

Gone Too Soon

“Maddie is not dying!” Austin Stevens exclaimed out loud trying to convince herself this nightmare wasn’t true. In her mind, saying Maddie wasn’t dying out loud might not make the situation real, as if the last few months were a bad joke. She didn’t want to hear the incessant beeping any longer.

The chirping had been background noise for three days. *How could this be happening? I was living my ideal life a year ago. I had a loving partner. We had a wonderful home and then she complains of a backache that won’t go away. Before I know it, I’m going back and forth to the doctor with her, she’s been diagnosed with stage four pancreatic cancer. The doctor tells us there was no way to catch it, Maddie probably had the disease for a while, long before the pain made her see a doctor. The doctor told us we needed to start treatment right away. We didn’t have time to catch our breaths and now, Maddie is never going to be able to catch her breath,* Austin thought as she stared at the skull-like visage of the love of her life.

Seeing her partner on death’s door made Austin want to scream or beat the wall or cry until she couldn’t cry anymore. Her Madelaine had been so beautiful. Austin had called her “The Indian Princess” because of the way she looked. She had worn her hair long, usually braided down her back, which had accentuated her high cheekbones. Her eyes had been expressive and full of life. She had been a couple inches shorter than Austin and when they entered a room everyone had looked at them.

They had fit together. Their love story was material for a bardic ballad, if such a thing still existed. Everyone always commented how jealous they were because they wished they had the kind of love evident in both women’s eyes when they looked at each other.

Austin hated the scent of death. The smell pervaded the air in the bedroom. The aroma of antiseptic along with the musk from the lover was almost too much. She thought if she brought her partner home the smells would go away, but they followed, seeping into every nook and cranny of their bedroom.

The smell ruined the ambiance Maddie had worked so hard to create in their love nest, as she called it. Their bedroom was decorated with rich tones of royal blue and purple. The walls had been painted a light shade of blue, creating a calming atmosphere. The bed had the deeper jewel tones because Maddie wanted Austin to feel as if she were royalty when they went to bed.

There was no comfort when she looked at the bed. All she saw was her dying partner hidden away from the world. The frustration of not being able to do anything to help Maddie added to the overwhelming need to run away. Maybe if she ran away, time would stand still, and her lovely partner of thirty years wouldn't die, and they could go back to pretending like they were a royal couple surrounded by comfort.

Austin had tried to maintain the sense of comfort even after they realized Maddie wasn't going to get well. She had teased Maddie about bringing her meals in bed and fluffing her pillows to make her comfortable. Maddie had laughed and told her not to forget she was the queen of their world and should be treated as such.

Madelaine Williams was a trouper, doing what needed to be done. Getting the chemo and taking all the crappy medicine the doctor wanted her to take, dealing with the poison flowing through her body. Austin scoured the internet each night looking for ways that would make the treatments easier for Maddie, but nothing helped.

They had tried herbal teas, smoking marijuana, and many other home remedies. After going to the chemo appointments for six months with no improvement, Maddie had said “I’m done, no more. I feel worse putting this crap in my body than I do without it.”

“What! What do you mean? We have to keep trying baby, I know this is tough, but you’re going to get better, I know it.” She said, but her partner was resolute. No more chemo, no more drugs. They weren’t working and she wanted to spend her last days loving Austin. Not in front of the toilet, which was where she spent most of the time after her treatments, or sleeping, because the drugs sapped her energy. They made her miserable and Austin realized that all the work she had been doing to try to help Maddie wasn’t going to make it easier for partner. She loved Maddie so much and although she knew this would be the beginning of the end, she accepted what her partner wanted.

Austin’s father was with her when Maddie made the decision to stop the treatments. After she had put her partner to bed, he held his daughter while she cried, giving her love and support, but she knew it was difficult for him as well. He loved Maddie as much as Austin loved her and he had cried along with his daughter. Father and daughter were distraught, knowing they could do nothing to help the one person in their lives who gave them balance. Austin as her partner and her father as another daughter he could love unconditionally.

