

# The Neurology of Angels

A NOVEL

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Sick children are angels on loan.  
—Elizabeth Rose

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*Cambridge, Massachusetts*

#423—THIS IS THE ONE.

Galen wrote the words into his notebook and yawned. Beside him, a hum emanated from a gently rocking platform of vials. He tugged on a pair of latex gloves and wrapped masking tape around each wrist to secure the fraying cuffs of his lab coat, then he settled onto a stool and drew a rack of slides across the counter. He slipped the first slide off the rack and positioned it under the microscope, looking at it for only a moment before replacing it with the next. He stifled another yawn.

His eyes scanned the second slide, left to right, and stopped. Galen squeezed his dark brows together and leaned closer to the eyepiece. He increased the power on the lens then grabbed another slide and another. His breath came faster as he registered the discovery: the blue-stained tissue of the control specimens was marred with black clusters of dead cells, but the slides treated with formula 423 were spotless. With trembling hands, he adjusted the focus. Not a fleck of black on 423, just a blue sky of healthy tissue.

The ocean rushed in his ears, and a memory of apple shampoo and caramel hair swept across his heart.

Galen's hand shot out for his notebook, knocking it to the floor. His long arm swung down to retrieve it. His pulse raced as he examined each page from the past week, searching for—hoping for?—a mistake. There were none. He switched off the platform, confusing the liquid against the walls of the vials. The tissue he had prepared before work that morning would be enough to repeat the final steps. He looked through the microscope again, like a kid peeking at his birthday presents.

As Galen reset the experiment, he recalled a dream from the night before. He had been by *her* bedside again, after her beautiful mind became trapped inside the paralysis and her weakened body was already buried beneath the covers. Again he had gathered her close and strong and vowed to make her well. But in his dream, she lived.

Galen's watch alarm startled him. He hurried to clean up; Linda would make him suffer if he were late for Lamaze class again.

After so many trials, so many failures, maybe 423 would finally be the cure. But then what? The words "this is the one" were written before every experiment in his notebook, part of him certain each time that it was true. But as the pile of notebooks grew, and the dozens of failed formulas turned into hundreds, the realist in Galen stopped thinking beyond the lab. So although he knew he'd have to do human studies to get FDA approval, he didn't know how. Mice, he could order from a catalog; he doubted the same was true for people. He had no idea how a drug was scaled up from the lab bench to commercial manufacturing. He had no idea how it got distributed around the country. How long would it take? How much would it cost?

The unknowns of success hit Galen in a wave of fatigue. He was overwhelmed with dread for the level of communication it would require to find partnerships for funding, convince the medical community of 423's merit, collaborate on research designs, and coordinate with the FDA. Maybe tomorrow's results would be another disappointment, and his life would remain predictable for a while longer.

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He put the negative thoughts out of his mind. This experiment would confirm his findings. And when it did, Eddy would handle the rest.

### *Arlington, Virginia*

ELIZABETH FORCED HERSELF to remain seated in the red leather chair opposite Dr. Frio's desk. She had kept the appointment with the genetic counselor for nothing more than a reason to get out of bed.

"I thought Mr. Rose would be with you today," Dr. Frio said as she flipped through a file.

"He—he couldn't make it."

"That's fine. You'll have the paperwork to take home. I'll start by saying that neither you nor Mr. Rose is a carrier of any of the usual diseases for which we screen: certain cancers, cystic fibrosis, and so on. Here is the list, for your records." She slid a piece of paper across the desk. Elizabeth looked down at it but didn't pick it up.

"At your request, we also ran some of the less established screens and found nothing of note there, either." She held onto the second piece of paper. "However . . ."

Elizabeth looked up. She couldn't speak but pleaded with her eyes that the doctor not say more. She was sure that if she heard what was to follow *however*, the fragile seams holding her together would disintegrate.

But Dr. Frio continued. "Per your consent, we ran some additional tests that are in development." She laid before Elizabeth three photos labeled *EIF*, each displaying what looked like stereo equalizer bars. "These are pictures of a section of a normal gene sequence compared to yours. You can see there are some differences. Based on these tests, we think that you and Mr. Rose both have variations in an enzyme called the eukaryotic initiation factor, or EIF, which is necessary for proper development of brain cells."

