

FIVE DAYS

A NOVEL

Matt Micros

For my parents.

Wishing they were still here
and looking forward to a reunion someday so I can ask
my mom why
she owned so many vacuums.

And for Katy.

Who unquestionably made my parents
more comfortable knowing they were leaving me in
good hands.

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Also by Matt Micros

~The Knights of Redemption~

~The Chameleon~

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FIVE DAYS

*“Is it a vision, or a waking dream? Fled is that music. Do I
wake? Or Sleep?”*

John Keats

This book is a work of fiction.
No part of the contents relate to any real person or
persons living or dead. No events depicted actually
happened or are implied to have happened.

I

~THE END OF THE BEGINNING~

The warmth and sun-drenched days of late summer, had been replaced by the cold, darkness of November, where the crisp chill served as a precursor to a winter that would long overstay its welcome once the holidays had past. Students that were eager to learn something new and different back in August had been replaced by unmotivated, and occasionally cruel creatures that were recognizable as human beings only by their DNA.

When the bell sounded signaling the end of another particularly draining day, it was difficult to determine who was happier—the students or the teachers. Mike Postman flipped the Algebra textbook he had been teaching from closed, waved as the students poured from the room, and sat at his desk for the obligatory twenty minutes mandated by the teachers' contract.

Mike looked like he was in his early 30's, but was actually nearly 40, with the sort of generic good looks that enabled him to pass as either the clean-cut boy next door, or a Hollywood character actor. He pulled into the driveway of his modest two-story cottage

across the street from one of the oldest beaches in Southwestern Connecticut. On this day, he didn't even go inside, but instead, immediately crossed to where the multi-million dollar homes stood. It wasn't much of a stretch to say that his home could have passed as a guesthouse for any one of them.

Walking on the path that ran along the Connecticut shoreline, Mike bit down his lower lip, the way he frequently did anytime he was thinking. Autumn always had a certain smell to it, he thought; even back when he was a kid. Not a strong one, mind you, but rather a soft, subtle smell, not unlike the gentle scent of a woman's perfume as she walked past. The interesting thing was that autumn smelled differently depending on where you were. In Florence, Italy, autumn was damp and musty, clinging to your senses like a memory you would never forget. In Chicago, autumn smelled like burning leaves. In New York City, it smelled like roasted chestnuts and Italian sausage. And in Woodmont - on - the - Sound, Connecticut, the smell of autumn was crisp and clean, like a freshly laundered shirt.

Gone were the rollerbladers and sunbathers of summer. Weather wise, this day was symbolic of his mood; colder than it looked, with clouds battling the blue sky for prominence. As a profession, teaching was simultaneously rewarding and frustrating. On more than one occasion, he had thought about trying something different, but he didn't know what else he was suited to do. Besides, the highs of teaching were generally higher than anything else he could imagine doing. There was nothing quite like seeing the smile of a struggling teenager after you had managed to give

them some measure of hope. And yet, for every time he felt as though he was making a difference, something would happen as if to not so gently remind him that just maybe he was wrong about that.

He heard the faint shout of a little boy as he came around the bend. Barely audible at first, he was so entrenched in thought, he didn't even notice it at first. But it grew louder with each successive shout, as a boy of about ten approached him frantically.

“Mister! Mister! My friend just fell in off the pier and he can't swim! I'm not good enough to pull him out! Please help!”

Mike didn't hesitate, throwing his jacket onto the ground and kicking off his shoes as he ran to the end of the pier and dove in headfirst. It was abundantly clear that he wasn't a strong swimmer himself, but after a few awkward strokes, he managed to reach the boy.

Holding him around his neck with his right hand gripping the boy's shirt collar, he dragged him along, struggling to keep himself above water in the process. With the other boy lying prone on the pier with an outstretched arm, Mike swung around and tried throwing the boy toward the arm. Once he saw that the boy's friend had grabbed him and helped lift him onto the pier, Mike relaxed, and then suddenly, and yet almost peacefully, plunged beneath the surface of the water. For the briefest of moments, he felt himself taking in water--through his nose, mouth, and ears. His eyes were burning from the salt water. His lungs felt as though they were about to explode. And then he felt *nothing* at all.

