

CHAPTER ONE

HEAVEN

I've always been captivated by the horizon line out on the ocean because that is where heaven and earth come face to face. And you can never touch that beauty because the line is perpetually moving away from you. Is untouchable beauty to be found under the definition of heaven? I believed there is a heaven after we die. But I also believed that heaven can exist on earth. And my heaven on earth was far more than I could have ever imagined. I lived in a five thousand square foot home with a four-car garage on two acres in the upper hills of Santa Barbara, California in a neighborhood called Montecito.

In the hills above Montecito and its many mansions is a place called the *Tea Gardens*. Behind a fence and up a quarter mile at the end of a paved road you'll find a terrace with three arches. With fifteen foot tall columns connected by arches and benches that face the ocean, one can sit for hours. The trestle extending from the arches to the railing is thick with purple irises and an enormous purple bougainvillea. There is no house, just a slab of cement with one magnificent view of the town, the ocean, and the distant Channel Islands. Montecito folklore has it that a wealthy woman, in memory of her deceased husband, erected this isolated gem. She was driven there every afternoon to have tea and spend time longing for her lost beloved. This fairytale spot is a reflection of what heaven might be like.

From down in Santa Barbara, I could look up and find the arches. Even at the bottom of State Street, or the Pacific Coast Highway, I can sometimes make out the arches sitting completely alone, faraway on the mountain slope.

Daily, from my backyard patio I watched heaven itself radiating beautiful sunsets out over the ocean and across the Santa Ynez Mountains right behind us. It's such a stroke of God's artistry, that one could forget to breathe, taking in so much beauty.

One Saturday afternoon, a week before Christmas, as we tore across the blue ocean waters off the coast at the helm of my 58-foot yacht, the *Oh Happy Day*, I had flashes of heaven on earth. The shining sun radiated particles of gold across the blue waters. From a well of gratitude I shouted an explosive "Thank You" through my huge smile as my arms reached for the blue sky for all He's given me: my family, my career, and my perfect health (nothing more than a cold and I'm forty-two). I believed that part of this, or I should say *all of this*, was because God allowed me to have it. And I never forgot it is He who gave me this caviar life.

I never allowed any room for guilt in my mind for having all of these gifts. The gatekeeper that keeps guilt a safe distance away is tithing. I remembered God's law for tithing. Tithing is good. It takes just ten percent and that makes you a part of God's universal flow of good will. Personally, I've watched tithing pay dividends in more good deeds over decades of time. My attitude was, if you hang close enough to the big laws, the big laws will protect you. I'm guessing that in most major religions in the world, God desires ten percent. So there's no way of getting around it, wherever we live or however way we worship Him. I believe I was living the life God fully intended me to live.

In the early seventies, deep in the gospel world of Charleston, South Carolina I was the lone six-year-old white boy in my neighborhood who would walk himself to the all African-American church a block away every Sunday morning and sometimes evening. At this impressionable age I watched grown-ups praise God with their soul. And the congregation didn't seem to mind my six-year-old restlessness as I moved from pew to pew to pew to pew to pew.

While attending Cal Tech in Los Angeles, I met my future wife Joanne on a church winter-camp retreat for young adults in Lake Arrowhead, about ninety miles northeast of the city. The moment I laid eyes on her, I was struck. No one ever told me that love at first sight is like getting sideswiped by a speeding bulldozer. It is an obsession floating in euphoria. But beware! There's definitely a concussion.

We dated two years before we married, when we were both twenty-four years old. And for the first three years of our marriage she helped me get my Masters of Science in Mechanical Engineering at Cal Tech. I've known her longer than anyone else in my life.

Joanne has spent the last four months redesigning the cabin and galley of our new 58' cruiser.

Passing the Channel Islands to our south at twenty-five knots, under the sun, all I felt were waves of happiness.

We stole quality time with the kids out on the *Oh Happy Day*, where friends couldn't drop by and cell phone range was miles behind us.

When Joanne appeared at the top of the stairs with lunch, I was again, appreciative. Rachel, my fifteen-year-old daughter, followed her mom with drinks as I traded the steering wheel for my sandwich. Joanne at the helm was unpredictable. She liked to make the letter "s" across the waters. She's a born show-off and today was no exception. As I bit into the sandwich, she swung the wheel abruptly and caused me to smear the sandwich halfway across my face. We laughed, but Rachel laughed the loudest. I never knew I could get so much satisfaction just hearing Rachel laugh at the silliest things. I took it to mean a sign of innocence. And I'm convinced that innocence, at any age, keeps us young.

I got part of the sandwich in my mouth, but I was finished with her antics and headed down to the galley to hang with my two sons.

I slid into the booth next to my sixteen-year-old John, and across from him sat his thirteen-year-old brother Edwin. Edwin's toughest issue in life was that he lived in the shadow of John. They were watching the end of a football game on television. And why did I put a TV onboard the ship?

John asked, "Can I go rock climbing with Ray and some friends?" I consented to let him go because he was always safety conscious.

Edwin could always be relied on to ask the same question: "Can I go?"

I explained to him, "Edwin, it's not my place to invite you to go on an outing with your brother and his friends. If they want you to go, they'll invite you. Otherwise, there are ten other things we can do."

Edwin asked suspiciously, "Together?"

"Not necessarily," I told him, letting him off the hook. The boys got up from the table. Through a mouthful of food I asked, "Where are you going?"

John answered, "To the fly bridge."

"I came down to finish lunch with you and now you're leaving me," I protested.

“Dad, we’re not leaving you. How can we leave you when we’re out in the middle of the ocean?” Edwin retorted. But sometimes Edwin’s remarks were just a little too cute. He tested the edge of sarcasm but rarely crossed it.

“Sure, go ahead, I’ll be all right,” I said, whining some more. I liked whining at times. Sometimes I actually got what I wanted. But this was not one of those. They left me with commercials on the TV. I channel surfed until I stumbled onto the Travel channel showing an image of the blue ocean, identical to the ocean outside the starboard window. I chuckled at the coincidence and then turned it off. I didn’t come all the way out here to watch the ocean on TV.

I looked around at the sleek stainless steel galley Joanne had remodeled. On the port wall I saw a new photo she had recently hung. It’s of the entire family up on the fly bridge taken a couple weeks earlier. I remember the moment Ralph, my best friend and attorney, took this photo of us. We were all smiling from a place of genuine happiness. We hugged each other as Ralph froze our happiness in Technicolor as proof to the world that paramount joy filled our family. It was the perfect photo.

As much as I wanted to shut out the real world, I kept thinking about business. I forced myself to think about something else and climbed my way back up to the skipper’s chair.

A couple hours later, back at the dock, I slid the *Oh Happy Day* in her slip at the yacht club. I logged our hours and noticed it was only 3:30 p.m. I liked that there was still half an afternoon left to do things.

A jeep full of teenage boys pulled up to the wharf gate. They came to pick John up to go rock climbing. Joanne went to greet them and talk a bit. Shortly after, she walked back to me while I secured the boat.

“See what I just did?” she asked.

It’s a trick question. I could smell one a mile away and hesitantly asked, “What did you just do?”

“I walked over there and I got close enough to look at them, listen to them, and smell them. I got in their face, just to let them know I’m not above getting up close to smell out any bad behavior.”

I looked at her and said, “Wow, I’m suddenly afraid of you.”

When we got home, Joanne and Rachel decided to go Christmas shopping. Edwin got on the phone and found a better offer than spending it with his dad. This meant I was left alone to get some work done. In my office I opened up the Pentagon bid on my computer. Was I was doing this out of habit? All the while I knew the bid was in the top drawer at my company office ready to fly in a FedEx envelope. Even the cover letter was already written and just waiting for my signature. It was all done and prepared before we left for Christmas vacation, so out of habit I opened it on my computer, again.

I found an envelope with receipts from a trip to DC a couple weeks earlier. I recall the initial presentations we had at the Pentagon with several high ranking military officers who are going to ultimately decide whether or not our company, BriMar Industries, will get the new Blackhawk fuselage contract. Charles McGraw, the company president, went to help pitch the sale by bonding with the brass. He left it up to me to pitch the numbers and specifications.

As senior vice-president for BriMar, it was up to me to make sure those deals come to us. So far, I had an impressive ratio of wins over losses and that’s why they kept me around at my gigantic salary.

I delivered enormous profits for the company, and they showed their recognition with super-sized bonuses. And the board did show their appreciation this bonus season with a check for half a million dollars.

I figured Charles had another five years left as president and perhaps one day that office would be mine. But until then, I had nothing to complain about. He was my boss and I valued his impressive leadership skills. He had a keen eye for looking ahead at the long-term business landscape, and he never panics.

Charles was warm and friendly outside an office environment. Joanne and I have had him and his wife Charlotte over for dinner too many times to count.

I reviewed the bid presentation we planned on sending just after the first of the new year. With all the required signatures showing that my executive peers signed off on this ever-important bid, I'll sign the cover letter and ship it out the day we return after the first of the New Year. I'd been so consumed by this bid for the past eight months, I've watched many other projects fall by the wayside. Yet the potential profit was a staggering one hundred and twenty million dollars.

I lost two hours in the details of the numbers and surfaced in a small panic. It didn't matter, I reminded myself. It was only Saturday.

Sunday morning arrived, streaming with sunlight piercing our dark master bedroom. I reached over to find that Joanne had already gotten out of bed. Slowly I made my way downstairs and to the veranda to pour myself a cup of coffee. I went looking for her and followed her distant voice to the gift-wrapping room. I heard her murmuring on her cell phone, and as I approached she quickly ended her conversation. I'd say it was almost suspicious.

Every morning of our lives we greeted each other with a hug and a kiss. I looked at the gifts she'd bought and asked, "Who is this one for?"

"Samantha, Rachel's gymnastics coach," she answered. I left her to her wrapping and went back to the veranda and my coffee, and the Sunday paper, and the view. It's always about the view.

Looking out across my backyard lawn I could see for miles up and down the coast. The visibility in December can be infinite. The Channel Islands looked so close, I could see details in the landscape. Although the marina and yacht club are miles away, I could make out the docks, and through the telescope I could actually make out the *Oh Happy Day*.

I savored the perfection of the moment and started thanking Him for this day. But alas, any quiet perfect morning can be ruined by a pack of groggy teenagers. And just like every other Sunday morning, we rustled them into their clothes and got them in the car by 9:40.

As I drove down a main neighborhood street in Montecito, we passed a colossal mansion. It is a soft white French chateau with three floors and scattered majestic architectural touches. With huge deep purple canopies protecting the windows, it's strikingly beautiful. The four Greek Corinthian columns guard the nineteen-foot high front doors. The long driveway ends in a circular path around an elaborate water fountain, making it all look very regal. It is set back from the street with a half-acre of nothing but a green carpet of lawn, giving the chateau huge vistas. Every time we drive by, it calls out for our glance and attention. Its size and beauty are so pronounced, it's become a local landmark. And that speaks volumes when your address is on mansion row.

John asked, "Dad, how much do you think that mansion's worth?"

“Guessing, I’m figuring around sixteen million dollars,” I said, shrugging my shoulders. John shook his head.

“John, you’re just jealous because that’s not our house,” Rachel said accusingly.

Joanne remarked, “Yes, they have a splendid mansion, but are they really happy? They probably argue and have family squabbles over money all the time. How could they be happy? They’re probably not even going to church.”

That morning, Pastor Ryan preached on the subject of “Bargaining with God.” From the pulpit he sermonized, “There is no bargaining with the Almighty, also known as the Omnipotent. What possible bargaining position can you claim when approaching the Maker of everything you see, everything you hold? What could you bring to the table that would make Him stretch His arm on your behalf? What possible bargaining chip could you offer Him who *is* everything?”

