

THE HEART THAT MATTERS MORE

BY MARC ELIAS KELLER

It wasn't the first baby that had died under her hands. It wasn't even the first one since they'd started dating. But tonight, when Samantha came into her house, where Elliot was cooking dinner for them, she didn't say hello, or give him a kiss, or ask what he was making. She just breezed straight to her office and closed the door behind her.

Elliot knocked on her door a few minutes later. "Sam, sweetie, are you OK?"

She pursed her lips tightly and kept staring down at the surgical notes on her tablet, knowing that he'd intuit what had happened and how she felt about it: something she liked about their relationship, because it saved her the time of having to translate her emotions into words.

"I'm so sorry," Elliot said. "But it's like you say. It's part of the job. Unfortunately." When she didn't answer, he went on: "You can't blame yourself, Sam. You know—"

"I don't blame *myself*, Elliot." She looked up so sharply that he leaned back. "I blame *us*."



They'd met in an animal shelter on a Saturday morning six months ago. Since Samantha's divorce, she'd been volunteering at the local SPCA to sate her love for dogs until she was ready to replace the yellow rescue Lab that went to California with her ex-husband. And it was as Samantha was returning from a brisk walk with a pit-mix when she first saw Elliot, thinking he was nice-looking, with his longish hair, his full beard and his slim, lanky frame. She learned he worked as a remote copywriter for the ASPCA and as an employee was expected to spend some hours every month helping in a shelter.

He pointed toward her fleece vest, with a PENN Medicine logo on it. “Do you work there?”

She nodded, saying she was a pediatric heart surgeon.

Like most people who learned this, Elliot seemed impressed, even awed. “Oh. Wow. That’s quite a job. I’ve actually never met a surgeon.”

She grinned. “Probably a good thing.”

When they finished volunteering, Elliot, upon learning they were both vegetarian, asked if she wanted to have lunch with her in a nearby bistro. From how he smiled at her, Samantha assumed he might be asking in more than a platonic way—a not unpleasant idea. She had Saturday errands to do before a dinner honoring a retiring surgeon, but she had to eat lunch anyway, and she was enjoying Elliot’s company. She spent so much of her life with hard-driving, brusque surgeons, that a kindly copywriter for an animal welfare nonprofit was a refreshing change. And she realized who Elliot reminded her of: Aaron, her first real boyfriend, in junior year of college. For a few moments she recalled, wistfully, Aaron and the A-minus.

The good conversation with Elliot continued through their first lunch together. He asked about a small class ring she wore and Samantha told him she’d grown up in Virginia, went to UVA, then came to Philly for med school. Her father had been a chemist and her mother was a librarian: “In high school, I thought I’d be an English professor, actually,” Samantha said. “I didn’t really think seriously about med school until sophomore year of college.”

After lunch, Elliot asked if he could take her to dinner sometime. “Meaning, a date.”

She knew what he was asking, and likely wouldn’t have asked herself—not because of gender traditions—but because her mind had been so distanced from the pursuit of romance or sex since her divorce from Tom was finalized a year ago. But Elliot was interesting. And it seemed like a good time to go on a real date and see how it felt.

“Sure. You just have to understand, my schedule is—”

With all her commitments, not only at the hospital, but attending continuing education webinars, or editorial meetings for two medical journals, or dinners with visiting surgeons—the first evening she proposed was a Friday night five weeks in the future.

Elliot laughed. “I feel like I’m a patient actually trying to get an appointment with you.”

“That’d be about five *months*, actually.” But Samantha consulted her phone again and said she could shift something around and do a Friday night three weeks from now.

“It’s a date, then.”



They went to a Korean restaurant for their first date and kissed good night, long enough for her to feel some chemistry. Two weeks later they went on another date, before Elliot proposed cooking dinner for her and Samantha agreed, suggesting that he do so at her house. This was the first time he’d been to her house, in the tony Gladwyne suburb of Philadelphia, and he was clearly impressed by the expansive and professionally-decorated house. She and Tom had agreed that she’d stay in the house for two years, before they sold it and split the proceeds.

“I know, it’s pretty ridiculous for one person,” she said, giving Elliot a brisk tour. “I guess it was even for two people, when I was married.”

“You didn’t have kids, it seems?”

“We thought about it,” Samantha said, “but neither of us were really enthusiastic about the idea, so we kept putting off a final decision, and then the marriage started getting shaky, so—”

She led him back downstairs. “Do you have any kids?”

