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and well-written debut." —*Booklist*

Priscille Sibley

THE
PROMISE
OF
STARDUST

A Novel

P.S.
INSIGHTS,
INTERVIEWS
& MORE...

THE
PROMISE
OF
STARDUST

Priscille Sibley


WILLIAM MORROW
An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Dedication

For Tim, who has given me his heart and the courage to write. And for Robert, Cole, and Ethan, who have taught me why it is important to never give up.

Epigraph

As for me, to love you alone, to make you happy, to do nothing which would contradict your wishes, this is my destiny and the meaning of my life.

—Napoleon Bonaparte

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The Emergency Room Call

Late that night—on our last night—we lay in awe, mesmerized again by the Perseid meteor showers as they transformed stardust into streamers of light. They were an anniversary of sorts for us, a summertime event Elle and I cherished, and we fell asleep on the widow’s walk of our old house, my beautiful wife curled up beside me, her head resting in the crook of my arm.

If only I stayed home in the morning—if only I’d looked over at Elle and realized nothing I could or would ever do was more important than keeping her safe. If only—Jesus—

I’ve heard patients’ families play the “if only” game. In the eleven years I’ve been a doctor, I’ve come to expect the denial and the bargaining. But reality is cold and hard and, all too often, irreversible. I did not stay home and neither did Elle.

I was already at my office, studying an MRI that showed what I suspected was a glioblastoma and wondering how much time I could buy my patient by excising his malignant tumor, when my receptionist buzzed me. “The hospital is on line three. Said it’s urgent.”

“Thanks, Tanya.” I picked up the phone, still staring at cross sections of the temporal lobe. “This is Dr. Beaulieu,” I said.

“Hi, Matt. It’s Carl Archer.” The emergency room doc cleared his throat. “You need to come over.”

“Page Phil. He’s covering the hospital.”

“He’s already here. I need *you* to come in. It’s your wife.” Carl’s voice sounded as tight as screeching tires. “She’s had an accident.”

His tone, more than his words, conveyed the gravity. And its weight kept many questions tampered down in my throat. If Phil had already arrived, were Elle’s injuries neurosurgical? Or perhaps my partner simply happened by the ER. Maybe he was standing there telling Elle jokes to distract her from something minor. *Please*, I thought. *Don’t let her be dead.*

“Is Elle all right?” I asked.

Carl cleared his throat again. “It’s serious. Come now. I’ll see you in a few minutes.” The dial tone sounded.

I leaped out of my chair and charged through the waiting room, past a woman standing next to her wheelchair-bound son, barely turning to my receptionist to say where I was going. After sprinting through four blocks to the hospital, I arrived at the emergency entrance in a cold sweat. I pushed through the double doors and headed straight to the trauma area. My partner, Phil Grey, stood next to a red code cart, its drawers open. He wore sterile gloves, a gown, and a surgical mask. An IV pole, decked out with a dozen IV bags and pumps, stood against the gurney. Lines of all sorts sprang from the patient’s extremities. Not Elle. Please, not Elle. The ventilator hissed its accorded wheeze as it pumped

oxygen into the hose coming out of her body. The nurse stepped aside, and I saw Elle's face, white as the bed linens, dried blood caked in her blond hair. The only indicator that she was still alive was the tracing across the cardiac monitor.

Her body was rigid and arched, her toes were pointed, and her hands were curled under. This position is called decerebrate posturing, and it is an indicator of severe brain damage. I dropped to my knees, knowing whatever happened had devastated her brain.

I can't say exactly what happened next. Maybe someone dragged me to my feet. Maybe I staggered up of my own volition. Phil said something about Elle and a fall from a ladder, something about a grand mal seizure in the ambulance. And Carl was hovering and saying something about a flat cardiac arrest and a Glasgow score of five. Something—about being down for only four or five minutes. Something—about her fixed and dilated pupils. Something—about her CAT scan. Something—about surgery.

I touched Elle's cold contorted hand. People were staring at me, pitying me. People I worked with. People I didn't give a damn about. I pulled a light pen from my pocket and checked Elle's pupils. *Come on, Elle, I thought. React. Prove my gut reaction wrong. Prove. Them. All. Wrong.*

I flicked the light across my wife's green eyes, which weren't green at all but black. Her pupils were blown and huge.

I checked her reflexes and found nothing but more evidence that the accident had destroyed Elle's brain.

I met Phil's eyes, eyes filled with tears. "Let me show you the CAT scan. I just put in the ICP monitor. Her pressure's high. We started steroids and mannitol. I want to get her downstairs right now. I'll do everything. D'Amato is scrubbing in with me. The OR is all ready for her."

For a flitter of a second, I thought I would scrub in, too, but then my sensibility returned. I could no more cut into her brain or watch anyone else do it than I could turn into a superhero.

Phil held up the CAT scan that showed the bleeding compressing her brain tissue. I steadied myself against the wall. This could *not* be happening.

Less than twelve hours before, Elle and I had made love on the widow's walk. I must still be sleeping there, having a nightmare, worrying about Elle leaning against the rickety railing. I had to force myself to wake up. As I glanced around—taking in the textures of the emergency room, the definition of the lines on Phil's face as his logical mind planned out his surgical approach, the axle grease on the gurney's wheels—I renounced reality in favor of believing it a vivid nightmare. Powerlessness pounded my denial like a drum. I wandered back into the trauma room as the nurse I now recognized looked up from checking one of Elle's tubes.

No. This was real. And my wife, the girl I'd been in love with since I was seventeen, the girl who had loved as my closest friend for an even longer time, had fallen and cracked her head open. Even the best neurosurgeon I knew, my friend and partner, would never be able to fix the damage.

