

# Bittersweet Success

Merritt staggered for a moment but eventually motioned towards the entrance. One of the nurses met him at the door.

“Dr. Merritt, you know you can’t come in here. Hospital regulations strictly prohibit family...”

Merritt quickly interceded. “Nurse, I know the regulations, but I have to see him! You have to let me in there!”

“Doctor please. I know you’re upset, but we have things well under control. Dr. Belcher has already stabilized his condition and is now preparing for emergency surgery.”

Merritt’s face contorted with anguish, but he knew that she was right. He finally resigned himself to the fact that he would merely be an observer. After pondering on that thought for a few moments he then turned to Wright.

“Jack—I think you should get in there,” Merritt snapped. The uneasiness was apparent in his tone.

Wright turned to his friend with a confused expression and responded. “But that’s your father in there. I—I just don’t think I could do this.” Wright hesitated for a moment, trying desperately to find an excuse to deny his friend’s request. “Besides, he’s not going to die!”

Merritt took a deep breath. “Look. The last thing I’d want is to lose him. But just ask yourself this question. If he knew this was his time, don’t you think *he’d* want you in there?”

Wright suddenly felt a sickening pang in the pit of his stomach. Of all the times he had entered this room, he never

considered the morbid nature of his actions. For the first time he felt an overwhelming sense of guilt.

Merritt fought with his own conscience as he spoke. “This may be your last chance! You’ve got to take the opportunity now while you still can!” He paused as the emotions began to creep into his throat. “Jack, remember what he said about friendship? I’m with you on this. No matter what the outcome, I won’t hold it against you. If my father’s going to die on that table, nothing you do will change that!”

Wright sighed, but finally conceded to his friend’s request. As he entered the room, one of the nurses provided him with the appropriate medical apparel. He took a position away from the action and produced the small black box once again.

John laid motionless on the examination table as the emergency team scurried around him. Merritt looked on helplessly. The attending physician, Dr. Harold Belcher, conveyed an air of confidence as he calmly orchestrated the actions of the entire medical team. Nevertheless, completely aware of the urgent nature of the situation, he moved with great haste as he attempted to save his patient.

Wright was already prepared to take his measurements as he stood there waiting. He still felt the sickening unease brought on by the revelation of his own morbid actions. “How could I have been so cold,” he thought to himself.

Belcher avoided raising his voice as the situation escalated. His tone was calm and steady as he continued to dictate his orders to the medical team. Wright took notice of this style, which was a stark contrast to Merritt’s more colorful, debonair approach. Yet, it was merely etiquette.

The team responded in unison, like a finely tuned orchestra, reacting to every motion from their esteemed

conductor. Similarly, the cardiograph reacted to each labored pulse from John's damaged heart and the now familiar tone set a defining tempo for the action. The medical team fought to keep it at bay.

"His BP's still rising," shouted one of the nurses. "170 over 95!"

"Come on people, let's get him stabilized," Belcher exclaimed with commanding authority.

Unfortunately, John's brain was systematically being deprived of life sustaining oxygen and the damage was already taking its toll on his higher brain functions. Nevertheless, the medical team fought relentlessly to save him.

Wright's remorse turned to anguish as the now familiar waveform began to dance on the small glowing display. He tapped on the keypad, foolishly hoping that the device was malfunctioning. It was not. The reading was becoming more and more prominent as John slipped deeper into the ultimate abyss.

Without warning, the cardiograph began to flat-line. The tone in Belcher's voice fluctuated a little, but he still managed to maintain composure. "Let's defibrillate now," he bellowed and took the paddles from the nurse. "Clear," he shouted and everyone stood back as he hit John with the charge. John's torso jerked and lifted off the table slightly. Merritt sighed and placed his hand across his forehead as he mumbled a prayer.

The waveform was beginning to grow in intensity and the now familiar spikes began to form along the larger wave. "LOCKING" was flashing at the bottom of the screen. Wright glanced over towards Merritt as if to encourage him, but his expression said otherwise. In any other circumstance, he might have been anticipating the celebration of months of

unremitting hard labor, but the potential for a bittersweet success merely left a bad taste in his mouth.

