

ALL  
OR  
NOTHING

*by*

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ANTE  
MORTEM

## Chapter 1

*Pinetree, Colorado — Friday, August 12, 1994*

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

The clock stood at twenty minutes past nine as Matthew Chambers walked into his law office on the outskirts of Pinetree on the last morning of his life. Kathleen looked up from the copy machine where she was holding a mug from which drifted the odor of fresh coffee. Next to her, on a small wooden table, stood a yogurt from which a teaspoon protruded.

She smiled at him. Not for the first time, Matthew briefly wished that he was twenty four instead of forty four.

“Morning, Matthew.”

“Morning, Kathleen. The first appointment is Jeremy Walters, at nine thirty, about a codicil, isn’t it?”

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

“Ah, yes,” Matthew nodded. “That should take until noon, I expect.”

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

He grinned mischievously. “So that’s my day. And what about you? Anything special?”

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Kathleen returned her employer's grin. She was lucky, and she knew it. She lived in a beautiful town, worked for an undemanding man who paid a very fair salary, and had a boyfriend who thought the world of her. Life could be a lot worse.

"Not really. I thought I might do a bit of typing, you know, just for form's sake; answer the phone, things like that, for which my expensive education trained me."

"Sounds fine to me. Let me know if it gets too much for you."

Matthew disappeared into his office, closing the door so that he could prepare himself for the arrival of Mr. Walters. As expected, Kathleen, for all the persiflage a remarkably efficient secretary-cum-receptionist, had placed Mr. Walters' file on his desk ready for perusal. His "In" basket contained the files that he would need later in the day.

He draped his jacket over the rear of his chair, loosened his tie, and opened the file labeled *Mr. Jeremy Walters*.

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Matthew Chambers returned to his office from Bolton and Smith as the clock in the reception area moved past four o'clock. As he walked in, Kathleen was seated at her desk, taking a telephone call.

He waited until the call was completed.

She said, "That was Mrs. Healy, calling to ask if you'd be willing to endorse her husband for mayor again this time around, and reminding you about supper this evening. I told her you were out and you'd get back to her when you were available."

A momentary frown creased Matthew's face.

"OK, I'll deal with it, thanks." His face cleared. "Now, Kathleen. It's past four o'clock on a beautiful summer day. What's more, it's a Friday. And to clinch the matter, your boyfriend will be in town within a couple of hours. Why don't you take the rest of the afternoon off? Just switch on the answering machine and get out of here. I have to be at the Healys' early and I need to go home first and get changed, so I'll be leaving in a couple of minutes myself. Have a nice weekend, and I'll see you nicely rested on Monday morning."

Kathleen scrutinized her boss. Presumably his comment about being "nicely rested" was a joke? But his face was a mask, so instead of laughing she threw him a muted smile and began to tidy her papers.

Matthew strode into his office and glanced around to check that there was nothing he had forgotten that needed his attention before the weekend. A minute later, the two of them left the building together.

Matthew drove his Cherokee back to his mountain hideaway with the window down, letting the breeze caress the side of his face. Already the sun was beginning to fall towards the mountains; in another hour parts of the town would be thrust into early-evening shadow.

He turned off the road and changed down for the climb up the long dirt driveway to his home.

Almost immediately, the openness of the valley was replaced by the packed boskage of the pine-studded slopes. Driving now in shadow, he was chilled by the sudden coolness, and shivered. He closed the window. Ninety seconds later, he pulled to a halt inside his garage. He discovered that he was whistling.

He showered, changed and recovered a bottle of wine from the refrigerator where it had lain for the past two days. As he had done several times earlier in the day, he exercised his right arm to make sure that there was still no pain from the shoulder where he had injured it playing racquetball on Wednesday. There was a slight twinge, but nothing serious; the anti-inflammatories Dr. Taylor had given him were doing their job.

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

Matthew drove unhurriedly through Pinetree. Halfway through town, a quarter of a mile beyond his office, the sun ducked behind a mountain. Even in August, evening came early in Pinetree.

He arrived at the Healys' front door with a smile on his face and the bottle in his hand at five minutes to five.

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

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“Good evening, Matthew. Glad you could make it.”

She looked into his eyes a moment longer than was strictly necessary, and Matthew struggled to keep anything from showing in his face, fully aware that her husband was watching.

Lucinda stepped backwards, and Matthew took the opportunity to interpose the bottle between them.

“It’s been in the refrigerator all day. It should be just about right after the drive over.”

Lucinda took both the hint and the bottle, and turned toward the kitchen. Matthew stepped into the house and was greeted by Lucinda’s husband.

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

Despite his appearance, Bill Healy possessed a forceful personality that had served him well in local politics, culminating in his election as mayor of Pinetree four years ago. His reelection as council member and mayor this coming November was a foregone conclusion. Even Matthew intended to vote for him, although for reasons that had nothing to do with politics in the usual sense of the word.