“No, no. I never wanted them. Personally, I think there’s enough humans on the planet without me making more. Though I’d consider adopting or fostering.”

Samantha nodded. “I could see myself being interested in that. But with the right person. Not on my own.”

During the rest of the tour, she thought about her ex-husband, Tom. They’d met as young surgeons at Penn, before he transferred to a hospital in New Jersey that fast-tracked him to chief of orthopedic surgery. She’d been attracted to his fierce ambition and that he fully understood her life and career. They’d been married for seven years, but by the last year, it felt more like a cohabitation arrangement: both of them were so busy, it seemed like days could go by without them being awake and in the same room at the same time. Then Tom was offered an irresistibly prestigious position in Los Angeles. Samantha had no interest in leaving her job in Philly, so rather than try to figure out some ultimately unsatisfying arrangement—they simply divorced, concluding that the marriage was like a vestigial organ that could be excised.

After the house tour, Samantha caught up on emails while Elliot cooked a Thai curry dish, plated artfully with a sprig of basil. “It’s wonderful you can cook like this,” she said, offering to wash the dishes (meaning, load the dishwasher) when they finished eating. But Elliot insisted on doing it himself, so she went back to her office, getting so absorbed in a medical journal that when she emerged over an hour later, she was startled to see him sitting on her sofa, flipping through a copy of *National Geographic*.

“Oh! Elliot. I forgot you were here. Why didn’t you come get me?”

“I didn’t want to disturb you,” he said. “But I guess I should get going.”

Samantha glanced at the heavy rain pattering at the bay window. “You can stay here tonight.”

Elliot smiled. “You *do* have plenty of spare bedrooms.”

She kissed his lips. “But then we’d *both* be lonely.”

It was her first time since the divorce. Over the past year she hadn’t pursued it in the slightest—nor, to be truthful, did she miss it in any significant way, though she’d enjoyed sex with Tom. She was pleased, too, that Elliot was her re-entry point into that world. He was tender, but impassioned, and Samantha responded with plenty of physical vigor, approaching it (as she had with Tom) as a high-intensity workout to supplement her morning routines in her basement fitness room. She felt aware that she was in her late forties, five years older than Elliot, but he had nothing but compliments for her body, turning the lamp back on when she clicked it off.

By the next morning, it was apparent that they were “dating”—

“But no need to be formal about it,” Samantha said. “And you should feel free to see other people. Just be safe.”

“Of course.” He was disappointed, but didn’t show it. “Do *you* want to see other people?”

“Oh, El, I barely have time for *you*.”



Right from the start, Elliot was amazed at Samantha’s professional schedule. He’d assumed she did a few operations a week, that each one required days of prep and mental rest, but in fact she usually did two *a day*, four days a week, Thursdays being reserved for patient consults, though she occasionally had to do emergency procedures on that day, too. Her first surgery usually started about eight a.m. and she was at the hospital by 6:30, rarely leaving before seven at night and rarely going to sleep before midnight.

“You only sleep for five hours and then you do *two* open-heart surgeries? *How*, Sam?”

“It’s worked out all right so far.” She knew Elliot’s job and schedule was far more relaxed: he could work on his copywriting assignments whenever he wanted, as long as he was meeting his deadlines, and he only occasionally had to be in virtual meetings. But she didn’t think him lazy or underachieving. She thought his job was admirable, in fact, trying to stop the killing of homeless dogs and cats. And she respected his mind, enjoying his views on politics, food ethics, art, and so on. Just as she had respected Aaron’s.

More weeks passed. They got into a routine where Elliot would come to her house on Thursday and Saturday nights and cook dinner, then clean up while Samantha checked email and reviewed surgical notes. They often listened to music together, especially in bed, both of them liking pop and rock songs from the 90s. One band in particular, Counting Crows, was a mutual favorite, Samantha remembering listening to their debut album, over and over, on a road trip from Virginia to Miami the summer before she started med school. “Get right to the heart of the matter,” she and Elliot sang along in bed one night. “It’s the heart that matters more.”

Then came late August, when her birthday fell—and his, too. On their fourth date, they’d learned they had the same birthday, August 28, making for a fun coincidence, though both of them understood that there were a *lot* of people in the world, and only 365 birthdays, so these coincidences were not as fantastical as they seemed. Samantha, in fact, had a cousin with that birthday, too. This year August 28th fell on a Thursday, one of their date days, and she proposed dinner at the city’s fanciest vegetarian restaurant. Elliot agreed, but then a few days later, he told her he’d seen that Counting Crows was playing a concert in Atlantic City on that very night, their birthdays. He’d already bought two tickets, showing them to her excitedly.

