

“Kiss Me Darling...”

Hardcourt entered the emergency room, quickly taking her place beside Merritt. An older man, perhaps in his early seventies, was lying on the examination table. His vital signs were currently stable even though he had just suffered a major heart attack. Merritt barked at Hardcourt for her late arrival and then fired several orders at the emergency team.

Wright was sitting in his usual corner monitoring the activities. The hand held device had two or three lights that appeared to be flashing in unison with the patient’s vital signs, and a small glowing screen displayed several pieces of information about the patient’s neurological condition. Wright tapped on a few buttons, clearing the current readings and displaying an entirely different set. Heart rate, respiration and brain activity were all registering through this small device. Wright tapped on a few more buttons and a single waveform with several numbers above it danced on the screen. Wright concealed a smile under his mask. Apparently, the problem that had plagued him the night before was no longer an issue. Now all he had to do was wait.

Merritt turned to one of the emergency team members. “Where’s the results from the...” Before he could finish his sentence the patient went into arrest for the second time. The cardiograph began to emit a steady tone.

“Damn it,” Merritt shouted. “Get those paddles charged! He’s not going that easy!”

Wright looked down at the glowing screen and noticed a change in the waveform. A near perfect sinusoidal wave began to form and was slowly drifting across the screen. “It’s the carrier wave,” he thought, “I’m really going to get it this time.” He pressed a single button and the wave doubled in size, expanding the view. Tiny spikes began to dance up and down the slopes of the larger waveform. Wright’s eyes lit up with anticipation. He was totally oblivious to his friend’s plight as the doctor tried desperately to resuscitate the dying man.

The patient was not responding to the defibrillator. Merritt was already making preparations for an emergency procedure that would allow him to quickly enter the patient’s chest without opening his rib cage. He intended to manually massage the patient’s heart in an attempt to revive him.

The tiny spikes on the small display were now growing both in frequency and intensity. Wright responded with another tap on the keypad. The word “LOCKING” flashed on a lower section of the screen. Wright knew he was close, but contained his elation due to the dismal nature of the situation. “LOCKING” continued to flash on the screen. At any moment, Wright expected the word to change to “LOCKED.”

Merritt had made a diagonal incision, spanning from the center of the patient’s chest all the way to his side. The opening was spread apart to reveal the patient’s heart. Merritt gently caressed the heart and began to massage it. The clattering of instruments and scuffling of the emergency team came to a grinding halt. Merritt made a spiritual plea as he held the man’s life in his hand.

Wright paused to notice the anguish in his friend's eyes. He felt a moment of sorrow for the man on the table, but his mind was reeling with the success in which he was about to partake. The word "LOCKED" finally appeared on the display. In a few moments, Wright thought to himself, all the months of research were finally going to pay off.

Suddenly, the cardiograph beeped. After another second it sounded again. Merritt rolled his eyes upward and whispered, "Thank you," removing his hand from the man's heart as it began to beat unassisted. The tone from the cardiograph became consistent and Merritt sighed with relief.

Wright looked stunned as the waveform on the display simply disappeared. He mumbled an obscenity under his breath, but the room was still fairly quiet. Everyone in the room turned to Wright in unison with a look of utter shock on their face. Wright, realizing what he had just done, offered a sincere apology. He stumbled as he attempted to explain that it was frustration with the device that prompted the crude remark. Most of the staff, unaware of his real intentions, simply shook it off, but Merritt was livid.

"Let's get this man up to O.R.," Merritt said deliberately. Wright lowered his head in shame, feeling an overwhelming sense of guilt. He watched as they carted the patient out of the room, earnestly hoping the man would survive.

Looking to Merritt, Brighton gave him an enthusiastic congratulation for his astounding medical savvy. The young intern made the admission that he had never seen this procedure performed under such critical circumstances. Merritt responded modestly and gave a nod of gratitude for the compliment.

Turning to Wright, Merritt's demeanor was suddenly quite cheery. "Whadda you say we shoot over to the Flats for a drink a little later? I feel pretty good about this one."

Wright, a bit dumbfounded by his friend's apparent apathy over his previous action, responded solemnly. "Yeah—okay—that sounds good."

Merritt nodded graciously and took off down the main corridor.

Dusk was beginning to capture the remains of the day, creating beautiful hues of orange and gold. A wall of towering dark clouds loomed ominously above the sunset, threatening to engulf the picturesque scene. Through a large window in the neurology building, Bradford could be seen sitting at his desk reading.

