

# stab wound

A novel

by

James Gottesman

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## Chapter 1

### **Lopez Island, Washington, Thursday, May 8<sup>th</sup>, 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. 3:31 *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.”

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. The next morning she woke up 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..."

Nicole immediately leaned forward and snarled, "One more word and I'll punch your lights out." She continued 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.

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

"This is Nurse Tanya Hetlinger 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," Hetlinger 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," Hetlinger 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," Hetlinger 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.”

“Oh my God. That’s terrible.”

“Dr. McNeil said he’d be fine with one kidney. Like nothing ever happened,” Hetlinger said. “He’ll be in recovery for thirty or forty minutes, but we’re not staffed to handle this level of post-op care night. 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 to the mainland on a weekday night.

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

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,” Szalwinski 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.*

## Chapter 4

Three months later Art Brown entered OR #4 to needle his friend. “Dr. Roberts, you were late this morning.”

“Yeah, dead battery and the alternator is shot,” Paul said, pushing himself away from the robot’s control panel. “I tried to wait for Triple A, but they didn’t show up. Some bullshit excuse. I called Uber and yadda yadda. I’ll deal with it later this week, if I ever get home early enough. Needs to be towed to the BMW dealer.”

“I get it,” said Brown. “I’m headed home now but I’ll pick you up tomorrow morning. Five forty-five?”

“Great, thanks. I’ll Uber home tonight, whenever I’m done.”

Paul exited Seattle Medical Center at 8:30 p.m. through the Arnold Pavilion to Madison Street at Summit to wait for the bus. Paul had been at Seattle Med for four and one-half years and this represented his first foray into the realm of public transportation. A list of five bus routes and two hundred times sat posted on a dimly lit telephone pole. He turned on his cell phone’s flashlight app, but the numbers, now clearly visible, continued to make no sense.

“This is crazy. I’m a surgeon,” Paul said loudly to the telephone pole. “I should be able to figure this out.”

The pole remained emotionless, but a soft voice behind him broke the silence. “Excuse me. You look lost.”

“I’m fine,” Paul replied, without looking for the source of the voice. “Just trying to figure out all these numbers. How do you tell which one of these routes heads towards First Avenue in Belltown?” When he turned around to

correct the intrusive interloper as to how lost he wasn't, two blue eyes greeted him. "Oh... It's you. Hi."

"Yep, just me," Nicole said.

"My car's in the shop and..."

"You're slumming it with us peons," Nicole interrupted.

"I guess," Paul said. "I could have called a cab, but there were none in front of the hospital and Uber wanted thirty bucks. I figured what the heck."

"Well, you need to take the 'what the heck' Number Twenty-two to the Jackson Street bus station and then the Thirty-eight, north along First Avenue."

The confidence in Nicole's easy manner and the pride without arrogance in her easy conversation mesmerized Paul in a nanosecond, as it had a few months earlier. He just stared for what seemed the longest moment the spoke.

"When's the Twenty-two come?" he asked.

"Soon. I take it too, but then head south on the light rail. You'll be home finishing dinner before I get close to my apartment. I've got to go all the way to SeaTac, then walk. Fortunately, I don't have to be back tomorrow."

The Twenty-two came as Nicole finished her sentence.

She flashed a transit card and sat in the third row of a near-empty bus as Paul pulled out his wallet.

"How much to go to the Belltown?" he questioned the driver.

“Two fifty. Take the Thirty-eight north from the bus station at Jackson.”

"I knew that," Paul announced, trying to show he wasn't totally helpless. He then pulled a twenty-dollar bill from his wallet. "Change, please."

The driver looked at the twenty, then back to the road, shaking his head. "What rock you been sleeping under, bub? We don't give no change on city buses. If you wanna put the twenty in, fine with me, but you ain't getting no change or credit."

Nicole came around Paul and dropped ten quarters into the coin collector. "You owe me."

"You be one lucky man," the driver said.

Paul disregarded the bus driver's comment and returned to the seat next to Nicole. "Better you should owe me," he said. "Here's the twenty. You owe me seventeen fifty."

Without hesitation, Nicole took the twenty and put it in her purse.

*I was kidding. Who takes the twenty?* Paul thought better of the situation and remained quiet.

"Thanks again for the references on cholestatic jaundice," Nicole said. "I didn't understand everything, but most. Nurse Port gave me time on the computer in her office. She said the other nurses and aides wouldn't have understood if she let me use the computers in the nurse's lounge." Nicole, sitting by the window, stared out at the dark street. "Anyway, someone must have said something because they transferred me away from Urology."

"Our loss," Paul said. "You really did help that woman."

"Nurse Port told me that I'm too smart to be an aide and that I'd make a great nurse."

"I'd agree. You are too smart to be an aide."

"Thanks."

"By the way," Paul said, "I'm sorry how I acted when you asked me to see that patient on the ward. I was rude and didn't need to be."