For a minute, I stood frozen, remembering how much Elle did not want to suffer through a lingering death like her mother had endured. Phil shoved a consent form on a clipboard in front of my face. "Sign, so I can take her to the OR. I don't need to explain this to you," he said.

"We should let her go." I turned and bolted into the bathroom, where I heaved my lunch. It felt like everything else I'd ever eaten came up in that scummy hospital toilet, too. Make no mistake; it was possible to turn inside out.

Phil opened the door and found me throwing up. "Matt, I need to take her downstairs. Now. We don't have time for bullshit. Listen, horrible as this is, you know as well as I do, she probably won't make it, but you'll hate yourself if we don't try." He shoved the clipboard in my face again.

What did I promise Elle on our wedding day? That I would love, honor, and respect her. I had to respect her wishes. She wouldn't want this. I knew the odds. I knew the consequences.

I grabbed the clipboard and scribbled my consent anyway.

He disappeared through the door, leaving me behind, regretting every betrayal I'd ever made of her. It was selfish to want her to live, knowing the kind of suffering she would have to bear, knowing her brain could never truly recover from a neurological insult this devastating. That was the trouble with being a neurosurgeon; I knew her prognosis. I could not be lulled by blind hope. Nothing and no one could save Elle. But I needed her. I needed Phil to save her even if it was impossible.

I splashed water on my face and returned to the trauma room. The nurse was setting up the portable ventilator so they could move Elle to the OR. "Can you give me one minute alone with her?" I asked.

The nurse sidled around the equipment and then touched my elbow like a visitor at a funeral home does a mourner. "We need to get her to the OR."

I put my hand on Elle's. The frigging IV was in the way. I bent down and kissed her cheek. I couldn't kiss her mouth because of the endotracheal tube that was sticking out of it like an elephant's trunk. "I love you, Peep. I've always loved you. Understand, I can't live without you in this world. Come back to me. Please."

Orderlies, a respiratory tech, and two nurses came through the door. They unlocked the gurney wheels and pushed Elle and the shitload of life-support equipment.

Left behind at the elevator, I walked around in circles. I had to tell our family, her father and mother, and I had no idea how. I removed my cell phone from my pocket and stared at the screen alerting me that I had a voice mail from Elle. I held the phone to my ear.

"Hey, it's me." She sighed softly. "Can we do something tonight? Maybe we could take a walk on the beach? Listen, I know we made up afterward, but I am *so sorry* we argued yesterday. Let's spend a little quiet time together this evening, talking and holding hands and ... I love you *so much*." She paused for a moment and then sounded like she was smiling when she continued. "Give me a call when you get this, and we'll make plans for later, okay? I can't wait to see you! Bye."

I couldn't breathe. Elle. Jesus. She had to be all right. Phil would get in there and the damage wouldn't be as bad as the CAT scan indicated. I started muttering out loud. Elle was brilliant. If anyone could recover from a brain injury, she could. I'd work with her. She was resilient. Maybe I was misreading everything. I held the phone to my ear, listening to her voice again as I followed a crowd of people back to the ER. Carl was staring at me as I approached. I wanted to look at the CAT scan again. This was insane. *Please, tell me. Tell me it's not as bad as I think.*

"I—I'm not sure what you said before. I guess I'm in shock. What exactly happened?" I asked.

Carl rubbed his forehead. "According to the rescue squad, they picked her up at her brother's house. He's out in the waiting room, by the way. Evidently, she hit her head on a rock after she fell about ten feet off a ladder. Your brother-in-law can probably tell you more about what happened. She had a long seizure on the way in, maybe ten minutes. She was in respiratory arrest when the EMTs got her here. They bagged her. We had trouble tubing her, and she went into a cardiac arrest, but we got her back fairly quickly."

"How long was she here before you called me?"

"Twenty minutes. We were busy, trying to save her," he said.

I swallowed while I tried to gather my thoughts. He wasn't saying anything encouraging, and the mirage of my denial evaporated. "Where's her CT scan?"

"Phil took it with him."

Right. I'm not thinking clearly. "I have to talk to Elle's brother," I said.

As I turned toward the waiting room, the hospital CEO approached me and stretched out his hand. "Dr. Beaulieu. I heard that your wife is on her way to the OR. I hope it goes well." He hesitated a moment before adding, "I don't know if you're up to it right now, but the press wants a statement."

"The press?"

"The accident was on the police scanners," Carl said. "If Elle McClure is rushed to the hospital, it's news. She's a local celebrity. Maine's like a small town. They remember her from NASA."

For a moment I was still at a loss, then I realized Carl was talking about the Space Shuttle. Elle was an astrophysicist, a college professor now. But four years ago she had actually flown in space and been part of a NASA mission, one which had garnered worldwide attention.

Carl fiddled with his stethoscope and nodded toward the CEO. "Listen, we can't tell the press anything, HIPAA laws and all that, but when you're ready—"

"I can't right now. Excuse me." I had to talk to Elle's brother. I pushed my way into the waiting room, a twenty-by-twenty-foot square with plastic benches and a flat screen mounted on the wall. Christopher stood with his back to me, studying the contents of a vending machine. I tugged on his shoulder, and he spun around.

"Matt, finally." Christopher's gaze frantically darted between me and the double doors of the ER. "No one will tell me anything."

"What happened?" I asked.

"Is she all right?"

"Not really. What the hell was she doing on a ladder?"

His mouth hung open for a moment. "Elle dropped by, and Arianne and I were washing windows and the baby was hungry, so Arianne went inside to nurse her, and Elle said she'd help out, and she took over for Ari on the ladder, and I went back inside, you know, to work on the same window, making sure there were no streaks—and then Elle fainted. But she's going to be okay, right?"

