

Chapter 45

The Next Morning

After he heard Dr. Macaca's office door close, Michael eased open the door to the office he was hiding in and stepped out. He took a quick glance through the window in Dr. Macaca's office door and saw Ophelia giving Dr. Macaca her undivided attention. He quickly but quietly rushed toward the triage area and then out of the hospital. He reached his car, got in, sat down, and placed his forehead on the steering wheel. He felt tears starting to burn in his eyes as he blamed himself for Amanda having been injured in the accident. He believed that, if he had stayed another five minutes, Amanda would have gone home with him and she wouldn't have been involved in the accident since the two of them would have left about two minutes sooner than she had left. Finally, he did something he hadn't done in over 20,000 years. He prayed.

"Dear God," he began, "It's been a long time since I sent a prayer up to you. I know that you know why but I am sorry that I haven't. Like most people, I only pray when something goes wrong in my life and I want you to intervene on my behalf. The last time I prayed was when I was diagnosed with the HEV and you reminded me of Dr. Broadhurst's experimentation with stasis. Because of that, I'm still alive 20,000 years later. This time is no different.

"When I was awakened, I met Drs. Leo and Tigresa Panthera who, after thinking about the fact that I have no living family, decided to adopt me. They hired a tutor to teach me how much life had changed over the last 20 millennia. Four months later, I obtained a job at SoGa Industries as the manager of the CIT Department. As a result of this, I met Amanda Fuchs. As you know, at first, I wouldn't allow myself to feel more than friendship for her. But, as I spent more and more time with her, I felt my emotions for her grow stronger and stronger until I realized that I loved her. I don't know if you approve of my relationship with her but, it doesn't change how I feel. Finally, even though it was a joke at first, I decided that I wanted her to be my wife.

"Earlier tonight, I took Amanda to a party to celebrate the engagement of someone she barely knew. After enjoying the dinner, I convinced her to join me on the dance floor and we were enjoying each other's company as we always do when we're together. Then, the person who was celebrating his engagement asked to dance with her. While it made me nervous, I agreed if she was willing. After walking back to my seat, I started thinking and it occurred to me that it was strange that this man who was announcing his engagement would ask if he could dance with another man's date, a near complete stranger. As I contemplated this situation, it struck me as to who it was he was engaged to marry. I was hurt and felt betrayed by Amanda. Instead of sitting when I reached my seat, I continued out of the door and left. As I walked to my seat, I happened to glance over to Amanda's parents and saw her mother smirking at me like she knew what was happening even before Amanda did. Oh, how I wish I had stayed. Because of the fact that I left, Amanda was in an automobile that was struck by a vehicle traveling at a high rate of speed and driven by someone who was under the influence of alcohol.

"A short while after arriving home, I received a telephone call and was asked to go to the hospital. When I arrived, I was informed that the woman I love was in a very bad way with numerous broken bones, a punctured lung, perforated diaphragm, and a lacerated liver. Dear God, please don't let her die. I couldn't bear the thought of living if she was no longer alive. If someone must die, please let it be me. After all, I've lived over 250 times longer than the average human lives. All I ask is that

you allow me to live me long enough to see her healed, awake, and out of pain.

“Amen.”

After praying, Michael felt a weight lifted off his shoulders. He cranked his car and drove home. As he drove, he still felt the burning of tears in his eyes but, it was no longer because he feared losing Amanda to death. It was because he was berating himself because he believed he could have prevented her being injured in the accident had he stayed at the party and driven her home himself.

As Michael was sitting in his car asking his God to protect Amanda, her parents were sitting in Dr. Macaca's office. After telling them about Amanda's injuries and the life-saving surgery she was enduring at that moment, he asked them if they had any questions.

Ophelia asked, “Was anyone else injured in the accident?”

“Yes, ma'am. One person died at the scene.”

Ophelia smiled and asked, “A human?”

Having been informed about Ophelia's attitude toward Michael, Dr. Macaca said, “No. It was the driver of the automobile that struck the vehicle that your daughter was a passenger in. I'm saddened to say that that wolf's family won't get the chance to tell her good-bye.”