When he came to, he found himself lying amongst a bevy of soft, white, puffy, cumulus clouds. He staggered to his feet just in time to see a tram, not unlike one you might find at Disney World, approaching in the far off distance. It seemed to make up several miles in a few moments, before it eased to a stop directly in front of him.

“Let’s go, Mike. Get on,” the driver said impatiently.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“You’ll know when you get there,” was the response.

How did he know him? Where was he? And why was he the youngest one on board by at least 25 years?

The tram tunneled through the clouds, emerging at the front gate of what appeared to be Caesar’s Palace. Not the one from ancient Rome, but rather the one that had been modeled after it on the Las Vegas strip.

“This is your stop,” the driver said, matter-of-factly, a nod of his head indicating he was supposed to get off.

When no one else moved toward the exit, Mike realized the man was talking to him, and he stepped off the tram.

“How did I end up in Vegas?” he asked no one in particular.

The response came from a voice behind him.

“You didn’t,” the voice said.

It was a deep, James Earl Jones-like voice.

“I didn’t?”

“No. But we had to do something. We were getting too many complaints that our accommodations weren’t as nice as those down below. His home looks like Graceland.”

The man was African-American, wearing a white, flowing gown that was a cross between a priest’s robe and a Roman toga.

“Elvis lives downstairs?” Mike asked in a perpetual state of disbelief and confusion.

“Of course not,” the man laughed. “Elvis is a music teacher in Wisconsin.”

Mike nodded as if this somehow made sense. “Then who’s down below?” he asked.

“Beelzebub. Satan. You probably know him more readily as the devil.”

“So if he’s downstairs, then that must mean I’m in—” The man nodded. “Gabriel—at your service.”

“How did I end up here, Gabriel?”

“You died saving that little boy’s life. Or should I say—you *let* yourself die.”

“I don’t really recall that much about it,” Mike responded, “And I don’t mean that in a Bill Clintonesque sort of way.”

“Your memory will come back a little at a time as you need it,” Gabriel assured him.

Mike glanced around him and nodded at an elderly couple that walked past. They didn’t even acknowledge him.

“If this is heaven, Gabriel, how come no one’s very friendly?”

“Oh, they’re not going to be friendly to you, Mike.”

“Why not?” he asked, offended.

Gabriel stopped walking—took on a more serious tone now. “Because you took your own life, while most of these people has theirs taken away from them.”

He decided not to waste too much time thinking about it. He simply had too many questions that needed to be answered.

“Then why am I here, if I’m such a bad guy?”

“Did I say you were a bad guy?”

“You implied as much.”

“Don’t read too much into things,” Gabriel answered, his tone much more cordial once again.

“And you’re here because you’re visiting.”

“I’m visiting?”

Mike didn’t much care for the sound of that.

“Is this some sort of a tryout?” he followed up with.

Mike had always hated tryouts. It didn’t matter whether it was an athletic team, the school play, or a job interview. He wanted to be wanted. He didn’t want to have to convince someone he was good enough.

“Of course not.”

“So after I visit, then what?”

“Then you go back.”

“Then I go back,” Mike repeated.

“Do you always repeat everything people say to you?” Gabriel asked.

“Only when I think they’re full of—“

He stopped himself just short of finishing his sentence. He thought better of it, considering his surroundings, and also how tenuous his tenure there appeared to be.

“So I get to go back where?” he continued.

“To where you came from. To any year you like actually. You’ve been given a great gift, Mike. You’ve been given the opportunity to go back and relive any five days from your life of your own choosing.”

“And why exactly do I get to do that?”

“Have you ever wished you had the chance to do something over? To go back knowing then what you know now?”

“Of course. Doesn’t everyone?”

“Well, you have the opportunity to do that.”

“Does everyone get to go back?”

“Not everyone,” Gabriel answered cryptically.

“Then why me?”

“It will all be explained to you in time. But we really need to get going.”