Pastor Ryan went on: “Besides, you try to bargain with God not knowing what the future may hold. When you make promises to God, you set a condition of your love for Him, because a promise usually entails something for something. When was the last time you promised God anything without asking for anything? The Creator does not have to bargain with you. He’ll have His own way every time, like it or not. There is no getting your way without Him allowing you to have it. Rest assured that His overriding *will* comes to pass every time. All you can bring is an open heart and a prayer. And if it doesn’t show results, then believe that it is not in your best soul interest. He knows the future and the past, and that’s why He withholds things from us.”

Occasionally, I noticed a few friends and co-workers sitting with their families. I smiled, realizing how blessed I was to have so many good friends here.

Focusing back on Pastor, he said, “Our blessings come from the fact and truth that God is infinite love. God’s love is the most powerful force permeating the farthest reaches of the known and unknown universe.”

I noticed Claire, my assistant and friend, was sitting alone, again. I spent more awake time with her than I did my own kids. And it was a real gift to see her coming to church. What that did was set a level of respect for how we should conduct ourselves towards each other. She’s just young enough to do anything she wants, but old enough to have old-fashioned good manners. I’m surprised no man has married her, but I can only imagine that she has such high expectations.

When the sermon was over, we stood in line with the congregation on our way out the front door. As we approached Pastor Ryan, I shook his hand and told him how much I appreciated the message in his sermon.

I said, “Thank you, Pastor, we’ll see you next Sunday.” I said those very words to him every Sunday as a matter of ritual.

Stepping into the sunlight, it was another beautiful Sunday afternoon. As we walked across the parking lot to the Range Rover, in my peripheral vision I saw a homeless man standing in the distant corner of the parking lot. He was looking at the exiting crowd with a look that spoke desperation. I felt as if I had to do something. I said to the family, “I’ll meet you at the car, just go on.” I tossed the keys to John and walked away towards the corner of the lot near the street.

When I got closer to the homeless man, I motioned for him to follow me around a van where we could not be seen by the other members of the church. Handing him a hundred and fifty dollars made me feel like lecturing him, as I did not want him to waste it. I suggested that

he spend it wisely. Who was I to tell this poor man how to spend what was now his money? I wouldn't want anyone telling me how to spend my money, so I could only suggest with a tone of voice that showed some level of compassion and direction. Sensing his appreciation, I hoped he was not going to misuse it.

When I got to the car, Edwin asked, "Where did you go, Dad?"

I replied, "Just helping out someone who needed some help." On our way home, I swung south to Yanonali Street to the Santa Barbara Men's Shelter to drop off some shoes, clothes, and overused designer jackets.

When we arrived, John and I jumped out and took armfuls of jackets and bags of clothes inside the lobby. We handed the items to a staff member in the main room. The guests were scattered about the large open room. Some were talking and laughing. Some were reading, some looked sad, and others just stared.

Driving back to the house, I looked forward to napping on the veranda and eating some lunch. But I knew that sometime that afternoon I would have to sneak out and buy some Christmas gifts.

As we pulled into our garage, Joanne said, "I'll start making some lunch for everybody." As we walked away from the car, I headed to the back kitchen door. Whereas, Joanne and the kids headed towards the front door.

I stepped through the back kitchen door and into the kitchen. As I turned the corner to the living room, I was startled to see people silently crouched down behind furniture looking at the front door. I froze. The nearest body to me was Claire about five feet from me, looking at the front door. If I were coming through the front door, she'd be hiding behind a pillar. She turned and looked right at me. And then she screamed.

Everyone turned around and through their utter shock and laughter, managed to scream, "Surprise!"

I yelled back at them, "Haa, surprise!"

And then an angry Joanne ran up behind me, frantically yelling, "I thought you were right behind me! You were supposed to be right behind me!" The whole room was laughing. And they did surprise me.

Pastor Ryan stepped out of the crowd with a blown-up check that was the exact duplicate of the check I gave him a couple weeks earlier in the privacy of his office. I looked at him, not believing he was doing this to me. I had been ambushed by my friends and bushwhacked by my pastor.

He stood beside me with one arm around my shoulders and the other holding the two feet by three feet half a million dollar check with my signature made payable to the church.

Deep inside, I just wanted to disappear. I screamed inside my head, "I can't believe this is going on!" But my outer shell, still in shock, smiled and laughed as the crowd sang "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow." I prayed, "Dear Lord, would you just take me now, kill me now before they finish the song?" When it was over, it got worse.

A couple fellows from the church Youth Group rolled in a table on wheels with an architectural display model of the new youth center with miniature shrubbery, etc. Wow, I was lost for words, and then when I read the lettering on the building model, I wanted to jump out of my skin. It read, "The Joanne Whiley Youth Center." I looked at Joanne, now giggling like a nine-year-old school girl pointing out her name to a girlfriend.

I kept smiling as my laughter turned to silence. And then back to laughter. Internally, I just wanted to kill someone, maybe start with myself? Pastor? Joanne? Too many choices. So, I shook Pastor Ryan's hand and stood at attention while someone took a photo of us holding the check.

Ralph shouted, "Say something, Michael."

I searched for words in my head. "I just want to say that what I did was what anyone else would have done---and thanks for ambushing me. The Whiley family is now taking donations. You can drop your money by the front on your way out the door. Thank you, now go home." Everyone broke into laughter.

Joanne shouted, "Lunch is served on the veranda."

I turned to Claire and said, "Nobody listens to me."

Claire smirked, "I do, but only at the office." And then she turned and walked away.

I turned to Joanne. "When you said you were going to make lunch for everybody, I didn't think you meant *everybody*. How long have you been planning this?"

Joanne boasted, "Since Pastor Ryan called me the very afternoon you gave him the check. We've been planning this little shin-dig ever since."

Jokingly, in my head I thought, "If only that check had bounced, I would have saved myself all of this." I took a deep breath.

I turned to Pastor Ryan privately and as the crowd disbursed, I whispered, "Can I see you in my office?" Pastor Ryan followed me to my office and I made sure to close the door. I thought to myself that I didn't want to sit behind my desk and appear disrespectful to a man with his connections. With a sigh of disbelief, I slumped into the sofa next to him. I started, "Pastor, do you remember when I gave you that check?"

I recalled a couple weeks ago signing the cashier's check at my desk at BriMar. I slid it into an envelope and then into my jacket pocket. I drove to the church and entered the office door. Wendy Schmidt, Pastor Ryan's secretary, was at the church that Monday afternoon. I stepped into Pastor Ryan's office as he greeted me with his warmth and openness. He walked me to the chair across from his desk. As he took his chair, I reached for the envelope. I pulled it out and said (not knowing the day would come when I would regret saying these words), "Pastor Ryan, for some time now I've been feeling God speaking to me about giving a donation to the church, and, although I give weekly, I just thought this might be of use for the youth center that I know you're trying to build."

Pastor Ryan opened the envelope and took out a check made out to the First Calvary United Church in the amount of \$500,000. He sat with his dropped jaw and his mouth opened for a while. When he snapped out of it he said, "I don't know what to say."

I replied, "You don't have to say anything."

Pastor Ryan found his posture again and looked at me with sincere appreciation in his tone. "Michael, thank you so much for being such an inspiring man. You have made the youth center possible. Up to now, it was just a dream, but now, with your contribution we're going to help so

many young people stay out of trouble and find a place where they'll feel like they're among true friends. WOW."

Holding the check in his hand, he walked around the desk and gave me a hug. Naturally, I returned the hug as I felt his relief flow right out of him. Apparently, he'd been stressed out over how the promised youth center was ever going to become a reality. He shook my hand and looked me in the eyes. "God is going to bless you, Michael, you can rest assured."

Inside I felt good, a bit elated too, thinking that maybe I had an extra chip lying on God's table in this game of my life.

He continued, "I believe this is a sign from God that our ministry is to go full tilt ahead."

In that instant an alarm went off in my head. I alerted him that I did not want my name on the youth center. "So just do me a huge favor, please do not put my name on it. You have to promise me that," I insisted.

Pastor Ryan replied, "But don't you think that people should know that there are still good and generous people out there? You're an excellent example to all our church members and many who aren't."

I didn't care where he was going with this; I just didn't want my name on it. "Please Pastor, promise you won't put my name on it," I pleaded. I continued explaining my motivation. "Pastor, I'm trying to practice the scripture passage 'Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.'"

"Of course, if you don't want your name on it, we can call it something else. I'll respect your wishes," he promised.

Now, back in my home office he quipped, "But I didn't put your name on it."

I shook my head and reminded him, "That cute little miniature model with Joanne's last name on it is the one I gave her. What do you think Whiley is?"

His face turned to one of concern about my feelings. He offered, "You're with friends, Michael. These people here today all love you, and isn't that enough to know that you can relax among people who care about you?"

I realized it didn't really matter in the long run. So what if people know I gave the church that much money. Since the cat was out of the bag, it didn't matter or not if I cared. I decided not to fight the issue that was already lost. I was going to drop the subject and go with the flow of the moment. "Okay, let's go get some lunch," I said to him.

When we stepped outside to the backyard, I found our kids, friends of our kids, and kids of our friends running around the huge lawn.

The center piece of our backyard decorations was the Nativity stable that was nearly life size. And this set didn't spare any barnyard animals: cows, roosters, sheep, mule, and somehow a reindeer got thrown in for the atmosphere of it all. The baby Jesus slept in a bed of real hay and a real wooden trough. The wise men, Mary, and Joseph all leaned in towards the sleeping Child of God. It looked good in the daytime, and even better lit up at night.

And then I noticed my friends at a table by the Nativity. Pastor Ryan and I walked over to them. They were all there: Ralph, Adam, Larry, and Terry. Ralph was the most sensible of all of us; being my lawyer, he should be.

One of my production executives, Adam, was working at Boeing Aircraft until I made him an offer. But it wasn't the money that sold him, it was the weather. He was still single and that's probably because his other life was ministering to teenage kids, or to inmates at the county prison.

My friend, Larry, also worked with me at BriMar. I've never regretted signing Larry to a contract that gave him fifty thousand dollars more a year to get him to leave Lockheed and move to Montecito. Larry bought himself a nice home here for his two daughters and beautiful wife. BriMar had a huge gap and he had to fill it.

Even though Adam and Larry worked for me, we were friends, and never did one world poison the other. I've regarded these friends beyond any employment arrangement, and would forever have been their friends even if there were no BriMar.

The odd man out would be Terry, who was a successful real estate agent in town. He attended our church with his family before hitting the road on busy Sunday afternoons checking on his many units. But he took this Sunday afternoon off.

Adam couldn't resist the opportunity to skewer me. "I'm just blessed to be without the burden of having so much money like you, Michael."

I turned to Pastor Ryan, shrugged, and said, "I told you so. This is why I didn't want anyone to know." They all burst out laughing.

Terry chastised Adam. "Oh jeez, Adam, it's Sunday, give the man a rest."

Since we were all close friends, we tended to know each other's business. Larry, Adam, and I talked openly of BriMar in our tight circle.

Larry brought up the Pentagon bid we were about to submit. Concerned, he said, "I talked to accounting, and the word is that we may have to cut back personnel next year if that contract doesn't come through."

I told them, "I know the odds are in our favor, but you can never be overconfident. I do feel this bid is right on target because I know what the brass is looking for. This is in their budget and we're the most reliable."

Adam pitched in his two cents. "I can't see how they could give it to anyone else. We've delivered too many big projects on budget and always beyond their expectations."

With a nod I confirmed Adam's hope and tried to fill the air with optimism.

