved position, lying prone with his head in her lap.

She leaned over to plant her welcoming and lingering kiss on his lips. He beamed. "Thanks Honey. I needed that."

"Bad day in ER?"

"Nope. I filled in for Jack Smith in surgery. I spent four hours with Johnson, the orthopedic surgeon, operating on one of the quake victims. The patient, a fourteen year old boy, had a fractured pelvis. Both knees were crushed and he had a mangled left foot.

After four hours, we took a half hour break and resumed for another three. Johnson and I were not finished when we broke for the day. We start at six in the morning to complete the work."

Martha said. "I haven't worked with Johnson. Is he new?"

"He arrived a few weeks ago, young and talented. He reminded me of a watchmaker as he replaced tiny fragments of the shattered ankle of our patient. He is a true artist."

"Don't you feel that you could have done the same, Michael?"

"No, I don't. I was happy to be assisting. There is no doubt that I could have handled some of the major fractures, but not the mangled foot. I know I could have handled the knee replacements."

"Maybe it is just a lack of confidence, but I am sure I could not have the steady hands that the minute finger work required of Johnson."

Martha switched to a different subject. "After putting David to bed, I poured myself a glass of wine and began to reminisce. I thanked God for bringing you into my life, for the role you played in Momma's life. I recalled moments of our struggles as well as the joy you have given me."

Michael began to say something, but she put her index finger on his lips. “I thank you for the love you show for me in everything you do. Your honesty and your willingness to share your thoughts have made for a great marriage.

“You have always been there when I needed you and never have you been too proud to ask me for help when you were in need. You have personified for me love in action.

No woman could ask for more.”

She leaned over and let her lips put the punctuation mark to the brief homily.

He rose, then knelt facing her. He took her hands in his. “You, Honey, are love in action. Without your attention and dedication, I would not be the man I am today. You have worked with me, for me and given me support in my darkest hours.

“I smile and laugh today because of you. It was in those first days after the black out when you and Dad stood by, giving me room and courage to make a decision, yet with arms ready to grab me in case I faltered.”

Martha stood, pulling Michael to his feet. She reached to put her arms around his waist, her head nestled on his chest. Silence filled the room for a few long minutes.

“Michael, have you ever despaired that life foiled your original dream?”

He thought about that for a few moments. “I guess I was on the verge during those days I just mentioned, but I appreciate the end result. Our working together in ER and the experience last Sunday has been a fulfillment of the dream we had together.”

“Complement that with a healthy little Donald and I ask what more can a man ask?”

She looked deep into his eyes. “There is one other thing that you mentioned a long time ago.”

His eye brows wrinkled as his face asked, “What is that?”

She smiled, leading him to the bedroom. A little boy for you and a little girl for me.”

The end.