The phone on his desk rang out urgently, startling him. He picked up the receiver to hear the same voice he had spoken with earlier that day.

"Well, what is it?" Bradford barked, tossing the papers he had been reviewing down upon the desktop.

"You told me to call you if Wright did anything out of the ordinary," the voice responded nervously. "I'm not quite sure if this qualifies but..." The voice paused, fearing chastisement from Bradford. "Wright appeared to be quite upset when Dr. Merritt saved our last patient."

Bradford responded with great enthusiasm. "Excellent. Excellent! Perhaps, I won't have to do anything. It sounds to me like he's going to cut his own throat. How did Dr. Merritt respond to his actions?"

The voice relaxed a little. "Actually, Dr. Merritt wasn't really bothered by it at all. He was too elated about his success in the ER."

"Merritt must be covering for Wright. He's too much of a sentimentalist to let something like that go unnoticed," Bradford spouted forcefully.

“Perhaps you’re right,” the voice volunteered uneasily.

“I know I’m right,” Bradford retorted.

The voice hesitated momentarily and then spoke. “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Yes,” Bradford responded devilishly. “Try to get on good terms with our Doctor. Perhaps, if you could convince him that you’re trustworthy, he’ll reveal what Wright’s really up to.”

“Do you really think that Dr. Merritt knows what’s going on?” the voice inquired.

“Absolutely!” Bradford responded harshly and replaced the receiver.

Dividing the west and east sections of Cleveland is an industrialized port, known as The Flats—an area of waterways and intersecting railroads now populated with a series of bars, night clubs and restaurants.

Wright walked into one of the restaurants that he and Merritt frequented occasionally. Several large windows stood on the far wall, giving way to a striking view of the main waterway. Two large railway bridges, resting above the narrow sections of river, were accentuated with bright glowing auras of blue and orange light. He found his friend sitting at the bar. Merritt looked somewhat somber as he held a glass in front of his face, slowly swirling the contents.

Wright approached apprehensively, not knowing how his friend was going to react.

“Hey, Chris,” he opened cordially, “How are you doing?”

Merritt ceased his activity for a moment, turned his head slowly towards Wright and then returned to his drink. His tone was sarcastic, “Well, let’s see—I’m watching my best friend flush his career down the toilet and he seems intent

upon taking me with him. Yeah, I think that pretty much sums it up.” Merritt downed the contents of his glass.

“I had a funny feeling that you weren’t going to let me slide on this one,” Wright responded, trying to lighten up the situation. Merritt ignored the attempt.

“Damn right I’m not going to let you slide. The only reason I acted so cordial earlier was because I knew we were being watched. I had to play it off. Even then I still think there are going to be some repercussions.” Merritt motioned to the bartender for another drink.

Wright requested a Vodka Tonic and sat down next to him. “Look Chris, I’m sorry about what happened, but I was so close. I actually had a signal lock.”

Merritt closed his eyes in anger. “You’ll have to forgive me for not being excited, but I happen to think that man’s life was slightly more important.”

“Believe me when I say that I’m happy you saved him. Please Chris, I only did what I did because I was frustrated with the monitor.” Wright said in defense.

“Oh, come on! You just said the monitor was working. Don’t give me that crap! You were upset because you were just about to get your readings and the guy didn’t die like you wanted him to,” Merritt barked, the alcohol now assisting his rage.

Wright sat there for a moment trying to contain his anger. He knew that Merritt was slightly intoxicated and didn’t want to escalate the argument any further.

“Look, I’d be a liar if I said that this research doesn’t mean everything to me, but I haven’t forgotten what you’re trying to accomplish. I admire you more than you know, and it’s not just because you’re a fine doctor. You care about people. You don’t just look at them like some HMO number.

That’s a quality that very few people in your profession share. Typically, they hide behind doctor-patient protocols and never consider...”

Merritt intervened abruptly. “I get the point, but that doesn’t excuse your actions in the ER.”

“I know that Chris. So believe me when I say I’m very sorry for my comment and I won’t make that mistake again. I need to contain my reactions no matter what the outcome.”

Merritt nodded in agreement. “That’s right Jack. You’re not going to make that mistake again, because I’m not going to allow you back in the emergency room.”

Wright was flabbergasted. He sat for a moment trying to speak, but couldn’t assemble the words. Finally he responded. “Chris, please don’t do this to me. I’m so close to getting a valid reading.”

“You’ll just have to go with the data you’ve got,” Merritt said coldly.

