



I PROMISE
YOU

Sarah J. McNeal

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Gideon rose up out of the ether of anesthesia as his senses began to return to him. Pain seared across his chest beneath the bandages. He opened his eyes to the too bright white of the hospital room and the smell of antiseptics and fresh linen. He glanced up at the bottle of clear fluid dripping into the plastic tubing that ran down to his arm where it disappeared under the cover of a small dressing. Thank God, he couldn't see the needle where it pierced his skin.

A soft knock and the door opened. Doctor Swanson walked through the portal, across the room to Gideon's bed where he sat in a chair beside the bed. He folded his hands and bent his head to stare at them for a few moments before he lifted his head and looked Gideon in the eyes.

Gideon's heart fell in gritty pieces into the pit of his stomach where it sat cold and heavy. He knew the answer before he asked the question but he had to ask it just the same. "Well Doc, what's the verdict?"

"I'm sorry, Gideon, it was malignant. I preformed a radical mastectomy. I got the tumor out and removed the lymph nodes under your left arm to be certain I got it all."

He went on talking about medical terms, recovery and statistics but his words seemed to bounce around the room and echo in Gideon's brain. Taking a deep breath, Gideon mustered the courage to ask, "Am I going to be alright?"

Dr. Swanson reached over and patted Gideon's hand. "You'll need a couple rounds of chemotherapy but I have every confidence that we got it in time."

Gideon's breath hitched with emotion as he inhaled—relief, shock, fear and embarrassment. "I didn't know men could get breast cancer."

Nodding his head, Dr. Swanson leaned back in his chair. "Any where there's a human cell, there's an opportunity for cancer. Although it's generally thought that only women get breast cancer, one percent of all breast cancer patients are men. Four hundred and fifty men died of breast cancer last year out of the nine hundred that were diagnosed in the United States."

"But there hasn't been anyone with cancer in my family—not ever. Why me?" He combed his right hand through his hair as his mind wondered at the men who died. Would he be one of them?

"You don't have to have a family history of cancer to get it yourself. Life style can contribute, but cancer can strike anyone. That's why yearly physicals and screenings are so important. You're a young man. With the surgery and the chemotherapy, I have confidence that you'll do well."

"It's a lot to think about, Doc." Gideon eased back into the pillows, his chest aching and his thoughts scattering like quail in the undergrowth.

The doctor stood and handed Gideon a push button device. “You don’t have to be in pain, Gideon.. Just push this button when you’re hurting. It delivers a measured dose of morphine instantly.”

“I get legal drugs? There are benefits after all.” He tried to joke but his laughter sounded forced to his own ears. “What happens now? Can I go back to work? I don’t want to hold up the guys in the band. They’ve got families to feed and they’re going to need a singer and piano player. We were booked at Lupe’s Bar for the next two months.”

“You need a few weeks to recover from surgery. Then you’ll need physical therapy and chemo treatment.” He smiled reassuringly. “We’ll get you through this, Gideon.” He pushed the button on the morphine that delivered a dose into Gideon’s vein. “You get some rest now.”

A rush of soothing warmth spread up Gideon’s arm and throughout his body giving him sweet relief and then sleep.

* * * *

Gideon had no comprehension of time, but hours must have slipped by when the nauseating smell of food rolled in his stomach. His ears were pierced by the shrill voice of Sylvia Defoe, his beautiful fiancée. Funny, he had never really noticed the screech of her voice before. Was it the morphine that caused her words to seem harsh? The sound of it clawed deep into his brain.

“Giddy, darling, are you sleeping?” *Not any more.* He hated the nickname she gave him. Giddy just sounded like an out of control giggle. Her perfume filled the air with exotic spice. Ordinarily, he found the fragrance sexy. But now, in this post anesthetic state, it clung heavily in the air and made his stomach churn.

“Hi, babe. Where have you been? I thought you were going to be here before I went into surgery.” The woman had no concept of time and she didn’t remember what he said from one minute to the next. But who cared? She was knockout gorgeous with her tall, slender figure, jet-black hair and almond-shaped, coffee colored eyes. He was so lucky to have her.

Sylvia dropped her shopping bags by the door and drew near the bed, gliding rather than walking like ordinary human beings. His heart fluttered as she approached, sending heat coursing through his veins. Well, this sure wasn’t a good time to get all horny. He wrestled his lust to the ground and waited patiently for her to speak.

