

unpublished

stab wound

A novel

by

James Gottesman

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Chapter 1

**Lopez Island, Washington, Thursday, May 8th,
2002**

Nicole Marrone skip-scurried out the east gate of Lopez School and bounded onto Bus #2. She had no reason to think her life would change by the end of the next day. None at all.

Despite a sunny San Juan Islands afternoon, clouds of exhaust from just departed Buses #1 and #3 obscured Center Road like a tagger armed only with gray paint.

Mr. Harrington, the #2 bus driver, looked at his watch. 3:33 *p.m.* “I’d never guess who’s late again,” he mumbled.

“Sorry, Mr. H,” Nicole said with her biggest smile.

Harrington smiled back. He adored Nicole, the most upbeat teenager he’d ever met. He gave the eighth grader his customary eye-roll and pointed his right thumb backward over his shoulder. “Take a seat, Miss Blue Eyes,” Harrington said.

Nicole quickly viewed the empty aisle seat next to her older brother, Tony, who smiled while he patted the well-worn black Naugahyde. Nicole’s bus-mates had long given up any notion that she would sit anywhere else. Tony, three years the elder, had been held back, now twice, into the ninth-grade and she couldn’t let anyone sit next to him, lest the teasing would commence.

Bus #2’s large diesel engine sputtered, as if it had a bad mid-winter cough, then found its rhythm and started towards Center Road.

Nicole, head whirling, thought about the catapult she planned to create for her school project. She had seen the movie *Gladiator* two nights earlier and had been fascinated by, then dreamt about, a Roman catapult used in a battle scene. She woke up the next morning thinking, *I can make that.*

As the bus rumbled east along Vista Road, Nicole finished her preliminary drawing of her fire- and stone-hurling machine.

Tony turned away from his customary window-trance and espied his sister's plans. "Whatcha doin'?"

"Designing a catapult," Nicole said.

"A 'what-a-pulled'?"

Nicole said, "Cat – a – pult. It's a weapon used centuries ago to throw huge stones or fireballs at castles. They don't make 'em anymore."

Tony turned back to the window. "Catapult, catapult, catapult, catapult..."

Buddy Szalwinski turned around from the seat in front of Tony and glared at the annoying perseverations. Szalwinski needed little excuse to start taunting Tony, or anyone. "Catapult, pull a cat, Tony's a cat, Tony's dumb as a cat..."

"One more word and I'll punch your lights out," Nicole snarled, leaning forward, then glaring until Szalwinski turned away. Nicole hit the back of his seat with the heel of her hand and waited. Szalwinski knew enough to not turn around. Facing her brother, Nicole took his hand and gently squeezed it.

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“That’s enough, Tony,” Nicole whispered. “We’ll talk about catapults at home tonight. Okay?”

“What castle are you going to attack?” Tony asked softly. “I want to attack with you.”

Tony didn’t wait for an answer and turned his gaze back to the road.

“None. No castles, last I looked on Lopez,” Nicole said, returning to her drawing.

Tony watched the pine trees zip by, lined up in soldier’s formation standing guard over Vista Road. Tony saluted a minute later, after three battalions of trees had been inspected. Tony turned back to his sister. “Nic, you’re so smart,” he said. “I know it and everyone in school knows it. You’re the smartest person I know.”

“You’re plenty smart. Just different,” Nicole said. “Nobody on this bus could have taken Mom’s old clock apart and repaired it. You think anyone on the bus knows the capitals of every country in the world like you do? I’m okay smart but I don’t have your good heart or common sense. You care about everyone else first. I couldn’t ask for a better brother.”

“Well, maybe a smarter one,” Tony said. “I try. It just doesn’t come easy for me.”

“Yeah.”

Tony turned back to the window and softly mumbled, “Catapult, catapult...”

The bus stopped at the entrance to Dusty Road, a narrow, quarter-mile rutted dirt road, to let Nicole and Tony off. The intersection was as close as they’d get to home.

As Tony and Nicole walked together, she eyed the large madrona tree root that rose out of the road near Jane Redlim's house. The same root that caused Nicole to trip and break her wrist four years earlier. *They'll never fix it.* She kicked the root confidently to establish the indisputable truth that she now ruled Dusty Road.