Fainted? The word registered on some back shelf in my mind. I tried to steady my voice and focused on the "Triage" sign hanging above the door. I couldn't look at Christopher in the eye as he pictured the CAT scan again. She'd arrested. Given her appearance and the decerebrate posturing, she had significant brain damage. I admitted the unfathomable to Chris and to myself. "No. I don't think she's going to be okay." The room's temperature felt like it dropped forty degrees. "Where's your father?"

"Wait. What do you mean?" Christopher asked.

"It's a bad head injury. Really bad. Where's your father? Does he know she's hurt?"

Christopher shook his head. "But she didn't even fall that far. She cut her head and everything bled out—you're a neurosurgeon. You can fix her, right? Did you see her? Did you talk to her?"

"She's not conscious," I said, trying to stay composed. "I saw her. I—listen, Phil took her to surgery. Call your father. Tell him to come in." I blinked a few times. "Chris—she probably won't make it."

"What?"

"It's bad." I turned around and walked away.

Maybe it was cold to leave him with the prognosis, but I had someone else to tell. My mother. That would kill her. Or me.

My mother was an obstetrical nurse—had been for almost forty years—but I didn't know if she was working that day. I took the elevator to Labor and Delivery, passed security, waving my hospital ID, and went to the nurses' station. A couple people recognized me, smiled hellos, and one said, "Hi."

Matt. Linney's on break, but I think she's in the lounge."

I turned and beat my way past a laboring mother pushing an IV pole down the hall. She paused evidently in the grip of a contraction.

Galloping laughter emerged from the nurses' lounge as I pushed open the door. Mom sat at the table, holding a mug of hospital-grade sludge. She took one look at me and stopped short. "Who is it?" she asked.

"Elle. She had a fall." And just like that, I was sobbing in my mother's strong arms. Thirty-seven years old and I might as well have been one of the newborns wailing his first sounds of life. Except this felt more like a death cry.

The Surgery

I paced the hospital corridors like a video Pac-Man, sweeping each cybersquare, counting the linoleum tiles, cornering and turning when I hit the wall.

My mother walked with me, asking me inane questions like “Why would Elle faint? Has she been sick?”

It didn’t matter why—only the result of the fall mattered. “I doubt she fainted. It’s more like Christopher was supposed to be holding the ladder steady, and instead, he went to take a piss.”

“Matt, really.”

“You know what he’s like. He’s what, twenty-eight, and he still gets Elle to wash his window because he’s too afraid to climb his own goddamned ladder. Besides, you’d put it past him to walk away when she needed him?”

Mom grabbed my sleeve. “You’re upset, and you want someone to blame.”

I tugged away as I turned into the next corridor. “The only time Elle’s ever fainted was when she hemorrhaged—when we lost Dylan.” Even for someone like me, a doctor, it was astounding how much blood a woman could lose in childbirth when things went wrong. And things went very wrong. “She doesn’t faint,” I said.

Mom came to a halt. “She passed out in her father’s driveway once.”

I stopped abruptly and turned toward Mom. “When was this?”

“She was pregnant, before one of the miscarriages, early on. She made me swear not to tell you because she didn’t want you to worry. She’s not pregnant again, is she?”

I hesitated for a moment before I answered. “No. She isn’t.” While I resumed pacing, I considered how my mind had yet to assimilate the situation, how for one instant my heart raced again at the possibility of having a child—at the thought of a family—but Elle wasn’t pregnant. I wouldn’t let her risk her health after the last time. But we’d argued about trying—yesterday—just yesterday.

I’d dismissed the idea with a single syllable. “No.” I was good at no. But I could still see Elle standing on the widow’s walk. The sun shining on the river backlit her like a halo, making her hair look white-blond as it did when she was a little girl. Over the years her hair had darkened to the shade of honey, but her eyes were the same green they’d always been, a color that could be as warm as sex or as paralyzing as anger. And she was angry.

I leaned up against the jamb of the attic’s doorway, watching her, the sole of her instep, the curve of her bare calf, the way her hip turned slightly toward me, the narrowing of her waist. Even angry she was beautiful, maybe more beautiful. She didn’t look much different than she had as a girl, determined and certain of her convictions.

“Life is all about taking chances, or you may as well curl up in a cave.” She sighed, then came

me and reached up to touch my face with her fingertips. “I’m sorry. I know that losing the baby devastated you. And me. But we should try. I’m thirty-five, Matt. I don’t have forever. I want to try one last time.”

Time.

Less than twenty-four hours ago, she wanted me to take a chance. Now time was lost. Elle was lost. I was lost.

After they brought Elle back from the OR, I knew from the expression on Phil’s face as he led me into the intensive care unit’s on-call room what he was about to tell me. “Matt,” he said, steeping his fingers almost as if he were praying for my forgiveness. “I couldn’t do much. She had subarachnoid bleeding and shearing.” He stopped for a moment to take a breath. “It’s a mess. With all the cerebral edema, her brain stem should have herniated. I removed part of her skull, stopped the bleeding, and evacuated what hematomas I could get to, but everything from her frontal lobes to her parietal lobes was shot ...” He rambled on with the details.

I didn’t respond. I couldn’t.

“After the anesthesia wears off, we should verify brain death,” he said. Then he stammered a bit before adding, “I—I can’t believe I’m asking you this. But do you ... well, would she want to be an organ donor?”

I nodded. She’d signed the form on her driver’s license; however, it occurred to me Elle’s autoimmune issues might disqualify her.

“I’ll take care of talking to the New England Organ Donor Bank,” he said.

I tried to compose myself as I yanked open the on-call room door. I needed to see Elle. Even though I understood the traumatic damage, my wife was not like any other patient to me. I couldn’t see this as a clinical situation. Phil could lay out the most wretched scenario, but they were only words. Hell, I’d reported the same ones to families more times than I cared to recall.

