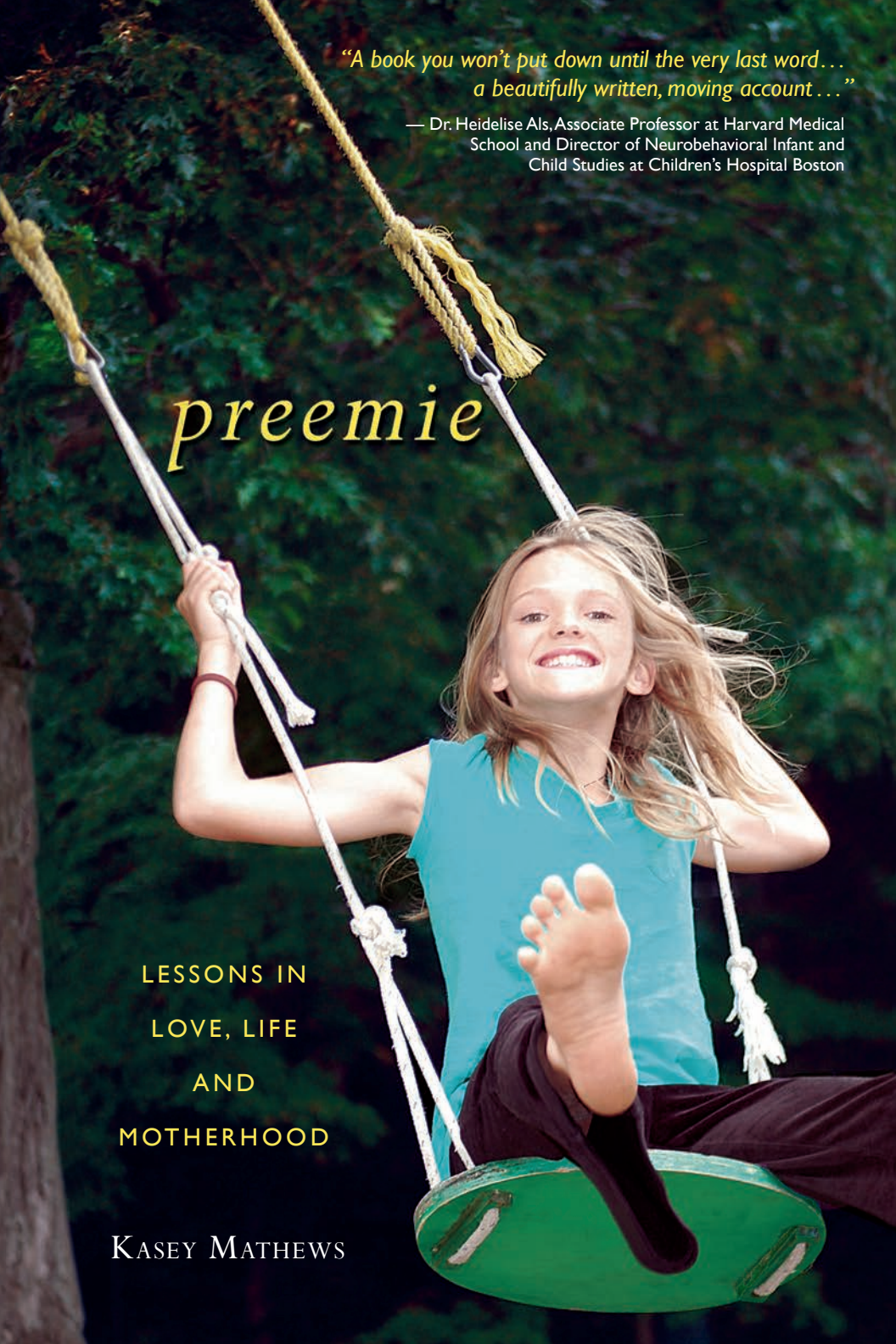
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preemie
LESSONS IN LOVE, LIFE AND MOTHERHOOD
Kasey Mathews

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BOOK EXCERPT ...