Eyes forward, Nicole thought back to the catapult and whether her father could break away from his fledgling restaurant business to help her. Tony and her mom would be no help. *Maybe I'll do it myself.*

"Tony, listen carefully," Nicole said. "Tomorrow is Thursday and I won't be coming home on the bus. I've got a soccer game and Jodie's mom will drive me home. Make sure you sit next to Sarah Schneider and nowhere near any of the Szalwinski brothers. I'll remind you again at lunch tomorrow and I'll talk to Sarah."

Tony nodded.

Nicole made no note of a black sedan facing them, parked on a side road to Mr. Fadder's shed.

* * *

The next afternoon, Tony exited the bus alone and headed happily down Dusty Road. The Szalwinskis hadn't bothered him. He had not seen the black sedan the day before nor did he notice it this day. He didn't hear the car's engine running or see its dark-tinted glass. As he walked past the side road, he didn't hear or see a man exiting the car's back door just behind him.

* * *

Susan Marrone returned home at 5:45 p.m. to an empty house. By six-thirty, hyperventilation had turned her lips and fingertips prickly-numb. Her hands shook so

badly she had trouble dialing the next mother on her school list. But she persisted, finally with success.

"What's up, Sue?"

"Have you seen Tony?" she pleaded. She couldn't remember which mother she had just called.

"No, I haven't seen him. Slow down. Are you okay?"

"I can't slow down. I can't find him. I can't find Tony. Nicole is playing soccer and I'm afraid to leave the house in case somebody calls."

"I'm sure everything is okay. Was he supposed to be at our house?"

"No, not that I know of, but...but...he's not home," cried Susan. "You're the fifth mother I've called. Tony didn't tell me he was going anywhere. He knows the rules. The bus dropped him off at four. Sarah Schneider said she saw him get off the bus. But his backpack isn't here, so I don't think he ever came home. It's not like him."

"Hold on. I'll ask Billy if he's seen Tony or knows..."

Susan interrupted, "Oh. Oh. I've got a call coming in." The phone's LCD display said, *Stevens Cascade Hospital*. "I'll call..."

The words "you back" were chopped off once Susan pushed the phone's *FLASH* button.

"Hello. Hello," Susan yelled into the receiver.

"Is this the home of Anthony Marrone?" a calm voice answered.

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"Yes, yes. I'm Tony's mother. Has something happened?"

"This is Nurse Molly Madson calling from Stevens Cascade Hospital. First, your son is okay. He's stable."

"He's stable? What happened? Where is he?"

"As I said I am calling from Stevens Cascade Hospital. We're located in Index, Washington, on Highway 2. Your son was brought here seventy-five minutes ago. He was unconscious and appeared as if had been assaulted. He suffered a stab wound to his left back along with bruises to his face, legs, and arms."

"Index? I know where that is. What was he doing in Index? That's impossible. He couldn't be in Index. Are you sure it's my son? Is this some kind of prank?"

"He's about fifteen or sixteen," Madson said, "black, curly hair, brown eyes, a small curved scar on his chin and..."

"That's him. That's him. Oh, my God. Is he okay? Is he okay? Oh, please God. Is he..."

"Mrs. Marrone, he's doing fine now," Madson interrupted. "We found his name and phone number inside a hidden pocket in his jacket. His left kidney had been severely lacerated and he was bleeding internally."

"Oh God. Tell me he's okay again."

"Your son is stable and he's very lucky," Madson said.

"What do you mean, lucky? He disappeared and was stabbed," Susan cried.

“I meant he’s fortunate because Stevens Cascade is a small hospital with limited services. We’re not usually staffed or equipped to handle major trauma. Luckily, a surgeon, Dr. Charles McNeil from Everett, owns a summer cottage in town and happened to be nearby when your son presented. Dr. McNeil felt your son’s situation was critical and did not think he could be transferred to a major trauma hospital safely. He operated emergently here at Stevens and stopped the bleeding but needed to remove your son’s left kidney. He’ll be in recovery for thirty or forty minutes, but we’re not staffed to handle this level of post-op care. As soon as he is stable we’ll transfer him to Everett General by ambulance. I expect he’ll be in Everett within one and a half to two hours. Again, he’s doing fine.”

Chapter 2

Henry, Susan and Nicole Marrone rode the 11:00 p.m. ferry to Anacortes, the next and last eastbound boat leaving Lopez Island on a weekday night to the mainland.

Henry Marrone said nothing, holding a near death grip on their 1975 Datsun 710 steering wheel as Susan repeated her wailing. “Why?” “Why, Tony?” “He’s so innocent.” “Who could do such a terrible thing?” “Why?”