I was collapsing inward, like one of those black holes Elle spent so much time studying. Her existence, in the most pragmatic of ways, had ceased. The proof: Phil’s surgical report, her CAT scan, and my wife’s flaccid form stretched out in the intensive care bed in front of me. I stared from the doorway as nurses adjusted her monitor wires, set her IV pumps, and cleaned away the antiseptic from her shaven head.

I gathered a breath, bracing myself against the inevitable. There is no definitive test for brain death. Doppler flows, corneal reflexes, apnea testing, a series of criteria, physical responses—or the lack thereof—are what we use to establish it. I stood, a little wobbly, but somehow I stood, barely drawing air. I needed time before I could accept this. Elle had no other significant injuries. Why hadn’t she smashed an arm or a leg? Even if she’d broken her back or her neck. Why did it have to be her head that hit the rock?

Phil’s hand on my shoulder startled me. “Do you want me to talk to your family?”

“No. I’ll go to them in a minute.” What was another minute or another year? At least for now, they had hope. Hearing his report would end everything. I slipped in and took Elle’s hand. It was so cold. They hadn’t bothered to take off her wedding band down in the OR. At least that much of me was with her while Phil operated.

“Excuse me,” one of the nurses said. “I have to check her IV.”

I backed into the corner of the room by the wash sink. I slipped off my own ring and read the inscription. *My love, my life, Peep*. I placed it back on my finger and stumbled down the corridor to the ICU’s waiting room.

I paused before entering. Our families were inside—correction: our family. The plural had changed to the singular when Elle and I married. Not that there had ever been much differentiation between the Beaulieus and the McClures. Elle and I grew up in side-by-side Victorian houses, and both families passed easily from one kitchen into the other. At either place we were home.

And now our family was sitting in the ICU waiting room. Elle's father, Hank; her brother Christopher, and his wife, Arianne. And my mother. I had to tell them we had lost Elle. One by one their eyes found me standing in the doorway. Her father drew his fist to his mouth. Christopher jumped up. And my mother drew a hesitant breath then fell forward, folding onto her own lap, and she wept silently. My mother loved Elle; she had always loved Elle.

I sat beside Mom and rubbed her back. Emotionally, I was in a sensory deprivation chamber or in a tunnel with no light, and I didn't believe I'd ever see light again.

Words dribbled out of me, slowly at first, mechanical words, rehearsed words, a mere substitution of Elle's name for some other poor schmuck's. "Elle suffered a devastating and irreparable brain injury. It damaged her center for consciousness. She won't wake up. She signed the organ-donor form on her driver's license." I watched their faces, grappling with the news. "After the anesthesia wears off, two doctors will determine if she meets brain-death criteria; the odds are she will, and if her autoimmune issues don't disqualify her as a donor, well, she'd want to donate her organs. The donor team will probably come within the next twenty-four hours."

Christopher shook his head, whimpering, "No. No. It has to be a mistake."

My father-in-law stared at me, disbelief leaking from his every pore. "You're not going to do anything about it, to save her?"

"I can't. No one can." I stammered inside my own denial of the evidence.

"People come out of comas," Hank stated with such assurance it sounded like a truth.

"She won't. It's not exactly a coma. Comas usually stem from more localized injuries. Not that they aren't serious, but Elle suffered a massive head injury." My voice faltered. My mother took my hand in hers as I continued. "Elle wouldn't want to live like that anyway. There's profound damage to almost every part of her brain."

"You're going to give up? I won't allow it." Hank pounded the arm of his chair.

I stared at a corner of the ceiling. "This isn't giving up. And it isn't something we allow or disallow. I wish it were. I'm going to sit with her. If anyone else wants to come in—to say good-bye—give the nurses a half hour to settle her first."

"Oh my God." Christopher was shaking like he was going to collapse, and his wife put her arm around him.

Hank bolted over and blocked the doorway as I stood to leave. "There's no way you're going to let my daughter die. I'll get a court order."

When I tried to sidestep him, he slammed me up against the wall. His breath smelled of whiskey. How the hell had he gotten liquor at the hospital? More to the point, when had he fallen off the wagon? As far as I knew, he'd been sober for the last twenty years. But it didn't matter. I didn't know when he'd started drinking again, and I didn't really give a shit.

I grabbed his wrists and yanked them away from my shoulders. "I'm not *letting* her do anything. If there was *anything* I could do, I would. I love her, but the second she fell, it was too late. And she didn't want to die the way her mother did, and you know it."

My mother pushed her way between us like a referee in a contentious prizefight. "Come on, Hank, sit down. Matt's right. Elle made a living will—years ago. After Alice passed away. As soon as Elle turned eighteen."

Mom always thought fast on her feet, and this sounded like something Elle would have done, but Mom was lying. Elle let everyone know she believed her father had mishandled her mother's illness but she would have told me if she'd made an advanced health care directive. Still, I was grateful for my mother's fabrication.

My mother sniffed. "God, have you been drinking?" she asked Hank, her voice rife with frustration.

He shook his head. "Just one."

Mom's eyes filled with pity or anger, hard to tell which, and she spun away from him.

"Dad!" Christopher said. "What are you doing? Jesus Christ. Call your sponsor. We'll go find you a meeting."

For a second I saw Elle in Christopher's eyes—the way she always tried to keep her father under control—and then it was gone. Hank swooped up his suit jacket and stormed past his son. Christopher retreated and became a man-child again, sitting next to his wife. I wondered how he would even survive without Elle to take care of him.

I wondered how I would.