A look of disappointment crossed Ophelia's face before she asked, “Anyone else?”

“Yes. An Arctic fox, a Reginald Reynard, III, had superficial injuries, mostly cuts and a couple of abrasions and a wombat who was admitted with a large laceration along his right jaw and a concussion.”

“No one else?”

“No, ma'am.”

Ophelia growled quietly before turning to Jacob and saying, “Jacob, I want that human banned from visiting her. If you won't do it, I will!”

Before Jacob could respond, Dr. Macaca said, “Are you referring to Michael Thomson, Mrs. Fuchs?”

Turning angrily on Dr. Macaca, Ophelia said, “Do NOT use that name in my presence. I want him banned from seeing her if he finds out about this.”

“I'm sorry, Mrs. Fuchs, but, he already knows.”

“How did he find out!?”

“I told him.”

“You had no right to tell him anything about this.”

Remaining calm despite his growing anger, Dr. Macaca replied, “On the contrary, Mrs. Fuchs. Mr. Thomson has more right to know this than you do. The only reason you know about it is because he asked us to tell you.”

“WHAT!? I’m her mother, I have more right to know about her injuries than that, that, human does.”

“On the contrary, Mrs. Fuchs, Mr. Thomson is your daughter’s emergency contact not you. Therefore, he had a right to know any and everything about your daughter’s injuries and only the people he allows to know will be informed.”

“Why does he have a right and I don’t?”

“Because, according to a law that’s over 150 years old, anyone on another person’s Emergency Contact list has a right to know anything about that person’s medical condition in an emergency.”

“Why in the world would such a law be passed!?”

“That law was passed after a young person entered into a relationship with someone her parents disapproved of. When the young woman was hospitalized the parents, who were on the Emergency Contact list, prevented the young woman’s mate from learning anything about her condition. He asked and asked but, her parents wouldn’t tell him anything. Even after the young woman died, her parents wouldn’t tell him anything. He didn’t learn about her passing until she had been buried for 3 months and then he only learned because his mate’s brother defied his parents and told him. The woman’s mate sued the hospital because he was on her Emergency Contact list and he wasn’t informed about her condition. Congress heard about it and passed the Emergency Contact Guarantee Act which says that anyone on a person’s Emergency Contact list has a right to know anything about the person whose contact list they’re on. So, you can’t ban him from learning anything about your daughter.” He handed her a piece of paper and continued, “If you’ll note, he added you and your husband to the list of people authorized to receive any information about your daughter’s medical conditions. So, whether you like him or not, you should thank him for choosing to include you in need to know list.”

Ophelia’s growls became more audible as she turned to Jacob and said, quite sarcastically, “Did you hear that, Jacob? He was kind enough to include us in the need to know list.”

Jacob said, “Ophelia, hush.”

“I want him off of her Emergency Contact form.” Turning back to Dr. Macaca, she said, “Take him off of her Emergency Contact list. NOW!”

Ignoring her anger, Dr. Macaca said, “Mrs. Fuchs, I’m not allowed to do that. The only person who can do that is your daughter and she isn’t going to be in any condition to do that for several months, if not years.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s going to be in a coma for a long time. Even after her broken bones heal, her body is going to need to heal and, if she’s awake, her body will be moving too much for it to heal properly especially her lung, diaphragm, stomach, liver, and ribs.”

For the first time in many years, Ophelia openly showed concern. After a few seconds, she said, “Where is her fiancé, Reginald?”

“Mr. Reynard received medical attention for his injuries, as slight as they were, and, after learning the wombat was being hospitalized, he called a taxi cab and left.”

Under his breath, Jacob said, “And you want Amanda to marry someone who cares so little about her.”

Ophelia said, “I’m sorry, Jacob?”

“I said, ‘And you want Amanda to marry someone who cares so little about her’, Ophelia.”

Dr. Macaca said, “It’s going to be several hours before your daughter is out of surgery so, if you’d like, I’ll show you to the cafeteria and I’ll let you know when your daughter’s out of surgery.”

Jacob said, “Thank you, Doctor.”