Henry would not answer other than, “I don’t know.”

Nicole finally echoed her mother. “Dad, why did this happen to Tony? You need to answer Mom.”

Henry Marrone’s jaw tightened until the veins coursing above his temples bulged deep blue. He didn’t turn, didn’t speak, and didn’t blink as he headed east off the ferry toward I-5. He remained mute for the entire and painful forty minutes from the ferry terminal to Everett General Hospital.

Nicole sat in the backseat, still not fully comprehending the day’s events but upset at herself for not being on the bus to protect her brother. Anger percolated slowly as her temples ached from clenching her jaw. Finally, she unsnapped her seat belt, leaned over the front seat, put her arms around her mother’s heaving upper chest, and hugged her. Nicole repeated a short comfort in her mother’s ear until they reached Everett: “Everything will be all right. Everything will be...”

* * *

The Marrones arrived at Everett General at 1:00 a.m. and rushed to the surgical intensive care unit to be met by a senior nurse. Her blue plastic nametag read, Pam Chase, R.N.

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“Anthony will be fine in time,” Chase said.

Nicole interrupted. “He likes to be called Tony.””

“Okay. Tony’s lost some blood but has not needed a transfusion. Dr. MacNeil, who practices here at Everett General, miraculously happened to be in Index when Tony arrived at Stevens Cascade. Dr. McNeil took him directly to the OR. It could have been worse.”

“What time was that? When did he arrive at Emergency?” asked Henry Marrone.

“About five thirty p.m. according to the nursing notes and...” Chase said.

“That’s impossible,” Susan interrupted. “You can’t get to Index, or even Everett, from Lopez in two hours, and we know he got off the bus in front of our road at four. There aren’t any ferries until eleven p.m. after three thirty. It’s impossible.”

“Honestly, I don’t know the particulars,” Chase said, clearly perplexed. “That’s for the police, I guess. I heard he was left on the hospital driveway in front of the ER. As for why, that’s for police too. I’m just one of the nurses caring for him here.”

“I’m so sorry,” Susan said. “I’m upset and confused. Can we see Tony now?”

“Sure, of course,” Chase said. “He’s still pretty groggy. Give me a minute to make sure everything is okay.”

Henry mumbled as the nurse walked away, “Who could have possibly done this? It makes no sense.” He wiped tears off his wife’s face and then wrapped his large arms around her as he softly kissed her forehead. Henry

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Marrone already knew the situation would likely change everything about their family, but said nothing.

The three Marrones walked into Tony's room to find him asleep and uncovered from the waist up. Bandages surrounded his forehead and upper right arm. Bruises and swelling had closed his left eye. Gauze and tape covered a left flank incision, and a suction drain exited below the bandages.

Susan started sobbing immediately and turned to Henry, who enveloped her in his arms.

"Everything will be okay. Tony's going to be fine," Henry said, unconvincingly.

Nicole looked at her parents, then her brother and then back to her parents. She bolted from the room.

Sitting on a nearby hallway couch outside the ICU, Nicole had just watched her father and mother disintegrate, knowing they could have lost their son, her harmless and loving brother. Her boiling anger finally reached liquid stage, although she didn't know yet that the family's situation was in the proverbial toilet.

Someday, somehow, I will find out who did this. I will. They'll pay. I swear.

* * *

The next morning, Susan Marrone's eyes opened widely at her husband's declaration.

"You what?" she asked. "Please, with all that's happening, tell me you're kidding."

Henry Marrone repeated, "I haven't been paying for health insurance for seven months. We needed the money

for the restaurant. I meant to send a check in last week but forgot to mail it. It's in the glove compartment. We have no coverage."

"What does that mean?"

"I've been down to the hospital accounting office twice. The head lady down there said we'd probably owe the emergency doctors, the surgeons, the anesthesia doctor, the ambulance, and both hospitals."

"What are we talking about?" Susan asked, already starting to hyperventilate. "I mean, money wise. How much?"

"The hospital bills alone will be forty-five thousand, maybe more. The doctors about seven. They said we could pay them back over time."

"Can we borrow money from the bank?"

"No," Henry lamented, shaking his head. "I asked the bank last month for another five thousand for the restaurant. They said absolutely not. If we tell them we've got outside bills for fifty to sixty thousand, they'll shut us down."

* * *

For the next two weeks on Lopez Island, everyone's conversation centered on Tony's kidnapping and surgery.