“I’d love to go, El, of course. But I have surgery the next morning.”

“You have surgery almost every morning,” he answered, softly, pointing out that she never went to sleep before one a.m. anyway. “Look, the concert starts at seven. Counting Crows will start around nine. They’ll play about two hours. We won’t have traffic coming home, so we should be home by 12:30, one o’clock at the latest. Same as usual, sweetie.”

“Not exactly, but—”

“Obviously it’s up to you, Sam, but I *really* want to see this concert. I can find someone to take the other ticket—but I’d love to go with you. And it’s such perfect timing, with our birthdays.”

For a day or so, Samantha deliberated, remembering junior year in college, when Aaron had asked her to his fraternity’s semi-formal, being held the night before her final exam in Advanced Organic Chemistry. She had refused at first, but eventually allowed herself to be convinced by him that college was more than just studying, and they were a couple, so who else would he take?—and now she let herself be convinced by Elliot that yes, she should see Counting Crows with him. She was allowed to have *some* fun, wasn’t she? It seemed sad if she couldn’t go to *one* concert, of a favorite band, on her *birthday*, with a man she was dating. And Elliot was right: they’d be home by her usual bedtime. If they did just go to dinner, there was a good chance they’d come back to her house afterward and spend some time in bed, anyway. So what was the difference if those hours were spent at a concert?



The dual-birthday celebration, until the very end, went splendidly. They left her house at 5:30, with him driving her car to Atlantic City so she could read and reply to emails with her phone. They made it to the beach just in time for a sunset stroll under thick cumulus clouds,

walking barefoot and holding hands, both of them reminiscing about family beach vacations. For the last few minutes of the sunset they sat on the sand, and she, seemingly overcome by the moment, tilted her head so it was touching Elliot’s.

“You know, El, even if I did have time—I wouldn’t want to date anyone else right now.”

Dinner was at a Japanese restaurant, then they drove to the theater that was attached to a casino. Elliot and Samantha danced in front of their seats and sang along to the songs, and she felt like a college grad road-tripping joyously before getting subsumed by med school. She even bought two overpriced beers, one for her and one for Elliot.

“Look at *you*,” he laughed. “Party girl.”

“Just one,” she said. “Birthday beer.”

The band played for about eighty minutes and announced the last song, a radio hit that got the crowd cheering wildly. Once the band left the stage, Samantha started gathering her purse.

“I’m sure they’ll play an encore, babe.”

“Maybe we should go, though. It’s getting late. And we can beat the parking garage traffic.”

“Oh, we can’t come all this way and leave with two songs left,” Elliot said. “We’ll be home by one, sweetie, just like we said.”

“Fine—if they come back out in the next couple of minutes.”

They did, to a huge cheer, and played a song from a newer album. Then came a rambling monologue from the lead singer about how great it was to be back on tour. Samantha gave Elliot a “Let’s go” look, and though he was loath to miss the last song, he started to shuffle toward the aisle—as the band struck up their finale: “Omaha,” as birthday luck would have it, one of their joint favorites, the song they sang along to in bed, in fact, the first night they spent together.

“We *have* to stay for this one, sweetie,” he said, not really giving her any chance to refuse, though in fact she was already starting to sing along. It was practically a storybook ending, she told herself, and this spectacular day with Elliot would substitute for so much leisure time she otherwise missed. “Get right to the heart of the matter,” she and Elliot sang, when the singer pointed the mic at the crowd. “It’s the heart that matters more”—and during this lyric Elliot put his arm around Samantha, who closed her eyes and reveled in the beautiful heartbreak of the song, rather than thinking ahead to all the broken hearts she had to fix.



The parking garage traffic was bad, the zipper merge system that was necessary not working well because many of the drivers wouldn’t let anyone in front of them. “See, this is why you leave early,” Samantha growled.

“We would’ve missed the best song,” Elliot said. He’d offered to drive her car home, so Samantha could review notes on her phone, and she took him up on the offer. “Besides, we knew there’d be traffic getting out of here. I accounted for it, so we’re still on schedule.”

Finally they were free of the parking garage and heading toward the expressway, a steady rain falling on the car. She had relaxed once they were out of the garage and now smiled and touched his thigh. “That was a really nice night, El.”

