

# PROLOGUE

My knees buckled in horror when I saw Luke lying in the hospital bed. He looked so much worse than I anticipated. *This can't be happening. Why couldn't anyone else see what was so obvious? Luke didn't need anything or anyone but me.*

Luke was on his back with his head propped on two pillows. His face looked gaunt and his pasty skin blended with the white cotton blanket that covered him. His left arm was tied to the railing of the bed so he wouldn't disturb the IV line taped in the crook of his elbow. I reached for him tentatively, sliding around the IV pole to be next to him. Close up, I noticed a rivulet of drool sliding down his chin. He half-opened his eyes in response to my touch. "I have to pee," he mouthed.

I felt terrified as his brother, Jack, knelt beside the bed, untied Luke's rigid arm from the railing and hoisted him to his feet. Leaning his full weight on his brother, Luke's shoulders stooped and his head sagged. Jack practically dragged him across the room. I watched in horror, fighting the urge to scream, "It's all a big mistake!"

# CHAPTER 1

The last time I saw my parents together was in my father's hospital room, a few days before he died. It was February 1990. They had divorced ten years earlier. My sister, Dani, had been estranged from my father for nearly two years and I was a fourth-year medical student.

My father had been diagnosed with advanced-stage cancer five weeks earlier. His doctor said he had three to six months to live. When my father was admitted to the hospital, I didn't even think to inquire after him. He had been a perpetual patient and hypochondriac. A week or so earlier, he began complaining of severe abdominal pain. I assumed it was another of his "crying wolf" episodes and was shocked when his doctor told me about the cancer.

I had called his doctor from the hospital where I was doing an elective in endocrinology. I was the only medical student on this rotation, so I had nobody to talk to. I had no idea what to do. My relationship with my dad was so conflicted; I wasn't even sure how I felt. I loved him and identified with him, yet he had hurt me again and again.

I called my boyfriend, Johnny, a psychiatric resident working in the same hospital as I was, but he was not at work. He was home, drunk, again.

I called my therapist, who was treating me for depression and ADD. He told me to go see my father immediately.

Next I called Mom. She had been furious at Dad for as long as I could remember, but she knew how I felt about him. I was close to my father; I had gone to medical school to appease him. Once I assured her I was okay, she told me to wash my face, have a drink of water and make the forty-minute drive "very carefully" to Dad's hospital.

Almost as an afterthought, I called Dani, who is six years younger than I am. She was working on her senior project in photography and was due to graduate from college at the end of the semester. We were very close. Dad had hurt her, too, so often and so badly that she refused to have anything to do with him. I was astonished that she was upset.

"Will you meet me at the hospital?" she asked.

"Of course," I told her. "And by the way, it's his birthday. He's fifty-five."

As I drove to the hospital, I imagined what I would do when I got there. I'd go to his bedside and talk to him about his diagnosis, comfort him and try to help him deal with it. The prospect of seeing my father so sick filled me with trepidation, but I wanted to be there for him.

When I walked into Dad's room, Pam, his wife, was there.

Her shoulder-length red hair was perfectly coiffed, her make-up impeccable. Her nail polish matched her silk blouse. She looked like a million bucks. Dad looked awful. Lying on his bed, tubes emanated from his arms like tentacles. His skin was ashen. She wiped crumbs from around his mouth and arranged his birthday cards on the windowsill. As I looked at him, my heart sank.

I wanted Pam to get out of the fucking room. When she finally left, I spoke to Dad in a sympathetic voice. Tears caught in my throat. "How are you doing?"

"Don't let her know," he demanded.

I hated his making believe everything was okay when *nothing* was okay. This was his approach to life. I couldn't stand it.

Dani arrived shortly after I did. Dad was ecstatic to see her.

Dad's health deteriorated quickly and dramatically over the next few days. Mom, as always, was the "Rock of Gibraltar" for Dani and me. Dani pleaded with her to come to the hospital, but Mom waited until my father asked for her. I couldn't blame her. He had treated her horribly since the divorce *and* while they were married.

He was in and out of hospitals so often that she had grown inured to his many real and imagined illnesses.

Dani and I met her in the lobby. I was nervous because there'd been so much animosity between them for so long. The last time I'd seen them together was at my college graduation seven years earlier. Their interactions were strained. Dad's wife was with him and my mother loathed her.

The stench of death, mixed with antiseptic and urine, assailed us when we walked into his room. The curtain around his bed slid quietly back. Pam emerged carrying a full urinal. She mouthed hello as she exited the room. I was relieved there was not a scene between Mom and Pam.