Tony returned to school four weeks later, still listing to his left from the flank incision. Uncomfortably, he was the center of attention despite Nicole's attempt to shield him.

At lunch, Buddy Szalwinski joined the crowd around Tony and Nicole. Buddy, used to being the center of any conversation, felt compelled to add his two cents.

“You gotta be the stupidest person in the world,” he shouted. “Anyone that would let himself get kidnapped and then lose a kidney probably deserved it for being so dumb. Never would have happened to me.”

Nicole exploded and forty-five minutes later found herself, with her mother, in the principal’s office trying to explain the shiner surrounding Buddy’s left eye.

She was suspended from school for four days after refusing to apologize to Buddy and his father.

“I’ll do it again if he opens his trap. I swear,” Nicole told her mom on the ride home.

Four weeks later, Henry Marrone declared bankruptcy and closed his restaurant. Lopez National Bank foreclosed on their home three months later.

Susan, Nicole, and Tony moved into the basement of Susan’s sister’s house in Arlington, Washington, while Henry took a job in Marysville driving a delivery truck.

Susan and Henry fought often in the beginning, but in time they accepted the hand dealt them. Henry became sullen and regarded himself a loser. He started driving long-haul semis and would come home only for short stays.

Susan hated the fact that she was relegated to the basement of her younger sister’s home. In time, she pulled herself together and started working as a clerk in a nearby Home Depot.

Tony never understood the reasons for the family's move and actually enjoyed the cramped two-family living situation.

Nicole changed schools and lost dear friends, and despite her parents absolving her for Tony's kidnapping, she blamed herself for the woes of the family. Worse yet, she found little joy in life.

Susan and Henry would not move back to Lopez Island until both children had graduated high school.

Of course, the imaginary castles of Lopez Island were safe from Nicole's planned but now forgotten catapult. She would often cry herself to sleep. *Someday, somehow, I will find out who did this. I will. They'll pay. I swear. Someday...*

Chapter 3

Ten years later.... 2012

Seattle Medical Center

Urology and Transplantation -11 Southwest

Lucy Port, RN, sat at the nurse's station, ear to phone, while simultaneously intaking data from two computer screens.

"Dr. Roberts, glad I got hold of you. One of the new nurse's aides, Nicole, wants to speak to you," Port said. "We're two RNs short and I put her on Dr. Flanagan's patient, Mrs. Clemons, in 1147. We're swamped and I haven't had the time to check it out."

"I'm swamped too. We've got a kidney coming in at seven. Can it wait until later tonight?" asked Paul Roberts, M.D., senior resident in Urology and Transplantation.

"The aide goes off at six; probably better you talk to her before she leaves," said Port.

"Okay, okay," said Roberts. "Be there in five minutes. I'll take a quick peek. I hope it's not a waste of my time."

Paul, in his fifth year of a six-year residency program, had not been caring for the seventy-four-year-old Mrs. Clemons, the private patient of an outside urologist.

As Paul reviewed Clemons' history and hospital course on his iPad, the elevator rose to the eleventh floor.

Five days earlier, Clemons' urologist had removed, with great difficulty, a chronically infected left kidney. Post-surgery, Clemons' hospitalization had been unremarkable, and her chart contained no doctor or

nurse's notes of alarm. Her discharge had been slated for the following morning

Paul closed his iPad as the elevator door opened and he looked at his watch. Walking quickly, he bypassed the nurse's station and entered Room #1147.

Applying a bandage over an elderly woman's left flank incision, two gloved hands moved effortlessly, while ponytailed, shoulder-length, auburn hair peeked outside a hair bonnet. Mrs. Clemons, on her side, faced the doorway.

"Hello, Mrs. Clemons. I'm Dr. Paul Roberts," he said, ignoring the hands and auburn hair.

Clemons, squinting, scanned the doorway, attempting to make eye contact with the voice. She closed her eyes, remained quiet, and made no effort to respond.

Realizing that Mrs. Clemons would be no help, Paul said to the hands and auburn hair, "Hey, are you the nurse's aide looking for me? I'm really busy and have to be somewhere."

The auburn ponytail stayed down and ignored the question. "There you are, Mrs. Clemons. All taped up." Nicole Marrone looked up briefly, then back to Mrs. Clemons' flank as she removed her latex gloves and lastly her hair bonnet.

Paul hadn't been prepared. His neck popped back an imperceptible fraction of an inch as his eyebrows arched. All he'd seen in two seconds were youthful, large eyes, swimming in blue, squarish shoulders, straight back posture and a soft, but resolute, physical aura. She had a warm smile, aimed only at Mrs. Clemons.