The rain picked up when they were on the expressway, making Elliot tick the wiper setting to high and ease off on the gas.

“Why are you slowing down?” Samantha asked, looking up from her phone.

“Well, it’s coming down pretty hard. Just trying to be safe.”

She went back to her phone. Five minutes later, the deluge came, a hard downpour that made it hard to see the road. “Maybe we should pull over,” Elliot said.

“What? No. It’ll pass. Just drive carefully.”

Elliot slowed even more. Most of the other cars around them were also going well under the speed limit, though a few zipped past them, apparently untroubled by the driving conditions.

“We need to get home, El. I have surgery in the morning.”

“Not if we crash, you don’t,” he snapped back. “Sorry. I just have to concentrate really hard.”

Samantha didn’t offer to drive and dove back into her phone. By now it was almost half past midnight and they weren’t even close to home. Elliot continued along slowly, as the rain kept pounding down with no respite. Samantha said nothing more, but couldn’t help occasionally glancing toward the speedometer and pursing her lips.

“If you want to drive, Sam, you—”

“No, I have to review these notes. Are you going to do that for me?”

Another thirty minutes passed with them crawling along the highway. As they neared Philadelphia the rain did slow down and he was able to drive about the speed limit, but even so, with a minor accident that slowed traffic on I-76, they did not pull in Samantha’s driveway until 1:40 a.m. It was a given that Elliot would sleep over, but sex was out of the question, obviously, and the moment they got into her house Samantha rushed to put on her pajamas.

“I’m sorry, Sam,” he said. “Really, I had it all—”

“It’s not your fault.”

“I feel like you think it is, though.”

“I just want to go to sleep, Elliot”—she glanced at her phone—“so I can wake up in three hours and go into the operating room.”

“I’m sure there’s a way to reschedule, if you don’t think—”

Her sharp look silenced him. Then she tucked herself into bed, all the way at the edge of the king-sized mattress.



Samantha woke at her normal time, after three hours of sleep, and felt fine during her morning regimen (though she skipped exercising in her basement) and on the drive to the hospital. She wasn’t brooding on the night before, she was simply driving to the hospital in the same calm and focused mindset as she did any other day, though Samantha knew the first surgery of the day would be a challenging one.

Her name was Alicia Culler, three days old and born with a congenital heart defect called Ebstein’s anomaly, a rare and dangerous condition affecting the tricuspid valve and creating a high probability of congestive heart failure. “We’re going to do everything we can,” Samantha had told the frantic Cullers, sitting close to them and patting Mrs. Culler’s hand. “But unfortunately, the risk of Alicia not surviving the surgery is substantial.”

Mrs. Culler started sobbing. “What—why—why not?”

Samantha explained that the high mortality rate came from the frequent need to replace the tricuspid valve in Ebstein’s patients. “And unfortunately, tricuspid replacement in neonates is not well toler—often causes heart failure post-surgery.”

“That’s what you’ll be doing? Replacing the tricuspid?”

“If we can repair it, that’s usually a safer option. But often it’s not repairable. We won’t know until we see it. But we’ll be prepared for either option.”

And now the time had come for Baby Alicia’s surgery. By 8:00 she was prepped and anesthetized, then Samantha opened the baby’s sternum, looking at the golf-ball-sized heart as the perfusionist got the bypass machine running. As expected, the tricuspid valve was in bad shape, and Samantha glanced over at her surgical fellow.

“You think you can fix *that*?” he asked.

It would be a tough call for any surgeon on the planet: a successful repair would require some luck and the very utmost of her skill. Attempting it was not unreasonable—but suddenly Samantha yawned from behind her mask and then, to her own surprise, she thought momentarily about last night, the extra-short night of sleep, the alteration of her routine, the one beer she’d drank—and she felt something she never felt during surgeries. Uncertainty. Hesitation.

The fellow glanced up. “Doctor?”

This was silly, Samantha told herself. She’d nothing wrong by going to a concert on her birthday. And it was perfectly normal to hesitate before taking a scalpel to a very fragile newborn heart. It’d be an extraordinarily risky repair even if she’d gotten ten hours of sleep.

“Replace,” she said, finally.

Three hours later, Baby Alicia was on her way back to the NICU. Samantha called the Cullers and explained that Alicia’s tricuspid valve was beyond repair and had to be replaced. Alicia would be closely observed in the NICU for a few hours, then the Cullers could see her.