"You were rude...but apology accepted," Nicole said.

"Is there any chance I can buy you dinner near the bus station?" Paul asked. "I haven't eaten yet. Or at least join me. There's a ton of good restaurants downtown."

"Not going to happen and I don't think it's a good idea," Nicole said immediately. "If anyone were to see us, I'd likely lose my job. The supervisor in charge of nurse's aides told us 'Day One' that we were not to fraternize with the doctors, or even male nurses."

"Really, what are the chances of someone knowing you at Il Terrazzo Carmine at nine p.m. on a weekday?"

"My brother and I need the money, so I can't lose this job. Even if the chance was one in a ba-zillion, I'd say no," Nicole said.

"First, you make a great pickup on the ward. Next you help me find a bus. I might have gone the wrong way and ended up in North Bend."

"Not likely," Nicole said, smiling.

“Plan B. Next time we’re both free,” Paul said, “I come down to SeaTac. You pick the restaurant. Some obscure, dark place. I’ll come in disguise. You can’t say no to that.”

Nicole laughed for a moment then wrinkled her mouth and nose simultaneously. “Trust me, I could say no. But against my better judgment, there’s a Mexican dive, Taqueria Vallarta, on International Boulevard, just north of South One Fifty-Fourth. It’s in a large strip mall and no one you know, or ever will know, goes there.”

"How do you know that?" asked Paul.

“Trust me, I know. Seven thirty, Saturday night. I’ll meet you there.”

“I can pick you up.”

“No. I’ll meet you. My way.”

“Deal.”

Nicole arrived home an hour later. The following morning she dialed a cell phone number in area code 442 north of San Diego and spoke for fifteen minutes. Then she called area code 862 in New Jersey followed by area code 248 outside Detroit.

Nicole knew all three numbers by heart.

\* \* \* \*

At half past seven, Paul walked into Taqueria Vallarta. His fair skin, broad shoulders, easy smile, and a height just over six two stood out against every other occupant.

Nicole's description of the restaurant did not disappoint. The Naugahyde chairs were probably from the fifties, and the peeling Italian motif wallpaper suggested a menu and owners from a different era. The cilantro-infused air reeked of refried beans and Spanish rice.

Paul, ski cap pulled down low over his forehead, had attempted to look the furtive bank robber. Not surprisingly, his fitted leather jacket, wool slacks, and loafers blew the cover. A few disinterested couples, clearly Hispanic, looked at Paul, then back to their Coronas, chips, and salsa. Paul was not one of them. Paul scanned the room looking for auburn and blue until he found Nicole sitting in a corner table, trying to withhold a laugh. She, now giggling, waved him over and he took a seat opposite her.

"Hi. What's so funny?" asked Paul.

"Your paste-on mustache is peeling off and the ski cap doesn't match anything you have on," Nicole said. "Nonetheless, thanks for trying. Trust me that no one you know would ever come in here, even to ask directions."

Nicole leaned over the table toward Paul. "This is going to hurt for a second," she said, and then quickly pulled his paste-on mustache off.

"Ouch." Paul massaged his lip for a second. "You could have met me in the city at someplace a bit nicer than this."

"No, I really don't want to jeopardize my job," Nicole said. "I need the money. I'm supposed to start school in the spring and I need to make enough to live on for a semester."

"You're different."

stab wound

“Different than whom,” Nicole said.

“The rest of the aides. Heck, any aides I’ve ever met. Not to mention you used ‘whom’ rather than ‘who.’ Honestly, nurse’s aides seem intimidated by doctors, even intimidated by interns, nurses, or ward secretaries. You’re not intimidated at all.”

“Nope. I’ve seen worse,” Nicole said.

“You’ve worked at other hospitals?” Paul asked.

“No. Afghanistan. Eight months.”

“Really?” Paul asked. “The surprises keep on coming.”

“You surgeons are nothing compared to a pissed-off Marine sergeant. Not even close.”

“You were a US Marine medic?”

“Wish I had been; they’d pay me more at Seattle Med. I drove half-ton trucks, MRAPs, and Humvees attached to an infantry unit. I did a six-month medical assistant course at South Seattle after the Corps to get certified and land the job at Seattle Med.”

“What the hell is an MRAP? Sounds like a fancy burrito.” Paul picked up and scanned the one-page, refried-bean-stained menu, and said, “MRAP must be here somewhere.”

Nicole laughed at the lame joke. “Sorry. It means ‘Mine Resistant, Ambush Protected.’ It’s an assault transport that provides protection from IEDs. IEDs meaning ‘Improvised Explosive Devices.’”

When Nicole stopped laughing, Paul saw her lip catch on the crooked upper incisor that she instinctively

cleared with her tongue. He said nothing but couldn't help staring at the whole package.