Michael arrived home, went to his bedroom, and started getting ready for bed. Once again, he was joined by his two kittens who started play fighting all over the bed causing Michael to do something he hadn’t been able to do since earlier in the evening; he smiled. He watched them bound across the bed, tumble off the bed, climb back up, pounce on each other, and race off. Eventually, despite his heavy heart, he laughed out loud at them. After watching them play for several minutes, he could hold his eyes open no longer and he fell asleep while lying on top of the bed linens and with the kittens continuing to play.

A few hours later, Michael was awakened by the sound of his telephone ringing. Momentarily forgetting the previous night, he grabbed the receiver, put it to his ear, and said, “Good morning, Sweetheart.”

There was a short pause before Michael heard a familiar feminine voice say, “I like you, too, Michael but, I don’t think Leo would appreciate you calling me ‘Sweetheart’.” Then she laughed.

Embarrassed, Michael said, “I’m sorry, Dr. Tigresa. I thought it was Amanda calling me like she does every Saturday morning.” He paused for several seconds before continuing. “I had forgotten about last night.”

“You don’t think she stayed overnight, do you Michael?”

“No. I can guarantee she didn’t stay overnight.”

“How do you know?”

“Are you calling me to invite me over for brunch?”

Perplexed by his answer, Tigresa said, “Yes. What does . . .”

“I’ll tell you when I get there. I think this is something that I should tell all of you at the same time.”

Tigresa paused for a moment before saying, “All right, Michael. Brunch should be ready by the time you get here.”

“Thanks, Dr. Tigresa. I’ll be over in a few minutes. I need to feed my kittens and get dressed then, I’ll be on my way. Give me about 15 minutes.”

“Wait! Kittens?”

“Yes, I had been telling Amanda about my pet tiger and pet fox when I was growing up and how much I loved having and taking care of them. So, a couple of weeks ago, she demanded that she and I go and find me a couple of pets to take care of. We went to a nearby pet store and we found a solid black kitten and a solid white one. The next thing I knew we were walking out of the pet store with those two in boxes and bringing them to my apartment.”

“Aw. That’s sweet. Are they happy with you?”

“Yeah. Sometimes, they fight over who’s going to lay in my lap. It’s fun to watch them play, too.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re happy to have them. So, you’ll be here in about 15 minutes?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“All right. Breakfast should be ready by then. Oh, and Anne’s looking forward to you visiting.”

“Oh. Please tell me she isn’t mad at me for not visiting in so long.”

“She isn’t. However, she did beg me to invite you over for breakfast.”

“Figures. All right, I’ll see you shortly.”

Michael got out of bed and got dressed. He spent a couple of minutes playing with Me-you and Buddy. After playing with them, he went into his kitchen and prepared their breakfast. He also put out some fresh water before petting them and telling them he’d see them later. They followed him to the front door of his apartment and cried pitifully before he closed the door. He walked down the stairs and to his car. He cranked the car and headed toward the Panthera household.

At 0100, Jacob was sitting in the waiting room with Ophelia. He had his arm around her shoulders as she slept with her head on his shoulder. He looked down at her belly and saw that her pregnancy was starting to show. He reached down and gave her belly a light pat and soft rub as he smiled at the fact that, she had decided to get pregnant once again. He couldn't understand why she wanted to continue to get pregnant even though she could prevent it but, he did everything he could to make her happy and, if she wanted to continue having kits, he was going to agree to give her more kits. However, as with the other pregnancies after Amanda was born, Jacob was hoping that this one would mellow Ophelia enough to allow her to accept that Amanda could make her own decisions but, he was realist enough to know that it wasn't likely.

Finally, Ophelia opened her eyes and stretched. She looked at Jacob and asked, "How long was I asleep?"

After taking a quick look at a wall clock, he said, "About 4 hours."

"Have they said anything about Amanda?"

"I asked Dr. Macaca when he walked through here about half an hour ago and he said that she was still in surgery and would likely be in surgery for another 3 or 4 hours. He also said that the punctures of her lung and the lacerations of her stomach and liver were more severe than they originally thought but, they're confident that they can repair the damage and reset the three ribs that caused all the damage in a few hours."