6

Trains

✦

At four years old I was attacked by an Afghan hound. It happened after my Aunt Harriet's wedding reception. I was a flower girl, dressed in soft blue cotton, my blond hair hanging down my back. A framed picture of my Dad and me at the wedding rests on a bookshelf in my parents' den. My father looked like Rock Hudson in his tux, holding my hand, leading me to the dance floor.

After the reception, we went back to Nam and Gramp's house on Farmer Street. Mom put me in pajamas and then to bed, but hearing my cousins playing with the neighborhood kids, I snuck out to join them.

When my parents heard the screams and saw the bloody, fair-haired child cradled in Uncle Glenn's arms, they thought my cousin Peter was hurt. I only remember bright lights, scary green masked men, and heavy swinging doors that kept my parents on the other side.

They sewed 49 stitches in the left side of my face—two sets below my eye, another by my ear, two sets beside my mouth, and the last one on my neck, along my jugular vein. Apparently when the dog attacked, I'd fallen face forward on the driveway. Mom always said, if I'd landed face up I would have been killed. Dad said the three days and nights I slept

between them, whimpering in pain, were the longest of his life.

I still had the stitches in my face when Dad and I went out one day to the P&C for groceries. I ran over to hug a dog tied to a signpost, but before I could pet him, Dad grabbed me by the arm and yanked me away. Squatting down, he put his big hands on my shoulders and looked me in the eye. "If you *ever* do that again," he shook his finger at me until I thought I'd cry. "I'll pull your pants down and spank you right here."

When I had Tucker, I finally understood why my father scolded me that way, why he often touched my barely visible scars and offered to pay for collagen injections and other plastic-surgery procedures.

As I lay staring at the ceiling in the recovery room just after Andie was born, I remembered my father's face that day at the grocery store, and I remembered years later watching a friend hold her newborn and tell me she would stand in front of a moving train to protect him. I didn't have kids yet and wondered if she'd lost her mind. Now I knew I'd stand in front of 10 moving trains and a thousand Afghan hounds to protect Tucker, but this half-done baby I'd never even seen? I tried counting the dots in the acoustical tile to stop these thoughts, but couldn't make it past seven before my eyes blurred with tears.

Lee hung up the phone. "Elizabeth and Todd are on their way."

"No," I wiped my palm across my cheeks. "Please, call them back and tell them not to come. I don't want them to see me."

Lee squatted beside my bed and brushed the hair from my face. "They drove all night through this storm," he said quietly. "I'm not going to tell them to turn back. Besides, they're only a few minutes away and they want to be here with us."

When Lee's brother and his wife walked in, I tried to sit up and smile. Lee and Todd held each other for a long time. Elizabeth squeezed my hand. "How are you doing?" she asked, setting a tray of Starbucks down on the table next to me. "Well," I started, but didn't finish. She handed Lee a coffee. The bitter smell lodged in the back of my throat and made it hard for me to swallow.

They stood around me, drinking their coffee. Elizabeth moved behind the bed to rub my shoulders. I stiffened. I didn't want her to touch me. I didn't deserve her kindness. Something I had or had not done caused my baby to come early, and I deserved to be punished, not comforted. My body had failed me and everyone else. But when her hands reached my neck they were so soft, I couldn't resist the tenderness. I let myself close my eyes and relax for just a little bit.

We all turned when a nurse appeared in the doorway. "Ready to see your baby?" she asked cheerfully.

"No," I said.

The room went still. All eyes turned to me.

"Oh," the nurse pushed up her funky reading glasses. "Are you sure?" she had a perky voice that sounded sing-songy in the sterile room. "Because it's really important for Mom and baby to see each other."

"No, thanks. I'm okay," I said, as if she were passing a tray of hors d'oeuvres.

I don't know why she bothered asking. She looked from Elizabeth to Lee and finally to his brother, and then she marched into the room and the four of them began to move my bed.

"I said I don't want to go."

No one answered.

When I started to protest again, the nurse kicked the brake off the bed. "Well, let's just get you started and see if you change your mind."

Lee and Todd pushed the bed from behind while the nurse led the way. Elizabeth walked beside me, holding my hand. The bed navigated the narrow corridors past swirling signs and faces, causing my head to spin. I felt like I was rocking in the hull of a boat. I thought of the poem my second grade students memorized every year. I silently recited it in my head. "My Bed is a Boat," they would begin. "by Robert Louis Stevenson."