Even when the nursing staff was not in Elle's room, they could see inside because instead of Sheetrock there was a glass wall between Elle and the nurses' station. In the past, and from the detached perspective of a physician, I'd thought of ICU rooms as fishbowls, but now the fishbowl metaphor seemed more darkly apt than I'd ever considered. Somehow, I pictured Elle floating to the top, belly up and lost, or maybe it was me there, disembodied and displaced. I couldn't focus or make sense of anything. Cognitive dissonance had taken over. I kept whispering to Elle and begging her to wake up. I knew what was happening. I could not accept it even though every prop tethered me to this unreality. One minute I was looking at Elle's intracranial pressure monitor, and the next my mind shot into fantastical asides like—fishbowls.

Supposedly, right before you die, your life flashes before your eyes. I wondered what Elle was thinking about, the best way to keep the streaks off the windows? Should she spray Windex directly on the storm window or on the paper towel? Her legacy: the streakless window.

Or was she thinking about us?

Grief has stages, five if you buy into the Kübler-Ross worldview: denial, bargaining, depression, anger, and acceptance. For me, the first four were superimposed upon one another, but I wasn't close to accepting anything. Currently, anger took top billing, anger at her, anger at her brother. I couldn't even begin to tell anyone how angry I was at Hank. Fury. Blind raging fury. I would have put my fist through the wall, a fucking glass wall, but some level of reason persisted. They would have made me leave the intensive care unit—leave Elle. They would have had to kill me to do it, of course, but that had its appeal; I'd be dead then, too.

On the exterior wall, the ICU's double-paned window overlooked the ER's ambulance bay and didn't open, which was a good thing since I was considering the best way to kill myself. *Shake it off, Matt. The window's not high enough to jump out of anyway.*

The sun vacated the sky, and the full moon was making a stealthy appearance up high. *Come on, Matt, find a loophole. Some miracle surgery, some drug regimen no one has ever considered. Find a frigging innovation, and save Elle.* I'd put in twenty years of education and seven more of indentured servitude to the medical community. For that, I needed restitution. I was desperate for a stroke of genius that would bring Elle back to me.

A deep void was beginning to replace my anger, and deflated, I paced the ICU cubicles.

occasionally glancing out through the glass walls to the nurses' station. I didn't know what I expected to see. Elle, maybe. The body lying on the bed wasn't really my brilliant wife. Her clever mind. Her compassionate heart. I took her hand in mine and sat in the tangerine leatherette chair at her bedside. *Please, wake up.*

After a while I flipped the little television onto CNN. Another story about the debacle in Iraq followed a story about an earthquake in Peru. Just when I reached to shut it off, Elle's picture popped onto the screen. One from a NASA celebration. She was dressed to the nines in a spaghetti-strap peach dress that fit her like she was born in it. Her hair was longer then, down to her midback, and she looked more like a Hollywood ingenue than the hard-core scientist she was. *Was?* I'd used the past tense.

I upped the volume.

"Former astronaut Elle McClure is in a Maine hospital this evening after an accident. A spokesman for the family released the following statement: 'Elle McClure Beaulieu is in intensive care pending the results of tests. Her family requests prayers on her behalf.' "

I had not requested anything. I'd made no statement nor authorized anyone to do so. Video of her EVA, or space walk in layman's terms, popped up on the screen.

"You may recall that Dr. McClure rescued fellow astronaut Andre Jabert on the 2004 mission to upgrade the Hubble Telescope. A micrometeorite penetrated Jabert's space suit, and McClure pulled him into the shuttle before his suit fully depressurized. His injury forced *Atlantis* to make an emergency landing, but Jabert survived and has flown on a subsequent NASA flight. McClure left NASA four months later and returned to her hometown to marry neurosurgeon Matthew Beaulieu. She currently teaches at Bowdoin College and consults at both MIT and NASA."

The press kept obituaries prepared for all people of note. They'd pulled hers and read it.

"She *did* teach. Get it right. It's all past tense now," I mumbled, switching off the TV.

I spotted Elle's OB/GYN standing beside the nurses' station, talking to Phil. I nodded in acknowledgment.

I couldn't concentrate, and I resumed thinking about death by carbon-monoxide poisoning, death by Vicodin overdose, or death by blowing my brains out—one of which would occur after I buried Elle. I was also considering ways to make my suicide look like an accident, considering whether that might be easier on our family.

The thing was, I could almost hear Elle sneering at me. "It is always consoling to think of suicide in that way one gets through many a bad night." She'd been fond of quoting Nietzsche; at least she often cited his less misogynistic lines. She picked and chose. Come to think of it, she didn't like her atheism either. Those lines were mine to banter around, particularly on the rare occasion she headed off to church early on a Sunday morning and I wanted to sleep in.

Where was God now?

Equipment rolled up to the doorway, but I didn't glance up again until I heard my name.

"Matt? Can I come in?" Blythe Clarke, Elle's high-risk OB, stood before me, shrugging into her lab coat. As always, Blythe wore a pink ribbon in her otherwise stark white hair.

I would have preferred to endure torture than make small talk. I was afraid the next time anyone said he was sorry I'd punch him—or her—in the nose. Still, I murmured, "Sure."

To my surprise, she pushed a portable ultrasound machine to Elle's bedside.

I narrowed my eyes, wondering what the hell Blythe was doing. Elle had not sustained any other significant injuries. Phil stood at the doorway as Blythe set Elle's chart on top of the machine then pulled up a stool next to my chair. "You know we run pregnancy tests on all female trauma patients."

“She isn’t.” I pinched the bridge of my nose. Aside from that moment or two with my mother, I held myself together. I couldn’t waste these last hours with Elle crying. There would be time later.

“Actually, the pregnancy test in the ER was positive,” Blythe said. “And the beta hCG indicates she’s close to eight weeks along.”