Larry's confidence sprang a leak when he retorted, "But what if it doesn't come through?"

At that point I went back to the tried and proved, "Have faith, Larry."

Adam asked, "But what if...?"

"Stop with this negativity, so close to the Nativity. You can't say that too often," I injected. We chuckled our worries away.

CHAPTER TWO

THE DEAL

High above the earth at 70,000 feet, God's Gulf Stream G650 flew pilotless as it pierced the upper stratosphere. When God was the passenger, you didn't need a body in the pilot seat. And God just happened to be the only permanent passenger on this ultra luxurious aircraft. Everyone else came and went. And flying high above the earth, God was taking requests. In the main cabin, He sat in a plush captain's chair on the copilot side.

He was taking a meeting with His archangel, Rafael. Rafael, looking strikingly charismatic in an electric blue silk suit by Versace, remained on one knee while delivering the news to God. Rafael, even with all his strength and courage, was moved when he reported to God that two hundred thousand lives were lost when the Yangtze River over-flooded in China.

When Rafael felt God was finished with him, he stood. God dismissed him with an order to send in the next angel.

Gabriel walked down the aisle towards God and knelt before the Almighty. When he stood, he wore a steel gray Versace three-piece suit. Gabriel began, "Master of All, I come asking Your blessing on a small island in the Caribbean called Jamaica."

God replied, "Gabriel, I know Jamaica is in the Caribbean. I put it there. Why do you give me so much information?"

Gabriel answered, "I figure the more information I give You the better in the little time You give me."

God scratched his white hair and looked back at Gabriel, "I give you so little time because you give me too much information. What is happening in Jamaica?"

Gabriel replied, "A hurricane is on a direct course for that island, but there's still time to save their humble world."

God asked Gabriel, "What would you like Me to do?"

Gabriel answered, "I need winds. If the winds could come from..."

God cut him off. "Don't give me the details. I'll always know which way the winds should blow."

Gabriel, ever confident in his relationship with the Omnipotent, ventured deeper in his request. "And Sir, I know You don't like to be told *when*, but right *now* would be good."

God heard the urgency in his tone. "Running late, are we?" God just sat there with His eyes closed and took a moment to Himself.

He came back to Gabriel and said, "Thus, have I heard their prayers. If there's nothing else, Gabriel, go save Jamaica, the one in the Caribbean."

Gabriel took this to mean he needed to be present in Jamaica in order to save it, and that everything was going to be all right. "Thank You," Gabriel said appreciatively. He headed down the aisle to the door in the rear compartment from where all angels come and go. As he approached the door, Lucifer entered and walked past him on his way up the aisle. Gabriel was so taken aback by the sight of Lucifer that he stopped to witness this interaction.

Lucifer found God napping.

But obviously God knew through His closed eyes that Lucifer stood before Him. Lucifer knew that God knew that he was there, yet He acted like He was asleep. Lucifer looked at Gabriel with a shrug that asked, "What's up?"

Gabriel pointed at his knees and then to the floor. Lucifer resented having to kneel before the Almighty. He realized that God wouldn't open the store until he first knelt before Perfect Love sitting before him. With resentment on his face, Lucifer dropped to one knee and then quickly stood up.

God, feeling Godly, opened His eyes and acted like He was surprised to see Lucifer. "Lucifer, what brings you? What is it that is so irking you that you would approach the Peace that passes all understanding?"

Lucifer casually strolled over to a window and looked down at the earth. He looked back at God and claimed, "I've been all over this earth. Around and around, from pole to pole and back again, and frankly, I don't see much worth saving, do You?"

In His infinite love, God tried to reach into Lucifer. So He occasionally took him up on his petty challenges. And sure, He'd let Lucifer win some, but those that fall will eventually make their way here. Because God has the advantage. And with that, God confidently reassured Lucifer: "I have plans that don't include you."

Lucifer feigned hurt feelings and challenged God with "The truth is, I'm hard pressed to find even one, just one righteous man. So how are You going to fulfill any 'plans'?"

God wasn't amused by Lucifer's assumption that he knew everything there was to know. He pressed Lucifer's doubt by telling him "Oh, they are out there, yes indeed. And you want me to give you their names so you can use them for entertainment? No, it's not your business."

Lucifer knew how to play the game, as his negotiating skills were still sharp from the days of the Cold War. He knew that if he gave something, he might get something bigger in return. He offered God, "Well, there is one man I know of who believes he's a righteous man. His name is Michael Whiley and although he's amassed a small fortune, he's probably on a very short list of righteous men."

God asked curiously, "What makes you think Michael is a righteous man?"

Lucifer remembered he had tried to involve Michael previously in a business deal that would have personally made Michael millions. But Michael walked away from the deal, feeling uneasy about the brokers and the metallurgical integrity of the product. And above all, he didn't want to jeopardize BriMar's reputation.

God, the All Knowing, remembered this too and lectured Lucifer, "You can't always get what you want, and you can never ever underestimate the depth of one man's love for his God."

Lucifer knew people were weak for the material world, and their never-ending thirst for more things made them slave-like addicts. And he was proud of his efforts to create a sense of "materialism frenzy." Through television, Lucifer massaged the egos of the masses and propped up a false sense of happiness. Lucifer found Michael to be an interesting target for the amount of wealth and fortune he'd garnered while still practicing more than just the fundamental laws.

But Lucifer didn't have much patience for this lecture. He didn't risk shedding some of his evil in the presence of God, just to be lectured. He came to bargain and entrap one more soul into hell with him.

Lucifer, ever the genius, thought best to change his tactics and not to act like he knew everything. “Maybe Michael Whiley is a righteous man, and maybe he isn’t. Sure, it’s easy being righteous when you live off millions and have all the luxury and comforts anyone could ever want. It’s easy loving You when you’re living high off the land and high above the rest of the real world that suffers day to day.”

God saw the irony in his words and rebuked him. “You are wrong, Lucifer. It is the man in *need* who calls out My name. But Michael has enough for many lifetimes, yet he still calls out for Me. Michael doesn’t love Me because he *has* to, or needs to, but because he *wants* to. He’s earned his wealth.”

Christmas morning arrived with an explosion of excitement and smiles. After breakfast, the family was enraptured by the opening of one gift after another while happy Christmas songs filled the house. Beautifully wrapped gifts got tossed around the room, and torn and mangled wrapping covered the floor.

John tore open another box revealing a nice Hawaiian shirt from Mom. He hugged her with an appreciative kiss on her cheek.

Rachel squealed when she opened a jewelry box with her first silver charm bracelet. She loved horses, so I made sure her first charm was a silver horse. I put it on her wrist and locked the clasp tight. “Merry Christmas, honey,” I said with a hug.

She promised, “Daddy, I love it so much, I’m never going to take this off.”

Edwin ripped through the wrapping of a box containing a new baseball glove. He played third base in Little League, and I’m hoping he’ll want to keep his sports interests as he moves into preteen. “Merry Christmas, Edwin,” I said, gently tossing a new baseball into his new glove.

He smiled and tossed me a gift. “Merry Christmas, Dad,” he shouted above the joyous chaos and noise.

“Thanks, Edwin,” I said. I opened it to find a black Greek-like Captain’s hat with the name of the yacht, *Oh Happy Day*, embroidered across the front of it. I put it on to a perfect fit. I gave Edwin a bear hug because I knew he actually had to think about this gift. I liked it so much, I doubt I’d ever take it off.

Joanne handed me a beautifully gift-wrapped box. I opened it to find a money clip with a sparkling gem adorning the gold plated metal. It was impressive and I knew I could put it to good use. “Thank you, honey,” I said with kiss and a hug.

I reached for Joanne’s gift and with a kiss I said, “Merry Christmas, darling.” Joanne knew I held something really special, and she acted very excited. All the kids stopped to watch me hand Joanne the iconic Tiffany’s baby-blue box with that girly white ribbon.

Lucifer continued to challenge God. “How can a man be so wealthy, and yet be on that short list of righteous men?” He sensed someone wasn’t telling the truth and it wasn’t God. He suspected Michael was lying. He asked himself out loud: “With his yacht and gold-spoon-fed

lifestyle, how could he make a sincere effort? I don't understand. What would be the point of calling out for God if he didn't need anything?" He was perplexed. He reinforced his disbelief in the power of God's love by doubting Michael's faith.

Lucifer finally articulated the core of his proposition to God. Lucifer claimed, "I propose to You that Michael does not love the Giver of the gifts, as much as he loves the gifts themselves."

God smiled confidently. He contradicted Lucifer, saying, "I have searched his heart, and I have no doubt that Michael indeed loves the Giver of the gifts more than the gifts themselves. He'd love Me whether or not he lived in this abundant manner or any other way for that matter."

"Then show me," Lucifer requested.

"I don't have to show you," God replied.

"As far as You know, he'll be cursing Your name within a week of his troubles," Lucifer claimed.

"Not Michael," replied God.

"He'll be spitting the ground at the mention of Your name within a week of his woes," Lucifer insisted.

"Not Michael!" God said louder.

"You don't know until it happens!" Lucifer shouted.

"Not Michael!" God shouted back.

Lucifer knew he couldn't win with words. "Then show me. Am I asking too much?" he begged of God.

God considered Lucifer's words. "Leave Me until I call you," God said to him.

Lucifer walked back down the aisle to stand near Gabriel by the back door. Gabriel stared at him with suspicion.

God gazed out the window and closed His eyes. He saw Christmas morning in the family den. He saw the three kids, Joanne, and the room with all the celebrating, and then He looked at Michael. God asked Himself, "Can you do it, Michael? Will you remember Me when times get bad? Will you still love Me when all this is gone? Will you love Me when your world is upside down? I want to believe you will. I have so much faith in you, Michael."

God opened His eyes and waved His arm indicating Lucifer to return. God leaned into him and said, "He can do it."

"I don't believe You will ever really know until it happens," argued Lucifer.

God replied, "Very well, everything he has I put under your control."

"Everything?" Lucifer asked. Even Lucifer was surprised at God's generosity.

"Everything, but you cannot take his life," God stipulated.

Lucifer saw that he had just won a huge victory and knew that he wouldn't have to kill Michael in order to destroy him, and most importantly, destroy his relationship with God. Lucifer beamed at his own genius, and through his sarcastic laughter assured God, "Take his life? I won't have to take his life!"

But beneath his fake yearning to understand Man's love for God, Lucifer was motivated by his need to be entertained. And you can only entertain the devil by destroying something, or someone. So Lucifer asked God, "How long do I have with Michael?"

God looked at Lucifer and telepathically reminded him that He is still in control of the situation.

God answered, "When I AM that I AM is satisfied."

Knowing when he was ahead, Lucifer took a step back and nodded. Because Lucifer knew that even he exists at the whim of the Omnipotent.

God said, "Now you can leave."

Lucifer turned and walked back down the aisle, passing Gabriel, who was still standing there. While passing him, Lucifer turned to Gabriel and asked, "Aren't you forgetting something?"

Gabriel quickly remembered and whispered, "Oh God, I have to save Jamaica."

From the far side of the cabin God heard Gabriel's whisper and commanded, "And you'd better hurry."

It was a beautiful, sunny Christmas day, full of nice gifts and a wonderful meal as we sat out on the veranda enjoying our banter and food. I loved Christmas Day afternoons because they were the best. As tradition had its way in our home every year, a local catering company delivered a full turkey dinner with all the trimmings.

That evening found Joanne and me curled on the couch in the family room in front of a blazing fireplace. Our beautifully lit Christmas tree showered the room in a rainbow of colors. The kids were doing their thing somewhere in the house. As we channel surfed the TV, we stopped on a news report showing Hurricane Cindy moving away from Jamaica. Yet another Christmas miracle, I thought to myself.

