



# SAVING

*'don't you dare give up on me.'*

# SABLE

by Marianne Pope

**W**hich would it be? Would Sable, my ten year old Shepherd-cross, pull through her unexplainable bleeding ailment, or wouldn't she?

I got my answer while waiting at a streetlight. It was after midnight and I'd just left her at the emergency animal hospital for the fourth time in two weeks and was heading home. The streets were quiet, it had started to snow and I was stopped at a red light. Usually, I'd be bawling about now. But despite the facts – Sable was still bleeding profusely from her neck because her blood refused to clot and she'd already had two transfusions so a third was risky – I just knew that somehow she'd pull through.

This all started with a routine minor surgery where she'd had two sebaceous cysts removed – one from her side and one from her back – as well as a chipped tooth pulled. It was the cyst on her side that caused the problem because for some reason, removing the tiny bump triggered a massive hematoma – a lump of a bruise the size of half a football. Within days, the entire length of her body turned a purplish blue. She was bleeding to death on the inside. And not only did we not know why, there was nothing the vets could do to stop it.

What baffled the vet who did the surgery (and the half dozen who cared for Sable in the weeks to follow) was why would the removal of one cyst cause a bleed but not the

other? Both cysts were benign. And furthermore, why didn't the site of her tooth extraction bleed since the mouth is an area far more prone to that?

Clearly it was a localized bleed. So a blood condition, such as the inability to clot, was unlikely and the tests did not indicate this – yet that's exactly what was happening. The possibility of cancer was raised, and is certainly still on the list, but as the oncologist told me, cancer tends to present itself loud and clear. The challenge in her job is rarely the diagnosis; it's getting the patient successfully into remission.

Sable's surgery had been on a Monday and her regular vet kept a close eye on her dropping red blood cell count in the days to follow. By Thursday, he was concerned enough to meet me at the clinic after hours. Sable was extremely lethargic and her gums nearly white. The vet ran the test: her red blood cell count was 10. Normal is 35.

"You're going to emergency," he said. "This dog needs a transfusion. Now."

By Saturday morning, Sable had experienced her first blood transfusion. She was still in rough shape – and I, even rougher. The internal medicine specialist gave me an update: still no diagnosis. And because Sable continued to hemorrhage, it would be prudent for me to prepare myself to lose her. Surgery was not an option.

*I nodded slowly as the tears began. Then, just like that, seven and a half years dissolved and I was back in the Foothills Hospital ICU awaiting the news on the condition of my husband, John, a police officer who'd fallen through a false ceiling and hit his head.*

*"John has suffered an extremely serious brain injury," the ICU doctor had said, "and although his condition is still stable, surgery is not an option."*

*"Oh."*

*"His head struck the ground so hard that his brain hemorrhaged – and there's nothing we can do to stop that."*

I looked to the vet. "Isn't there anything you can do?"

"Maryanne, I'm sorry to tell you this but your dog will not stop bleeding."

*"Maryanne, I'm sorry to tell you this but your husband is brain-dead."*

In the afternoon I returned to emergency with Soda, my other dog and Sable's partner in crime, for another visit. Gently holding Sable's paw, I began to say goodbye.

*And then it happened again: I was back in the Foothills ICU holding John's hand as he succumbed to his brain injury.*

I let out a sob.

Sable groaned and shifted a little, trying to get comfortable. She was three when John died and had been by my side ever since. I wasn't just losing Sable; I was losing another link to John. The self-pity monster reared her ugly head again.

So I asked myself if perhaps there was a lesson I should be learning here.

Detachment? Letting go? Being in the moment? Accepting loss?

No. Been there, done those.

I suspect what I was to be learning was, surprisingly, self-worth. For I'd told an old lover the day before what was going on with Sable and he hadn't called back since. This hurt. I was going through enough losing my pet, why was I continuing to look to men who refuse to love me the way I deserve to be loved...

*the way John loved me?*

My favourite author, Sarah Ban Breathnach, once wrote that self-loathing is the silent hemorrhaging of the soul. "If I were to assign a color to self-loathing," she said, "it would be the bluish black and purple of an ugly bruise that erupts on the surface of our lives or on our bodies; a warning sign that



something serious is happening on a deeper level. We bruise when we bleed within. Loathing is grief that has festered; the rampant infection of self-pity."

Granted, it wasn't me physically bleeding to death – but since Sable's condition was shrouded in mystery maybe there was a metaphysical message to be deciphered.

Soda and I went home for dinner. I lay on my bed and cursed at whoever may be listening, even if it was just four walls.

Then I returned to emergency, on my own, knowing this would likely be my last visit with Sable. But as the nurse walked with me to the visiting room, she told me that the doctor would like to speak to me.

"Oh?"

"I think there's a medication they'd like to try," she said.

I felt a tiny flutter . . . the one I think Emily Dickinson was referring to when she wrote, "Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul, and sings the tune without the words and never stops at all."

Sure enough, the medical team had decided to try the good old fashioned antibiotic doxycyclin, which may help clot Sable's blood – in the event we are dealing with a form of cancer that prevents the blood from clotting on its own.

It worked. In retrospect, likely because it killed whatever nasty infection Sable was battling.

Two days and five thousand dollars later, I took Sable home and together we began the healing process.

Fast forward two more exhausting weeks, a couple more thousand dollars, several more middle-of-the-night visits to our friends in emergency, a really lousy fortieth birthday (mine), an external bleed (Sable's) all over the kitchen floor, and we're back at the stoplight moment.

As I waited for the light to turn to green, I thought of my last image of Sable.

She'd been standing in her pen, glaring at me through the glass door. Wearing an enormous pressure bandage around her neck and most of her head, she'd smacked the glass with her paw and given me the look – the one that said, 'don't you dare give up on me.' As I watched the snow fluttering to the ground, it hit me: she knew her worth and was obviously still willing to fight to live, considering that, beneath the bandage, blood was spurting from her neck.

And she did.

Three months later, I'm happy to report that I not only have a happy, healthy dog, I also learned a lesson: whoever I fall in love with next is going to have to love me as much as I love Sable – which should be as much as I love myself. **ca**