Dad lay back with his sweat-soaked head on pillows. A white cotton blanket dangled from the side of the bed. His hospital gown hung off his shoulder, exposing his concave chest. Baby powder swirled like finger paint over his ribs. His dentures, a green plastic bedpan, and the remnants of his lunch were on a table next to his head. A bag of clear liquid hung on an IV pole.

I held my breath as Mom moved the table aside and leaned over his face. That she moved so close to him surprised me. She whispered to him and gently brushed his cheek with her hand. A smile gradually crossing his face accentuated his hollow cheeks. Tears slid from the corners of his eyes as he looked at her. Lines on Mom's face belied a lifetime of regrets. She didn't wear make-up, which made these lines all the more pronounced.

I was anxious about what she would do next. I felt embarrassed witnessing their intimacy and sad at the sudden realization that they still loved one another. Despite my training in psychiatry, and natural insight into people, I would not have guessed that they still cared for each other. I had only heard them berate one another for the last twenty years.

Dani passed my mother a chair. She and I sat across from each other near Dad's knees. We stared back and forth maintaining a reverent silence as Mom stroked Dad's head and cheek and softly cooed to him that he'd be okay. Mom dabbed at Dad's tears and shed a few of her own.

My heart was ripping from my chest. I had no memory of seeing my mother treat Dad so tenderly. It suddenly occurred to me how much I had longed for parents who were kind to one another. How painful this lack of love and constant acrimony had been for me. I wondered if Dani was thinking the same thing.

Soon their interaction became more upbeat, and the four of us started reminiscing about "the old days." We talked warmly about our summers in Cape Cod, the time our two Old English Sheepdogs were sprayed by a skunk, and funny things about Dad's mother.

If my father had not been gaunt, ashen, and intermittently gasping for air, this could have been mistaken for a family reunion. A family I barely recognized. But Dad was dying and this was Mom's way of forgiving him and saying goodbye. The sadness I felt was physically painful. It was as though I was finally mourning the tragic loss of my family that had happened two decades earlier. I realized what I'd missed, what I had needed and longed for with all my being--a unified family.

Shortly after my mother left, Dad pulled out his IV and fell on the floor while trying to climb out of bed. Half-naked and bleeding from the IV site, he clutched the leg of a chair and started screaming about the doctors and nurses. "It's a conspiracy," he bellowed. "They're trying to kill me. I need to go to a different hospital."

Despite having grown weary of my father's "conspiracy theories," which I'd been hearing for much of my life, I was moved by this pathetic display. I was also angry that he was likely to make the final days of his life as difficult as possible for me. He had been making things hard for me for as long as I could remember. Now that I was so close to graduating from medical school, *his dream* for me, he was once again threatening to sabotage my success. I was furious at him for making this difficult situation even more untenable. I felt guilty for being angry with a dying man and for thinking about how his transfer to a hospital further away would inconvenience me. I was mostly angry at the unpropitious timing of his illness. I was supposed to be celebrating my acceptance to a residency program, finishing my fourth-year electives and studying for the Medical Boards. His illness interfered with all these things.

I was devastated that Dad was not going to be around to see me graduate. It was *he* who had pleaded with me to go to medical school. It was *he* who promised to pay for it and then reneged on his promise. It was *he* who sued my mother and me a year earlier, devastating me emotionally and disrupting my studies for months.

A few months earlier, I had given him an ultimatum: "Either stop hurting me and sabotaging me, or I will no longer have a relationship with you. I love you more than anyone, but I cannot go on like this." He denied awareness of having done any of this to me. He apologized and promised not to hurt me again. Now he was playing his trump card.

Dad was transferred to another hospital. The following day, he became delirious. Over the next few days, Dani and I stayed there together. I sat by his bedside trying to study, held his head when he vomited and put his penis in the urinal, which he could no longer do by himself. Occasionally, I lay down next to him and cried. When Dani saw me holding him and crying, she reprimanded me, saying not to upset him. From then on, I detached emotionally from the situation.

A few days later, Dad's heart gave out. He was transferred, in a coma, to the intensive care unit. It was February 28, 1990, Pam's fortieth birthday. Pam, Dani, and I sat together in the waiting room of the ICU. We were only allowed to go into his room one at a time for fifteen minutes every hour. After twelve hours, his doctor came over to us. "It's time," he said.

We all went into his room. Pam stroked his face; Dani held his hand, and I stared at the monitors. When they flatlined, I felt Dad's soul leave his body.

Dani started crying. I did not. I asked her what she was feeling. "You can't borrow my emotions. You have to have your own," she replied.

But I felt nothing. It wasn't until my break up with Luke nearly two years later that I got in touch with the pain of my father's death.