“I would have been here, honey, but I worked late last night—a new photographer, what can I say? So, I slept late this morning. So sorry. Then I had to run over to Macy’s because their Prada bags were on sale.” She sat on the bed beside him causing his incision to shriek pain across his chest. Without noticing the sweat pop out on his face as the pain ripped through him, she continued talking without even taking a breath. “I saw George Montif. You remember him, don’t you, from Louis’s party last spring? He was in the men’s department near the ties. I was going to buy you a tie but then I remembered you seldom wear one.”

Gideon opened his mouth to deny remembering such a person but Sylvia rattled on.

“Any way, he’s the editor of *Elegant Magazine*.” She bounced on the bed sending another searing trail of pain into his chest. “He said they were doing a whole layout for Vera Wang next week and he was interested in using me. Me, Giddy, can you believe it? Me in *Elegant Magazine*.”

There was no time to respond before she continued talking. “So, he asked me to lunch to seal the deal, so to speak. I never imagined it would take so long.” She leaned over and gave Gideon a quick kiss on the cheek. “I’m so sorry I’m late, honey.” She pulled over the bedside table and uncovered the plate of food allowing the nauseating odor to permeate the air.

Gideon put up his right hand palm outward to wave away the food. “Maybe just some iced tea, babe. I don’t think I can keep anything else down.”

In a nonstop run of chatter in the “it’s all about me” world of Sylvia, she handed him the iced tea remembering, at least, to put a straw in the glass affording him the ability to drink. The tea was bitter without any sugar in it. He didn’t bother to ask for sugar, content to drink anything that would slake his thirst. Leaning his head back against the pillows and closing his eyes, he allowed her never-ending stream of words to wash over him. He didn’t feel much like talking any way being more absorbed in his own thoughts about his surgery, his therapy and his hope for survival.

Accustomed to Sylvia’s self-centered and relentless chatter, Gideon knew it wasn’t necessary to comment on anything she said. Sylvia was shallow but she was very entertaining in her own way and, oh, so stunningly beautiful. Gideon pushed the button in his hand that would bring him relief.

Maybe it was the morphine causing him to slip into some kind of hallucination or maybe he was just dreaming—or wishing. The room appeared filled with white fog so thick that nothing was visible beyond the bed where he lay. A fragrance drifted on the fog almost like a memory of forest, pungent cedar, rich, leaf-covered earth and sun warmed water.

Gideon knew before the form appeared through the fog to stand at the foot of his bed that his father was near. He closed his eyes against the visage yearning for it to be real and knowing it couldn’t be. His parents had died two years ago in a car accident. But, when he blinked his eyes open once again, his dad was still there a slim, tall man wearing waders and a fishing hat over his thick, silver hair. A narrow fringe of white mustache graced his upper lip as he smiled that lopsided way that Gideon remembered so well.

He seemed so real that Gideon felt a lump of suppressed emotions form in his throat and wanted to cry for joy. All he could manage to say in a whisper was, “Pop? Is that you?”

The figure moved closer, sat gently on the side of the bed and took Gideon’s hand. His hand felt warm and solid in Gideon’s grasp. With a voice barely audible, filled with an aching, bitter need to clutch his father to him, Gideon asked, “Did I die? Am I in heaven now?” A

tear slid down his cheek, not from sadness at the passing of his life, but with pure, unmitigated joy that his father was with him again.

His father shook his head. "No son. I heard you were in trouble and needed me." The old man smiled and squeezed his hand the way he'd done a thousand times before. From scraped knees to his first broken heart, his dad had always been there to comfort, love and guide him.

In truth, whether this vision of his dad was real or was brought about by the morphine in his veins, Gideon was glad he was there. Never had he needed his father more than he did right now. "Pop," Gideon spoke the one watery word like a prayer filled with despair and hope, "Please help me."

"We'll get you through this, Gideon." His father's image seemed to fade, blending into the chair where he sat.

"Where are you going? Please, stay." Gideon felt like a child again, feeling afraid and alone.

"Someone's coming." His father's voice was a mere whisper when his image completely disappeared as Gideon's band buddies jostled through the door and into the room.

Gideon glanced around the room looking for Sylvia wondering if she had seen his dad or heard their conversation but she was no where to be seen.

His friends took seats around the room: Sam Erwin, the drummer, sat in the chair beside his bed, the base fiddle player, Oscar Thibodeaux, made himself comfortable on the cabinet below the window and Jose Hernandez, the guitarist, settled in at the foot of the bed.

"So how'd the boob job go?" Sam asked and laughed a little high pitched and nervous.