Turning Mrs. Clemons and then propping her head on a pillow were the hands attached to the warm smile. Paul remained transfixed and watched.

Nicole finally stood erect and was taller than Paul would have guessed. She looked at him, sans smile, and parroted his question with, "Hey, are you the resident that the head nurse said would answer my questions?"

Paul, unused to being made small by anyone other than his mother and the chairman of the Urology and Transplant service, said, "Uh. Yeah. Hello. Who exactly are you?"

"I'm Nicole Marrone, a nurse's aide."

"Nurse Port said you wanted to talk to me."

"I've been taking care of Mrs. Clemons this afternoon, and Nurse Port said you're covering. Mrs. Clemons told me she hoped to go home tomorrow. She's developed a little fever this afternoon, one hundred point five, and didn't eat any of her lunch."

"It's probably nothing," Roberts said. "She's done pretty well up to now. Tell me that's not why you asked to see me?"

"Well, no," said Nicole. "Something's bothering me and I was hoping you could explain it. Her urine has a funny color. She's still on IVs and taking fluids by mouth, so she's making lots of urine. I expected her urine to be pretty clear and..."

"She could have bleeding from the ureteral stump," Paul interrupted. "Maybe a little scab came off and caused some bleeding and..." He hesitated. *This girl has no idea what I'm talking about.* "Excuse me. I'm really

busy and don't have time for teaching right now. Is that why you dragged me up here?"

"Actually, yes. I was concerned that her urine had an unusual color," Nicole said.

"I'm guessing you didn't save a specimen for me to see?" Paul asked.

"That was a negative question, Doctor." Nicole, jaw set and lips pursed, walked toward the bathroom, passing Paul, who stood motionless. His eyes followed her into the bathroom.

Nicole's light olive skin, the quarter-sized scar on the right side of her neck, the hint of a small cleft in her chin, and the single crooked upper incisor didn't register with Paul. He saw only auburn and blue.

Exiting the bathroom, Nicole said, "And I did keep a sample for you to look at. I'd think that the urine would be reddish if that were true. I mean if there were bleeding."

Nicole held up a small plastic, sealed cup and handed it to Roberts. The fluid was yellowish, but a bright orangey-yellow, not the usual dull, straw color of urine.

Paul spun the cup around after holding it up to the light. "Hmm. Do you know if Mrs. Clemons has ever had any liver problems?"

"No, I don't know," said Nicole. "I didn't know to ask her."

"Actually, you're not supposed to ask. We are and maybe the RNs. Not the aides."

Nicole's jaw tightened at the apparent reprimand.

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Paul hesitated and said, "I'm sorry, I didn't need to say that. Anyway, this urine looks jaundiced. I need to look at her chart again."

Paul spun his iPad into view and exited the room followed by Nicole. Nicole stopped and then backed into the doorway of Mrs. Clemons' room as Paul kept walking away, turning in to the nursing station.

"You're welcome," Nicole said loudly to the empty hallway, then added softly to herself, "asshole."

Forty-five minutes later Paul Roberts found Nicole in another hospital room bent over an empty bed changing sheets. An elderly male patient, who Roberts did not know, sat in a chair near the window. Paul stood in the hallway and said, "Miss...uh. Can I talk to you?"

Nicole looked up and dropped the sheets on the bed. "Excuse me for a moment," she said to the man in the chair and exited the room. The two seas of blue eyes returned as she faced Dr. Roberts.

"Nicole, my name is Nicole," she said, pointing to her name badge. Not sure if the doctor intended to reprimand her again, she crossed her arms tightly across her chest but didn't look away. She was clearly not intimidated.

"Nicole, then," Paul said. "I thought you'd like to know that we drew some stat liver function tests on Mrs. Clemons and she has cholestatic jaundice, a reversible form of hepatitis, probably caused by a couple of drugs she's been given here in the hospital."

Nicole's head swayed right and left, confused, trying to understand the meaning of Paul's comments.

"Acetaminophen and an antibiotic called Oxychloromycin. Both can cause the liver to malfunction,

so I've stopped both. She'll need to stay in the hospital for a few more days, but should make a full recovery. That was a good pickup on your part. I just wanted to thank you."

Nicole's arms relaxed to her sides. "Thank you, back," she said. "I didn't understand much or most of what you just said. I guess I'll have to read up on it. I'm not sure why her liver problem made her urine orangey."