Belcher finally displayed some concern as a single bead of sweat ran down his forehead. He fought desperately to save his patient, but his efforts were becoming futile. The cardiograph had been flat-lining for several minutes.

Suddenly, the cardiograph sounded, and almost as quickly as it had come, the tone resolved into a steady interval of short familiar beeps once again. An almost unanimous sigh of relief filled the room.

Merritt's eyes widened as he looked towards Belcher with overwhelming appreciation. Belcher nodded nonchalantly in response. As John's vital signs began to normalize his eyes slowly opened. With a renewed sense of relief, Merritt smiled cautiously and took a deep relaxing breath.

Wright, on the other hand, was perplexed as he continued to monitor the device. The word "LOCKING" was still blinking steadily on the screen and he tapped the keypad several times in an attempt to clear it. But again the reading was valid. Wright glanced towards Merritt once again with a foreboding expression of sorrow in his eyes. Merritt's smile quickly faded into confusion, discerning his friend's obvious distress.

In an almost bizarre manner, John turned his head toward Wright. His face contorted with an expression of utter horror and fear, and then he sunk into unconsciousness once again. The cardiograph squealed horribly as the incessant tone returned. Nearly everyone in the room froze momentarily, shocked at what they had just witnessed.

Hesitantly, Wright drew his eyes down toward the monitor. To his utter dismay the word "LOCKED" was already fixated in the lower corner, and with only a momentary

hesitation, a string of numbers began flooding across the small glowing display. As they reached the bottom, the numbers began scrolling upward, disappearing as a new set appeared below. Closing his eyes, Wright turned his head away, feeling a sense of shame for his untimely success.

Belcher demanded the paddles once again. “Clear,” he exclaimed and hit the man with the charge. “Come on old fellow don’t give up on me now.” Belcher fired off a few more orders as he continued defibrillation, but the cardiograph was unwavering.

Wright was mortified as the monitor continued to flash its barrage of numbers. “Why did it have to be John?” he thought to himself. The irony of the situation was eerily disconcerting. Then the words, “*leave it alone*” echoed in his mind. Was his own subconscious simply playing tricks on him, or was there truly something more evil involved? He was contemplating these questions when suddenly, the numbers ceased. The words, “TRANSMISSION COMPLETE,” were now slowly blinking across the center of the screen. He glanced up at Merritt once again. Merritt’s face was expressionless as he focused on his father’s lifeless body and Belcher’s continued futile attempt. Finally drawing his eyes upon Wright, Merritt desperately searched for even the slightest glimmer of hope, but Wright had none to give.

Belcher was resigned to the fact that he could not save his patient. Calling the time of death, he turned towards the exit and approached Merritt.

“Doctor, I’m—sorry,” Belcher said somberly. He paused for a moment considering his next words, but ill equipped to relay any sincere emotion, he simply nodded and walked away.

One by one the other members of the medical team emerged, giving a customary nod of sympathy or apologetic gesture as they passed. Externally, Merritt remained completely stoic, but internally a surge of painful emotions was beginning to well up.

As the final member passed, Merritt reluctantly entered the room containing his father's lifeless body. Wright was still standing in the corner, wishing desperately that he could have been transparent at that particular moment. But Merritt failed to even acknowledge him. Instead, he approached his father and stopped at the head of the examination table.

He stood there for several seconds speechless and motionless. Wright knew the pain he was feeling, and for that reason remained silent. Merritt eventually collected his thoughts and spoke. "Well dad, I guess you finally got your wish. You can be with mom now." Fighting off the constriction in his throat he spoke once again. "I just wish I could've said goodbye."

His emotions had finally betrayed him as he began to weep bitterly. At that moment Wright took his cue and approached his grief-stricken friend. Merritt did not dissuade him as Wright placed a hand upon his shoulder.

