

THE HARDEST GOODBYE

He was sitting up in bed, looking brighter than he'd done in days. So it made what happened next seem all the more utterly impossible



A few weeks later, he arrived home hot and shaking and in terrible agony. 'I'm calling an ambulance,' I said.

When it arrived, we all went to hospital together.

'I'll be fine,' Matthew said as he was taken off for scans. But later, a doctor came over.

'Your spleen is about to rupture,' he said to Matthew. 'We need to remove it straight away.' I looked at Matthew in shock. What had caused that?

And as he was taken for surgery, the answer came.

'We think Matthew has leukaemia,' a doctor told me.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Matthew hadn't seemed ill. My mum came to take Peter and, after the operation, I sat by Matthew's bedside. Doctors were keeping him sedated while they carried out further tests, so it was a lonely vigil. I just kept

thinking it was all a big mistake.

Then came the confirmation. Matthew had acute lymphoblastic leukaemia. He'd need chemo and a bone-marrow transplant. 'What are his chances?' I asked.

'We have to take things a day at a time,' the doctor replied.

Matthew was still sedated, so I went home, back to Peter. Holding him close, I burst into tears. Why was this happening to us – now, when we'd just become a family? I longed to rewind to just a few weeks ago when we'd been so happy.

The worst news

But when Matthew was brought round from his sedation, I knew I had to be strong for him.

I went to his bedside and waited until he began to stir.

'So how am I doing then?' he asked, coming round.

'You have leukaemia,' the doctor told him.

'You're very poorly,' I said, my voice wobbling. 'But you're going to beat it.'

His eyes shot away as if he was trying to hide the pain. Then he looked at me and said firmly: 'Well, now we know what it is, I can fight it.'

He started chemo and I'd bring Peter in to see him. He was too weak to hold his little boy now but I'd lie him by his side and Matthew would talk to him or they'd doze together.

After three months,

Matthew was given a bone-marrow transplant. His brother, Michael, was a match and it gave us hope, even though the op left Matthew so drained.

But, like the storybook, I'd find ways to show Matthew how much I loved him. I'd gently kiss the gold wedding band on his finger and whisper: 'I do.'

It was something Matthew had done when we'd been out shopping or walking down the street. I used to tell him to stop embarrassing me – but how I longed for those moments now.

We kept positive. Matthew only ever mentioned dying once. 'If you play *Somewhere over the Rainbow* at my funeral, I'll haunt you,' he said. 'I can't stand it.'

'I promise I won't,' I laughed. But I shuddered inside as I said the words, because the thought of Matthew not being here was just too unthinkable.

Three weeks passed and I waited for the news Matthew's treatment was working.

Then one day, I was feeding Peter in the relatives' room when a consultant came in. A nurse was with her and she took Peter, saying she'd look after him. Then the consultant led me to a side room. I sat in a chair, shaking, as she began to talk.

'We've got Matthew's latest blood tests back,' she said. 'I'm sorry, but the treatment's not working. There's nothing more we can do.' The unthinkable was happening. I was losing Matthew. Peter was losing his daddy.

'How long has he got?' I asked



'Matthew was an amazing dad'



'Father and son shared a special bond'

finally. 'It's hard to say,' the consultant replied. 'It could be days, it could be hours.' Hours.

My heart pounded and I could hardly breathe. 'We need to tell Matthew,' the consultant went on. I felt sick as she led me from the room to Matthew's bedside.

As we walked in, I saw Matthew sitting up in bed. He looked brighter than I'd seen him in weeks. 'Hi, love,' he said.

How was I supposed to tell him he was dying, that his life could be over in a few hours?

The consultant stepped in.

'It's not good news...' she began. 'What's going on?'



'Our wedding day'

said. I understood. How could he say goodbye to his son – the baby boy he loved so much?

Final farewell

For five hours we talked, then Matthew suddenly began to gulp for breath. He didn't have days – death was close...

So, taking his hand, I kissed him gently. He winked at me – it was all he had the strength to do. Then his breathing grew shallow. I was losing him. I fled from the room, unable to bear it.

It was just six hours after I'd told him he was dying. I'd watched him fade away in front of me, aged just 30. People came and offered kind words, but I just couldn't accept Matthew had been taken from me so quickly.

Then a nurse brought Peter to me. I took him in my arms and he smiled up at me, making me weep all over again. At only nine months old, he'd lost his daddy.

The next days passed blankly. Peter was my salvation, but I missed Matthew so desperately I didn't think I'd ever get over it.

Then it was his funeral. I took along *Guess How Much I Love You* and asked a friend to read from it. It had meant so much to Matthew and it seemed so fitting.

'I love you right up to the moon – and back,' she read. Her voice filled the chapel and I hoped with all my heart Matthew could hear.

Three weeks later, on what would have been Matthew's 31st birthday, we scattered his ashes on one of our favourite coastal walks in Torbay. As I watched

them disappear into the wind, I felt a piece of me go with him.

Back home, there were reminders of him everywhere: a 'Get well' card from his work, his PSP by the bed, pictures of us happy and smiling with Peter.

When I wanted to be close to him, I listened to the alarm he'd recorded for me. 'Hello pretty lady, I love you,' his voice said over and over. Tears streamed down my cheeks. Matthew had been my life and yet all I had left of him was this recording.

But with the help of friends and family, I realised that Peter was Matthew's legacy. He was my reason to carry on. I also found support through the Way Foundation – a charity that supports young widows.

Attending local meetings, I met other women who'd suffered the same awful grief as me. We'd share experiences and provide each other with support.

Some days were still tough. Celebrating Peter's first birthday with family, I felt so sad that Matthew couldn't be there.

But now, 18 months after Matthew died, I'm slowly learning to cope without him. Peter's two now and he's got a little half-smile that reminds me so much of Matthew. I'll always make sure he knows what an amazing man his dad was and how much he loved him – all the way to the moon and back.

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www.wayfoundation.org.uk
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AS TOLD TO FRANCINE ANKER AND LUCY LAING

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'Peter has helped me stay strong'

Matthew asked, looking to me. I knew I couldn't let him down. I had to be strong. I took his hand.

'You're not going to win this one I'm afraid,' I said.

'You're joking,' he replied, confused. 'I feel better than I have in ages.'

I shook my head and couldn't stop my tears falling.

'Maybe they've got the results mixed up,' Matthew was saying, his voice desperate.

'It's not a mix up,' I whispered. 'I'm so sorry.' Matthew cried and I fell into his arms. This man I adored was going to be taken from me and there was nothing

I could do, no way to make this better. After the tears came the anger. 'It's not fair,' Matthew said.

He was right, but it didn't stop it from being real. Taking his hand, I talked to him about the happy times we'd shared – the day we'd met, our wedding, our honeymoon in Mauritius.

'I'll always be with you,' I said. His eyes filled with tears again.

Then his parents arrived and we sat together around the bed.

'Do you want to say goodbye to Peter?' I asked. A nurse was still minding him.

Matthew shook his head. 'I know you'll look after him,' he