Paul, switching into teaching mode, said, "Oh, it's simple. Hepatic dysfunction. It's the excess bilirubin in her blood from liver dysfunction that spills over into the urine that causes the orangey..." Paul stopped when Nicole's arched eyes told him she still didn't understand a word. "Tell you what, it's not too complicated, but you may have saved her from a much worse outcome. Read up on hepatic insufficiency and cholestatic jaundice and we'll talk."

Nicole's eyes arched again at the unfamiliar terminology.

Paul took out his tablet and asked, "What's your tablet ID."

Nicole said, "NAM5188. You doctors and some of the nurses can take their hospital tablets with them. But aides can't take their tablet out of the hospital. I have to check it when I leave."

"Oh, yeah. I forgot about the rules for aides." Paul knew the coding system for tablets. *5188, born 1988, she's twenty-four*. "I just transmitted to you the word 'cholestatic jaundice.' Google it at home. I'll send you some references later."

"I don't have a computer. Well, I do. An old one, but we don't have Internet access; it's too expensive."

"The library has computers," said Paul.

"Aides don't get privileges here and I have to get home after my shift. The public library nearest to me has free Internet but it's not close and not safe at night. Maybe my neighbor will allow me to use hers. Or, I can do it here during breaks, if the nurses let me."

"I'll tell Lucy, uh, Nurse Port, to let you use the nurse's computer," Paul said.

Over Paul's shoulder, Nicole could see one of the senior nurses eyeing her conversation. "Thank you. I...I've got to get back to work now."

Nicole turned quickly and walked back into the hospital room to finish making the bed. She missed Paul's attempt to shake her hand. Paul turned and headed back to the nurse's station.

Three hours later Paul ducked into the doctor's lounge and ran into Art Brown, a chief resident in thoracic surgery. They had done internships together at the University of Chicago and both came to Seattle Medical Center to continue training in their respective specialties. Brown, married for five years with two small children, had little in common with Paul, other than an obsession with medicine and mutual respect as surgeons.

"I've got a little problem. Well, not really a problem but an issue," said Paul.

"Shoot," said Brown.

"Don't laugh."

"Jesus, what'd you do already?"

“Nothing. I met a girl I’d like to ask out for a cup of coffee.”

“Why you talking to me, dufus?” asked Brown. “You haven’t liked any of the girls Joan and I have set you up with. Please tell me you didn’t pay one of those dating websites.”

“No. She’s a nurse’s aide here. I met her on the ward today.”

“A what? A nurse’s aide,” Brown said, then immediately rolled into a litany of putdowns. “You gotta be kidding. She probably hasn’t finished high school. She speak English? What’s she got that you want? Wait, don’t answer that, I don’t want to know. Little Paul is speaking to Big Paul. You know, you’re never too old to learn or do something stupid.”

“You are such an asshole,” Paul said, smiling.

“That’s Doctor Asshole to you. How young is she?”

“Twenty-four.”

“At least she’s legal.”

“I know it’s crazy,” said Paul. “She seemed different. She picked up on a drug reaction causing cholestatic jaundice when everyone else missed it. I was acting a bit holier than I should and she gave me some shit. Most aides won’t even talk to me. She wasn’t intimidated at all and seemed way too smart and inquisitive to be a nurse’s aide. So what’s the protocol on asking out aides?”

“Red flag and against hospital policy,” Brown said. “You’re the one who’s in harm’s way. If anything happens, she accuses a doctor, a senior resident, at that, has forced her into something. She hires a lawyer and

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sues the medical center. Never goes well for the doc. That's why rules are in place.”

“Nothing’s going to happen,” said Paul.

“Something happened if the aide says it happened, even if it didn’t,” Brown said.

“You’re such a downer.”

Brown, now laughing, said, “I’m trying to keep you above water. Find another girl. Trust me. This had B-A-D written all over it.”

“Okay. Okay. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

Paul’s mind flitted on and off Nicole until the following morning.

Four days later, he received a message on his tablet while making morning rounds. *Thanks 4 references on cholestatic jaundice. BTW, her anti-depression drugs could have caused it 2. NAM5188.*

Paul texted back, *Glad 2 discuss liver issues with u. Can I buy u a cup of joe?*

The response was immediate. *No, 4 obvious reasons. I can’t afford to get fired. Maybe in another life. Thx tho. NAM5188.*