With that, Gabriel smiled a knowing smile and held the casino door open for him to enter. Mike bit down on his lower lip as they walked past the cavalcade of high-end shops just inside the entrance, while the distant chiming of slot machines and occasional screams of joy echoed down the corridor.

“So, Gabriel,” Mike said with a wink, “do they have any ten dollar craps tables at this time of day?”

“We don’t use money to gamble up here.”

“Then what do you use? Cars? Clothes? Women?” He winked again, and made a clicking sound with his tongue.

“People gamble for the thrill of beating the system,” he answered simply.

“Don’t you think it would add an additional thrill if a cool grand was riding on one toss of the dice?”

“It wouldn’t matter. People have no use for money here. Everything is already provided for them. Food, clothing, shelter, entertainment, transportation...”

“Sounds like a communist block nation. Well, if they don’t need money, what would be the incentive to work?”

“Most people don’t. Most people have worked their entire lives and are glad not to have to any longer.”

“But then how does anything get done?”

He rethought his question as soon as the words left his mouth. After all, it was heaven.

“Some people choose to work anyway.”

“Why would anyone *choose* to work?” Mike asked. It was a concept he had a difficult time wrapping his arms around. Most days, he had come home so exhausted both mentally and physically, that he wasn’t sure he would be able to do it again 12 hours later. Of course he always had, but if anyone had given him a choice, he would have gladly chosen to follow the Mets around the country instead.

“You yourself once said that if you won the lottery, you would still work, only without having to worry about money, you’d take a job where you really felt as though you could make a difference.”

“How do you know I said that?” Mike asked. It was true. He had said it. But he was trying to impress a girl at the time and thought it sounded better than drinking beer, following the Mets and playing Xbox.

“I know everything there is to know about you, Mike. Except for one thing.”

“And what’s that?”

“All in good time, my friend,” Gabriel said as they continued down the narrowing corridor.

II

~THE RECOVERY ROOM~

“You know, I think you’re right. I’d prefer not to work after all,” Mike said.

“And why’s that?” Gabriel asked, curious now.

“Well, I don’t think you’d have the kind of job I’d want up here. Besides, being a pro basketball player would lose some of its’ luster if I had to take an 85 year old to the hole.”

“I could see how it might.”

In just a few dozen steps, they had managed to make the chiming from the casino a distant memory. They continued down a hallway with dozens of closed doors. There were no numbers, no names, on any of them.

“The only other job I’d consider is working with kids. Not as a teacher, but like a counselor or something. But I haven’t seen any kids up here.”

“Kids are in a different place.”

“A better place?”

“A different place.”

“Do they get to go back?”

“Some of them.”

“You’re kind of evasive in your answers, Gabriel.”

Gabriel smiled as he held open a door at the very end of the corridor. “As are you.”

The room was tastefully decorated in burgundies and tans, with cherry oak trim, oriental rugs, and seven leather home theatre seats that faced a wall covered by velvet curtains that ran from ceiling to floor.

“Is this like a screening room or something?” Mike asked. “The angels get together here for movie night?”

“It’s a recovery room actually.”

“Recovery from what?”

“From yourself.”

Mike was getting a bit irritated. “Look, if this is about why I killed myself, I already told you I don’t know why I did it. Everything’s a blur.”

“That’s what this room is for. To help you recover your memory.” Gabriel continued speaking in a calm, almost measured tone. He was handling Mike, but at least Mike knew it. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“You got any Corona?”

“I was thinking more along the lines of orange juice.”

“No, thanks,” Mike answered before he noticed Gabriel pouring what appeared to be the tallest, freshest, coolest glass of orange juice he had ever seen. “On second thought...”

Gabriel had held it out for him before he had even changed his mind.

“This isn’t some sort of truth serum is it?”

“No, it’s just orange juice,” Gabriel laughed.

“Will it still give me the runs? It always used to give me the runs on earth.”

“I don’t think you’ll have to worry about that. He motioned toward one of the chairs. Have a seat.”