My bed is like a little boat;
Nurse helps me in when I embark;
She girds me in my sailor's coat
And starts me in the dark.

At night, I go on board and say
Good night to all my friends on shore;
I shut my eyes and sail away
And see and hear no more.

My bed and its band of followers came to a stop in front of a set of double doors labeled "NICU." At the time, those letters meant nothing to me, but once I was pushed through those doors, they came to mean everything.

My bed moved down a hallway, through another set of doors, and into a brightly lit room filled with machines and medical staff. They stopped my bed in front of a plastic box. Another nurse was waiting. Like a model on a game show, she greeted me with a smile. *Show her what she's won, Johnnie.* She opened the box. "There's your baby," chirped the transport nurse.

Splotches flashed in my vision and my eyes went blurry. What was inside that box was something out of a sci-fi movie. I imagined a mad scientist, surrounded by boiling pots and smoking glass beakers, making these babies in the adjoining room. That couldn't be a human baby, so pale, translucent, and alien-like. That could not be *my* baby. And just as I had this thought, I threw up all over myself. Other people in the room turned our way. The perky nurse went silent. And then she quickly wheeled my bed back out of the NICU.

Throughout the rest of the day, the mixture of drugs and the vision of my daughter swirled through my system, and I continued to throw up.

I wanted to throw her away and start over.

Years later, a massage therapist would tell me that's because I'm a Leo. "In the wild, a mother lion would just leave a sick cub to die and let Mother Nature take its course," she said rubbing oil on my shoulders. "It's a natural Leo response."

Yeah, right.

For the rest of that first day, Lee visited the NICU and talked with doctors. When he came back to the room, he attempted to comfort me. Several times he tried to coax me into going back.

I couldn't. I wouldn't. I refused.

The next morning, that same perky nurse arrived, carrying a breast pump. With her bobbed hair bouncing, she explained how the two suction cups would be attached to my breasts, and told me I should try pumping every two hours until the milk came. I might have failed at the pregnancy part, but I knew from experience I could at least give her my milk. As soon as Tucker was born, before the cord was even cut, I'd put him to my breast, and he'd latched on immediately. I'd nursed him for a year.

After the nurse left, I pulled open my gown and followed the instructions. As the machine whirred, I stared at the television. The station flashed announcements about the hospital gift shop and the weekly menu from the cafeteria. I watched the screen until I had the gift shop hours memorized and knew the breakfast schedule for the next three days. I didn't make any milk.

When Lee came back from the NICU, he changed the channel. I tried pumping again. A documentary about Tasha Tudor came on. The narrator had a slow, deliberate voice. He described the life of the 80-something-year-old woman who'd written and illustrated over 80 children's books.

He said Tasha lived alone with her beloved Corgi dogs in a reproduction Cape her son had built in the hills of

Vermont. Every day, with her dogs at her heels, she walked a mile down her road and back again, just to retrieve her mail. She cut wood for her stove and dried herbs for savory meals. I could smell the boughs of lavender she collected from her garden. I felt the dewy grass and dirt road beneath her bare feet and saw blooming apple blossoms through her wrinkled eyes. Maybe Tasha Tudor wasn't telling me to go visit my baby, but she was giving me the strength to do so if I chose. She was showing me what a strong woman looked like.

✦

For two days, Lee continued to go back and forth to the NICU alone. He left Polaroids of Andie on my bedside table. I covered them with a box of tissues. On Wednesday morning, he was about to walk out the door when he turned and looked back at me. His eyes were red from lack of sleep and his hair was sticking up every which way. "You've got to see her at some point," he said and then walked out.

Fifteen minutes passed before I moved the box of tissues and picked up the Polaroids. It was hard to see her beneath all the tubes and wires, but when I held the photos at arm's length, I saw she was more human-like than I had thought. I ran my finger over her tiny fingers, her closed mouth. Her eyes were like the eyes of a baby robin I'd discovered as a girl in a fallen nest. Everything was there, just miniaturized.