Phil cleared his throat. “Somehow we overlooked it before we took her to the OR. I don’t know how that happened.”

“No. She can’t be,” I said, remembering the pregnancy test beneath the bathroom sink, the one she bought last month, the one she didn’t take because her period started on her way home from the store. That was only a couple of weeks ago. Besides, we’d been careful.

“Has she been taking the baby aspirin?” Blythe asked.

“Yes.” After Elle’s third miscarriage, Blythe figured out that Elle kept losing babies because she had an autoimmune disorder. Aspirin really is a miracle drug; it even treated Elle’s APS.

Blythe passed me the lab printout.

I gripped the paper. Elle was pregnant. “Seriously? She had a period a couple of weeks ago. That isn’t a mix-up?” I asked.

“Maybe she had breakthrough bleeding, and that’s why you didn’t know. I want to do an ultrasound to see if there’s a fetal heartbeat. After what’s transpired today, there’s a good chance she may have miscarried.”

I raked my hair, still flummoxed.

Blythe beckoned a nurse, who closed the drapes and bedside curtains, darkening the room. Then Blythe took a wandlike ultrasound probe and covered it with a sterile cot and transducer gel. “Matt, we need to do an internal exam. Do you want to leave?”

“No, but, Phil, do you mind?”

He ducked away.

The nurse, barely out of college, raised Elle’s right thigh and draped her perineum. Blythe inserted the probe into Elle’s vagina.

Anxiety jacked up my heart rate. How many X-rays were done that day? How many teratogenic drugs did the emergency room pump into Elle? What might that have done to a developing fetus? At the same time I remembered reading a journal article about one brain-dead woman who carried a baby to a good outcome and I wondered if it was possible.

“There,” Blythe said, pointing at the monitor. “A heartbeat.”

I narrowed my eyes and approached the ultrasound machine. The little flicker on the screen fortified me. “She’s really pregnant.”

“I’d say about eight weeks is right.” Blythe pointed, marked it, and saved the results to the hard drive. Drawing a deep breath, she turned to me. “I can make some phone calls to find out how this would work. I’ve never treated this kind of situation but, at a conference, one of the presenters talked about a case. The family didn’t know the woman was pregnant until after a motorcycle accident. She stayed in a persistent vegetative state throughout the pregnancy and still delivered a healthy baby.”

I remembered to breathe only after stars started bouncing around the periphery of my vision. “Given Elle’s history ... do you think it’s possible?”

“Maybe.” Blythe shrugged. “Phil said her pituitary gland and hypothalamus looked okay. So if the injury didn’t destroy her pituitary, her body should be able to regulate her hormone levels, maintain her body temperature. But I don’t know, Matt. It’s hard to say.”

“She’s been pregnant four times; she’s never gone to term.”

“The last one was close. The reason the baby died had nothing to do with anything that we

expect to recur.”

~~The blood drained from my head, remembering Baby Dylan’s lifeless body in my arms.~~

Blythe rested her hand on my shoulder. “I’m not trying to tell you what you to do. But I do think you should have all the facts before you decide to withdraw Elle’s life support.”

After the Surgery

Mom entered Elle's hospital room carrying two cups of coffee and a bag with sandwiches from a shop across the street. I set it aside. For some reason, people try to fill you with food when you're filled with grief. I didn't need food. I needed a reason to keep living.

"You have to eat, Matthew."

I shrugged and continued to stare out the window, agonizing about what Elle would want me to do.

Mom set the sandwich on my lap again and turned toward Elle. "Do you think she's in pain?"

"No. She's ..." Elle was brain-dead. She wasn't experiencing anything anymore, and I was so lonely for her that nothing could ever take up the hollow space she'd left vacant.

Mom bent down and kissed Elle's cheek. "Do you think she might still be able to hear us?"

"No." Her temporal lobes, the parts of the brain which hear, were saturated with enough blood to create their own Red Sea. She couldn't hear. Or see. Or act. And still I'd spent most of the last hours whispering to Elle and asking her what she wanted me to do.

Touching my shoulder gently, Mom said, "It's late. Let me drive you home."

"I can't."

My mother pulled up a chair beside mine, in the already crowded space between the bed and the wall. "It took me hours and hours to leave when your father passed away. But she's not here, if what you said is right—that she's brain-dead—she's not here anymore. You don't have to stay."

I didn't want to start crying. Not about Elle. Not about Dad. Yet the mention of his name nearly undid me. And the longevity of grief, the endlessness of it, settled into my future reality. Besides, Mom was hoping Elle's spirit lingered nearby, even though I didn't believe in bullshit like that. "Listen, Mom, you can go. I'm fine," I said flatly.

I could feel it in her exhalation, her desire to do what mothers do. She wanted to take me away from this sadness, but she couldn't fix this.

Probably in an attempt to remove me from this place, if not physically, emotionally—to pull me into memory, to a happier time—Mom said, "I keep thinking about when Alice and Hank brought Elle home from the hospital when she was a baby."

I nodded, not paying my mother much heed. Elle would probably miscarry, but everything she ever said about being pregnant and babies screamed she'd want me to try. In fact, almost everything she'd ever said indicated that.

Almost. Elle didn't want to live in a vegetative state, but at the same time she had risked her life for things she deemed bigger than herself—like on the Space Shuttle.

Mom reminisced. "Her mother put Elle in my arms—well, in your arms, Matt, because you were sitting on my lap. You don't remember it by any chance, do you?"

"I was two and a half. How could I?" Although I'd heard the story enough times, how I had heard

Elle when she was just three days old.

“We thought you were deaf. Did you know that?” Mom was talking to herself as much as she was to me. She needed to distract herself from Elle’s condition, too.