The lights dimmed and the curtains opened, revealing a wall size window that looked down into a church. It was a funeral. Mike’s funeral. Every seat in every pew was filled the way it was anytime someone died young and unexpectedly. His parents, sister and brother-in-law were in the front. They didn’t have any tears left to cry, and looked like they hadn’t slept in days. What appeared to be hundreds of his current and former students were in varying degrees of disarray, although from his vantage point, it was difficult to make out who was who.

He had always wondered what it would be like to attend his own funeral. To see who came. To see how people reacted. To see what they really thought of him. He supposed everyone had those same thoughts, but he was actually getting to do it. It wasn’t at all what he expected. It was as if they were watching the service from the balcony. Mike stood and walked closer to the window, close enough to

touch it, scanning the scene below without so much as a word.

Gabriel handed him a remote control. “Go ahead. Zoom in. It operates just like a camera.”

Mike pointed it at the wall and zoomed in and down on the service.

“Per the family’s request, we have a number of people who have stories to share about Mike. Some funny. Some sad. All should help paint the portrait of who he was and what he stood for. We hope that you will listen and enjoy a glimpse into his life,” the priest said as a man made his way to the podium.

The man was in his late-forties, handsome, athletic, composed. Mike didn’t recognize him at first, but as he zoomed in closer and mentally shaved away the man’s mustache and colored his greying hair, he saw his childhood friend. As the man began to speak, Mike felt his legs go weak and fell backwards into the chair.

* * *

“Mike Postman was my neighbor growing up. I was his sister’s age—five years older than him, but he and I quickly became the best of friends out of our love of sports. As the “unofficial leader” on a street full of kids, I was the one who organized the games of football, basketball, soccer, baseball and softball.

Mike was about eight or nine when he first started playing with us, and back then, we used to make sure he was always on the winning team. Someone would fumble the ball on purpose, or slip when they went to tackle him, but he caught on quickly, and he soon demanded that everyone play it straight. Mike was an unusual nine-year old. He never cried when he lost. He never whined that the teams were unfair. And he never complained when someone tackled him hard.

I like to think that in many ways, Mike became a better athlete when he was older in large part to playing with us as a kid. If no one else was around, Mike and I played individual sports like home run derby and golf. If I only had a dime for every window we broke back then, I would be a rich man today. When the weather was bad and we couldn't play outside, Mike and I played Sports Illustrated's baseball and football board games. I was an Orioles' fan. He liked the Mets. We must have replayed the '69 World Series a hundred times, and as in real life, the Amazins must have won 90 of them. We were both Cowboys fans during a time when it was good to be a Cowboys fan. Roger Staubach. Drew Pearson. Ed "Too Tall" Jones. Thomas "Hollywood" Henderson. Two close losses to the Steelers in the Super Bowl, and finally—victory over the Denver Broncos. I was in college at that point. And although we had lost touch by then, Mike was the person I thought of when the final whistle blew.

As the years passed, we kept up with each other through our mothers. It seemed as though we were living parallel lives. He went to college in the Midwest days after I moved back to Connecticut. I moved to Florida two weeks after he left Florida for Los Angeles. Every few years, we would catch up during the holidays at a party or on the phone, and it seemed as though we had seen each other only the day before. I had always considered him to be the little brother I had always wanted but didn't have. But I always wondered how he had viewed me. It would be 25 years before I would find out.

About five years ago, I received a manila envelope in the mail from my mother one morning. Inside was a chapter from a book Mike had written simply entitled, "David". The last paragraph will stay with me forever.

David taught me how to play every sport I've ever played. Football. Basketball. Baseball. Even sports he wasn't even as familiar with like soccer. He taught me poise and composure by giving me confidence. He's the reason I teach today. I remember hearing his parents and my parents talk about how David was never motivated to do his schoolwork. To me, he was already a teacher without even knowing it. He shaped my personality. The one who taught me patience in dealing with little kids. He was a dreamer they said. My parents said I was just like him. It was the greatest compliment they could give me. For to me, David was a hero, and it is because of him that I will always think that the world looks like a much nicer place when viewed through the eyes of a nine year old.