Laying her head back on his shoulder, Ophelia said, "I'm getting hungry. Could we leave a message asking them to page us if we're not here if they have any news?"

"Give me a minute." Jacob walked over to the nurse's station and got the attention of one of the nurses. "Ma'am, could you page Jacob and Ophelia Fuchs if you get any news about our daughter's condition while we go eat breakfast?"

"And your daughter is?"

"Amanda Fuchs."

The nurse looked through the records of Amanda's surgery and said, "Yes, sir. Should I page Mr. Thomson, too?"

"No, he isn't here." Looking over his shoulder, he added, "My wife doesn't like him and he left shortly after we arrived. However, feel free to give him a telephone call to update him."

"Yes, sir. I'll be happy to do that."

After this short conversation, Jacob and Ophelia made their way to the hospital cafeteria where they ordered their breakfast. After paying for their food and sitting at table, Jacob noticed that, unlike the normal look on her face, there was a sad softness there. She placed her elbow on the table, put her

hand on her forehead, and stared at her food for several seconds. Jacob felt sympathy for her because he was certain that she was finally realizing where she had made a mistake when Amanda was growing up.

However, Ophelia said, “Jacob, I warned you that this was going to happen if we continued to allow Amanda to continue to see that human. Why didn’t you listen to me?”

Jacob couldn’t believe what he was hearing. *“Is she really trying to blame that accident on Michael and Amanda dating?”* He thought. However, hoping to make her realize how ludicrous that statement was, he asked, “What did Michael do to cause that drunk driver to be at that intersection at the exact same time that Reginald’s limousine entered it?”

“Jacob, the dream told me that she would die in an accident if she continued to be with him.”

“Ophelia, you know I don’t believe that dreams can predict the future. Besides, Amanda survived the accident.”

“She hasn’t survived the surgery yet, Jacob.”

“Even if she doesn’t survive, it doesn’t mean the dream was correct.”

Ophelia’s eyes were starting to tear up as she looked at Jacob and said, “Jacob, I know you think I don’t love Amanda but, I birthed her. I only want the best for her.”

“And you think that whore dog is best for her?” He asked incredulously. “Ophelia, despite what that judge ruled, everyone knows Reginald is the father of the wolf’s son.”

“Jacob, there wasn’t any proof.”

Giving her a stern schoolmaster’s look, he said, “Ophelia, the judge made that ruling despite the fact that the DNA test said that there was a 99.99% chance that Reginald was that pup’s father. The judge said that because it wasn’t 100% there was a possibility that Reginald wasn’t the father therefore, he was ruling in Reginald’s favor. He ruled on less than 0.01% possibility Reginald wasn’t the father. A week later, 5,000,000 Yenars was donated to the judge’s re-election campaign fund by an ‘anonymous’ donor.”

Shocked, Ophelia said, “Are you serious?”

“As a heart attack, my Dear.”

“I can’t believe that you think that Reginald would stoop so low as to bribe a judge.”

“I didn’t say it was Reginald, Ophelia.”

Ophelia suddenly became extremely interested in her breakfast.

Michael arrived at the Panthera home and, falling back on his upbringing, knocked on the door before opening it and walking inside. "Hello!" He called. "Is anybody home?"

He heard a happy squeal and the pounding of tiny feet running through the house after he called out. He also heard a semi-angry female voice saying, "Anne! Get back here and let me finish drying you and putting some clothes on you!"

Around the corner of the hallway and running as fast as her two-year-old legs could carry her while she ignored her mother's calls came Anne Panthera. Anne was calling as loudly as she could, "Mah'l! Mah'l! Mah'l!" Michael knelt down and Anne ran right into his open arms nearly knocking him over. She wrapped her tiny arms around his neck and gave him a hug and a kiss on the cheek while Michael hugged her back.

After hugging Michael, Anne looked around him and asked, "Mah'l, wayuh Manna?"

At that moment, Tigresa walked into the living room. Michael saw her but, spoke to Anne, "I'll tell you in a few minutes. I want to tell everybody at the same time. Now, go with mama and let her finish drying and dressing you."

