

The Dream

by Kara Mathis

Elise Montgomery rocked gently on the porch swing, the sweet scent of magnolias thick in the warm spring air. She no longer knew how long she'd been sitting there—or if she had ever really come outside at all. Two months had passed since Elise had received the notice, that dreaded message on U.S. government stationery. She could still hear the words ringing in her ears. *Please accept my sincere condolences and deepest sympathy...*

Her eyelids grew heavy, and her thoughts began to drift. Somewhere far away, a steady beeping kept time with her breath. The sight of a yellow school bus brought her back to the present. The bus pulled up to the mailbox and opened its clunky doors. A bright-eyed third grader with blond curls and an eager grin came hopping down the steps and dashed across the soft, green grass toward Elise, her eyes twinkling like blue topaz in the sunlight. Elise smiled. *You have your father's eyes.*

"Mama! Mama!" Beth ran up the concrete steps onto the wooden porch and set her backpack down at Elise's feet. She reached inside and pulled out a thick envelope. Beth carefully slid the folded cardstock from its sleeve and proudly pushed it into her mother's hands.

"Look, Mama! I got all As!" Elise unfolded the card and smiled. *William had been a good student, too.*

"Of course you did, hon," she cooed gently. "You're a smart girl, just like your daddy." As she spoke, something inside her softened. Beth beamed up at her. She liked when Mama talked about her father. Elise wasn't the only one who missed him. A steady beeping emanated from the kitchen.

"That must be the oven timer. I made us a blueberry cobbler to celebrate your last day of third grade." Beth grinned and gathered her backpack. "My favorite!" It had been William's favorite, too. Beth reached up and held Elise's hand, and the two went inside. *If only I could hold onto moments like this forever.*

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The summers passed, and Beth grew tall and strong. She took to swimming and was a natural. *You get your height and athleticism from your father, too,* thought Elise. She had nudged Beth to try out for the middle school team. Elise smiled, remembering how gracefully William moved in the water during their summer swims, the sunlight dancing across the drops of water that clung to his golden skin. They had been so carefree then...

"On your marks, get set..." The airhorn shattered Elise's thoughts, and the gym erupted into cheers of encouragement as the spectators rallied behind their swimmers. Finally, Beth's hand pierced the water's surface and tapped the wall of the pool, securing the win. Beth searched the crowd, her smile broadening as she spotted Elise waving frantically. *Yes, I saw you! I'm here!*

Beth gave her mom an enthusiastic wave back, along with a grin that stretched from ear to ear. The smell of chlorine was strong and stung Elise's nose, but she wouldn't trade this moment for anything.

The years passed, and Beth continued to thrive. Her childhood was ending, and though Elise didn't want to lose her sweet, vivacious girl, she knew Beth was looking forward to starting college in the fall. Elise had done everything in her power to give her daughter a normal, happy childhood. Nothing could fill the void William had left, but Beth seemed happy, and Elise knew he would have been proud of both of them.

The week of the performance, Elise stayed up late with Beth. Her senior play was only days away, and she had managed to land a role in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Elise delighted in sewing Beth's costume and helping her rehearse her lines. When the big night arrived, Elise took her seat next to the aisle. As the house lights lowered, a hush fell over the audience.

Beth was radiant in her billowy gown, moving with an understated grace that made her look ethereal under the stage lights. When the final curtain was drawn, the audience rose to their feet with applause. The air was electric, and the entire cast came out, hands clasped together, to take their final bow. The spotlight shone brightly on Beth in her flowy white dress. She looked like an angel, her braided hair a golden halo. Beth spotted her mom in the crowd, a proud smile fixed on her face. *I'm here! I saw you! You were amazing.*

The spotlight lingered on Beth, her gown glowing as the light intensified. The applause grew deafening, then faded into the background. There was a slight ring in Elise's ears, interrupted every few seconds by a faint beeping in the distance. Beth's eyes moved past Elise, her hand rising to give a small wave to a figure in the back of the theater. Elise turned to see the familiar man... tall and proud, with eyes like blue topaz sparkling in the light.

In that moment, time—like her heartbeat—came to a halt. The man turned his head and met Elise's gaze. His smile softened, and without saying a word, he extended his hand. Elise understood. William was calling her home. She turned back to the stage, a soft haze filling the air. Beth smiled and mouthed the words, *"It's okay, Mama. You can go."*

Elise felt a small hand squeezing hers. She looked down and saw a young Beth smiling up at her. *"It's okay, Mama."* Elise squeezed the warm, tiny hand, then parted her eyelids ever so slightly. *How long have my eyes been closed?*

She was back in the hospital room. A nurse, somewhere nearby, checked her vitals. Sitting by her side was a much older Beth, now a woman, tears brimming in her eyes. She gently squeezed her mother's hand. *"Goodbye, Mama."*

Elise closed her eyes and was back in the theater with the muffled applause and the bright stage lights. There was William, hand outstretched, patiently waiting for her. With the sweet scent of magnolias lingering in the air, Elise Montgomery took her final breath and reached for his hand.