Buckston Stevens was a strong man, but the death of his daughter’s partner had almost done him in. He had loved Madelaine Williams from the moment Austin had brought her home. She was vivacious and full of life. She always had a smile on her face and the way she looked at Austin made him realize she was a keeper. She had handled Austin in a way that brought her back to him, when he thought she was lost. His gratitude and appreciation for Maddie never faltered and grew as the years went by.

Having been raised in a Southern Baptist household, he had struggled at first with their relationship, but she won him over. Maddie had been subtle in her quest to get Buckston's approval. She never confronted him or made him feel like his opinion was wrong. She accepted him and his judgments. Austin would get angry with him and his attitude, but Maddie would remind her that he was her Father and he needed her. He was forever grateful for her patience and kindness. When they found out she was sick, he went home the first night and cried.

Her Father had supported Maddie's decision and had arranged for her to spend her final days at home with Austin. Hospice came in twice a day to check on her, but her time to leave this world was getting closer. *I love her so much. Why is this happening to us? I don't want to have to start over. For God's sake, I'm fifty years old. I thought we were going to grow old together, I thought we would both go peacefully in our sleep.* She had imagined going to bed when they were in their nineties, shutting their eyes and never waking up -- together, not separately.



Maddie's body had begun the process of shutting down. Every now and then Austin would hear a gasp as her lover's lungs struggled to get enough air. She had been warned by the hospice nurse that when Maddie's body began the process of dying, she would likely hear the "death rattle," as it was called in layman's terms.

On the day Maddie died moments after the hospice nurse came in to check on her, Austin knew her love was no longer with her in spirit. Maddie had become unresponsive. No matter how much Austin talked to her and touched her lovingly there was no movement, no clasping of hands, no opening of eyes, nothing.

Austin was gazing out the window because she couldn't stand to look at her love any longer. Suddenly a tiny, yellow butterfly appeared. At first, Austin thought it was caught in a

spider web because it seemed to be floating in the air as if the insect was caught on the spider's silk, but after closer inspection, she saw a barely visible push of the wings. The moment felt as if the butterfly was waiting for something. The tiny insect floated in the air for what seemed like hours but was only minutes.

Maddie's eyes flickered open for the briefest moment. She looked at Austin and she smiled at her. Her eyes twinkled as they always did when she was telling her she loved her and then they went blank. The butterfly flew off at the same time. Austin knew Maddie's soul had left with the butterfly. *I look at her now and all I see is a body without any kind of life. It's still going through the motions of living, but there's nothing in her heart. I know it's time let her go.*

"It's okay, Honey, you can go, you don't have to hang on any longer. I'll be okay. I'll miss you so much, but I know you're ready, just go. I'll see you one of these days and we'll sit on our porch and laugh and joke about our life together."

The time between gasps was getting longer. It was difficult for Austin to listen to the crackly wheezing. She wanted to reach out and shake her partner and tell her to stop fooling around. She wanted her to open her eyes and laugh and say she was just kidding. She wanted so much. She wanted her love. She wanted their life. She wanted her Maddie to be okay.

Austin looked at her partner who was so robust in life but had been reduced to a small, frail entity. She had lost weight as the cancer ate away at her body. Her hair had fallen out and had grown back curly and white. Austin tried to remember her as she was before the disease took away her attributes.

Maddie was buxom for a small woman, which she attributed to her Mother's side of the family. Austin's partner, when describing her physique, had said she had extra meat on her bones. Her hair was dark brown and had started to show streaks of gray. Her chocolate-colored

eyes were almond shaped, and Austin called them “Almond Joys” because they reminded her of the candy bar. Austin could always tell how she was feeling by looking into her eyes.

Austin had loved every bit of her and had struggled when the weight began to slough off her. She had watched her partner waste away and tried to hide her anger at the disease, but she was not always successful. Maddie would hold her and tell her it was okay to be angry, she was mad, too. She would joke about it taking her so long to build the cathedral that was her body and a stupid disease was tearing it down one block at a time. Austin would laugh and everything would be okay for a while.