"Uh-kay, Mah'l." She hugged Michael again before hopping off of Michael's lap and, giggling mischievously, dodged around Tigresa heading toward the bathroom.

"Come back here, you little scamp!" Tigresa said, causing Anne to giggle even louder.

Michael looked at the front of his now completely soaked clothes and, despite his sadness, smiled. Even after all this time, he was amazed at how much Anne loved him.

Tigresa returned holding Anne. She took one look at Michael's wet clothes and laughed. Turning around, she said, "Come with me, Michael." She led him to his old room and the closet. She opened the door and pointed inside. "After you moved out, Leo and I went out and bought a few outfits that fit you just in case you needed them whenever you visited."

"Thanks, Dr. Tigresa."

After changing his clothes, Michael returned to the living room just as everyone was entering. Victoria smiled at him but Mary came running up to him, jumped into his lap, and gave him as big a hug as Anne ever did.

"Wow! Thanks, Mary. What's that for?"

Mary smiled shyly but didn't say anything. She only snuggled into Michael's chest. When Anne saw this, a scowl formed on her face followed by tears as she started whimpering. Finally, she demanded that Tigresa put her down. After being put down, she walked to Michael and Mary.

"Ma-ee," she cried, "gih ou' Mah'l la'!"

Normally, Michael would have sat there waiting for Tigresa to intervene but, he had been a part of the Panthera family long enough that he felt like he could respond to Anne's outburst. "Anne," he

said, "Mary can sit in my lap if she wants to."

Whimpering even more loudly, Anne said, "Bu', Mah'l!"

"No buts, Anne. Mary is my sister just like you. I have plenty of room for the both of you."

Sadly, Anne said, "Uh-kay, Mah'l." She climbed into Michael's lap although she continued to glare daggers at Mary who acted like she didn't notice which only upset Anne even more. Anne started to cry softly which caused Michael to put his arms around her and Mary.

Richard said, "Wow! Anne was never that possessive of me."

Michael said, "Don't worry, Richard. She's just sleepy."

"How can you tell?"

"See how she's rubbing her eyes and nose? That's a good indicator."

Tigresa said, "I was going to put her down for her morning nap when you got here, Michael." She looked and saw that Anne had, indeed, fallen asleep. "Give her to me, Michael and I'll put her in her crib." She took Anne and walked away. After several seconds, she returned.

Michael looked around and saw that everybody was present so he said, "I'm sure all of you are wondering why Amanda isn't here with me." He looked at all the children and continued, "Your mother and father think they know but, they don't know the whole story so, I'll tell all of you the whole story."

"A couple of months ago, Amanda received an invitation to an engagement party. It was addressed to 'Amanda Fuchs and Friend'. Since I was her fiancé, I was, technically, her friend. Last night, we went to the party and, after a little confusion, we were seated. Even though I'd eaten the food before, I'd never had it prepared quite as well as it was prepared last night."

Leo said, "Yes, the food was prepared quite well. Of course, the Reynard family is the second wealthiest family in Catlanna so, they can afford to hire the best cooks and chefs available in Catlanna."

"Well, after dinner and desert, Amanda and I were enjoying the music when I asked her if she'd like to dance."

Tigresa said, "Nobody dances at a Reynard party, Michael."

Michael laughed and said, "Yeah, Amanda told me. I insisted and she said, 'Okay.' So, we stepped out onto the dance floor and, to the sounds of a beautiful waltz, we danced. I saw the shocked looks of everyone at the tables but, I didn't care. I was holding the most beautiful woman there."

Tigresa said, "Humph!", which caused everyone to laugh.

Leo turned to her and said, "Now Tigresa, he just doesn't know you as well as I do." This caused another round of laughter.

Michael, still smiling said, “We danced and, eventually, everyone had joined Amanda and me. After a few minutes, the young Arctic fox made his way to where Amanda and I were and asked to cut in. I told him that, if Amanda didn’t mind, I didn’t mind. I could see that she didn’t want to dance with him but, at the same time, she didn’t want to offend him. So, I watched them for a few seconds before I headed back to my seat.