To this day, that chapter remains simply, the greatest honor I have ever received."

The man stepped away from the podium to make way for a beautiful woman. Tall and thin, with shortish, straight brown hair and crystal clear, sparkling blue eyes, Mike recognized Jordan Roberts immediately.

"I first met Mike when I was in sixth grade," she began. "He was the lone freshman on the Varsity soccer team that my older brother was the Captain of. Mike was so shy and little back then, it was hard to imagine that just three years later, he would replace my brother as the big-shot, Senior Captain. I had entered high school at that point, and although he and I had barely spoken in three years, Mike had this way of making you feel as though you were among his closest friends after a few short moments. He did it partly by making you

laugh at his outrageous comments. Sometimes he did it by telling you something personal about his life that made you feel special. But usually he did it by taking the time to listen to things no one cared to listen to.

I had a lot of problems my freshman year. My older brother was off at college, and my father was battling what is now known as “clinical depression.” Back then, they didn’t have the drugs available to treat it that they do now, so my father found himself in and out of the hospital on more than one occasion. He was finally released for good, or so we hoped, a few days before Christmas of that year. But what looked to be a happy occasion, turned tragic when my mother and I walked into our living room one night and found my father had shot himself to death.

I didn’t know how to react at the time. I only knew I didn’t want to be alone. So I went into school the very next morning. Most people hadn’t heard about it yet, and the ones that did were walking on eggshells around me. But not Mike. When he arrived that day, he walked up behind me, and threw his shoulder into my back, and sent my books flying across the floor. I remember hearing a collective gasp from everyone else, wondering what my reaction would be. As I turned to face him he said, “What? You got a problem? Cause I’ll knock you out if you do.”

I laughed, and everyone breathed a sigh of relief. He clearly didn’t know I remember thinking to myself. “My father killed himself last night,” I said to him at last.

“I know. I’m so sorry, Jord,” he said as he helped me pick up my books and walked me down the hall.

Some people go their whole lives without ever knowing what to say in a crisis. Mike, however, was one of those people who was able to say or do the perfect thing by blending humor with

sincerity.

Until I heard what happened to him the other day, I hadn't seen or spoken to him in more than twenty years, but I thought about him from time to time. And every now and then when I was having a bad day, I found myself wishing he was around to make me laugh.

* * *

Another female approached. By the smiles and nods that were exchanged, it appeared that the two women knew each other. Blaire Kaanen could have been the head of the PTA or the director of an art museum; maybe both.

* * *

"I transferred into Mike's high school my junior year, not knowing a soul before I got there. As is usually the case, none of the girls were very nice to me at first, and although most of the guys were, I didn't take that as much of a compliment since they would have flocked to any new girl just because they were new. So I pretty much kept to myself for the first month or so, until the lunch tables changed and I ended up at Mike's table.

The lunch system was set so that every teacher was assigned a rotating table of nine students. In addition, there were two student-only tables that were run by the student government. Mike was in charge of one of those tables. I had heard of him prior to that—which is to say I knew he was a good athlete, and a good student—but I had never actually met him until the day I was assigned to his table.

"Who's this little tramp?" were the first words he ever spoke to me.

I felt my jaw hit the floor from shock.

For Mike, that was the same as saying hello.

“Say outrageous things all the time, and people assume you’re joking, even when you’re not. It helps you get away with things,” he would later explain.

And so it went. He would see me in the hall, punch me in the arm a few times, and call me a “whorebag” or a “slut” or something of that nature. I loved the fact that Mike was the only person who could make me laugh even when I was having the worst possible day.

Our relationship must have seemed pretty confusing to an outsider, but we actually became close friends. In fact, there was a time where it looked like we might become more than that, but I was still involved in an extremely unhealthy relationship that I couldn’t break free from. Faced with a choice between someone completely right for me, and someone completely wrong, I naturally chose completely wrong.

“Typical female,” Mike said. “Always want what you can’t or shouldn’t have.”