“You thought I was autistic.” My pediatrician said something was profoundly wrong with me because, until the day the McClures brought their new baby over, I’d never spoken. My parents had taken me to a dozen specialists, none of whom could find a damn thing wrong with me other than I didn’t speak.

Mom wiped a tear from her cheek. “I didn’t believe any of it. I knew you’d be fine, and when Elle started cooing, you said, ‘Peep.’ You called her Peep for the longest time. Until you two started dating.”

I nodded. Sometimes I still called her Peep, usually as a term of endearment, rarely in front of anyone else. I twisted my wedding band. *My love, my life, Peep.*

“Your father said you couldn’t stand being upstaged by the little baby girl.”

“It was probably more like I’d been waiting around for her to show up. I can’t imagine this world without her in it.” I shuddered, on the brink of crying.

My mother nodded. “Me either. It seems impossible, Matt, but you do go on. I did after your father died. You will, too.”

“She’s pregnant,” I said.

My mother’s eyes widened. “Pregnant?”

I nodded. “It looks like eight weeks, but we didn’t know. She hadn’t missed her period.”

“Oh my goodness. That *is* why she fainted, then.”

“Maybe.” I shook my head, thinking the pregnancy had done this to her. By getting her pregnant again, *I* had done this to Elle. “I found out a couple of hours ago. Part of the trauma workup.”

“I’m sorry, honey.” Mom put her hand on mine. “Too many losses.”

“Blythe Clarke thinks it might be possible to save—the baby. She’s on the phone, talking to perinatologists all over the country. A couple of similar situations made it to term.”

“Matt—Matt, you can’t be serious. There is *no way* Elle would want to be kept alive like this.”

“I haven’t made a decision yet, but I think she’d want me to try,” I said.

Mom blinked rapidly. “She signed a living will.”

I leaned forward. “I thought you were bullshitting about that.”

“No, she signed one. Don’t you remember how much she hated that they kept her mother going for so long?”

“I know, Mom, but Alice had cancer and was suffering. Elle’s not in pain. Don’t you think she would want the baby to live?”

Mom squeezed her eyes shut, then a moment later covered her face with her hands. “If it means staying on life support for months? No, I don’t. I can’t let what happened to Alice happen to Elle. Christ my God, it’s not even reasonable to think this pregnancy could succeed. She’s had so many miscarriages.”

“That was because of the APS. It’s treatable.”

Mom pressed her lips together and drew in a deep breath. “Honey, you treated it last time, and you still lost the baby.”

“Not from the APS.”

“But he still died.” Mom reached out and took my hand. “I’m so sorry, but he did. And it almost killed Elle. I think it almost killed you. I don’t want you to get your hopes up just to have them crushed again. Let Elle go peacefully.”

“She’d want me to save the baby.”

Mom stood, looked out the window, and sighed. “It’s too early. Are you sure *you* don’t want save a piece of Elle?”

“Of course I do, but I’m pretty certain she would want me to put the baby first.”

Mom shook her head. “It’s hardly a baby at this point. Matt, for heaven’s sake, you don’t even call it a fetus until it’s eight weeks.”

I glared at my mother. I did not need a lesson in embryology.

“I know,” she said. “My heart is breaking. And I’d do anything if I thought we could bring Elle back. You’re shattered, but try to put on your doctor’s hat. What do you think the odds are that she could carry a pregnancy now when she never could before? A hundred to one, a thousand? I love her. She’s like my daughter, you know that. I want her to wake up and—” Mom’s voice broke. “And that isn’t going to happen. Letting go is hard. But she made me promise I’d never let anyone do this to her.”

“She’s my wife.”

“I’m well aware, but you’re grieving, and you aren’t thinking straight.” My mother’s expression conveyed regret but also absolute immovability.

Panic rose in my gut, not because I was afraid of my mother, but because she is the most relentlessly stubborn person I’ve ever known. “When did Elle sign this thing? Where is it? Doesn’t it say something about pregnancy?” I asked.

“It was a long time ago. I don’t remember that specifically, but I’ll dig it out and take a look.”

Blythe Clarke returned to the room, stopping short when she saw the stern expression on my mother’s face. “Hello, Linney. Matt, I have more information when you’re ready.”

I stood and stepped around my mother’s chair. “Go ahead, Blythe. I told Mom Elle’s pregnant.”

Blythe pulled a PDA device from her lab-coat pocket. “The pregnancy looks viable so far. The outcome will depend on how stable they can keep Elle.”

“But she’s only eight weeks now?” Mom asked.

“Yes,” Blythe said.

Mom squeezed her eyes shut. “I can’t let you do this to Elle. Not for months and months.” Mom reached for her purse. “I’ll be back in a couple of hours,” she said. As she exited the room, she moved so fast I felt like I was in the ebb of a semi traveling down the highway.

Blythe stared at me. “What does she mean?”

“Tell me what you learned first.”

She hesitated a moment before she replied. “I found about a dozen anecdotal cases. I can’t make any promises. It’s August. If we can keep her alive until Christmas, the baby will be twenty-six weeks.”

“That’s awfully premature.”

“Yes. I’d like to see her make it to February, but by Christmas, the baby would be small, but more likely it would live; it would have a chance anyway.”

I pictured the NICU and the preemies there, not mini, chubby-cheeked versions of the full-term variety, but sick little things, thin-skinned and struggling. “My mother said Elle had a living will or an advanced health care directive. I never heard about this until now.”

“Hmm ...” Blythe furrowed her brow as if she were puzzled. “I’m on call tonight, so I’ll be around. You can page me anytime. Otherwise I’ll stop by in the morning.”

“Okay,” I said as she walked away.