Healy greeted him. “Come in, Matthew. I’m sorry we have to eat at such an ungodly hour, but Lucinda insisted that it had been much too long since we had you over and, as you know, she’s going back east to visit her parents tomorrow. What with that and my work on the council and for Rotary, this was the only time we could fit you in.”

“That’s all right, don’t apologize. I’m always happy to sample Lucinda’s cooking. Makes a change from the usual bachelor fare.”

“Well, I just hope you don’t mind the early hour. The council meets at seven thirty and I have to leave by seven, you see.”

“It’s all right. Really. Don’t worry about it.”

“Well let me get you a drink, then. What’ll it be? The usual? Vodka and orange for the first one and plain o.j. after that?”

“Yes, thank you. That would be fine.”

They headed for the kitchen. Matthew hung back dutifully at the kitchen doorway, hesitating to enter Lucinda’s domain. He watched while her husband extracted a nearly empty pitcher of juice from the refrigerator and poured the juice into a glass. Lucinda was putting the finishing touches to the salad.

She said, "You two go sit at the table, and we'll be ready to start in a few minutes. Oh, Bill, give me the pitcher; I'll make up some more juice for Matthew."

"What's for dessert?" Matthew asked.

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

"Fine, but I'll have to be excused for a couple of minutes."

"Be our guest." Bill Healy added ice and vodka to Matthew's drink and handed it to his guest.

Matthew walked to the dining table, put his drink down, and extracted a small device from his pocket. Placing it against his index finger, there was an audible click and he withdrew the device to reveal a maroon drop on the end of his finger. He took a small strip from his pocket and used it to sop up the blood.

Slowly, he returned to the kitchen, glancing every few seconds at his watch. He opened the faucet and thrust the strip into the stream of water. Without thought, he went through the thrice-daily motions, shaking the excess water from the strip, then drying it thoroughly on a towel. Walking back to the dining room, he withdrew a small machine from his pocket and inserted the strip. Within seconds, the liquid crystal display showed *100*.

Bill Healy crossed the room and stood at his shoulder, a half-empty glass in his hand. He looked enquiringly at his guest.

"Everything all right?"

"Fine. If you'll excuse me, I'll give myself a fix."

It was an old, tired joke, but it never ceased to amuse Healy. As always, he grinned with apparently genuine delight as Matthew went outside to his car. Matthew returned with his kit and locked himself in the guest bathroom.

He took the opportunity to urinate. He washed his hands; then, seating himself on the toilet, he opened his kit.

Extracting two small bottles, he rolled them in turn between his hands to mix the contents thoroughly. Taking an alcohol-soaked paper towelette, he cleaned the tops of both bottles then tossed the paper into the trash can. He removed a syringe from his bag, then stopped for a moment to consider the ramifications of the forthcoming pavlova.

He rarely varied his dosage, but the high sugar content of tonight's dessert convinced him that this evening it was a reasonable precaution,

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especially since he planned to drink two glasses of orange juice. Holding the syringe up to the light, he withdrew the plunger until it sat against the fiducial mark that signified 33 units — one unit more than his usual dose. He picked up one of the bottles. As always (his doctor twenty four years ago had stressed that he should always do things in the same order), the bottle of slower-acting NPH insulin came first.

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

He looked down at his left leg, and searched for the last needle mark. There it was: a minute, red dot high on his thigh. He brought the needle so that its point rested against the skin about an inch farther down the leg. As always, he found himself — to his secret annoyance — holding his breath in readiness for the prick. Ow! Even after nearly a quarter of a century, it was still unpleasant. After all this time, he doubted that his reaction to the needle would ever change.

He injected the life-sustaining mixture.

The job done, he matter-of-factly withdrew the needle and threw the syringe in the trash can. The other materials he gathered together and replaced in his kit. Hitching his trousers, he flushed the toilet, washed his hands again, then unlocked the door and returned to what he always thought of as the land of the living, his ritual service to his chemical god complete.

The table in the dining room was set for the meal. He sat at his usual chair and looked out the mullioned window to the panoramic view of the slopes a mile away. He could just make out the ski lifts against the sunlit green of the forest background. One lift was operating, gondolas moving slowly up and down the mountainside, providing access to the restaurant at the top of the mountain.

He sipped his drink appreciatively.

“How’s business?” asked Bill Healy as he seated himself, wresting Matthew’s attention from the window.

They chatted politely about business and the weather until Lucinda joined them, carrying a wooden salad bowl filled with a colorful mixture



of vegetables. She went back to the kitchen and returned a moment later with the bottle of wine.

Bill opened it and poured for himself and his wife. Matthew had already consumed the one alcoholic drink he allowed himself of an evening.

The meal began.

