

RESTORATION

Daniel C. McWhorter

Chapter 1

**December 15, 2023 9:15 PM Central Daylight Time
New Beginnings Cancer Treatment Center
Kansas City, Missouri**

Where am I? Who are these people? Why do they all look so concerned? Oh yeah, I'm dying.

Doctor Evan Feldman, world-renowned geneticist and CEO of a large, publicly traded biotech company was rushed to the hospital three days ago and had been drifting in and out of consciousness ever since. He vaguely remembered collapsing the last time he got out of bed to use the bathroom and he remembered the ambulance ride from his home to the nearest emergency center. After that, nothing.

Now he was in a private hospital room with a nurse doing God-knows-what on the diagnostic console to his left, and his daughter and her husband were talking to a doctor at the foot of the bed. His daughter was crying.

“So, how much time does he have?” Dylan Harris asked as he put his arm around his wife and pulled her close.

Doctor Miles Conley hated that question. He had been a doctor for over thirty years and, despite significant advancements in technology over that time, nothing yet

Restoration

existed that definitively answered the question of when a diseased or damaged body would cease to function. So, he resorted, as he always did in these cases, to the truth.

“Honestly, I just don't know. It could be hours, or it could be days. I don't think more than that though.”

Lily Feldman Harris burst into tears again and buried her face in Dylan's chest. Dylan put both arms around her and held her tight.

“I'm sorry, Lil, at least he's not in any pain,” he said.

Dylan felt Lily tense, and he wished that he could take back that last part.

“What does not being in pain have to do with it? That's supposed to make it okay that he's dying?”

Her voice trembled as she spoke but it was hard to tell if it was because she was crying or angry, Dylan suspected it was both.

“I'm sorry, hon, you know I didn't mean that.”

Dylan tried to hold her hand but Lily put both hands over her face and cried even harder. He loved Evan as his own father but they knew this day was coming and there was nothing anyone could do to stop it—he only wanted to take away Lily's pain.

“Doctor Conley,” the nurse interjected, “the patient is awake.”

Everyone turned to look at Evan. Lily stopped crying, wiped the tears from her eyes and moved to the side of the bed.

“Dad, it's Lily,” she said in the happiest voice she could muster. “Do you know where you are?”

Doctor Conley moved to the bedside and leaned over his patient.

“Don't talk, Doctor Feldman, you are on a respirator,” he said

He took a small penlight from his pocket and flashed it in Evan's eyes. Evan's pupils responded slower than normal but, given the medications being used to control his pain, that was expected.

“Good, blink once if you recognize this person.” He pointed at Lily. “Blink twice if you don't.”

One blink.

“Excellent. Blink once if you know where you are.”

One blink.

“Do you know how long you've been here?”

Two blinks.

Daniel C. McWhorter

“Not to worry. You've been here three days. You suffered a hemorrhage of the interlobar pulmonary artery. We stopped the bleeding, but the cancer has destroyed a large area of the adjacent intermedius bronchus and has spread throughout your lymphatic system. Do you understand what I am telling you?”

Being diagnosed with lung cancer at age fifty-nine had been a cruel twist of genetic fate for Evan, who had never smoked a day in his life. He had tried every form of treatment available but they had found the cancer too late and there was no stopping its deadly rampage throughout his body.

He looked at Doctor Conley and blinked once.

“Well then, I will leave you with your family. I'll be back to check on you later,” he said.

Doctor Conley turned to Lily and put his hand on her shoulder. “Not too long please, he needs to rest.”

“Not too long,” Lily acknowledged.

“I'll be at the nurse's station right outside if you need anything,” the nurse said as she followed the doctor out of the room.

Lily wiped the tears from her eyes before sitting in the chair next to Evan's bed.

He had a large IV tube sticking out of the top of his wrist and there was blood visible under the clear bandage holding it in place. His skin was so thin and pale she swore she could see every bone and blood vessel.

She took his hand in hers and rubbed his fingers with her thumb.

“How are you feeling, Dad, can I get you anything?”

Two blinks.

“Aubrey is with Dylan's parents. She wanted to come, but I thought we should wait until after you woke up. Maybe we can bring her for a visit tomorrow if you are feeling better. Would you like that?”

One blink.

“You gave us quite a scare there, Evan.” Dylan stepped forward and rested his hand on the dying man's knee. “You'll pull through though. You're one of the toughest guys I've ever met and if anyone can beat this thing, you can.”

Lily glared at Dylan and hissed, “Oh, will you please stop with the optimistic bullshit!”