He was right of course, but that was a lesson I wouldn’t learn until many years later when faced with a similar choice. This time I chose correctly--except my husband never calls me a “whorebag”, “slut”, or “little tramp”. At least not to my face anyway.”

Mike smiled as she spoke. Some people, no matter the time that has past or the distance between you, would always have a special place in your heart. An older man was next. Early 60’s, his once dark hair now white. His walk, at one time a pace with which everyone struggled to keep up with, had slowed to a comfortable stroll.

“Every coach, no matter the level or the sport, will try to convince you they don’t play favorites. But the truth of the matter is that their favorites are those players who show up on time, ready to work just as hard at practice as they would in a game. Players whose smart play and positive attitude make you feel like a good coach.

For me, Mike Postman was my favorite for all of those reasons and more. I was his Junior Varsity basketball coach his freshman year of high school. Mike had a terrific handle, and could breakdown just about any press. He wasn’t the greatest pure shooter I’d ever seen, but he had incredible balance and the ability to hit off balance shots in traffic when you needed them the most. What separated him from others like him, however, was his refusal to lose. He would do whatever it took to win; dive 20 feet across the floor for a loose ball, race back to break up a fast break, or mix it up inside for a key rebound even though he was barely 5’8. In fact, it was on one of those occasions that he caught an elbow, breaking his nose and giving him a slight concussion in the process. Somehow, he managed to convince me at halftime that he was ready to go back in. He ended up breaking two fingers on his shooting hand in the second half. But he never let on until after the game was over. Three days later, he was back playing with the Varsity team in the state tournament.

At the end of the season, the Varsity coach resigned and I was named the new head coach with the opportunity to coach Mike for three more years. But somewhere between March of his sophomore year and November of his junior year, there was a noticeable change in his attitude. The school had always had a policy enabling multi-sport athletes to take a week off between seasons that overlapped, but until his junior year, Mike had never before exercised that option. My initial reaction was that

he was just burned out from a tough soccer season, and the beginning pressure of searching for colleges. But once rumors began to circulate that he wasn't going to play at all, I went over to see him.

He explained that he was burnt out and didn't want to play. I kept thinking all the accolades he had received in soccer had made him less interested in basketball, but that once the regular season rolled around, his competitive juices would begin flowing and he would be back. I was wrong.

I think his plan all along was to come back out for his senior year when he and his friends would comprise most of the team. What he hadn't counted on was his parents informing him that unless he got his way back onto the team as a junior, there would be no senior year.

He called me at home one night with about three weeks left in the season. It must have taken an awful lot of pride swallowing for him to make the call. He explained that he made a mistake, and wanted to apologize to the team, but mostly to me. I told him he had it wrong and that it was the team he owed the apology to. I also told him it would be up to them whether or not we took him back.

It was a split vote. His friends on the team all wanted him back. The seniors didn't. I broke the tie in his favor. Seven weeks to the day he had quit, and after just one practice, he suited up for a game. I think Mike's plan was to pay his dues for the remainder of the season. Work hard in practice and sit quietly at the end of the bench during games. But I thought that would have been letting him off too easy. Four minutes into his first game back with the team, I sent him in. He had a look of panic on his face when I called his name. And you could have heard a pin drop in the crowd when I made him stand up. He wanted no part of going in over players that had

been there for the last two months. And that's exactly why I sent him in.

Some people criticized me for what they claimed was a win-at-all-costs attitude. But the plain and simple truth was that our basketball team that year wasn't very good with or without Mike on the floor. And sure, there are times when I look back and wonder if I did the right thing by playing him so soon. But then I think about how the two minutes Mike Postman spent at the scorer's table that night waiting to go in, might very well have been the loneliest two minutes of his life."

* * *

"Was he right?" Gabriel asked.

Mike nodded. "Coach was always right. I probably learned more about accountability in those two minutes than I did the rest of my years combined."

"Was he the reason you became a teacher?"

"Teaching wasn't really something I had planned on doing."

"You know what I find interesting? All that time you spent working with kids, and yet, you never had any of your own."

"You see, your boss made it so that you kind of need the cooperation of the opposite sex for that to happen."