"Oh Chris—I'm so sorry. Believe me. I know what you're going through right now." There was heartfelt sincerity in his tone.

Ironically, Wright was holding back his own tears as the empathy for his friend along with the personal reminder of Cassandra's death was beginning to trouble him. But more concerned with the tragedy at hand, he simply suppressed the ill feelings and continued. "We'll get through this. I'm here for you just like you were there for me. Forget about the damn research."

For a moment Merritt looked as if he were going to embrace his friend, but instead he grabbed him by the shirt in a rather violent manner.

“The hell you are,” he barked. “You’ve dragged me into this project and, so help me God, you’re going to see this thing through. That man,” Merritt waved a hand towards his father’s body, “just lost his life. And you recorded it! Don’t give me this crap! I know damn well you wouldn’t throw this away now. If you want to help me get *through* this, you’ll finish what you started!”

Merritt was nearly breathless as he channeled every last ounce of strength he had to convey his discontent. Releasing his friend, he slumped a little and bowed his head in sorrow. Wright stood there slightly dumbfounded.

“Look Jack—I’m sorry about that, but this is a huge blow right now and totally unexpected. I have to make funeral arrangements, flight reservations, phone calls. And after all that I have to fly back to California with my father’s body.” Merritt paused for a moment as he choked on his own words. The thought of placing his father in a cargo hold was horrifying. Mentally shaking off the image, he spoke much more deliberately. “So, you’re on your own now. There’re no more chances to be had. I just hope you got something.”

Merritt looked exasperated as another horrid realization came to mind. “God—how am I going to break this to my sister? She’s not going to take this very well. You know she wasn’t there when my mother died. So this is gonna just devastate her. Damn it, how the hell am I going to break it to her? I’ve got so much to do now and I don’t even know where to start...”

Wright had never seen his friend so disoriented before. On the contrary, Merritt always seemed to maintain a calm

demeanor in crisis situations, but this had simply hit too close to home. “Just when you think you’ve been stretched to the breaking point, something else pops up and kicks you in the teeth!”

“Chris, you’re talking about your father here. I know how upset you are right now, but...”

Merritt looked almost crazed as he responded. “Don’t try to pacify me! I tried to warn him, but did he listen? Of course not, he was too damn stubborn!” In an almost bizarre fashion, he turned towards his father’s body and began barking at the corpse. “You self-centered bastard, all you could think about is you! Did you ever consider that *I* needed you? I wasn’t prepared for this!” The anger and sorrow had brought him to tears again. “I tried to tell you,” he uttered breathlessly. “I tried to tell you...”

Wright grabbed him by the shoulders, pulling him away from the body. “Chris, please. You’ve got to stop. I can’t stand seeing you like this, and it’s not helping.” After resisting for a moment, Merritt finally backed away.

Eventually catching his breath, he spoke once again. His tone was now very somber. “I need to be alone. Can you give me some time please?” Without seeking affirmation from Wright, he turned back towards his father’s lifeless body.

“Alright, I’ll be in the lounge if you need me,” Wright retorted. He paused for an acknowledgment, but Merritt failed to respond. Ultimately, he nodded quietly and departed.

Entering the lounge, Wright retrieved a cup of coffee and sat down. Although he knew the room was empty, he still managed to give it a once over. Confident that he was alone, he began thinking aloud. “What the hell is going on,” he murmured. The stress and anxiety of the past week’s events were taking their toll. He still felt a tinge of nausea

from the ER, and felt almost powerless to comfort his friend. He began pondering more deeply. “Maybe, Chris was right. Maybe I have been stepping on everyone’s toes—including his. At what cost am I willing to succeed? Does it include hurting others? And have I already crossed that line?” Wright took a deep breath and leaned back, reflecting on these thoughts.

After several minutes, Merritt finally entered the lounge. Wright stood up, but Merritt motioned silently with his hands for him to remain seated. As Merritt took his own seat, Wright leaned forward and spoke. “I’ve been doing some serious thinking and I’ve come to the conclusion that I’ve been a real jerk.”

