

## Prologue

Michael Sharpe looked, talked and acted like other men, but Michael Sharpe was not a man. He could grow and age like a man, but he could not die.

On this night—an early June evening in Bangor, Maine—Michael sat quietly at a hospital bedside. He listened to the rhythmic and familiar tone of medical monitors beeping and clicking. Beside him, the frail form of Daniel Ridge—a flesh and blood man, a man who *could* and *would* soon die—trembled beneath a sagging sheet.

Michael clutched the man's hand firmly. Each drip of painkiller down Daniel's intravenous line ticked off the seconds to his demise. Wracked with liver cancer and only one day shy of his forty-fourth birthday, Daniel would not live through the night. This Michael knew; this is what had called him here. Daniel would leave behind three young children under the age of 12. He would leave a wife of 17 years.

Michael studied Daniel's quivering eyelids that always seemed on the verge of fluttering open. He wondered what thoughts were in the dying man's mind. What was it like to be *afraid* of death?

Death was inevitable. Michael knew this.

Death was necessary. Michael knew this, too.

Death provided finite beings with focus and clarity. Death provided a clear beginning and a distinct ending. Death provided a sense of urgency, a need to accomplish and to grow within short spans of time.

All of this Michael knew.

Infinite beings did not fear the passing of seasons and years. They did not fear death. Yet infinite beings tended to drift, to lose focus, to lose passion, to begin to wonder, “*Why?*”

Michael was such a being.

Tomorrow morning, once his business here had ended, Michael was to meet friends along a remote river in the wilds of northern Maine. For centuries Michael, Sarah, Todd, and Galen had convened there annually to talk, to regroup, to revitalize themselves, and to share their experiences—good and bad—from the preceding year. Among them, Michael’s tenure was the longest, dating back several millennia, followed by Todd at 600 years. Sarah and Galen had been Earthbound for the shortest period, at a little more than two centuries apiece.

Normally Michael would welcome the diversion—the chance to escape for a day or two amidst the quietude and simplicity of Nature—but this year he felt differently. He was exhausted, worn, his energy and enthusiasm near depletion. Michael had been sent to make a difference, to help make things right . . . and he genuinely wanted to make a difference. But what *real* difference had he made recently? What real difference had he *ever* made?

He looked at the dying man. Daniel loved his family, worked hard, and provided for them well. In what should have been the prime years of his life, filled with little league games,

bike-riding lessons, movies and buttery popcorn, tee ball, trips to Disney World, good books, and thoughtful moments with his wife wondering what the next 20 years would bring; he was, instead, moments from death—about to grudgingly abandon his own life’s journey and subject his family to an unknown, unwelcome future without him.

Michael knew there was more to the picture; he knew there was more at play behind all things and all possibilities. But right now he was fixated on the smaller picture—the isolated life that was Daniel Ridge and his family, the *rightness* and *wrongness* of his being plucked from them at such an early age, and the aftermath of his leaving. To Michael, the man’s death simply did not make sense. It was not right . . . and this pervasive feeling was a source of great consternation for him. Being *who* he was and *what* he was, Michael knew death was necessary—though he had never experienced it first hand and never would—yet he often wondered, “Why now? Why not later?”

Daniel’s hand grew tense.

Michael sensed a recognizable tingle.

“Let go,” he whispered as Daniel’s fingers strained again. The time had come. “Let go.”

Michael felt Daniel’s soul depart with a barely perceptible “pop” of static discharge and, for a moment, he was alone. The medical monitor moaned a continuous, unfeeling, unwavering tone.

Suddenly, frenzied hospital staff raced to Daniel’s side, but to no avail. They tried their best to revive him, but there was simply no more *life* left in his body.

Sighing, Michael stood. He slipped unnoticed past the solemn nurses and the grim doctor as they dutifully went about

their business. He drifted into the hallway—past Daniel’s teary-eyed wife as she was escorted down the stark corridor, past Daniel’s somber children as they lingered unknowing in the waiting room with Gram and Gramps.

Michael felt powerless. He could do nothing to ease their sorrow.

“Not my job,” he muttered, knowing that soon another like him would be along to tend to their needs.

In the meantime, Michael realized with a glance at his watch, he still had time to grab a cup of coffee before assembling his fishing gear for tomorrow’s trip.