When I looked up from the photos, Lee was standing in the doorway. "I had a vision," I told him. "I saw two paths. One leads to a funeral in a week. The other to a beautiful

five-year-old girl." He stood still, watching me. "I'm going for the latter," I said.

Relief flooded his face and my journey as a NICU Mom had begun.

✦

I believe in re-creating my own truth; that I can alter the memory of an event to fit the picture I wish I'd seen. In this memory, I imagine a kind old nurse, a Tasha Tudor–type woman, taking my hand. "Honey, I want you to be prepared for some things," she'd say gently. "First of all, many babies have been born this early. A micro-preemie, that's what we call them when they're this little." She'd point to the picture and say, "See how everything is there, just tinier? Tiny fingers, tiny toes, but a real baby? A real baby that just needs some time to grow. And lots of love." She'd smile down at me with her crinkly eyes, and I'd smile back. "That baby needs love from her Mama. I know you're scared, but deep down you have a lot of love for her. Deep down, it's there."

She'd ask me to close my eyes and see my love for my baby. With my eyes still closed, she'd tell me all about the NICU. "Neonatal Intensive Care Unit," she'd say, slowly and clearly. She'd tell me not to be afraid of the machines and noises. "They're just there to let us know your baby's doing okay." As she spoke, my body would relax. "We'd love to give you the chance to see her when you feel ready," she'd offer. "First, why don't you think of some things that you'd like to say to your new baby. Things she'd like to hear."

She'd hand me a thick sheet of ivory-colored notepaper

and a fine-tipped, black pen. When I looked unsure, she'd say, "You might want to tell her you're glad she's here. That you love her and know she's going to be healthy and strong." I would stare at the paper. "It won't be easy." She'd pat my arm, "But those words are what your baby will need to hear." She'd tell me to include a list of all the things I'd like to do with my daughter when she got older. "Like flying a kite at the beach," she'd say. "Or eating chocolate ice cream on a hot summer day." She'd squeeze my hand one last time, leaving me alone with my assignment. "Give me a call when you're ready to meet your baby," she'd tell me on her way out the door.

I still didn't want to see my daughter, but I knew it was time. I was too weak and sick to walk, so Lee eased me into a wheelchair and helped me put a robe over my hospital gown. I felt old. I looked down at the hospital-issued sock-slipper things on my feet. "Pathetic," I said and we laughed. The normalcy of laughter made me feel better. Lee stopped the wheelchair in the doorway. He squatted down in front of me, just like he would with Tucker. "You ready?" he asked. I wanted to weep. "Yes," I answered.

The journey to the NICU felt endless. We had to pass all the other maternity rooms filled with balloons, babies, and cheery parents; past the nursery filled with round bundles of joy, letting out healthy cries. I did not belong on that floor. I belonged with the guilt-ridden, terrified moms who didn't even feel like mothers.

An elevator took us to the sixth floor. The doors opened, and I saw the NICU ahead. Lee wheeled me to the front

desk where he printed our names on a sign-in sheet. The receptionist picked up a phone and spoke to someone on the receiving end. "Andie's Mom and Dad are here." Suspicious that a phone call had to be made, I pictured scrambling doctors and nurses on the other side of the wall. "They're coming. Look busy over near their baby!" Lee, always able to read my reactions, smiled. "It's standard procedure," he said. We turned a corner and arrived in a small hallway with a sink where Lee showed me the proper hand-washing technique. Knowing what waited on the other side of that door, I took quite a while washing my hands. Lee finally reached over and shut off the water.

I felt hollow and shaky and slouched down in the wheelchair, willing myself to disappear. Lee opened the door. It took a moment to adjust to the glaring, overhead lights. Cutouts of pilgrims and smiling turkeys were still taped to the walls. At the nurse's station, several nurses turned from their paperwork to look in our direction. I turned away. I could hear what they were thinking, *There she is. That woman who hasn't even come to see her poor baby.*

We moved forward into a large, open room marked "NICU B." The incessant beeping of alarms, the florescent lights, and the bustling bevy of doctors and nurses felt overwhelming. The room smelled of hand sanitizer and fear. The six separate sections for each baby reminded me of stalls in a barn. Five of them were filled. As I passed the other babies, I wanted to look at them, to speak to their parents. "What happened?" I wanted to ask. But I knew not to look. Lee had cautioned me on the way to the NICU

about the hospital's privacy rights. We had to pretend those other babies didn't exist. We had to ignore the parents, probably the only other people on Earth who could understand how we were feeling.