"And how do you know it wouldn't have?"

"I don't know that I guess."

"Then why did you quit?"

"I didn't quit on anything," Mike said

defensively.

“What about the kids you worked with? You don’t think you quit on them?”

“If there’s one thing I learned while teaching, it’s that kids are resilient. You could be their best friend one day, and they’ll forget all about you the next. I don’t blame them for it, mind you. I’m sure I was the same way.”

“You don’t really believe that or you wouldn’t have walked away from your job at the talent agency in Los Angeles to teach and coach,” Gabriel said.

Mike absently rose to his feet and bit down on his lower lip again. “Don’t really know why I did that,” he began, before pausing to answer his own question. “Working at the agency was a real hoot and a half—for a while. But then I realized it wasn’t brain surgery. I mean, who gives a crap if some idiot movie star has a trailer to work out of that could fit most of Manhattan inside it? It was thrilling meeting famous people at first, but eventually I came to the realization that they were just as full of—crap—as anyone else.”

“And so you left to teach.”

“It’s a little more complicated than that. My dad got sick back east. I had a job lined up in New York City, but it fell through just before I was supposed to move. Teaching seemed to be the logical choice. I wasn’t qualified for much else. So, you see, it didn’t exactly fall out as nobly as it might have appeared.”

“You sell yourself short,” Gabriel answered.

“I am short,” Mike responded with a wink.

Gabriel was beginning to realize his job might just be considerably more difficult than he originally thought.

“How you ended up teaching is of little consequence,” Gabriel assured him. “What you did with it is what matters.”

“I’m afraid I didn’t do much.”

“You helped out a number of kids, whether it be in the classroom, on the athletic fields, or just by listening,” Gabriel said.

“It didn’t always feel like it,” Mike answered. “And I guess after a while it became a little overwhelming.”

Mike found Gabriel’s lack of response to be some sort of condemnation.

“What? You don’t agree?” he asked quickly.

“I didn’t say anything,” Gabriel responded.

“It’s what you didn’t say.”

“Listen, Mike. I’m not here to judge you. I’m simply trying to find out why you took your own life.”

“You know everything else about me. Why is it you don’t know why I did what I did?”

“Because the greatest gift mankind was given was free will. Freedom to choose as you please. And although I was well aware of the consequences that might follow a particular choice you made, I had no way of knowing why you made that choice. You’re the only one who knows that.”

“And if it’s not a good enough reason, I don’t get

to go back, is that it?"

"You get to go back regardless," Gabriel answered. "You get to go back because you saved that little boy's life, and the fact that you took your own in the process, certainly doesn't erase that fact."

Mike turned away again. "Would you believe me if I told you I don't know why I did it? Every day, people wonder what it would be like to throw themselves in front of a bus. Or to drive off a cliff. And for no other reason than to wonder what it would be like. What would happen? Would you survive? What would you find on the other side? You cannot tell me I'm the only person to ever have those thoughts."

"Certainly not," Gabriel said, "But most people have the sense not to act on them."

"I've got a question for you. Every day, innocent people die for no apparent reason. Children. Heroes. Wonderful people who would have contributed so much to society. Why?" Mike demanded.

"You're referring to Kylie?"

"Her and others like her."

"You really liked her, didn't you?"

"You're not answering my question," Mike pressed.

"It's not as simple as all that."

"And why isn't it?" Mike asked as he turned back towards him. "When you take someone's life, it certainly doesn't seem as though they have much choice in the matter. How is that free will?"

“They put themselves in those situations with the choices they made,” Gabriel said. “Kylie and her brother drove off a slippery road in the middle of the night.”

“Ok. Well, how is that some people who eat right and live right get Cancer, while others smoke like a chimney and live to be 100?”

“Everyone’s body makeup is different. Why can some people run faster than others? A catastrophic choice for one person might not affect another at all.”

It was a lot to take in and Mike was exhausted. “I don’t know what to tell you,” he said at last, “maybe I thought my life had reached its pinnacle. That it was never going to get any better. It wasn’t a bad life. It was just—just.....ordinary.