A few months before Maddie died, they had been lying in bed holding each other. They had not made love since they found out about Maddie’s disease and were arguing. Maddie wanted to make love and Austin was worried.

“Dammit, Maddie. I love you more than anything, but I don’t want to hurt you, or god forbid make you worse.”

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard from you, Austin Lee. I want to make love with you. I need to make love with you. In a few months I won’t be very desirable, and I want to be loved by you while I still can. Don’t you understand? I need this!”

“Oh, Honey, I’m sorry. You are the most desirable woman I’ve ever met, and I’ll still desire you in two months, six months, forever and ever.”

“Austin, I’m not dead yet and I want you to stop acting like I am.” Maddie shifted her body and pulled out of her lover’s arms.

“I’m concerned for you!” Austin knew she was only making excuses. If she were being honest, she didn’t know how to act. She was angry and terrified at the same time.

Maddie cupped her face and said, "Sweetheart, I know you're upset and scared. So am I. I don't want to die and leave you. I pictured us growing old together. Sitting on the porch swing, drinking tea and talking about our lives, but God has other plans for me and you. I don't want you to mope around and not live your life when I'm gone. I want you to be happy and find love again."

"No way, Maddie! You're it for me. I'm not going to find anyone else. I promise I'll be happy, but I can't promise I'll find love again. Please don't ask me to." The tears were rolling down her face as she looked at her beautiful partner.

"Baby, please don't say that. I've seen how your Daddy lives. I don't want a life without love for you. I don't want you to be alone. Please say you won't do the same thing your Dad did." Maddie was crying as well.

"We're a fine pair. It's going to be hard to make love if we're both drowning in tears." Maddie laughed at Austin's joke and pulled her close.

"I love you so much. Please make love to me." Austin looked into Maddie's eyes and knew she would do whatever she wanted for as long as she wanted. They had made slow, tender love and when they were done, Austin kissed Maddie lightly all over her face and body. Soon after, Maddie fell asleep and her lover knew time was not on their side. This simple act of love would be the last time she would be able to be intimate with the woman she cherished with every breath she took.

Buckston was in the room with Austin the day Maddie died. He had been by her side every day, the moment the hospice nurse had said it wouldn't be long. Austin heard a snuffle behind her and knew he was trying to hold back his tears. Anguished, Austin felt her heart break with each gasp Maddie made. *I don't know how I am going to face this life alone. What am I*

going to do without her? She looked at her father, begging him to fix this mess. After a few minutes, she heard a final gasp and knew she wouldn't hear another one. Her lover's physical body had died.

The nurse came into the bedroom when Buckston called for him, checked Maddie's vital signs and said, "She's gone. I'm so sorry for your loss." Austin continued to hold her lover's hand, stroking her thumb across the pad of the deceased woman's hand.

"I'll go make the necessary calls," the nurse said as he left the room.

Buckston squeezed her shoulder and walked out of the room as well. Austin looked at her love, knowing this would be the last time she saw her. Her lover looked so peaceful, her pain and suffering finally over. Austin stood up and let go of Maddie's hand, ran her fingers through the dead woman's hair one more time and then kissed her forehead. She walked out of the room to a life she never expected to live alone.



Several months had passed since Maddie had died. The funeral had been a celebration of Maddie's life. She had left strict instructions indicating those who attended had to have a good time with lively music, and only tell funny stories. All of Maddie's friends and family had attended. They had stopped coming around after hospice started coming to the house. It had been too difficult to see the woman they had loved and so full of life succumb to the awful disease.

Austin had tried to do what Maddie wanted, but had failed. She kept up a good front for everyone but when she went home at night she curled up in their bed and cried herself to sleep. Maddie wanted her love to remember all the good times they shared, not the last year of her life.