Elizabeth stared blankly at the photos. Her mind wasn't processing the words, only the thought that if she didn't speak, the world might continue to turn.

"Clearly, your brain cells and your husband's have developed normally." Dr. Frio hesitated.

Oh no, please don't say it.

"But both of your abnormal genes will likely be passed on to your children, should you choose to have them. EIF is implicated in a number of fatal childhood diseases, leukodystrophies in particular."

"I'm pregnant."

Dr. Frio sat back in her seat. Elizabeth thought she had succeeded in stopping the bad news, but after a moment, the doctor pressed on. "Unfortunately, we are not far enough in our research to be able to conduct neonatal testing or to quantify the risk for you, but I would estimate it to be relatively high. So while your pregnancy certainly complicates the situation, it doesn't change the nature of the decision. Of course, you don't need to terminate the pregnancy today. It's certainly something you should discuss with Mr. Rose."

"He's dead."

This announcement effectively ended the conversation. After a long period of Elizabeth staring at the graph and Dr. Frio staring at her, Elizabeth—still in one piece—walked out the door.

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GALEN AND EDDY crunched over half-frozen mud puddles on their weekly jog past Harvard University. As always, they slowed when they neared their former dormitory. The windows were lit with activities from indoor Frisbee on the first floor to debates on the sixth, where a wide screen television streamed election results.

“Who do you think will win the district?” Eddy said. “My money’s on Jenkins. I don’t necessarily agree with all his politics, but he’s the most likely to actually do something about health care in this state.” He paused to catch his breath. “I mean, the system’s a mess. Government should be taking better care of people.” After a moment of silence, Eddy said, “Don’t you think?”

“You know I don’t watch the news.”

Eddy looked sideways at Galen. “Ever the conversationalist.” He sprinted ahead.

Galen responded to the challenge, glad for the chance to burn off his anxiety. He did have something to discuss with Eddy, but not yet. Twenty minutes later, both panting and covered in sweat, they stomped in a tie on the ground step of Eddy’s apartment building.

Inside, Eddy kicked off his sneakers. “Anybody home?”

“I’m in the nursery with Linda,” his wife called.

Eddy clattered inside a utility closet. To Galen's amusement, he emerged with a six-pack of beer. "Joy would kill me in a jealous rage if she knew I had this."

They cracked open the cans and moved into the living room, where Eddy reached into a box next to the couch. "Look what we found when we were clearing out room for the nursery." He held up a heap of charred black plastic. "Remember that tailgate party at the Yale game? In the snowstorm?"

Galen groaned. "You kept the tarp?"

"It was so darn funny, we needed a souvenir. You trying to rig it up to keep Linda dry, and the more you tried, the madder she got, because the wind kept flapping it on her head." Laughing uncontrollably, Eddy could hardly get the words out. "I can still see your face when it blew off and landed in the bonfire!"

Galen balled up the tarp and launched it into the next room. But he couldn't help laughing as well. Despite the inauspicious beginning, he and Linda had married just a few months later.

Eddy clicked on the television, and Galen wandered behind the couch to look at the portrait of the two couples on their shared wedding day, posing before the Atlantic Ocean. Joy and Eddy could have been models for the portrait frame; she was tall with long, red hair blowing back toward the water, and his blond locks and carefree grin belonged at the beach. They were a glamorous contrast to the incongruous couple with self-conscious smiles: Galen, lanky and pale from too much daylight spent on research, and Linda with an oddly dark tan and platinum up-do.

Galen could feel Eddy's eyes on him as he scanned a new screen of photos from college. He knelt to look at one snapshot in particular. A twenty-year-old Galen was seated on a boardwalk bench. *She* stood behind him with her cheek pressed to his, her lean arms and caramel hair draped over his shoulders. Eddy's hands formed rabbit ears behind them, and they were all laughing toward the camera. The picture was inscribed to her brother: *Hey Eddy, Thanks for being my #2 fan. Love ya.* It was signed with a well-practiced illegible flourish. Galen smiled, remembering her insistence that an aspiring actress needed a distinctive

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autograph. He studied her face for some hint of the brain strokes that would take her from them a year later.