“What? I mean it. Your dad is tough and if anyone can beat this, he can!”

Restoration

Lily's eyes told Dylan to stop talking.

Dylan decided that Lily needed to be alone with her father.

"I will grab a coffee. Do you want one?"

"Yes, please," she said, thankful that he got the message.

Dylan gave Evan's knee a squeeze. "Take care, Evan, I'll see you tomorrow when we bring Aubrey."

Lily sat quietly, stroking her dad's hand for several minutes.

"Dad, do you think you will be with Mom?"

A tear welled up in Evan's eye and slid down his cheek.

One blink.

Lily's mom, Christina, had died three years ago in a plane crash. She had flown to Hong Kong on a corporate jet to spend time with Evan after he spoke at the International Conference on Genomics. The plane crashed in the middle of the Pacific Ocean after refueling in Hawaii, cause unknown and no survivors—at least they had found her body. Aubrey was born two months later.

"Will you please tell her I love her and I miss her and wish so much that she had met Aubrey?"

One blink.

"I love you, Dad. You're my hero and I promise that Aubrey will grow up knowing what an amazing man you are," she sobbed. "What amazing parents you both were."

Lily stood up and wiped the tears from his cheeks. She looked into his brown eyes and smiled before kissing him softly on the forehead.

"I only hope that Dylan and I can be half the parents you were," she whispered as she leaned forward to kiss him on the forehead.

"Good night, Dad, I'll see you in the morning." Lily squeezed her father's hand one last time before picking up her purse and heading for the door.

She reached for the handle to open the door but it was as if every ounce of strength had left her body and it wouldn't open. She took a deep breath and pulled again. The door opened, and she saw the nurse sitting at her station across the hall.

The nurse looked up and smiled at her. "Is everything okay?"

Lily tried to step forward, but she was suddenly overwhelmed with fear. What if she never saw her father again? What if she could never be the mother to Aubrey that her mom had been to her? What would her life be like without her ever-patient and loving father to guide her?

Daniel C. McWhorter

She willed herself to step forward but her legs would not support her. She stumbled into the hallway, slamming into a technician who had just exited the room next door. Lily fainted and crashed hard to the floor.

Dylan, who was just down the hall filling a second up of coffee at the vending machine, dropped both cups and sprinted toward her. The nurse checked her vital signs and tried to wake her while the technician rushed down the hall to retrieve a stretcher.

“What's wrong with her,” Dylan cried out in anguish. “Will she be okay?”

They loaded her on the stretcher and the technician wheeled her down the hall toward the emergency department.

The nurse grabbed Dylan's hand. “She will be fine, she fainted. She's under a lot of stress and I don't think she has been eating.”

“Yea...yeah, we both are.”

She gave Dylan a reassuring squeeze. “Please wait here, I'll come get you in a few minutes.”

Twenty minutes passed before she returned, which to Dylan seemed like forever.

“You can see her now,” she said. “She's fine. She needs more fluids and we've asked her to eat something before we discharge her. We have her on an IV and we have given her some soup. She can go home as soon as she's done eating.”

“Oh, thank God. Thank you, thank you, thank you!” Dylan clasped his hands and bowed his head in silent prayer before leaping forward and giving the nurse a giant bear hug. “And thank you!”

“You're welcome, now if you'll please follow me,” she said.

The nurse led Dylan to a quiet, curtained off area near the back of the emergency department. He pushed passed the curtains and rushed to his wife's bedside.

“Oh baby,” he said. “I'm so glad you are okay, you scared me.”

“It's nothing. I just need to take better care of myself,” Lily replied.

Dylan leaned over and kissed her gently on the lips.

“I'm sorry this is so hard on you. I'm trying, I am really trying,” he said, tears streaming down his cheeks.

“I know you are. It's not your fault. I haven't eaten since yesterday and I guess it caught up with me. I promise I will

Restoration

take better care of myself, you and Aubrey are too important to me.”

“I love you.” Dylan gave her another kiss.

“I love you too.” She kissed him back.

An hour later they were home. They were both exhausted and wasted no time getting ready for bed. Dylan slept soundly, the sleep of someone who hadn't slept for days and who was physically and emotionally drained. Lily couldn't make her brain stop working no matter how tired she was.

First Mom and now Dad, she thought. I can't do this without him!

She lay on her side facing away from Dylan and cried quietly until there were no tears left. When sleep finally came, it was the same nightmare-ridden sleep she had endured for the past year—but it was better than nothing.