Lucinda was, as always, the perfect hostess; it was obvious to Matthew that she had expended her usual effort on the meal, and he relished it to the full. Even Bill seemed to be on good form, despite his occasional nervous glances at the clock on the wall. They talked easily — of Rotary, of business, of the glorious weather, of when the first snow might fall, of the prospects for the coming ski season — until the main course was concluded. Then they carried the dishes to the kitchen, where Matthew refilled his glass from the newly replenished pitcher of juice. The men returned to the dining room while Lucinda remained in the kitchen, attending to the pavlova.

For some minutes, Matthew had been fighting a sudden tiredness. He was finding it more and more difficult to concentrate on Healy's conversation. At first he had ascribed this simply to the entirely plausible possibility that Bill was being even more of a bore than usual. But now he was beginning to wonder if something was seriously wrong. He stood by his chair, holding it for support, hoping that the fatigue would pass.

Suddenly, he felt himself unequal to the battle. No longer able to keep his eyes open, he toppled gracelessly to the floor.

He woke as a sharp pain struck his face. He raised an arm to protect himself, but was too slow to ward off a second blow from Healy.

Matthew tried to remember how he had arrived in such a ridiculous position, slumped on the floor against his chair. His mind was foggy, and he could remember nothing after the sudden fatigue had overcome him.

"Are you all right? You took a fall there. You don't look very well."

It took Matthew a moment to realize that Bill was speaking to him.

"Unh... I guess I'm OK."

His voice sounded distant and disembodied. Bill helped him to his feet. He felt his strength returning. His head was sore just behind the hairline: he must have banged it against the table as he fell. He rubbed the soreness, feeling confused.

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

Matthew nodded. Sitting on his chair, he rubbed his face, trying to clear the fog from his head.

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

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

Matthew shook his head. The room span but then steadied itself.

“No. It’s OK. I’ll be fine. Maybe I’ve been working too hard. I think I’ll just rest here for a few minutes and then go home and spend a quiet evening reading.”

Healy laughed, too loudly.

“I wish I could spend a quiet evening reading, but duty calls. I’ll have to be leaving shortly. Are you sure there’s nothing we can do?”

“No, I’ll be fine. Honest.”

He caught sight of Lucinda, hovering nearby. He remembered the pavlova.

“What I need is a good dose of that dessert of yours, and then I’m sure I’ll feel much better.”

He smiled at her, trying to make light of the situation. She returned his smile, but the smile did little to mask the worry in her eyes.

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

Matthew looked at Lucinda.

“That was stupid of me. I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me. But I really do think that I’d better go home and take it easy for the rest of the evening. You probably need to finish your packing, anyway.”

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

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

Matthew got to his feet, using the back of the chair to hold himself steady. He was trembling. The idea of an evening relaxing at home was becoming more appealing by the minute.

"Say goodnight to Bill for me, won't you? Tell him he has my vote."

"I will. But you will take good care of yourself, won't you?"

"Of course. And thanks for the meal. It was great, as always."

"You're welcome. Any time."

She hugged him gently and gave him a peck of a kiss; then she escorted him to the front door.

"See you in a little over a week, Matthew. And I will call when I arrive."

"I'll talk to you then. Have a safe trip."

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

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

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

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

He stood up... and nearly fell over. He was light-headed, and he realized that his hands were trembling. For the first time, he began to feel truly worried. Maybe there was something seriously wrong after all. He should take something to help him sleep and then go back to bed. But there was one thing he had to do first. He made his way slowly out of the bedroom and into the living room.

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Unsteadily, he crossed the room to where a chess set, a game in progress, stood on a coffee table. He needed to check his next move. He was due to call Henry Clarence before ten to give him the move. Normally he would wait until closer to the deadline, but tonight he would call in his move early. He looked at the board, trying to concentrate. Yes, rook to queen's knight four looked just fine. He had Henry Clarence on the run.

The board swam before his eyes.

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

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

He thrust his hand into his pocket for his roll of glucose candy, kept always within reach for just such an emergency.

He felt around in his pocket frantically. There were his keys, and a handkerchief. But *where was the candy?* Relief poured over him as his hand closed on a cylinder. But then he realized that these were not his candies, they were the anti-inflammatory capsules prescribed by his doctor for his racquetball injury. Irrelevantly, he realized that he had forgotten to take one with supper.

In desperation, he felt in his other pocket, but he already knew that there was something seriously amiss. The candies were always, *always* in his right-hand pocket. His left hand dived into a pocket to find nothing but a clean handkerchief. He began to move towards the kitchen. He had to get sugar inside him, *now*. He wanted desperately to vomit. Dark spots expanded and filled his vision. He stopped and closed his eyes to concentrate on the task of keeping his food down.

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For about five seconds he stood there, shaking. Then his legs could support him no more.

They buckled, and he collapsed to the floor.