Then Samantha ate lunch, reviewing the file for her afternoon surgery, a relatively straightforward mitral valve replacement. When that procedure concluded, Samantha saw a message to come to the NICU immediately. She knew what that meant and she was right: Baby Alicia had died. Two hours after surgery, and this was the outcome Samantha knew was possible

if not probable, she’d gone into congestive heart failure and stopped breathing before she could even be prepped for emergency surgery.

When Samantha spoke to the Cullers, the conversation went as expected: the sobbing, the impossible questions, the referral to a grief counselor and the promise that a full investigation would be done to determine exactly why Alicia hadn’t survived the intervention. Samantha, as always in these situations, was honest and direct, staying professional, but warm and sympathetic, too. She did not cry, nor did she spout platitudes, but only sat holding Mrs. Culler’s hand and consoled the parents that Alicia hadn’t suffered or felt any pain.

When Samantha finally left the waiting area and glanced at her phone, she saw a text from Elliot: “Hi Sam sweetie, I hope you’re having a good day. I stayed to work at your house. I can be out before you’re home, but maybe we could talk for a little while if you don’t mind me staying until you get home. Either is fine. If you want me to stay, I’ll make dinner. XO.”

“Stay,” was her reply, dictated hastily into her phone. “We should talk.”



“You blame *us*,” Elliot repeated. “What does *that* mean?”

“I didn’t want to go to the concert.”

“Yes, you did, Sam. I didn’t tie you up and drag you—”

“I told you it wasn’t a good night for me to—”

“It’s *never* a good night for you,” he said. “But that’s not how concerts work.”

“Then I’d miss it. It’s just a concert, Elliot.”

He took a step back. “But it was your birthday. And it’s one of your favorite bands.”

Samantha closed the tablet case with an angry slap. “Is that what you wanted me to tell the parents who don’t have a daughter anymore?”

“You really think that baby died because you went to a concert?”

“Well, now I’ll have to live with that question for the rest of my life.”

When Elliot finally replied, his voice sounded small. “I’m really sorry about what happened, Sam. I don’t know what else to say.”

“There’s nothing you *can* say. You can’t understand. You just can’t.” Then she started telling him a story from her college years: “It was sophomore year,” she narrated. “I was pre-med, and up to then I’d only gotten As. Then I started dating this guy named Aaron. Sweet, sensitive, thoughtful. Like you. And he always wanted to see me. Not that I didn’t like being with him, but I had to study. Especially because that semester I was taking Advanced Organic Chemistry. Tough class. Very hard to get an A. And I studied a lot, but the night before the final exam, he talked me into going to his fraternity formal. Anyway, I took the final, and I missed a question, and because of the curve, that was enough to make my semester grade an A-minus.”

“You turned out just fine, Sam, even with that A-minus.”

“But I wanted that A, Elliot. I know how it sounds, but I really, really wanted it.”

Elliot scowled. “And I suppose your point is that I’m like Aaron, and if you weren’t dating me, then that baby—”

“The *point*, Elliot, is that there’s a difference between an A and an A-minus. And maybe that difference was either going to the frat formal, or studying that night. And *maybe*, possibly—”

“It’s not a fair comparison, Sam.”

Samantha sighed. “Probably not.”

Elliot put a glass lid over the food. “So what now? You don’t want to see me anymore?”

“I didn’t say that. But surgery is a profession of perfection. I need you to try to understand that.”

He glanced toward the stove. “Well, we could just go back to how we were doing it before, and I won’t ever ask you to change your schedule.”

“Is that what *you* want?”

“I don’t know. That might feel a little—stagnant. And we can’t have it that every time you look at me, you think of—”

Samantha shook her head. “I wouldn’t do that.” Suddenly she realized she was ravenous: she’d only had those few bites of salad, eight hours ago. And it was pointless to keep thinking about the failed surgery until there was new data. Anyway, she was not one for long emotional debates. “Let’s eat,” she said. “It smells good, whatever you made.”

They ate in near silence, but not a silence that felt hostile. Then Elliot cleaned up while Sam went to her office and reviewed the notes from the Culler surgery. Twenty minutes later, Elliot knocked on her door. “I’ll get going now,” he said. “I can walk over to the train station.”

Samantha looked up. “You know, tomorrow morning is my time volunteering at the shelter. You could stay over tonight and come with me. If you want.”

“You’re sure?”

For the first time that evening, Samantha smiled, just for a moment. “No. I’m not. But what’s the worst that can happen?”