The middle of the night was the worst time for the dreams. Austin struggled with sleeping because she knew the dreams would come. The dream always started the same way. The sun was

beating down on her as she mowed the lawn. Maddie was sitting on the porch swing, reading a book and sipping lemonade. Her favorite place to be, especially in the summer, when Austin was working in the yard. They had bought the house because of the front porch and big yard surrounding the house. When they had moved into the house, Austin had surprised her love with the porch swing.

Maddie had mentioned when they began dating that her dream was to live in a two-story home with a veranda running the length of the house and an acre of land surrounding the house. She had wanted two or three kids, but she was unable to have children. They had waited until Maddie was in her late thirties but discovered she wouldn't be able to carry a baby to term. Austin was older, so they had contented themselves with spoiling their nephews.

Austin finished her work and drove the mower back into the shed. She made her way up the steps and was about to lean down and kiss her partner when Maddie looked up, "I love you so much. I can't imagine my life without you. I love our life together. I want us to die old together peacefully in our sleep."

"Oh darlin', I love the idea of us growin' old together." She leaned down and slowly kissed Maddie, running her tongue lightly across her lips.

Maddie raised her arms and wrapped them around her partner's neck, pulling her lover into her lap. They both laughed as the swing moved back and forth. Austin leaned in, starting a kissing session that seemed to go on for hours, but was only a few minutes. As they kissed, Austin was touching Maddie all over her body, loving her with her lips and hands.

Austin began to undo Maddie's blouse, but her lover touched her hand and stopped her. "No, we can't, not here. The neighbors might see, let's go in." Maddie got up and walked toward the door. She was never one for personal displays of affection out in the open.

“I’ll meet you in our room, wash up a bit before you come in.” Austin watched her backside sway as she walked into the house. Her lover’s butt drove her crazy with desire. Touching and rubbing Maddie’s butt sent shivers down her spine as did the anticipation of the act.

Austin jumped up and made her way into the kitchen. The kitchen had a big ceramic farmhouse sink and was one of her favorite places to wash up. She could stand at the sink for minutes at a time and look at the backyard in bloom. She would watch the bees migrate from one flower to the next, pollinating the flowers. Watching the birds jump from the bird feeder to the bird bath, singing and splashing as they moved around the yard, made her laugh.

Maddie would always make sure the feeders were full every morning ensuring the birds didn’t go hungry. Austin would laugh and kiss her, teasing the woman she loved saying, “The birds aren’t going to go hungry if you miss one feeding.” Maddie would slap her arm and tell her they might, and it was her duty as a lover of nature to make sure the birds were taken care of on a day-to-day basis. Besides, when she left this world, she hoped she could come back as bird. She wanted to fly and sweep through the trees just like the birds.

As Austin looked out the window, she washed her hands and face. She used the kitchen towel to wipe her arms down. The air from the air conditioner felt good after being outside. She could feel goosebumps all over her body and the tiny pebbles weren’t only from the cool interior of the house. She was turned on and wanted Maddie so much. Austin made her way out of the kitchen and up the stairs to their bedroom. When she pushed the door open, the room was empty. The luscious bed looked inviting but was empty. She looked down the hall toward the bathroom and yelled, “Maddie, are you in there? Maddie?” She paused listening for her lover’s sweet voice. “Maddie, where are you?”

She moved through every room in the house and couldn't find Maddie. *Maybe she went out front, thinking I was still outside.* Austin went to the front porch and when she didn't find her, she went down the front steps and around to the backyard searching for her partner.

"Maddie, where are you? Stop teasing me, where are you?" She was beginning to get upset. There was no sign of her partner. She continued to look for her, calling her name, begging her not to be gone.

"Maddie? Maddie? No ... no ... no don't be gone. Please, don't leave me." She yelled and dropped to the ground encircling her body with her arms and rocking back and forth, repeating "No, no, no, no don't leave me again." Austin always woke with a start, searching with her eyes and her heart, but never finding her love. *Dammit, another dream.* She felt the tears rolling down the sides of her cheeks. *Oh, Maddie, why did you leave me?* She continued to cry throughout the night and for many more nights.