"Great," Gideon answered, "It looks pretty much like a railroad track across my chest right now though." Though Gideon made light of his surgery, Sam's remark struck a nerve of humiliation in him.

"Well, we got some news for you, Gideon," Oscar said looking rather smug as he leaned back against the window over the cabinet.

"Yeah, what's that?" Gideon hoped the black Cagean from New Orleans had good news because he sure could use a big helping of that.

"You told us you might be laid up for a while and wanted us to get a temp. to take your place so we could keep our bookings. Well, we found someone I think you'll like. It's not as good as you being with us but at least she's something good to look at and she sings almost as good as you."

"She? You got a woman to replace me?" He mentally went over the list of songs they had worked on. "We'll have to change out some of the pieces to make it gender appropriate."

“Yeah,” put in Sam, “But don’t worry about it right now. You want to meet her? She’s waiting out in the hall.”

“Gees, you left her standing in the hall?” Gideon wondered who taught these guys manners.

“We didn’t want to drag her in here before we got your approval,” Jose replied. “That would have been embarrassing for all of us. So, you want me to get her now?”

The moment she walked into the room, Gideon experienced an electric thrill that pulsed through his body. It’s not that she was such a beauty, though she was attractive, just not in the Sylvia kind of way, but there was something else about her like mountain air and sunshine. Long brown hair all shiny and clean was held in a ponytail by a plastic clip that his fingers itched to remove. Warm, coffee-colored eyes soothed him with a friendly glance. Her skin, unadorned with makeup glowed with health. Of medium height, her body was trim but wonderfully curvaceous. Hers was a quiet loveliness that shone brightly like an aura around her. Never had he experienced such a curious feeling of excitement combined with comfort. She was a stranger but she seemed so familiar as if he’d known her all his life.

“Lola Tremaine, meet Gideon Fairfax, our piano player and front man.” Oscar introduced her as he led her to the chair beside Gideon’s bed. “Gideon, your mouth is hanging open. Try not to ogle her.” Oscar laughed good-naturedly.

Gideon shut his mouth and painfully drew himself up in the bed. Lola took his pillows, plumped them and placed them behind him making him instantly more comfortable. He sighed with relief as he settled back against them and peered at her with gratitude. “Thanks. That feels much better.” He took her hand enjoying the moment of contact. “I’m glad to meet you, Lola. The guys seem to feel you would make a good replacement until I can get back to work.”

She smiled as she took a seat in the chair. “I know I’m only temporary but I promise you, I’ll do my best not to let you down. I know you haven’t had a chance to hear me sing. I would love to show you what I can do, if that’s alright.”

“You mean right now? Without accompaniment?” He didn’t want to put her on the spot but he did want to know what her talent would prove to be. This gig was important to all of them and their families.

“I brought my guitar just in case,” Jose put in as he jumped up, picked up the case behind the door and withdrew his well-worn guitar. He strummed a few cords to tune it then began to play a tune that Gideon had written. After the first stanza, Lola began to sing. Her voice curled around the room in soft, sweet melody laying out the familiar song that Gideon had written for his mother in honor of her birthday a year before she died.. It was bittersweet to hear the song. His heart contracted with emotion listening to Lola’s enchanting voice.

There was silence for a few moments after she finished. By God, she was good—better than good, she was wonderful. In the back of his mind, Gideon heard his father’s voice say, “It’s more than her voice that’s wonderful.”

Before Lola and his friends departed, he agreed to allow Lola to sing with the band and promised to work on the music to change the key and the words to suit Lola's voice and gender.

Lola suggested that she come to Gideon's house to work with him on the music helping in that way to conserve Gideon's energy. Just as she was about to exit and close the door, she turned back and smiled. "Thank you for giving me this chance, Mr. Fairfax."

"Gideon," he corrected just as the door closed. The brilliance of her smile warmed him long after she was gone.

* * * *

In the weeks that followed Gideon's release from the hospital, the nausea became almost constant, his weight dropped by twenty pounds and his energy evaporated. As his hair began to fall out, he decided to have his barber shave his head. No longer did the man facing him in the mirror resemble the man he used to be. The mirror became an enemy to his self-esteem so he stopped looking at it. His spirits lagged as he wondered if he would survive.