Andie was in the last station on the right, near the window. I expected to find her in the same plastic incubator I'd seen her in on the morning she was born. Instead, she was on a flat, open table lying limply on her back with bright, blue lights shining directly on her from above. A strip of white cotton was taped over her eyes. She wore the world's tiniest diaper and nothing else but wires and tubes. I could see the blue veins running beneath her papery, see-through skin. A pudgy nurse was standing near her station, writing on a chart. She looked up as we approached. "We saved the window view for this one," she said. I didn't smile, and she walked away.

Lee pointed to the lights. "She's jaundiced. The lights are supposed to bring down her bilirubin levels." He gazed down at her. "She'll be back in the isolette once those levels are normal."

From my wheelchair, I looked at her. The isolette had kept her at a safe, untouchable distance. Now that she was on the table, I could have reached out and touched her. I didn't. I studied her as though viewing an unusual artifact in a museum. I couldn't believe this creature had come out of my body.

Lee reached forward and with the tip of his index finger gently stroked her head, which was not much bigger than a plum. I watched his finger move slowly back and

forth. She looked better than the Polaroids I'd seen. She really was all there. Ten fingers, ten toes. Her fingers were long, like mine.

Rising from the wheelchair, I took two steps forward. The pudgy nurse, who'd been watching us from across the room, flew over. I assumed she was coming to assist me. Instead, she berated me for my lack of shoes.

"With just those slippers on," she scolded, "any stray needle could stick your foot."

I sat back down in the wheelchair, too scared to move. Lee looked defeated. The nurse went back across the room, but I could feel her still monitoring my movements. "I want to leave," I whispered. Lee glanced at the nurse and nodded. He went around behind me, and took off the wheelchair brake, but before he turned I put my hand over his. Standing up quickly, I leaned over the tiny body. "Goodbye Andie," I whispered. "I'll be back later." And as I sat down, I knew I would.

As Lee wheeled me to my room, he told me about the conversations he'd had with the doctors. He spoke of medicines, machines, and enrolling Andie in some brain study because of a brain bleed. He had no idea that I wasn't really listening to anything he said. I was just relieved to be out of there.

Because of the caesarean delivery, we were due to stay in the hospital until Friday. I couldn't wait to get home. In the meantime, Lee phoned the office several times each day and worked toward completing his pending MBA project. It would have been crazy for him to quit at that point, when

he had only two weeks left of an arduous last semester. We couldn't imagine when he'd find the time to finish if he stopped now.

So all week Lee stayed on the computer, and I stayed on the breast pump, still not making any milk. Twice a day I went to visit Andie, once in the morning and once in the afternoon.

Friday finally arrived. Our attempts to create comfort meant there was a lot to pack including clothes, blankets, pillows, and robes, not to mention all the flowers.

My dad drove in to pick us up. By late afternoon, the car was packed, the room was empty, and we were ready to go. After one last visit to see Andie, we were out of there.

I walked into the NICU on my Dad's arm. Lee followed a couple of steps behind. When we got to Andie's corner of the room, I stood looking at her tiny toes, the rise and fall of her miniature chest, and her little palm curled into her neck. Looking down at that tape across her eyes and the lights glaring down at her jaundiced body, I felt a wave of emotion swell up from a place I hadn't known existed. I began to sob uncontrollably. "I can't leave her here," I said over and over again. "I can't leave my baby behind."

The amazing thing is, it was really me saying those words. *Me*. Not the emotionally controlled me who'd just gone through the motions, acting in a way I believed others thought I should. That me was standing with her jaw agape, staring at this utterly exposed, new, vulnerable self. Ignoring the old me, I let myself experience the depth of those feelings and said the words I should have said, but didn't know

how to express when Andie first arrived. "I'm here, Andie. I love you." In that moment, the uncertainty I'd felt about my capacity as a mother was gone. I *was* a mother. This startling maternal protection had risen from my core.

I was the woman who would stand in front of a moving train to protect this newborn baby.