Much later that night and across town, Charles turned over and over in bed because he couldn't fall asleep. He was too hot. Then he was too cold. He was agitated. Every little sound pulled him back from the shores of sleep. The finances in the new Pentagon bid prodded him like a hot poker of a worrisome thought.

Charles didn't see Lucifer walk into his bedroom through the open door. Nor did he feel the mattress slump when Lucifer sat on the bed next to him. Lucifer watched Charles squirming and turning over.

Lucifer peered into Charles's thoughts. He saw a man who was always in want of more. In fact, Charles had such an insatiable appetite for more things that he could never ever be satisfied. And he had a strong ego that Lucifer could work with. Lucifer smiled.

Lucifer saw the bid as it passed through the projection screen in Charles's head. Using Charles's weakness for money, Lucifer quickly saw his angle. Whispering into Charles's mind, he pressed how the bid amounts are too low and he could make so much more money by increasing the numbers just a little bit. A tiny bit here, another tiny bit there, and that would satisfy Charles's economic neurosis.

Charles sighed. Finally, he found an answer. He would just increase the particulars in unnoticeable amounts. But how would he do an end run around Michael?

Lucifer used his evil genius, and Charles quickly picked up the telepathic message.

Charles thought, "I'll have to get to the office tomorrow and send that package myself." He sighed again, feeling a great weight lifted from his shoulders, having found a way to put several

more millions of dollars into his pocket and with little resistance. He would work out the specifics later on the computer at the office, but for now he smiled at his own brilliance and fell asleep.

On the following morning, Friday, December 26, Charles used his key to enter the very secure administration wing of BriMar Industries. He turned off the alarm and went to his office where he found a copy of the bid in his drawer. He turned on his computer. With a pen, a pad of paper, a calculator, and the bid on the computer, along with his hard copy to work from, Charles went to work on the numbers with exacting mathematical precision.

At every step, he stopped and scrutinized the repercussions down the factory line if he were to adjust certain numbers upwardly, or even downwardly. He also had to recreate the factors in the equations throughout the 230-page presentation bid.

His revised calculations now stood to generate an additional forty-seven million dollars profit for the company and over four million for himself, personally. He was meticulous and detailed, always noting which pages were altered. He made two copies of each of the revised pages and copied the file onto a CD. He then walked to Michael's office.

He searched through Michael's desk and found the actual hard-copy bid that was being sent to the Pentagon by FedEx. And he knew this because it had an unsigned cover letter from Michael attached to the front. Charles looked around Michael's desk for his signature. Looking in Michael's drawers for any letter he might have signed, he found a file of letters with his signature on every page. On a blank piece of paper, Charles took a couple practice shots at Michael's signature and forged it on the cover letter. He then inserted his revised pages into the bid and prepared the whole thing for flight.

Charles cleaned up after himself and even double-checked everywhere he went. With the FedEx package in hand, he walked to the door, turned on the alarm, and stepped outside. When he got in his car, he turned on his navigation system to locate the nearest FedEx drop-off spot. When he was done inserting the data, the computer told him how to get there on the dash monitor. Charles smirked at having seen it on his way home. "Could this have been any easier?" he said out loud to himself. The whole process took him six and a half hours.

When Charles handed the package over to the FedEx agent, he felt a wave of confidence that what he had done was best for the company. Charles was certain his friends at the Dept. of Defense would choose BriMar over anyone else's bid because it was the best, and the boys at the Pentagon were his friends. After all, Charles reassured himself, "We're all in the same club."

Who would not agree that the happiest time of the year is the week between Christmas and New Years Day? Through this vacation week, I made sure we all had a good time together and included our friends. From horseback riding above Goleta, to climbing up the waterfalls in the hills behind Montecito, to taking the *Oh Happy Day* out to sea, we played loose and laughed hard. On one outing on the yacht, I counted nine friends the kids brought with them. I didn't mind, we all had a good time. One day melted into the next and before you could sneeze, it was New Years Eve.

During the week, I thought about a New Year's resolution. I pondered the thought and asked myself, like every other person in the world, "What should my resolution be?" And from outside of me, out of the blue, the thought "infinite forgiveness" came to mind. I thought about it and how much strength and goodness can come from forgiveness. So I smiled, knowing that

my resolution wasn't going to evaporate in a matter of days due to the lack of attention. No, this was a big resolution that was going to take a conscious effort and one I was going to have to nurture every day. But I felt a little pride that I picked a profound and meaningful resolution, instead of some lame goal that I would end up resenting in a matter of days.

On New Year's Eve, Joanne and I traditionally went to a gala party put on by the Santa Barbara Yacht Club. Black tie, enforced. And that's why we like to go. We enjoy the world of ritual and protocol. Besides, many of our neighbors and friends were always there. The event was held at an elegant mansion high above Santa Barbara. We always had a good time, as no one ever egged us on to drink more.

I rarely ever drank alcohol, except that night, when I'd likely have a couple glasses of champagne. Besides, I didn't need alcohol to enhance the flavor of fine catered delicacies and out-of-this-world dessert. And I certainly didn't need alcohol to enjoy the fifteen-piece orchestra with an eight-man brass section. And I never needed alcohol to enhance the pleasure of dancing with the most beautiful woman in the room, my wife.

Finally, the time came to get ready to go to the ball. I had an occasion to wear my new white dinner jacket I picked up at Bergdorf Goodman in New York last summer. As I looked at myself in a full-length mirror, I realized there's something about being in a white jacket that lights up a room.

I finished getting into my formal attire long before Joanne was finished dressing, so I meandered to the large window overlooking the backyard. I looked down at the Nativity scene and I lost myself in its significance. It took me back to the time I was in Bethlehem.

For one semester in college, I enrolled in a foreign travel program. It had nothing to do with my engineering major, but it seemed like a good way to see Europe. The two professors who led us through the great museums and landmarks of Europe and the Middle East showed us the shadowed drama behind the history of western civilization. To learn history, it's best to stand where history was made.

I'll forever remember the time in Israel when we stood on a rustic hillside overlooking Bethlehem at sunset. A professor pulled out a music box and started playing "Hallelujah Chorus" from Handel's *Messiah*. Hearing the explosive opening of the song made me burst out laughing as it hit me like a soundtrack. What other song would you play over-looking the little town of Bethlehem, I thought? I was quickly taken by the profoundness of the moment and froze the memory of it in my soul: the little town before us, the setting sunlight behind us, and the breeze coming off the Mediterranean Ocean. The music will forever live in me. Those few moments take up a whole chapter all by itself in my conscious library of impressions that make up who I am.

As I looked at the colorful Nativity scene sprawled across my backyard, I knew it wasn't anything like the way it really was. Back then, that stable was dark, smelly, dreary, and full of anxiety. Joseph was told by an angel in a dream to flee for safety in Egypt. Why couldn't I see an angel in my dreams?

I went downstairs to the family room to hang out with the kids and give them their marching orders for the night. Rachel was on the phone with her friend Sara, Ralph's daughter.

Rachel asked me, "Dad, is it all right if Sara comes over and spends the night?"

I replied, "Sure, but how is she going to get here?"

John piped in, "I'll go get her." Of course, what is more obvious than a teenager eager to drive anywhere at any time. With a warning and strict orders, I gave my permission for John to pick up Sara and come straight home. No stopping anywhere, no excuses. Sara was part of our extended family, so I saw no harm. Rachel spoke back into the phone and they worked out the details.

From the second floor, Joanne yelled, "Okay, I'm ready!" That was our cue for the whole family to proceed to the foyer to watch Mom come down the stairs. She made her appearance at the top of the stairs as we oohed, wowed, and aahed her way down. She smiled that rich, diva smile in her dazzling blue shimmering designer gown. She flaunted the moment for us. The fifty thousand dollar diamond necklace from Winston's topped off the whole....what's the word....event.

But it didn't stop her from barking at the kids. Sternly, Joanne warned them to "Keep the house clean and don't leave the kitchen in a mess!" Not the words I expected to come out of this sparkling jewel of my life, but whatever. My wife, I loved her because she could yell at our kids with equal fervor wearing a million dollars or wearing flip-flops.

I updated her with the news that Sara was spending the night. She smiled and said, "Let's go." In the foyer, we hugged and kissed every one of the kids as we wished each other a Happy New Year and told the kids we loved them.

We stepped out and closed the door behind us. "Haa! Freedom!" I shouted at Joanne.

Joanne twirled and asked, "How do I look?"

"You look breathless, like a movie star," I told her. And all I could do was take her in my arms, lift her off the ground, and spin her around while kissing her. She giggled like a teenager and I felt like I truly was the luckiest man in the world. With the sparkling Christmas decorations lighting up the atmosphere, I spun her in my arms as I whispered in her ear, "Happy New Year, my darling, I love you so much."

She replied in kind and we sealed our bond with a kiss. It was ladies choice as far as which vehicle we'd take. She picked the fastest Mercedes. So at \$120,000 we were going to fly across town at an average top speed of just thirty miles an hour.

Research shows that the happiest time people experience in their lives are the few minutes just before they go inside a theater to see a movie. When I was in the fifth grade, I lived on a military base, and every Saturday afternoon the base theater would show a double feature matinee, with cartoons, all for just a quarter. And not only that, with military precision, the U.S. Government would actually send an ugly gray bus around the neighborhood to pick up the kids every Saturday at 12:15 p.m. The absolute happiest moments of my life were when I'd see that military gray bus pull around the curve on Armstrong Street. My endorphins exploded across the daylight sky. It was so impressionable that after all these years I remember the name of the street.

As we drove through Santa Barbara, lit up with festive Christmas decorations, that same euphoria came ricocheting through my insides.

When we arrived at the mansion it was sparkling like a castle. The valet took the car as we beamed with excitement. Approaching the doors, I looked up and saw a dark cloud right above us. As I stepped inside, I reached out to test the rainfall when a couple of heavy drops hit the palm of my hand. As I entered, I looked down at the water in my hand and reached for my

handkerchief. I dried my hand as I beamed at the lavish and festive atmosphere abuzz with people having lots of fun and laughter.

It wasn't long before we bumped into Ralph and his wife Bette. She's a pretty woman with stronger than normal bonds with her family, meaning she's a little overly protective. Bette and Joanne had their own friendship.

When the ladies turned the conversation to their dresses, I turned to Ralph and said, "I'm assuming you know Sara is spending the night at our house, or are you the last to know?"

Ralph retorted, "Hey, I resemble that remark." He continued, "I told Sara that she was not to go anywhere but your house and that's it."

In her bedroom, Sara stuffed her backpack with her overnight things and checked the time. It was 7:45 p.m. She came out of her bedroom, dropped her backpack by the front door, looked out the window, and saw gusts of wind carrying the heavy rain horizontally. Then she lost an hour, absorbed in watching her favorite TV shows.

Sara called Rachel, but there was no answer. She picked another favorite show and lost herself laughing at Earl.

In the banquet hall, under a canopy of decorated lights strung over the sixty formally dressed couples celebrating the evening, Joanne and I enjoyed the fine five-course dinner along with a small mountain of desserts. Lit candelabras adorned the white linen tables, and calla lilies served as our name cards. The delicious dinner part of the night lingered for more than an hour.

Sara called Rachel again on her cell phone and even tried her a couple times on her home line. She expected them an hour ago. She repeated the phone call process for another half hour during which time she often checked the driveway for any signs of them. She started an internal debate of whether or not she should call her father. Another half hour flew by. Finally, she did.

Ralph's cell phone vibrated in his jacket pocket while he danced with Bette. He answered it and walked off the floor to take the call. Bette followed him. Sara told her dad that John and Rachel were two hours late and she couldn't get anyone on their phones. Ralph reassured Sara to stay calm and to call him when they did show up. And then they hung up. But Ralph knew that he couldn't keep this to himself.