Merritt’s failure to reply somewhat confirmed Wright’s contrite admission.

“Well, I’m really sorry Chris. And I’m even more sorry about what happened in the ER. I’ve been pushing and pushing this project and neglected to see what I’ve been doing to you.”

“It’s alright. I think I can cut you a little slack. I know you’re not responsible for my father’s death.” Merritt sighed at the thought for a moment and continued. “Needless to say, you still have my support and, if my father was still here, I’m sure you’d have his support too.”

“Well, I really appreciate the vote of confidence. We’ve come this far and the personal costs have been severe, but I know your father would’ve wanted to see this thing through as well.”

Wright paused. He was hesitant to pursue the subject any further, seriously considering the current emotional state of his friend. Yet, Merritt seemed to read into his thoughts and spoke candidly.

“Jack, I know you’re bursting at the seams to talk about this thing. And to be honest, I’d like to know that my father’s death wasn’t totally in vain.”

Responding with a single nod, Wright produced the monitor. “I definitely got something.” He paused for moment, giving Merritt time to absorb the full impact of the statement. After several seconds he finally continued. “Truthfully, I was feeling horrible about the fact that it was your father lying on that examination table and there were several times when I considered walking out. But I realize now that there’s got to be some sort of rhyme or reason to all this chaos. Let’s face it. Nothing about this project has been routine. The nightmares, the technical problems and now the personal loss. We’re getting close to uncovering something very powerful, and in some respects, perhaps very evil. Yet, I really don’t think this would’ve dissuaded your father. Do you?” Wright continued his dissertation without acknowledgement. “In fact, I think that’s what he was trying to tell us last night. Needless to say, there’s one thing I am sure of. Your father wouldn’t have had it any other way. And now there’s a good chance that his death will be the turning point of this entire investigation. In which case, his death was definitely not in vain.”

Contemplating his friend’s words, Merritt took a deep breath and finally spoke. “Jack you have a point. And I know that my father would be very honored.” He paused for a moment to recompose himself. “You know—I do believe that everything happens for a reason. And ultimately, things have unfolded the way they have because that’s the way they were meant to be in the first place. I guess I just needed to be reminded of what I already knew so well.”

Raising a hand to his forehead, Merritt closed his eyes as he rubbed his forehead. He held this position for several seconds and finally, reopening his eyes, he spoke again. “Look, I’ll be alright. I think I just need a little time. You my friend, on the other the hand, have no time to waste. As we speak, I’m sure Bradford’s scheming new ways to try and thwart this project.”

Inside the conference room, Bradford sat rather impatiently as the Medical Board continued to examine the documents he had distributed. Finally dropping the folder on the table, Dr. Tunney removed a pair of reading spectacles and addressed the man at the opposing end.

“Dr. Bradford, these are very serious accusations. And I’m still curious about the circumstances in which you obtained this information. This medical facility is based upon a strict code of ethics, and I believe that you have circumvented them for your own personal agenda.”

Bradford was instantly on the defensive and retorted angrily. “What is it with you people? The bureaucracy in this room is thick enough to cut with a scalpel. I cannot believe what I’m hearing! There’s a man down there performing unauthorized experiments right under your noses and you’re more concerned about the petty details of my administrative practices? What’s wrong with this picture?”

Tunney was unaffected by his outburst and spoke in a calm controlled manner. “Doctor, you can be assured that this Board is quite capable of executing decisions promptly and effectively.” Leaning forward, she spoke more sternly. “But this Board also has a responsibility to examine all the facts in a matter before exercising its authority. We will be conducting a thorough investigation to determine the validity

of your accusations. For now, I would suggest that you refocus your attention on your administrative duties and leave this investigation to us.” Bradford opened his mouth preparing to speak, but Tunney quickly intervened. “Thank you doctor. That will be all.” Her final words left no room for debate. The meeting had concluded.

Visibly irritated, Bradford shuffled his paperwork haphazardly into a folder, stood up, and left the room.