“I haven’t got anything! You know that! Please reconsider your decision. If you bail out on me now, this project is over. Bradford will get what he wants and you’ll have helped him achieve it.” Wright was pleading desperately.

“Hey, don’t try to pin this on me. You’re the one who’s been pushing this project and stepping on everyone’s toes in the process. I’m sorry but I’m not going to take the fall for you.” Merritt started to get up. He wasn’t going to allow Wright to sway his decision.

Wright had a look of sheer agony on his face. “Chris, stop—just for a moment and hear me out. Please!”

Merritt hesitated and then sat back down. “What is it?”

Wright took a deep breath and began to speak. “I’ve spent three years of my life researching and engineering this project. I’ve sold my house, my car and everything Cass and I owned

to fund this project. When I presented it to the universities they laughed in my face. You were the one who convinced Bradford that my research was worth pursuing. You've gone above and beyond what anyone could ask a friend to do. I realize that. And now I ask you once again to please let me finish what I started."

Merritt couldn't ignore the plea. He sat for a moment trying to ease the lump in his throat and then formulated his thoughts.

"Okay Jack, but with a few conditions."

"Anything, name it." Wright responded anxiously.

"First of all, you need to tell Bradford you'll accept his offer, but you need another week to wrap things up in ER."

Wright flinched at the thought as Merritt continued.

"That should keep him off our backs long enough for you to get a valid reading. Second of all, I want you to start acting more respectful towards Nurse Hardcourt. She may act cold and heartless sometimes, but she's the best nurse on our staff. If you show her a little respect she'll probably back off. And finally, I want you to relax a little. You've been killing yourself over this project and I'm really worried about your health. The monitor works, right?"

Wright nodded confidently.

"Well, then all you need to do is relax and wait for your opportunity to get those readings." Merritt placed a hand on his arm and spoke genuinely. "Jack, I'm just as excited as you are about getting to the truth, but you have to remember what the ER is about. You'll get your chance. You've just got to be patient," Merritt said reassuringly.

Wright nodded in agreement and the two men proceeded to finish their drinks.

Slightly after midnight, Wright returned home. He entered the shack in his customary fashion and turned on the light to find everything in its place. There was a strong urge to examine the information he had collected in the emergency room earlier that day, but instead, he considered Merritt's request and turned in for the night.

Entering the bedroom, he noticed the pillows and sheets still lying on the floor. The disarray reminded him of his last nightmare, and he paused momentarily as the image of Cassandra flashed through his mind. Quickly shaking off the image, he replaced the sheets. After collecting all the pillows into his arms, he swayed for a moment and then collapsed onto the bed. The relief bestowed by Merritt, along with a renewed confidence in his research, provided him with the vehicle he needed for a sound restful repose. He drifted off effortlessly within minutes.

Several hours had passed and Wright was deep within his own subconsciousness. He wrestled around slightly, but seemed to be less disturbed by the dream he was having this time.

Wright stood in a window overlooking a small section of park on the east side of the hospital. There was a thick line of equally spaced trees, now absent of most of their leaves, and the ground was slowly disappearing into a flurry of white as small flakes of snow gently tumbled to the ground. He turned away from the window and drew his eyes upon Cassandra lying in a hospital bed. She looked relatively peaceful with the exception of several tubes connected to her arms and a cardiograph stood beside her bed silently monitoring her heart.

"Look sweetheart it's snowing again," Wright uttered softly, hoping to capture a smile.

Cassandra was very ill, but managed to turn her head and responded in a frail, weakened voice. “I thought you hated the snow. The messes it makes with the salt and ice.”

Wright grinned and retorted. “I just never took the time to appreciate the real beauty of it. It’s a quality that I’ve been cultivating from you.”

She recognized the effort and smiled. “Jack, I’ve always known that you were a sensitive man. You try to shroud your feelings in that macho persona, but you can’t fool me.”

Wright was feeling somewhat transparent. Cassandra gave him a reassuring grin and continued.

“I know this is killing you inside. You’ve been so strong through everything—the tests, the chemo, the counseling sessions. And through all that, I don’t think I’ve seen you cry one time. Please Jack, just for once, take down the front and let it out.”

A single tear formed in the corner of her eye and finally ran down her cheek.

Wright began to speak but paused momentarily to recapture his emotions. “Cass, I’m afraid that if I start crying now that I won’t be able to stop. I want to be strong for you. I figure that if I start to break down, you will expend all your energy trying to comfort me. I want you to fight this thing and I want you to know that you can rely on me for that strength...” He couldn’t continue.