As Joanne and I were dancing to "Summer Wind," I smiled at the perfection of the moment until I watched Ralph walk towards us with anything but a happy look on his face. He walked up to us and pointed to follow him off the dance floor. I took Joanne's hand and we followed Ralph into another room. Ralph repeated to us what had Sara told him.

Annoyed, I reached for my cell phone inside my jacket. I told the phone to "Call home." The home phone line just rang and rang; after six rings the answering machine picked up. I turned to Joanne. "I'm sure if they hear my voice, they'll pick up. Maybe they have the music so loud, they can't hear it." Finally, the beep came on, "Hey! Are you kids home? Pick up the phone, it's Dad. Pick up the PHONE! Whoever gets this message better call me at once, hello?" Nothing.

I hung up, turned to Joanne and said, "I remember specifically telling John that he was only to go pick up Sara and then come home. Do you remember me saying that?"

Joanne spoke into her cell phone, "Call Rachel." Rachel's voice mail finally came on, letting Joanne leave a message.

I tried John on his cell. It didn't even ring, going straight to voice mail. I recorded, "John, it's your dad, where are you? You are to call me the minute, the second you get this message. Your

mom and I are very disappointed that we're not able to reach you. Bye." I asked Joanne, "What do you think? Should we go home?"

Joanne's happy mood dropped as she asked, "You mean, like go and never come back?"

I looked at my watch. It was 11:15 p.m., so I replied, "No, like go home, and then come right back."

She beamed at realizing her party was not over. "Sure, we could be back here by 11:45."

We both walked briskly to the car and we were on the road in seconds. Joanne didn't want to ruin the evening shouting at the kids. I countered her leniency with the importance of teaching them that we deserved our time together without drama. She made me promise that after five minutes of yelling at the kids I would have to put my party face back on, race back here, and ring in the new year with a smile. I promised.

When we pulled into the garage, we immediately noticed that the Escalade was gone. We walked into the house and started yelling, "John, Rachel, Edwin!" Nobody came. We walked to different rooms calling out their names. It seemed like no one was home.

I wondered out loud, "What if they just went to Rusty's Pizza and they forgot their phones?" I dialed Rachel's cell phone again. Her phone rang in her bedroom upstairs, startling me at first. I walked upstairs and found it on her bed. I dialed John's cell again. It went straight to voice mail. I looked in Edwin's bedroom to see if he might be sleeping, but he wasn't. I noticed all the lights and TV were on in the house, as if they just got up and left, not intending to be gone long. And that would make sense.

I found Joanne in the back part of the house on the first floor, still yelling, "Edwin, John, Rachel! They're not here."

I called Rusty's Pizza to see if they were there. They weren't. I called Sara to ask if they had showed up. They hadn't. A half hour went by with no answers and no leads.

We walked to the family room where the clock happened to strike midnight. I turned to her, the most wonderful woman in the world, and confessed, "I feel bad that we couldn't have shared this moment back at the party. Happy New Year, darling." I hugged her and sealed it with a kiss.

She replied, "Happy New Year, my love."

But here we were, entangled in a drama with good kids gone bad.

We heard the sounds of a car pulling up the driveway. "Finally, they're home," I said angrily. Outside the car pulled up and came to a stop.

We walked to the foyer. I could see Joanne was fuming. In the foyer, I held Joanne back from going to open the door and said, "Let them walk in here and be shocked when they see us standing here. I'm grounding John's license for three weeks. Forget it, the whole month of January he's not driving one car, not even one mile!" I was ready to let them have the brunt of my anger. Joanne stood stoically, holding back her steam.

Then an odd thing happened that startled us both. The doorbell rang. We were not expecting the doorbell to ring. We were just expecting the kids to just come walking through it.

I walked to the door, opened it, and found a policeman standing there with his hat in his hand. I was both alarmed and curious. I spoke first. "Yes, can I help you?"

He replied, "Can I come in, pardon the late hour." Of course I let him in.

"I'm Officer Marcus, maybe you should sit down," he said.

Joanne took a step closer to me. But rather than do as he said, I asked, "What is this about?"

Officer Marcus insisted we sit on the nearby bench. So, we sat down as I took Joanne's hand in mine.

He asked, "Do you own a Cadillac Escalade?"

I replied, "Yes. Where is it? Was it towed? Did you find the kids?"

Then he asked us how many kids we have.

Joanne answered, "Three. Where are they?"

I could see something in his face. He said, "Well, maybe you should know, there's no proof yet, so don't rush to....well, there was an accident involving a black Escalade, and we don't know anything yet, but there were three victims."

"Were they children?" I asked.

"I don't know," he answered.

He lowered his head and revealed his lying side when he said, "Don't rush to any conclusions, that's why I'm here. I've come to escort you to possibly identify the passengers."

"Oh my God!" Joanne shouted as she stood up.

I asked him, "Where are you escorting us to?"

He couldn't even look me in the eye to answer, "The morgue."

I heard his words but I couldn't make sense of them. My outer layer jumped right out of my skin and my inner world suddenly turned deaf.

What brought me out of this daze was Joanne screaming, "Oh my God!" I pulled myself back and took a hold of her in my arms. I held her tight and said, "We can't assume. Don't make any assumptions until we have proof. Don't let it get away from us. We don't know for sure." Joanne just nodded her head.

And then I heard Officer Marcus offer to drive us.

Sitting in the back seat of the police cruiser, we held hands and prayed silently. I looked out the window and I could not imagine an empty life before me without my three children. I thought, "Be strong, and don't rush to conclusions. Don't let your mind wonder into a never-ending, never satisfying scenario that may not have anything to do with reality."

The red-flashing light from the top of the car bouncing off everything created a very surreal, ominous effect that exasperated the blender that was now in my mind. Thankfully, he left the siren off.

I prayed, and I prayed with the deepest sincerity. I prayed silently, and with my inner voice I shouted at the top of my lungs as if from a mountaintop and across a valley below. From my deepest particle, I mustered the micro charge of my soul to come begging to God. "Oh, Lord, if these are my children, grant me the peace to endure all things. For You are the infinite well of love from where all peace comes. And if they are not mine, then I pray for the parents of those children. May You grant them infinite compassion and peace in their hearts."

Suddenly, Officer Marcus slammed the brakes to avoid killing a dog and then turned into the parking lot behind the Santa Barbara Municipal Facilities. And before we knew it, we had arrived.

I opened the car door and helped Joanne out of the back seat. We had not said a word to each other. I didn't know if that was good or bad. We followed Officer Marcus through the doors and down the corridor.

He passed us off to the coroner on duty, who said, "This way." The first thing I noticed was the cold, and the second was the smell. As we made a left turn down a long corridor, I could see the doors at the far end. Thinking that Joanne should probably be spared the horror of seeing our children like this, I pondered if I should go in alone. She had the right, but why should she if she didn't have to. Why inflict more pain on the wounded? Twenty feet before the doors, I turned to her and said, "Joanne, you don't have to do this. I can do it, just let me go in there alone."

"No, I have to see them," she insisted.

"Joanne, you don't want to see them like this, please don't," I repeated. The scars would last a life time if she saw her children in the worst condition imaginable. "Please, stop, Joanne," I pleaded. Why should she suffer the sight of our children looking like that? "Please, stop, Joanne," I begged. I had to stop her. My compassion for her overrode everything else so I shouted, "Joanne, stop!"

She stopped, but continued arguing. I took her arm and pulled her close to me because I wanted her to look into my eyes as I said to her, "I don't want you to go in there. Please, don't do this. Just let me go alone." I gave her a deep hug just before walking her to a bench along the wall. I said, "Please, wait here. I'll be back." She sat down and I followed the coroner.

CHAPTER THREE

THE EXECUTION

Hours earlier, and not too long after Michael and Joanne had left for their New Year's Eve party, John, Rachel, and Edwin all piled into the Cadillac Escalade to go pick up Sara. Rachel always sat shotgun whenever John drove, except of course if they were with Mom or Dad. When John started the car, they all heard the gas warning audio reminder go on.

John pulled the vehicle up to the gas pump just outside the garage door. He filled up the tank because Dad told him it was best to do it that way. As he returned the nozzle to its cradle, he felt a few drops of rain hit him. By the time he got settled into the driver's seat, the windshield wipers went on automatically. John looked up at the sky and asked, "When did they say it was going to rain?"

Rachel gave him a look and said, "It always rains in December, idiot."

John was taken aback by the tone in her voice and reminded her, "Mother told you not to talk to me like that." John turned back to Edwin and asked, "And you're not going to be a show-off and do anything really stupid to impress Sara, are you?"

Edwin looked embarrassed and replied, "Maybe."

John headed north to the hills above Summerland. He continued up the dark winding curves alongside the hills against the howling wind. He drove cautiously through the wall of rain. At Olive Street, he was surprised to encounter some traffic; but after all, it was New Year's Eve.

He crossed the boulevard and made his way higher up along the hillside with the ocean and cliff-side to his right. He made out the intermittent guardrail defining the road boundary. The windshield wipers knocking back and forth wildly caused the oncoming headlights to appear out of focus. Through the sheets of flying water drops, distance was difficult to measure. John told Rachel, "Why don't you call Sara and tell her we'll be there in ten minutes."

Rachel shrugged him off. "I left my cell at the house."

About a half a mile ahead, coming in the opposite direction, an old man slowly drove his old car through the pouring rain. But the old man was slowing down the fast Porsche behind him. The expensive German machine passed on his left and if it hadn't been for the buckets of rain, the driver would have been able to see the no-passing lines painted down the middle of the road.

John pulled his cell phone out of his pocket, but it fell and slid behind him on the floor of the backseat. Edwin unbuckled his seat belt and reached for the cell on the floor. As John made a left bank curve on the wet road, he saw both oncoming cars taking up both lanes.

The Porsche driver also saw John's oncoming lights and floored the accelerator. He shot past the slow car. But that put both oncoming cars at a combined speed of 120 miles an hour. John saw the lights coming at him faster. He blasted his horn.

Being inexperienced, John hit the brakes too hard as he turned the steering wheel sharply to avoid the Porsche. The SUV skidded out of control across the pavement towards the guardrail.

Nothing John did could correct the SUV, now hydroplaning across the wet cement. Rachel screamed. John screamed. They slid at an angle until the right rear fender hit the guardrail. The momentum tilted the SUV over the guardrail and gravity pulled it down over the cliff.

As the vehicle bounced down the cliff rocks, Edwin slammed against the roof repeatedly. John and Rachel faced the oncoming canyon floor with horror. John tried to grab Edwin, but the chaos would not let that happen. The kids screamed in panic and terror as they slid uncontrollably down the cliff rocks.

At the bottom of a steep drop the SUV slammed into the ground upside down.

In an instant, the sounds of honking horn, crashing metal, and screams climaxed to a haunting silence. Inside, John and Rachel, still in their seatbelts, were dead. Edwin's lifeless and broken body landed a few feet away from the wreckage.

Up on the highway, the Porsche driver stopped and dialed 911 on his cell phone. As he got out in the vicious rain, he raced to the twisted guard rail and in a panic he summoned help from the operator.

The old man in the slower car pulled over and came out with a flashlight. He ran to the railing. The old man pointed his light down the canyon and found the wrecked SUV. Both men saw that it was upside down. The Porsche driver impulsively started to go down the cliff when the old man stopped him, shouting, "It's too dangerous!" They both saw the angle of the canyon wall was far too steep for anyone to climb down. He knew the old man was right. The Porsche driver pulled himself away from the old man and stepped back to the shoulder of the road. He looked up into the rain and repeatedly screamed, "Oh, God!" at the top of his lungs, realizing what he had caused. He crumbled where he stood.