“As I walked, I glanced to where Amanda’s parents were sitting and I noticed a look of malicious glee on Mrs. Fuchs’ face. It was then that I realized who the Arctic fox’s fiancée was. I don’t know why but, I thought that Amanda had played me and claimed to love me when she was just waiting for the announcement of her engagement to him. So, I left without looking back.

“I started driving home but, I was arguing with myself. I told myself that it wasn’t Amanda’s idea. She had given me that look of abject fear when that Reginald guy asked if he could dance with her. I believe she only agreed to dance with him because she really didn’t know that she was his fiancée. So, I returned to the mansion.”

Tigresa smiled and said, “You should have stayed. You missed the fireworks.”

Victoria asked, “What fireworks?”

Leo said, “After announcing that she was his fiancée, Reginald pulled Amanda into a kiss and kissed her passionately.”

Tigresa interrupted with, “When Amanda managed to push him back, she wound up and hit him with a haymaker right on his jaw and dropped him like a sack of potatoes much to the shock of everyone there especially Ophelia.”

Leo continued with, “She stood over him and said, ‘I told you four years ago to never, ever kiss me without my permission.’”

Michael snickered and said, “I wish I had seen that. I’m sure Mrs. Fuchs tried to placate her.”

“She certainly tried. I couldn’t hear what Amanda said to her mother but, from the look on her face, I could tell that Amanda wasn’t thanking Ophelia for what she did.”

Again a small laugh came from Michael before he said, “I bet.

“After I heard that Reginald was giving Amanda a ride home, I decided to go home, go to bed, and call Amanda this morning.

“About two hours after I went to bed, I received a telephone call from Piedmont Regional Medical Center asking my name and if I knew Amanda. After I told the young lady that I did, she told me I needed to go to the hospital.” Michael’s voice started choking with emotion so badly that he had to pause before continuing. His eyes started tearing up as he thought of how to continue. His voice continued to choke up as he spoke.

“When I arrived, I spoke with Dr. Macaca. He told me that the limousine that Amanda was riding in was broadsided by an automobile being driven by a drunk driver.”

Victoria gasped and said, “Oh, my God! Is she all right!?”

“Her right tibia, fibula, femur, radius, ulna, humerus, clavicle, and all of the ribs on her right side are broken. Her clavicle is a compound fracture(1). Two of her ribs punctured her right lung. One of her ribs punctured her diaphragm and lacerated her stomach and liver. She also has a broken jaw. She’s been in surgery since around 1800 last night and is expected to be in surgery until 0600 today. That’s how bad her injuries are. I asked Dr. Macaca to call me here when she’s out of surgery and let me know how everything is with her.

After explaining to everyone what had happened to Amanda, Michael sat there and stared at the floor. Everyone just looked at him not knowing what to say or do. They decided to allow Michael his time to be sad and worry about Amanda’s situation. They also knew he was beating himself up because he believed that it was, basically, his fault that Amanda had been injured in the accident.

Finally after a couple of minutes, Tigresa got up and went to the kitchen. Victoria also got up and accompanied her mother. A few minutes later, everyone could smell bacon frying and could hear eggs being beaten to make scrambled eggs. Michael, who hadn’t eaten since the night before at the Engagement Party, felt his stomach start grumbling and demanding to be fed. He looked around and apologized for being a Debbie Downer when everyone had been having a good time before they saw him. Fortunately, everyone told him that they understood his being upset and they were going to be there to give him moral support.

Several minutes after the sounds and smells of the food cooking reached everyone in the living room, Tigresa returned to the living room and announced that their brunch was ready. It was about this time that Anne woke up and started calling Tigresa to come get her. Tigresa went to Anne’s room, took her to the bathroom and allowed her to relieve herself before finally returning with her to the living room. When Anne saw Michael, she demanded to be allowed to sit in his lap until her mother told her it was time to eat.

Michael was a little more talkative during their meal but, not much. He responded whenever anyone asked him any questions but, he didn’t volunteer any information unless Anne said something to him. He would smile at her and answer any questions she asked.

Just as they returned to the living room after eating, the telephone rang.

1-For those that don’t know, a compound fracture is when a broken bone perforates the skin exposing the bone to the air.