Lost in my thoughts, I must not have noticed my brother Mike walking up the hall. He said, “How

is she? I raced over here as soon as I heard.”

“Come in if you want,” I said.

He glanced down at his grease-stained mechanic overalls. “How bad is it?”

Unable to find words, I shuddered.

Mike grabbed me and pulled me into a hug as if I were a little kid. And he started to cry.

“Come on,” I said, taking his elbow. I led him out of the room. Even if Elle couldn’t hear us, couldn’t say “brain-dead” in front of her. While we walked down the long hospital corridor, I told him Elle was pregnant.

He blew out air like the wind had been knocked out of him. “But months? Are you sure you’d want to do this for months?”

“There’s a chance. So yes, I guess I am. Yes. I’m certain we should try,” I said, not at all certain about anything except that I felt devastated.

Day 2

In the morning when Phil entered the hospital room, I straightened and rubbed the kink in my neck. My partner performed a neuro exam on Elle. Periodically, I'd checked her pupils and reflexes during the night. She hadn't improved, and as a doctor, I did not expect a miracle. As a husband, I wanted her back, so I kept looking for a glimmer of hope.

"Melanie's outside," he said. "She'd like to sneak in and see Elle."

I nodded. Although the Longfellow Memorial's ICU usually enforced the family-only visitation policy, something told me the nurses wouldn't balk when the neurosurgeon's wife broke the rules. "Tell her to come in."

Phil went to the door and beckoned. When Mel entered, she looked as if she might cry, but instead she swallowed hard and opened her arms wide to me. "I'm so sorry," she said. She held on for long and tighter than would normally feel comforting, and still I wished she wouldn't let go. She offered what little comfort was within her power. Was I hungry? Did I need anything from home? What about clean clothes?

Mel sat next to Elle and took Phil's hand as if she needed his strength. "Phil says you can't help me, but ... Oh God ..." Her lower lip quivered and she looked up at Phil. "Isn't there something you can do?"

Phil seemed to deflate and shook his head.

Melanie pressed the back of her hand to her mouth for a moment. "Okay, listen, Elle, we love you. Don't want you to worry about Matt—or any of us. We'll watch out for him. I promise." Mel stood abruptly and folded herself into Phil's arms.

An hour later Christopher came into the hospital room. Shaken, he had declined to see Elle the previous day.

"Hey," he said as if we were tossing a baseball back and forth, then his jaw tightened. "The doctor shaved her head."

"For the surgery," I said.

His eyes shifted to the floor. "This isn't fair."

Fair? The statement was so typical of Christopher, but this wasn't a playground with referees.

"It never occurred to me that she might faint," he said.

"You want me to absolve you and say, 'Christopher, these things happen'? Okay. Accidents do happen. But this one wouldn't have if you'd gone up on your own goddamned ladder."

He grabbed the bed's footboard. "Heights never bothered her. She's never afraid of anything."

I shook my head and led him out of the room. Elle couldn't hear me. She couldn't hear her brother or any of us, but at any second I might blast Christopher for being such a pansy that he had to ask her big sister to act as his handyman. And I didn't want her to see me beat the shit out of her precious

Christopher.

Elle.

I stopped in the hallway and looked back through the glass wall at her stilled body, her eyes closed, swollen from the surgery and the fall. Even if she could open them, she couldn't see me.

No wonder my patients' families struggled with denial. I understood the physiology of Elle's injuries. And none of this made sense to me. I couldn't grasp the shift in my world.

"Matt? Did you hear me?"

I turned toward Christopher and shook my head. "What?"

"Why did you drag me out here?"

For a second grief overpowered my anger and then, like a demon, my rage resurfaced. "It's not true that Elle was never afraid. She just hid her fears better than most people."

"What was she afraid of besides ending up like my mom?"

I stared at him for a moment. Elle was afraid of a slow death. How the hell could I even consider keeping her on life support? Because, I told myself, she was willing to risk her life to have a baby. "Not realizing her dreams."

"It's not the same." His mouth tightened, and he avoided my gaze. "She was only afraid of dying like my mom. What time are they going to turn off the machines? I—I should be here."

"They aren't. I changed my mind."

"Why? Did Phil think of something that could save her?" Christopher's eyes widened, and hope fell across his face like sun breaking out of a storm cloud.

Oh God, I wished I could reach out and grab a fistful of his blissful ignorance. I shook my head. "There isn't anything anyone can do."

His mouth tightened, and he seemed to search the corridor, my face, and then the palms of his hands, which he then pressed against his eyes. "My dad wasn't making any sense yesterday. He never did when he was drinking."

I shuffled my restless feet, remembering the days when Hank was falling apart, when Chris was barely eight, their mother was dying, and Elle thought she had to carry the lot on her young shoulders. "I'm kind of surprised you even remember your father's drinking days," I said. Hank had been sober for a long time—at least until yesterday.

"I was old enough. You'd be surprised what I remember. You can't make Elle go through what my mom did."

I peered through the glass at Elle again, horrified by my decision to keep her on life support. "It's not the same. She isn't in pain. And she's—pregnant. If we can keep her stable long enough, we can save the baby."

His jaw dropped. "What? Not again. How many times now? Four? Five pregnancies?" He clenched his hands as if he wanted to strangle someone, me, most likely. "Damn it. I told you last time you better not get her pregnant again. She almost died last time." He turned toward the room. Chris started shaking with anger or grief.

I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing because this time she'd suffered brain death. Because of me.

It was rare for Christopher to act protectively of Elle. She was seven years older. But after her last pregnancy he pulled me aside. At the time I'd agreed with Chris. Trying to have a baby again would be too risky.

"She didn't tell me she was pregnant," Chris said.

"We didn't even know. It's early."

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