At the morgue, I slowly pulled back the first sheet and I could see that it was Rachel. The air rushed right out of me. I reached for her hand. And that's when I saw what I was looking for: the charm bracelet I put on her wrist a week ago on Christmas morning. The words she spoke when I put it on her came back to slug me in my heart: "Daddy, I'm never going take this off." I covered my eyes with my hands, not wanting to see what was before me. Tears flooded my eyes as I realized the moment.

I moved to the second body and pulled the sheet back and found Edwin. I noticed his little shoulders and spine were bent out of shape.

"What monster did this to my son?"

As I walked to the third, I realized John was under that sheet. And that was when an endless procession of tears started falling down my face. His handsome face was broken and bruised as was most of his body. I leaned over him, wrapped my arms around him, pulled him up to my chest, and said to myself, "So much promise, so much denied." Gingerly, I laid him back down, took a deep breath and realized my assignment. I took another deep breath as I walked towards the doors. But by the time I reached them my ashen face could not hide my grief and shock.

When I stepped through the door, Joanne stood up. She could see my face and she screamed, "Oh God, no!" I went to hold her and moved her back down on the bench. We sat down because the weight of the horror was too great to bear standing up. Joanne buried her head into my chest and sobbed. We both wept freely and openly, expelling our horror. Our wailing echoed up and down the hallways. I felt so many things at once: sadness, anger,

despair, shock, and more than anything, a bewilderment why God would allow this to happen to us.

She bellowed, "I want to see them!" But as she bolted for the door, I stopped her.

It took a lot of strength to hold her back. "Don't Joanne, please don't!" I held her tightly. The coroner returned and walked us to the entrance. He handed us off to Officer Marcus, who walked us back to his cruiser.

As we were driven home, Joanne buried her head in my chest. I held her close. I called Ralph on my cell and without explanation told him to go to our house as quickly as possible, and then I hung up. I felt myself falling down a black hole, all the while asking: Why? I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs and put my fist through the back door window, but this wasn't the time. Joanne's sobbing continued all the way to the house.

When we arrived, Ralph and Bette pulled up at the same time. As we got out, Bette came rushing over to help Joanne.

Ralph asked, "What happened?" I waited to answer until Bette walked Joanne out of earshot. And with the fewest of words possible I told Ralph what had happened.

Officer Marcus came over to me to offer his condolences and then left.

I turned and stared at the front door. I stood frozen. I had to walk through our front door knowing my children would never be there again.

My whole being felt as if a huge vacuum in the sky had just sucked the very life, air, and soul out of me. I had to consciously inhale. Feeling and looking like I could fall over any second, Ralph came up beside me and put his arm around my back. He walked me to the front door and into the foyer. Immeasurable sadness had overcome my home this day.

We heard Joanne's sobbing coming from upstairs, so that's where we went. As I rounded the top of the stairs, I noticed the kids' rooms. Someday I'll go in each of their rooms and have a moment with them, I thought to myself. It's inevitable, but not tonight. I had to get to Joanne.

Joanne lay on top of the bed as Bette comforted her. I looked at Bette and nodded towards Ralph. She took my cue and walked over to him. They went downstairs. I went to sit by Joanne and I held her. I kept my grief at bay, as I had to think of her first. We didn't speak. Our pain went beyond words.

Downstairs, Ralph led Bette to a chair in the kitchen and told her what I had told him. Her complexion turned pale as she cried into her hands. Ralph held her as they both wept. They sat together crying over the loss of children they watched grow up from the time the kids were toddlers.

Breaking away from our embrace, Joanne looked at me and through her sobbing asked, "Why?" Shaking my head in disbelief, my only answer would be more questions.

Ralph and Bette returned to our bedroom with water and tissues for Joanne. As Bette touched my shoulder in tenderness, I looked up and saw her tears. We traded places.

Ralph and I went downstairs and sat in the living room. We just sat in silence. There were many things to talk about, but I couldn't articulate, as my mind exploded with what ifs, whys, and why nots.

Bette gave Joanne a painkiller and helped her change out of her formal dress and into her sleeping gown. After Bette tucked Joanne back into bed, she came downstairs to join us.

I didn't want to leave Joanne alone. I should be with her. Ralph and Bette let themselves out with a promise to return early next morning.

Climbing the stairs, I felt the jabs of quantum questions demanding quantum answers. I asked, "Who am I weeping for? The kids are in heaven, so how can I weep for them who are with God? No, I must be weeping for myself and my own loss. Who could expect any man to bear the agony of losing all three children at once? Can it be done? Can it be done without going insane, vindictive, or bitter?" This event was one that will forever change the foundation blocks of who I am.

Joanne was still crying when I snuggled up against her and wrapped my arms around her. She squeezed my arm tightly as she wailed her pain openly. Suddenly, she flew out of bed and screamed, "Why would God do this to us? Why?" She slumped onto the bed.

I took her in my arms and I held her tight. We climbed back in bed together as I tried to soothe her to sleep. I knew that the pill she took should kick in any minute and give her peace from this madness.

And as she was quieting down, I realized that I was still in my tuxedo. I got up to change clothes. The glamorous party clothes denied the truth of the moment. In my walk-in closet, the process of getting into my pajamas was a start-and-stop operation that lasted a half hour. I thought about the accident and then I had to sit down in a chair, hold onto myself tight and let out a burst of sorrow. I prayed, "Oh, Lord, what did I do...what did we do...to deserve this? I don't understand."

Finally, I got in bed and stared at the far wall. Joanne had fallen asleep. Eventually, I too fell asleep.

At about four o'clock in the morning, I vaguely noticed that Joanne got out of bed. I expected that she would walk to the bathroom, but she walked out of the room instead. I pulled myself out of my subconscious to make sure she was okay. She walked down the hallway, turning on every light. I had to follow her to keep an eye on her, but I kept my distance. She went from one kid's room to another, turning on the lights and telling the kids to "Wake up." She repeated, "Wake up!" and got louder. She threw herself on John's bed, crying, yelling, "Come back!" I knew I had to get to her.

Abruptly, she walked past me and headed downstairs. I figured she'd gone for some water, so from a distance, I followed. But she didn't go to the kitchen. Rather she went through the sliding-glass door into the backyard. I watched her cross the lawn. She walked straight up to the large-size Nativity, held out her arms, looked to the stars, and prayed. I knew I should go out and pray with her. So I stepped into the cold late night air.

I didn't get ten feet before she grabbed a wise man and threw him across the lawn. She karate kicked the large cow so hard, it knocked over a few other animals when it went down. Sheep were not immune as she threw one like a discus, landing it in the pool. The second and third wise men were taken by their heads and shot put into the pool and across the grass. With her arms swinging, she knocked over Joseph and Mary. And then with all her might, she picked up the fake stable covering and pushed it over, turning it upside down, exposing the baby Jesus. She looked down, and then looked up. At the top of her lungs, she yelled at God, "Why would You do this to me?" I ran to her as she slipped on the wet grass and fell to the ground.

I held her tight. "We'll get through this, I promise," I said to her.

I took her back into the house and back upstairs to bed.

Again, I stared at the same far wall. I closed my eyes, and then images and smells from the morgue came haunting me.

I got out of bed and knelt on the floor at the foot of the bed and prayed some more. But moments later, I keeled over and fell asleep in a fetal position on the carpet.

I dreamt I was playing tag with the kids when they were smaller, as we did hundreds of times at the jungle gym in the park. In my dream, I ran as fast as I could, but I could not catch them. Edwin, John, Rachel, they were all faster than I was. They all taunted me with “You can’t catch me.” We all laughed hard. And then I turned to look at Rachel. I shouted, “Rachel!”

Suddenly, the sound of a ringing cell phone woke me. I recognized it was Rachel’s ringing tone. Mumbling, I said out loud, “Rachel, answer your phone.” I thought, why doesn’t Rachel answer her phone? And then I discovered myself on the floor. What was I doing on the floor? In the distance, Rachel’s cell phone kept ringing. And then I remembered the nightmare my life fell into last night.

Slowly, I stood and saw Joanne was also stirring. I staggered to Rachel’s room and turned the phone off.

Returning to the bedroom, I saw Joanne sitting up. I went to hug her. She looked at me and asked, “Did it really happen? Or was it bad dream?” I didn’t have to say anything, as my face showed my sadness. The front doorbell rang. I got my robe and went to answer it.

Ralph was knocking. I let him in and we made our way to the kitchen. He asked a few questions and offered to handle all the arrangements. I totally appreciated his support and readily took him up on his offers. As the day progressed, news of the tragedy spread quickly across town. Around noon, friends and neighbors began to stop by. My four best friends and their families came over to show their love and support and to share our grief.

Ralph handled the funeral arrangements from my home office. I sat nearby, trying to keep myself together.

My sister-in-law, Mary Ruth, lives in Bel Air and would have been here, except she was in Ohio. She’s Joanne’s only sister. When Joanne finally got her on the phone, Joanne broke down again. Just speaking the words and hearing the words come out of your mouth made you want to cry. Joanne dropped the phone on her lap. I heard Mary Ruth sobbing on the other end. She loved the kids profoundly and they loved her back.

Ralph took over the conversation and organized her travel plans.

I was told the accident made the newspaper. And a neighbor told me that local TV news mentioned it that morning. I didn’t see any of it, nor did I want to.

By mid-afternoon impromptu well-wishers swelled through the day as the news continued to spread. I kept asking, “Where would we be without friends?”

Over the next couple days, I noticed my grief would come and go in waves. One minute I’d be okay, but a minute later it would overtake me and I would have to find an isolated spot away from everyone. Whether it was a bathroom or upstairs, I just had to be alone. I noticed that lapses of time disappeared and then I would find myself here, or there.

Before I knew it, three days had passed and all I vaguely remembered was people coming and going. Folks brought food and flowers in a blur of activity and grieving. The flowers that came by the vanloads covered the entire downstairs.

Alone at night, we noticed the nights were harder to take than the days.

When I walked through downstairs at night, I could almost hear the distant chatter and rumbling of activity. But I knew it was not real. It was that replay button just on the other side of my audio subconscious, forever there to remind of what I once had.

Four days after the accident, the most dreaded time in all my life arrived. We buried our children.

Pastor Ryan took care of all the details in organizing a church service. At the service, it was standing room only as the sanctuary was packed with classmates, schoolteachers, church members, business associates, friends from the yacht club, and many people we didn't know, but they all had a connection to our kids. The crowd also filled the foyer.

At the altar, the three caskets were lined end to end. We sat in the front row. Joanne sat to my right, and Mary Ruth sat on her other side. They both wore dark veils to mask their grief. Although I was in the front row, I couldn't hear a word the pastor was saying over the screeching pain in my heart and mind. But later, I heard he gave a beautiful sermon on how God loves us and watches over our ultimate well-being. From the bitter cold Arctic of my soul I thought, "Well, what else would he have talked about?"

The kids' friends and teachers told stories about them for about a half hour. And so quickly, we were standing up to lead the caskets out of the church. Mary Ruth took Joanne's other arm and we all walked together.

It took eighteen pallbearers to carry the caskets down the aisle and through the foyer. At the church entrance, we stood aside as each casket was carried out to the procession of cars. We fell in behind the last one and walked to our limo.

After we got in, I closed my eyes to shut out the world. Inside my head, I kept asking, "How could this be happening to me, to us?" I asked this all the way to the Santa Barbara Cemetery. We sat in the quiet hollow of our disbelief that this could have happened to us. The funeral procession of cars and limousines stretched a mile.