He stood up. "How are your folks?"

Eddy let out a breath. "Good. My mom still worries about you, but she finally accepts that you haven't been spending all that time in the lab trying to create the Fiancée of Frankenstein." Galen's jaw dropped. "Oh, come on. Sis would have been the first to laugh at that."

Galen shook his head but smiled again. He leaned against the arm of the couch. "Of anyone, I'd think your parents would support my compulsion. To spare other people what we went through."

"No one asked you to give your life to it."

Galen shrugged. He gulped his beer then held the can up. "To new life. And whatever loophole got us into the club."

"Speak for yourself. I'm going to kick butt in the fatherhood department." Eddy bumped cans with Galen. "To riding my coattails."

Galen smirked and took the empties to the closet. He returned to the living room with more beer and handed one to Eddy, then he inhaled and announced his news. "The experiment worked."

"Quiet a sec."

The television journalist was saying, "Exit polls have Jenkins in the lead."

"I knew it!" Eddy clunked his can on the coffee table. Galen dropped onto the couch. "Sorry for my lack of enthusiasm, buddy, but you swore you were on the verge of a cure about four hundred compounds ago."

"Four hundred and twenty-two."

"Yeah, so no offense, but I'll believe it when I see it."

Another district winner said, "Thank you, Massachusetts. Together, we will stop corporate greed and give the government back to the people."

Eddy flung a coaster at the television. "Corporate greed is employing half the people in this state! Including me!" He turned

to Galen. “And give government back to ‘the people’? Who does he think runs the corporations? Martians and puppy dogs?”

“Speaking of running companies . . . 423 needs a business plan. You have the skills.”

Eddy hesitated a split second before he said jauntily, “Like I said, when I see it.” He turned back to the television.

Galen was confused by his friend’s reluctance. Eddy had been enthusiastic in the past, even recommending Galen for a job and sharing work projects so he could have flexible hours to continue his research. But somehow he must have known Eddy would have reservations, otherwise why would he have been nervous to bring it up? Galen chased the near-comprehension around his mind, his heart beating fast. He wanted to catch the insight and pin it to a piece of glass to study its innards, catalogue the evidence of feelings, and model their cause and effect so he could replicate the human understanding that was so difficult for him to find and hold. But like so many dreams, it began to dissolve then disappeared, and he was again isolated inside the mist.

Their pregnant wives’ voices bubbled down the hall. Eddy widened his eyes in mock terror. “They’re coming back. Hide the beer!”

Galen swallowed the last of his drink, and with it, his disappointment.

THE EVENING AFTER the meeting with the genetic counselor, an unseasonably warm breeze blew over the back lawn, and frogs peeped in the distance as though winter weren’t coming. Sitting on her porch swing alone, Elizabeth felt more lost than ever. When preparing a legal defense, she had always found an angle, no matter how hopeless the situation. She tried to remember how she had maneuvered her brain to work that way, to consider her options.

Dr. Frio had suggested terminating the pregnancy. Elizabeth’s soul cringed at the thought, but maybe it was just that easy. Without the fear of raising a baby—a sick baby—alone, maybe

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she could focus on overcoming her loss. She was only twenty-eight. She still had time to try again with someone else, to have a healthy child and a husband and the life she had planned. She leaned her heavy head against the swing and closed her eyes.

She was standing motionless by the side of the road, taking in the accident scene: the truck on its side, the tree in the road, the lights of the ambulance. She imagined the policeman before her was an actor in a movie, his every word of explanation scripted. She stared past him. The paramedics were approaching. They weren't talking or working, just walking, with a man on the stretcher between them. Elizabeth could only see his feet, draped with a sheet and rolling toward her ever so slowly up the hill. The rest of the man's body came into view. His face was covered.

Elizabeth's hand instinctively shielded her stomach. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry," she whispered to her husband so recently in the grave and her baby so helpless inside her.