Sylvia had left him. His house was bereft of any sign that she had ever been there. The day he came home from his last chemotherapy session, he found a note leaning against the picture of his parents on his piano. It read:

I can't stay here any more, Giddy. God, of all the things you could be dying from, you had to have breast cancer. My friends and I had a good laugh over that. It's just too embarrassing. George Montif is a real man. He asked me to move in with him and I am. It has to be a hell of a lot more fun being with an older man that being with a bald headed guy with a woman's disease that's sick all the time. I'm keeping the engagement ring. It's the least you could do for me after what I've had to put up with over the past weeks from you.
Sylvia

It's not as if he expected her to stay through his illness. That would have been uncharacteristic of Sylvia. Nevertheless, her words stung him like acid rain. He sat in the closest chair, his strength gone. Closing his eyes, he leaned his head back against the warm wood of his mother's rocking chair. The chair was one of the things of hers he had kept. It was her favorite chair. Even though the wound on his chest was healing, on the inside, he felt broken.

A scent like pine, clear water and sunshine permeated the room and then he heard the familiar voice say, "Pyrite."

The first thing he saw when he opened his eyes was his dad. What a welcome sight his father was, even if he was just an illusion. The old man sat in the chair across from him looking as alive and real as his Irish Setter, Maggie, who lay snoring at his feet. Maggie had died soon after Gideon's dad. She laid on his dad's grave refusing to eat or come in from the cold and the rain. She died there on his grave and Gideon buried her between his parents' graves.

“Pyrite? What are you talking about, Pop?”

His dad leaned down and scratched Maggie’s ears affectionately. “Pyrite is fool’s gold. That’s all she was, Gideon. She was beautiful but worthless.” He drew back in his chair and folded his hands in his lap. “You’re a good man, son. You just have to trust yourself more. Good things are on the way.”

“You always were quite the optimist, Pop.” Gideon wished he could believe his father’s words could be true.

How’s the chemo going?” His father reached down again and stroked Maggie who looked content as she snoozed on.

“It’s over now. I finished the last session.” Gideon hung his head unable to meet his father’s gaze. “It will be a while before I know if all this medical voodoo has worked.”

The warmth radiating from his father’s hand as he reached over and clasped Gideon’s hand was like the warmth of a summer sun. His throat choked with emotion making his words soft and low. “I’m scared, Pop. I’m more afraid than I’ve ever been in my life. I’m disfigured, tired and sick on my stomach most of the time. What if it’s all been for nothing?”

“Everything is for something, Gideon.” His father’s voice resonated in the quiet room.

Looking up, Gideon withdrew his hand from his father’s grasp then ran his fingers over his shaved head. “It’s a comfort to know that you and Mom are. . .you know. . . on the other side.”

“None of that talk now.” The timbre in his father’s voice edged on harsh. “You have to fight to stay alive. It’s important for you to complete your earthly tasks before you come home to us.”

“How do you know I haven’t finished them yet?”

“Your mother has always looked forward to having some grandchildren for one.” His father smiled slyly. “You know better than to disappoint your mother. She can get mighty cranky.”

“For God’s sake, Pop, I can’t believe . . .”

A soft knock at the door interrupted him. Gideon glanced at the door then back to the chair only to find it devoid of its recent occupant.

“Hello? Are you home, Gideon?”

His heart almost leaped from his chest. *Lola*. “Come on in. I was just sitting here thinking about going over these old songs I wrote.” It was only half a lie. To keep his mind occupied away from darker thoughts, he had begun in recent days to go through his old songs to change them and make them more suitable for a female vocalist.

The only thing that seemed familiar to him any more was his music. Lola joined him as he moved across the living room to sit before the black and white keys spread across the baby grand. It brought him comfort to feel the cool keys beneath his fingers. Composing his music gave him peace.

Before he began to play, Lola settled on the bench beside him. He would have felt her electric presence even if she hadn't laid her fingers on his arm or looked up at him with those coffee eyes. He knew he would feel her presence even if he was blindfolded and she was on the other side of the room. What was it about her?

"Are you feeling better today?" she asked as her hand heated his arm. "The color seems to be coming back to your cheeks."

It's because you are sitting too close and your lips are too inviting. The truth was that he did feel better since her arrival. Maybe it was just that he was working again and feeling useful and—horny. "I think getting back to my music helps."

"Now that your treatment is finished and you're feeling a little better, why don't you start playing with the band again?" She took her hand away and turned to look at the music he had been working on.

"I get tired quickly. I'd just bring them down." He tinkered with the keys on the piano and ran through bits of the melody he was working on. He missed the warmth of her hand.