Ten minutes later, as we drove through the gates of the cemetery, I had flashbacks of entering these very gates when I buried my mother and father. Years ago, when Mom and Dad passed away, I bought this family plot so we could all be together. But in my head, it was always the kids burying us, not the other way around.

Two blocks from the family plot, I noticed a large crowd already there waiting for us. This wasn't the crowd that was at the church. They were all behind us. This crowd was a mixture of more friends, neighbors, classmates, and strangers. Who knew I had such fantastic children? I was sincerely moved. It moved me because it showed my children touched so many lives in a positive way. It's a true testament to their loving and kind disposition.

They were good kids, but I was continuously realizing that my children were gone. The car stopped and I led Joanne and Mary Ruth up the knoll to the plot. When the caskets arrived, they were set above their open graves.

I didn't understand why God would bring me to this point of my life. To give me so much and then take it all away so suddenly made no sense to me. It wasn't fair. We listened to Pastor Ryan speak his words, but I didn't hear any of it.

Our closest friends stood directly behind us. They were all there with their wives and children, along with Claire and Charles, who closed the company for the entire day out of respect.

Pastor Ryan walked over to me and nodded. That was our cue to tenderly place the roses we held on the caskets. I took Joanne's elbow and guided us to John first, since he was our oldest. I took a moment to remember when we first brought him home. Joanne and I were so nervous holding and taking care of this human so small, we were certain that we were going to

break him or even accidentally kill the poor infant. I remember the sparks of magic he brought into our lives. I was sure that God had blessed me with a son among sons.

We moved to Rachel's coffin. We laid our hands on it. Our princess was gone and she took her laughter with her. Why did she have to be taken out of our lives so wickedly?

And then we moved to Edwin and thanked him for having come here and having been a part of our lives. He shared his playful demeanor and enormous curiosity with everyone he met.

It was hard to realize that two weeks ago we had the perfect day on the *Oh Happy Day*. The great benefit from parenting is the unconditional love demanded by any circumstances. But right now, flashes of anger wanted to explode out of me, but I didn't let them. Not now. And besides, I wouldn't know what to do with my anger.

As soon as I saw them lowering the caskets, I dropped my head into my hands. This blow went to the very core of me, forever branding its bitter memory on the front pages of my soul. Somehow, I felt this was entirely my fault.

When Pastor Ryan finished speaking, the graveyard crew went to work. The large crowd turned and slowly dispersed back to their cars. A few came up to us to give us a hug or a few words of assurance.

Charles came over to give me a hug and offered, "Michael, if there's anything I can do, you just have to ask. And take as much time as you need, really." And within a few minutes, they were all gone.

We stayed to watch the grounds keepers complete the burial process. When they unrolled the pre-cut grass over the dirt, my heart turned numb, as I now knew more than ever that the kids are not ever coming back. But this moment keeps repeating itself and I never expected this would be part of the process.

I had to spend a moment with my parents, so I went over to their graves and had a few words with them. I said, "Hi, Mom and Dad. I know this is a bit of a shock, but I want you to take care of John, Rachel, and Edwin. You're going to have to watch over them for us now." A part of me wanted to say more, but I couldn't articulate the words.

Joanne, Mary Ruth, and I sat for a long while before it was time to leave.

On the way home, inside the limo Joanne laid her head against my shoulder and for a minute I felt strong, that we were going to survive this calamity. We were both going to need counseling after this, and soon. Are we supposed to start a new family? Is that what this was about? Did we so screw up raising our kids that God had to take them away from us so that we could try again and maybe do it right the next time? No, I didn't screw up. Don't trip, I told myself.

The sun was setting as the limo dropped us off at our front door. The driver let us out and then left. I held Joanne's hand to the door, until I had to unlock it. Inside the foyer, subtly we both stopped and listened for the sounds of a lively house. That's what parents do when they get home. They listen for the sounds of life, love, and laughter. And from whatever room it may be coming, they search it out in hopes of finding a hug, a kiss, or a smile.

But alas, there was none of that today. Nor would there be any of it any other day. Joanne and Mary Ruth walked into the family room. I stood alone, frozen in the foyer. I was immobilized by the void of silence coming from inside my home. From my gut came a surge of despair and confusion. It turned into a cauldron of anger. I begged out loud, "I just want to know why. Can't You tell me that much?" I yanked off my shoes and threw them as hard as I

could against the wall. I slammed one shoe into a painting, and to my pleasure the whole thing fell off the wall and crashed to the floor. I targeted a lamp with my other shoe and it also went crashing to the floor.

I walked straight to the backyard and up to the grill. I lit it. I took off my socks and threw them into the fire. The black jacket followed, as did every piece of clothes. I had to burn every piece of clothing that witnessed the burial of my children. And when I was done throwing it all on the fire, I stood naked and watched it turn to smoke and ashes. My head fell into my hands and I sobbed from a bottomless place of loneliness I had never felt before. When did God ever think I had the strength to go through this?

Well, He was wrong this time. Then I reminded myself that all children belong to God. They all belong to Him. They never belonged to me at any time, and from the moment they were born they were always His. "Oh God, I need You to get me through this. Why would You do this to me? Oh, God, give me wisdom. I need wisdom! You are the essence of all wisdom that permeates the whole universe. Would You please pity me with an ounce of it? Just a drop of it! Why me? They were Yours to begin with. You had the right to take them, but why? Just let me know why!" I demanded.

Joanne walked up behind me and wrapped me in a blanket. She embraced me, and in the comfort of her arms I said, "We need wisdom. Let's pray, Joanne."

She replied, "Pray for us both, Michael." And then we cried in each other's arms. We were consumed by our pain, sitting near the flames and ashes.

I thought about my resolution of forgiveness. And who was I going to forgive? What could I do to the driver of the Porsche? I could kill him. No, I couldn't do that. That's not me. That's not what I'm about. I could stalk him for a few days or maybe weeks, but what would be the point? That's not who I am. But didn't he cause the accident? That creep killed my family. Yes, he's to blame. No, he's not. I couldn't blame him. As if my three children could be killed and God not know about it until the eleven o'clock evening news? No, that's not the way it works. If He knows when the sparrow falls, then He surely knew when He was going to take John, Rachel, and Edwin. I know He knew it before it happened. I just know He did. So why would He do this to me? I never saw it coming.

God is more mysterious than all the mysteries ever combined. He hides when He wants to and shows His face when it fancies Him. I begged Him to touch me with a drop of His healing powers as my sadness yearned to know what life could be like never seeing my children again. The love they radiated throughout our lives will never shine again. I will say this, God sure did send me three wonderful children and for the time I had them, it was real joy. And now He took them away. Is He laughing at me? Could He find pleasure in our pain and horror? Is that who He is?

Sometime through the haze of the night, Joanne and I found ourselves walking to our bedroom. As I climbed into bed, I failed to find what used to be the happiest moment of the day: climbing into bed, knowing everything was all right with the world. But tonight it felt hollow. Lying here, I hoped to dream of a life I had, that I may escape from the reality of this one. Sensing the open distance in bed between Joanne and me, we're going to counseling. Maybe we'll ask Pastor Ryan? Maybe we should seek out a professional? Maybe someone who handles trauma cases? And I'd be okay with that. She would too, but this isn't the right time to bring it up. We both sighed in synchronicity and fell asleep.

Sometime the next morning, Joanne told me she would like to spend some time with Mary Ruth at her house. Without hesitation, I encouraged her to get away for a while. I would miss her, but I understood that she wanted to get away.

Throughout the morning, I spent time in my office reading scripture. Earlier, I had closed the doors to the kids' rooms. I didn't know when, but the day will come when I can walk through those doors to take care of business. Perhaps find a little closure. Maybe I'd get around to it next week, or maybe next year.

The afternoon arrived too fast as Joanne and Mary Ruth were ready to leave. I told Joanne that whenever and at whatever time of the day or night she wanted me to come and get her, she should just call. We kissed and hugged before she got into the front seat. Mary Ruth came around to give me a hug. I surely welcomed her love and support.

I watched them as they drove down the driveway to the street. I didn't know what I was supposed to do now. The thought of spending the night alone in this house did not appeal to me.

At around four o'clock I decided to spend the night on the yacht. I could be out the door in a few minutes, and why not? I locked down the house and grabbed a few belongings and some leftovers from the kitchen. Instantly, I felt a little relief just knowing I was going to spend the night on the *Oh Happy Day*. I called Joanne and told her of my plans.

Lucifer found the Oh Happy Day with no problem. He came looking to destroy the yacht, and what better time to get some entertainment than when Michael was actually on it and out at sea. Invisibly sitting in the captain's chair, Lucifer waited patiently for him.

As I stepped onto the wharf, I noticed some beautiful clouds that should make for an impressive sunset. I unzipped the various canvas panels, climbed inside, and prepped the boat for sea while putting my personal items and food away. After executing the routine checklist, I pulled away from the dock in minutes. I didn't know what I wanted to find out there on the ocean, maybe just a different environment. I felt some satisfaction just knowing I was going away. Maybe I'd wake up early before dawn, have a bagel and cappuccino, and watch the sunrise from the fly bridge.

As the yacht raced for the open ocean chasing the sunset, the silhouettes of two men could be seen against the big bright red clouds that reached all the way down to touch the horizon. The captain was at the steering wheel high up on the fly bridge, and the other was downstairs reclining his feet up on the port wall. The two silhouettes were made of complete opposite polar fabrics.

I headed due west and throttled up some more. I turned wide to watch the town recede in the background, leaving nothing between that and me except time and a lot of space. And then I asked, "How can I leave behind me that which is an integral part me: my children?"

I throttled up more and lifted the twin engines to full speed and sizzled over the water like a skipping stone. The onslaught of the rushing air made me work at keeping my face facing forward. But I didn't care. I was at full throttle with two full tanks, and I just held on. The remnants of a majestic sunset surrendered to the big electric blue sky bringing on the night. Lonely planets edged out their places in the darkening blue. I turned around to find land was scarcely visible.

I screamed out loud. I screamed for God to hear me. I shouted His name at the top of my lungs, repeating my screams like a mantra. "God! God! God! How could You not hear me? I

know You're listening!" I bellowed my questions at Him at the top of my lungs. "Was it my fault? Is it Your fault?"

After an hour of ranting and relentless appeals for God's attention, I pulled the throttle back down to neutral and coasted awhile. Maybe I wanted something to eat?

I dropped anchor, although it wouldn't do much good this far out to sea, and made my way to the galley. Pulling my Bible and some other inspirational books out of my bag, I put them on the table. After I warmed up dinner and settled into the leather booth, I stopped to give grace.

However shallow my gratitude may have seemed, I gave it with the minimal amount of anything I had left in me. I folded my hands in prayer. "Father, I just want to ask that you bless this meal, and I pray for my three children. I ask that you bless Joanne..."

Invisibly, Lucifer made his way down to the engine room. He looked around at the possibilities of creating some entertainment. He turned this knob and that knob, and a lever here and a lever there. Finally, with the power of evil, he pressed his foot against a bolt and broke off the fuel injectors. Gasoline squirted out between the metal threads and onto the floor, quickly forming a puddle. It seeped down onto the engine and causes a chemical reaction.

I continued praying "...And Father, I pray for Your peace"...and when I said the "c" in "peace," a loud boom rocked the boat left and right. My heart pounded as I got out of the booth. I ran down another half-flight of stairs to the engine room where a small fire had broken out.

I ran up to the main level for the fire extinguisher. When I got there, I pulled the fire extinguisher from its cradle and raced back downstairs to the engine room. At the galley, I missed a step and because my hands were holding the extinguisher, I went face first onto the floor. "Ough," I yelled. I got up and continued to the engine room. When I got there, I was stunned to see how quickly the fire had spread. I opened the extinguisher and sprayed it at the bottom of the flames.