“Jack, you have been a pillar of strength for me, but now I think it’s time for you to let go. I’m dying and nothing’s going to change that now. The doctors have done everything they can and I am just so tired. Jack, I’m afraid that if you don’t let it out and I die...”

Wright intervened. “You’re not going to die. You’ve got to fight it.”

“Jack, please. I am so tired of fighting and I really want to sleep, but I need to know that you’ll be okay. I need to know that you can accept this and get on with life.”

Wright turned away as the tears welled up in his eyes. He fought the constriction in his throat as he spoke. “I’m sorry Cass, but I’m not ready to give up. I love you more than life itself and I’m not ready for you to go. I know that may sound selfish, but you’re the only thing in my life that makes it worth living. You hear what I’m saying Cassandra Penelope Wright?”

He turned back to look at her, but her eyes were closed. Wright paused momentarily with a look of confusion on his face, but soon realized what had happened.

He yelled out her name in agony. “Cassandra!”

“Oh God, please no! Please, please, please no!” He scurried about her bed trying to wake her.

One of the nurses came upon the tragic scene and grabbed Wright by the arm, trying to calm him. “Please Mr. Wright, she’s gone now. Please just calm down.”

Wright jumped back away from the nurse, crying and shouting incoherently. “Don’t tell me she’s gone! I don’t want to hear it!”

Another nurse entered the room and shortly after, Merritt followed. Quickly assessing the situation, Merritt grabbed his friend in a strong embrace. “I’m so sorry Jack. I’m so sorry.”

Wright struggled at first, but finally gave into his own sorrow and continued to sob. Merritt motioned for the nurses to leave the room and just stood there holding his friend. After a few moments, Wright finally calmed down. Merritt assisted him to a chair and Wright sat there hunched over. He mumbled pitifully, “She was right Chris.”

“About what?” Merritt inquired sensitively.

“She was trying to tell me that if I didn’t let my feelings out while she was still alive I’d regret it. And she was right. My last words to her were words of anger. I was so caught up in denying her death, that I didn’t take the time to say goodbye.”

Wright began to sob again. Merritt didn’t know how to respond and decided it was best to just listen.

“There were so many things we wanted to do, so many places we wanted to see. And now it’s too late. Cass is gone.” Wright stopped abruptly, recomposed himself and then spoke clearly. “I’ll be alright Chris. I’d just like a little time alone with her. Okay?”

Merritt nodded kindly and left the room, shutting the door behind him.

Wright stood up and approached Cassandra’s lifeless body. He knelt down beside her bed, gently placing his hand upon her arm. “You’re finally at peace my love. You don’t have to worry about the pain anymore. You can finally get your sleep. And don’t worry about me. Someday we will be together again. I know in my heart that nothing can keep us apart, not even death. I will find a way and we will be together again...”

Suddenly her torso lifted violently and her face was now inches from his. Her skin was gray and putrid with thousands of tiny blood vessels visible throughout, and her eyes were completely black and lifeless. As her cold white lips opened, Wright gagged, nearly vomiting from the rancid stench.

“You stupid, stupid man,” she spouted coarsely, “You are tapping into something that man was never suppose to tap into. If you have any sense in that puny little cranium of yours, you’ll take my advice and *leave it alone.*”

The last three words rang out in his mind. Her frigid hand clasped tightly around his arm and she spoke again, but now in a sweet loving voice. "Darling, please don't let them take me. Kiss me and let me know how much you love me." Just as she said that a thick black liquid began spewing from her mouth. Wright tried to back away, but she pulled him closer with unnatural strength.

"Cassandra, please stop!" he shouted, but the hideous corpse laughed insidiously, continuing to draw him closer as he fought to break away. Merritt entered the room and Wright pleaded for him to help, but instead Merritt responded curiously as if he were oblivious to Cassandra's altered condition. "What's the matter Jack? Isn't this what you wanted? Cass is alive. Show her how much you love her. Give her a kiss!"

Wright fought violently, but it was no use. He held his mouth closed as their lips met. The corpse's tongue pressed harshly against his lips trying to pry them apart as warm viscous fluid ran down his chin. His eyes widened with horror as her tongue penetrated his lips.

Wright jumped out of his bed flailing his arms in the air. "Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!" he screamed and finally opened his eyes. He looked around the room a little dazed by the experience and then uttered, "What the..."