"You could do it part time, maybe just one song each night. Oscar is a great musician but his talent is on the base fiddle and violin, not the piano. He tries though. It would give them a lift if you could be there even if it was just one song." She glanced up at him through her dark lashes making his heart knot up. "You need to get out more, get some exercise and work on getting your strength back."

She was also very irritating and pushy. "I'm too tired and I still feel nauseated sometimes."

"That's all going to go away now that the chemo is over. You should get out and walk, drink some energy drinks and take vitamin B12."

"What are you---some kind of health guru?" She was getting on his nerves.

She smiled bewitchingly. "No, but my mother had cancer and she tried some of these things. They seemed to help. Getting well is up to you now."

He was almost afraid to ask but he couldn't keep from it. "Did your mother make it?"

The smile became brilliant. It was like peering into the brightness of the sun. "She's alive and well. She and Daddy are planning a trip to Australia in the Fall."

Hope rippled through him creating a wave of joy in its wake. "How long has it been since she had the cancer?"

“Mom’s been cancer free for fifteen years.”

Gideon laughed riding on the dizzying ride of pure happiness. “I think vitamins, energy drinks and walking sound mighty fine. Will you help me?” It was the first time he had asked another human being for help since his parents died.

She turned those mysterious eyes on him and he felt himself fall into their depths. “Why Gideon, I’ve never heard you laugh before. It sounds beautiful.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I don’t believe I’ve felt like it until now.” He allowed himself to take her hand in his and feel its pulsing life. He bathed in the intoxicating warmth of her smile and felt alive again. “I think I’ll take you up on that idea of rejoining the band. They’ve probably gotten out of hand since I got sick. I can start slow and keep adding more time until I can handle a whole gig again. But Lola,” her name sounded wonderful to his ears, “There’s one thing I don’t want to change. I want you to stay with the band. I think we work well together and our voices blend so well.”

“Yes,” she answered before he was actually finished, “Yes, I would love to. I’ve enjoyed working with you so much. It’s meant a lot to me.”

“Me too.” More than she would ever know. “Why don’t we work on this song as a duet?” He turned to the music and played the intro before they joined voices. Her voice wove around his blending into a musical elixir that made him drunk with glee.

The title had new meaning for him. *I Promise You* was a song about hope and commitment to love always. When they finished the last stanza, the room reverberated with their voices and the music of the piano. In the silence that followed, Gideon turned to Lola and, without meaning to, took her into his arms and touched his lips to hers. To his utter amazement, she kissed him back warm and sweet.

When they parted, he stood with her, taking her hands in his as he felt for the first time since cancer struck his world, that he could live again—that he wanted to live because now he had a reason to be here on the planet.

After they finished working, Gideon walked Lola to the door and, before she departed, he took her in his arms again and kissed her once more. He could feel his blood pulsing with energy through his body as his life came back to him.

After he shut the door and turned to walk to the piano, his father stood there smiling at him. “Looks like you found real gold, son.”

“I think I have, Pop I think I’m going to be okay now.”

“You don’t need me any more, Gideon. You’re going to be fine.” He grew silent and cocked his head as if listening to something in the distance. “I have to go now. Your mother’s waiting for me. We’ll always love you.” The vision disappeared but a faint voice spoke to Gideon through the beam of sun that glanced through the window. “Don’t forget about our grandchildren.”

* * * *

In the months that followed, long after his hair grew back and his strength returned, Gideon never heard or saw his father or his faithful dog again but he knew he was there along with his mother watching over him. The band caught the attention of a recording company and signed a lucrative contract that would make them all a healthy income. And there was Lola, always at his side sometimes patient, sometimes annoying, but always loving. In her his future rested.

He had survived cancer with the help of his friends, Lola and his father's love.

The End

About the Author

Writing brings Sarah McNeal joy and fulfillment as nothing else can. Inspired by the story of her uncle, *The Violin* is the first in a series of books by her revolving around musical instruments. Future installments are to include *The Piano* and *Harmonica Joe's Reluctant Bride*.

Drawn to writing fantasy and time-travel fiction particularly, she has created a magical place called Valmora, where winged people with various magical abilities are in constant struggle with the evil forces of the Dark Isle. Readers can lose themselves in this world in *The Dark Isle* and *Lake of Sorrows*. A one-time nonfiction writer who has written for *The Charlotte Observer* and for the CMC Mercy Hospital, Sarah loves creating magical worlds and characters who strive to make a difference and invites readers to love them as she does.

Visit Sarah on the web at www.sarahmcneal.com.