As I was putting out one corner of the fire, I noticed a spray of fire right on the engine block. The gas leak near the injectors was spraying gas, but as soon as it came into contact with oxygen, it turned into flame. It was like a fan of fire and nothing I've ever seen before. I pointed the hose at it and was about to hit it with foam, but thought I'd better not.

I took off my shirt to pound the air out of the flames. But when I ran my shirt over the engine, the squirting fuel splashed it with gas and in a mini-second turned it into one ball of fire in my hand.

Immediately, I ran to the fly bridge, and at the controls I turned off the gas valves and bolted back down the stairs.

In the engine room I saw that the spraying gasoline was out, thank God. But the fire was now burning up the ceiling and the forward wall. I hit it with the extinguisher. I ran it across the ceiling and at the wall. I could see I was making progress. With half the fire out I was feeling hopeful.

But a minute later, the extinguisher went belly up on me. It sputtered to empty. I shook it and sprayed again, but only a little trickled out. I shook it again and sprayed. But even less came out. I had a fire onboard with no way to put it out. The smoke was thickening up through all the levels and cabins. Instinctively, I knew I had to get an S.O.S. message out.

I ran up to the navigation table and reached for the radio handset and shouted, "May Day! May Day! This is the *Oh Happy Day*. May Day! May Day! Anyone hear this transmission? May Day! May Day!"

I looked back at the black smoke and realized I had to abandon ship.

I ran past the column of smoke coming up the stairs and outside to the bench against the stern wall. I lifted the leather bench for the inflatable raft. I hauled it out and hit the inflate button. No! Too soon! And before I knew it, a ten-man raft exploded to full size right on top of me. I grabbed onto it. I had to get a rope for it. I reached back into the box, and I put my hand on top of a thirty-foot rope with clipped ends; exactly what I wanted. I clipped one end of the rope to the raft and the other to my belt loop. I threw the raft overboard into the dark waters. To my surprise, a built-in strobe lit up. I forgot about that feature and thanked God I had it. I ran to get back to the navigation table and the radio.

I looked at the flames coming up the stairs that in a couple minutes could potentially cut me off from the stern. But I had to try calling out again. When I reached the radio I shouted, "May Day! May Day! This is the *Oh Happy Day* at 34 by 26 at 50 degrees west."

I repeated it half a dozen times before I had to make my escape while I could. Then I remembered the photo. Should I try to save the family photo hanging in the galley? Was it worth it?

Outside, along the narrow walkway, I rushed to the forward, opened a hatch above the master cabin, and climbed down. I grabbed a blanket, covered myself, and ran through the smoke on my way to the galley. I yanked the photo off the wall and turned back to make my escape.

I climbed up onto the deck and looked at the stern. It was spewing six-foot flames coming up from the stairwell. I stood with the photo in one hand and the rope to a raft in the other.

Before I threw myself into the dark open waters, I tugged on the rope, bringing the raft closer to me. I pulled it up out of the water and close enough so I could slip the photo into a pocket below the flap bench seat. I let go of the raft and dropped it back into the dark water. The only thing left to do was to throw myself overboard.

I stole only a couple seconds and took in the destruction of our family boat now engulfed in flames. Then I remembered there were still 200 gallons of gas. I should get as far from there as quickly as possible.

I didn't want to throw myself into the raft, as I could tear it as I landed in it. The smallest rip could be disastrous. I took a deep breath and threw myself overboard. I landed about ten feet from the raft. As I swam towards it, a current kept me in place. So I just tugged on the rope to get the raft to me.

But the current was so strong, I started moving backwards. The raft came towards me, but the current was strange, and as the raft got closer, it suddenly passed by to my left. With rope in hand, the raft pulled me, and then I was following it. I looked at the boat in flames and saw that it was drawn into the same current. I didn't understand any of this. I kept yanking on the rope, as I had to get in the raft.

The flames on the boat were lighting up the ocean, and I could see that I was captured by one big whirlpool.

The whirlpool pushed everything in a circle. I watched a funnel at the bottom of the whirlpool grow larger and larger. And worse, with every spin around, I was coming closer to slamming into my flaming boat.

Knowing I'm a good swimmer, I let go of the rope and watched the raft move to my right behind me. I started swimming to get out of the whirlpool but I got nowhere. I didn't even remember to put on a life jacket. How stupid was I. That should have been the first thing I did.

I saw the raft coming back around. The whirlpool got stronger and deeper. It was now just a large drain. I was being pulled counter-clockwise along a curve wall of water. As the raft got to the closest point, I reached up to grab it. But the current pulled me to the left, and gravity pulled me down.

I fell through several feet of air before dunking under the water at the center of the vortex. My face surfaced just long enough to take a big gulp of air and then I was under again. I could feel water itself taking me down, pushing me deeper into the ocean.

The rope tied to the raft on the surface stopped me from sinking farther. I grabbed the rope and started pulling on it. I was able to crawl my way up the rope. I looked up and I saw the boat crashing into the funnel above me. The whirlpool current spun the boat around and around underwater. But now it was between me and the surface. It was sinking fast and it was all I could do to get out of the way. It passed within a foot of me. As the stern glided by on its way to the ocean floor, a dagger of mockery cut me as the words *Oh Happy Day* floated in front of me. I continued pulling on the rope tied to the raft.

I finally reached air and took the longest breath of my life. Air, sweet air filled my lungs. "Oh, God, please don't leave me now! Help me," I pleaded. Instantly, I felt the cold water and the cold air. I swam to the raft. I had to get in the raft as quickly as possible.

I climbed in. Shirtless and completely soaked, I curled into a ball to try to stay warm. I hoped the strobe light would get someone's attention. I snuggled up against the side of the raft to keep the cold wind from hitting me.

I tried to remember the little nuances of what transpired just before I heard that bang. What did happen? I never smelled gasoline, yet there was a gas leak. I was vexed. And why didn't I have a second fire extinguisher? I was so careless. But who would have thought that I would ever need even one extinguisher, much less two? Oh, my God, what happened to me? Is God punishing me? Did I do something wrong? If I screwed up, will He ever tell me?

I shivered, half-naked and exhausted, huddled in the raft. My hands and feet were freezing. I tried to keep warm by burying my hands under my arms and rubbing my feet together. I felt insignificant as I prayed to survive, with only the stars bearing witness to my struggle.

If I lived, would it matter? By all definition and purpose, my life had come to an end. I stared at the stars and wondered where my three children had gone. Are they out there dancing through the Milky Way? Where did they go? Are they out there visiting Orion? I wanted to know. Because if they were, I was ready to walk away from all of this so I could be with them again.

So, God, if there were ever a time that You would take me, this was it. "What do You want from me?" I screamed at the top of my lungs. I screamed so loud the stars could feel my anger. "What do You want from me?" I begged of Him. My anger kept me warm.

I thought, "I'll drift for days and slowly starve and dehydrate to death. No matter, I'll see my kids in just a few days time from now. However this turns out, I'm totally fine with it." I

looked at the stars and shouted to God, "Kill me, or let me live. It's a question You, oh Lord, hold in Your hands every day. Every day You decide if You want me today. Is it today, oh Lord? Is it today? Because I'm right here! I'm right here!"

And with that, I felt that if I died out there right then, I would be okay with it. I was ready. But, what would happen to Joanne? And then I passed out.

I woke up feeling a change in the level of light of the open sky. I opened my eyes and saw the predawn light. It turned into a colorful sunrise. But look at me. I was supposed to be having my cappuccino and bagel on the fly bridge. But look, Oh, Lord, this is where You find me this morning: half naked, floating aimlessly out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. I tried standing up and almost tipped overboard. I sat down. That was stupid, I thought. Perhaps I should go back to sleep. Or, should I continue my rant and rave at God, now that He can see me in the sunlight?

Was anyone looking for me? Did anyone hear my message? Too bad daylight arrived. I had a better shot at getting seen at night with this strobe light than I did in the daylight. I was just a dot on the ocean. I was nothing more than just a dot. I lay back down and fell asleep.

Sometime later, I heard a roar. It scared the sleep out of me as I saw it was a helicopter hovering above me. I saw the helicopter crew lowering a basket. When it reached me, I grabbed the photo and climbed into the basket. As I was lifted off the raft, I looked at the huge open sea. The basket spun a few times, giving me a 360-degree view of the seascape. It's a natural wonder so large, so inviting, so mesmerizing, and yet so dangerous. My eyes were transfixed on the horizon line, that great divide between heaven and earth.

So that day, God spared my life. As I was lifted skywards under the belly of this Coast Guard angel, I thanked God from the bottom of my heart. I thanked Him repeatedly and most sincerely for not leaving me to die out in the open ocean. And then I remembered my lost children and instantly my happy heart sank at the memory of reality.

When the basket reached the bay of the helicopter, a couple guys in helmets reached out to me. They pulled me to safety and out of the basket. I stood up, handed one of them the photo, and tried to find my balance. And for a second, I was all right. But my legs didn't do what I wanted and I think someone caught me on the way down to the floor. Because no matter how hard I fought it, I passed out.

In the white, overstuffed booth onboard God's Gulf Stream G650, John, Rachel, and Edwin sat opposite each other with their eyes closed. Beautiful music slowly woke them up. John looked out the window and marveled at the view.

Rachel looked out the window, too, and invited Edwin to share the vista of the earth from 70,000 feet. They wondered, like everyone else wonders, how they got here. "Can you smell that perfume?" she asked them. The cabin was filled with the sweetest fragrance they had ever smelled.

John wondered out loud, "Where are we?" Edwin looked up the aisle and saw God walking towards them. He sat down next to John as they smiled at His arrival. He seemed very familiar to them.

“Welcome, my children,” He exclaimed. His countenance was filled with bliss.

Rachel asked, “Why aren’t we with Mom and Dad?”

“Because you are with Me now,” He answered.

Edwin piped in, “What happened?”

God heard the question and wanted to answer truthfully, but considered the consequences. So God, being God, smiled and answered Edwin with, “That is not important right now. What is important is what is about to happen. I called you home for a very special purpose.”

Rachel asked Him, “Did we do something wrong?”

God reached His arm around her and assured her, “Absolutely not. I’m so proud of you in every way. You always showed a love for Me, respect for your parents, good manners, you never swore, and *mostly* you were respectful of others.” God glanced at Edwin.

John asked, “What’s going to happen?”

God explained to them, “Your father on earth is in a spiritual battle of strength over failure, of living faith over doubt, and a testament to one man’s love for Me. If your daddy succeeds, there will be a great wave of love and kindness reverberating throughout the world. He will be a testament across the cosmos to the spiritual fortitude of mankind.”

Rachel asked, “But why couldn’t we stay and help?”

God smiled and told her, “You are helping.”

John tried to understand but had to ask, “Is that why we had to leave?”

God answered, “Yes.”

Edwin wanted to know, “Where will we go?”

God laughed and answered, “You’re here. Well, not here *here*, this is just a stopover but you’re here. Isn’t it nice?” God gestured around at the luxury, hoping for their approval. The kids murmur how nice it was but there was only one thing on the kids’ minds.

Rachel asked, “Will we ever see our parents again?”

God looked her straight in the eye and said, “Yes, in time.”

John smiled and made an observation about himself. He glanced out the window, took a deep breath, and confessed, “I feel really different.”

Edwin, feeling his first glimpse of bliss, smiled at John and offered, “John, I feel so much love, it’s sort of neat.”

God looked at each of them and etched these words in their hearts: “That’s because love never dies.”