*She's the most interesting person I've ever met.*

"I knew what an IED was," Paul said, "but you're kidding me about the Marines. Really?"

"Not kidding." Nicole unfastened the top two buttons of her blouse, exposing bare chest above her left breast. The two-inch-high blue, bold-scripted "Semper Fi" tattoo lit up Paul's vision. The top of the US Marine eagle logo sat below the Corps' motto, suggesting that the rest of the bird extended well south of what Paul could see.

"I said you were different. But this is a whole different level of different. See action? I mean real fighting?"

"I was usually a few clicks behind most of the hot spots, but shit happens."

"A click. I've heard that used but it never registered."

"A click is a kilometer. And I did get into one real intense firefight. But that's another story."

"Shit. You carry a rifle?"

"That's a stupid question. Of course. But in the confines of a MRAP, my nine-millimeter Glock was more effective. I got shot in the leg and neck, but not bad. In the end, I did get a medal." Nicole pointed to the scar on her neck.

"You actually killed some people?" Paul asked.

"If you consider running over them in a MRAP, yes. I wounded one guy with my sidearm. The dude turned out to be some kind of important, so they made a big deal about it."

“Who are you? I’m just dumbfounded and I don’t get it. How’d you end up in the Marines? You’re smart. I expect you would have gone to college and done whatever.”

“Let’s put it this way,” Nicole said, “life and situations don’t always let you do what you want. Not to overuse my mom’s favorite cliché—you’ve got to play the hand that’s dealt you. The Marine Corps was part of a plea bargain.”

“Oh...” Paul said.

“By the way, nobody’s going to take our order if we just sit here,” Nicole said. “We have to go up to the counter. The Burrito Grande Vallarta isn’t bad.”

They ordered two Burrito Grande Vallartas and returned with two Coronas to their table.

“I’m treating tonight. I’m flush with cash,” Nicole said.

“No, you’re not. I invited you.”

“Yeah. But I’ve got seventeen fifty of your money from the Metro. I’m rich.”

“I forgot about that.”

“I assumed so,” she opined.

“So where’d you grow up?” he asked.

“Lived in Bellevue until I was seven, then we moved to Lopez Island. We had to move back to the mainland to live with my aunt when I was twelve and I finished high school in Arlington, just north of Everett.”

“That’s a lot of information. Why would your family move to Lopez Island? I thought Lopez was for retired people and rich people with vacation homes.”

“Not us. I liked Bellevue and my friends. We had to move.”

“Who has to move to Lopez?” Paul asked.

“My dad’s family owned a successful restaurant in downtown Bellevue called Antonio’s. When my grandfather died after a heart attack, my dad took over. Antonio’s seemed to be doing great, but the strip mall property was sold to a developer for a high rise, so the restaurant had to move or close. My parents said Bellevue was getting too crowded and it would be a good time to move. That’s when we moved to Lopez.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Paul said.

“Didn’t make sense to me either,” Nicole said, “until later.”

“Go on.”

“Just from conversations I overheard between my mom and grandmother, I found out that my dad had starting gambling. My mom didn’t like Dad’s friends and I think my mom and my dad’s mom, who was still alive, forced my dad to leave. Anyway, we moved to Lopez.”

Nicole did not relate the story of Tony’s kidnapping.

“You don’t need to know any more, and I don’t want to talk about my family,” Nicole said. “It upsets me.”

“Fine,” Paul said, “I understand. But can’t you tell me about the plea bargain? The only plea bargain I ever had was with my mother. I’d sneak off after dinner to my

room to do homework.” Switching into a high-pitched voice, he said, “Paul, you want to help me with the dishes? I’d respond, ‘Mom, you want A’s or clean dishes?’ I always got As.”

“My life has been just a tad more complicated, to say the least.”

“Start somewhere. Plea bargain,” Paul said.

“Carlo, my boyfriend at the end of high school, raced cars. I helped him work on the cars and during the races I was the pit crew. I worked my ass off. In turn, he showed me how to drive and got me a job in his uncle’s auto shop.”

“Plea bargain, where’s that?” Paul asked.

“Getting there. Anyway, I got really good at driving. Carlo’d never let me race but I could take the car out if no one was using the track. I knew I was good.”

“Plea bargain?”

“You need to hear the whole story,” Nicole said. “The summer after I graduated high school, a course in Bremerton had a two-thousand-dollar competition time trial. Best time took a thousand bucks.

“Carlo was certain that the ‘thou’ was his. I asked him if I could enter. He told me, ‘No, why would you want to embarrass yourself? Besides, what car are you going to use?’”

“Seems reasonable,” Paul said.

“Not to me. He asked me who was going to pay for *his* car if I wrecked it. Emphasis on the ‘his.’ I said it was *our* car and I would pay for it. Emphasis on the ‘our.’ We got

into a big fight and Carlo made me give him five hundred bucks as insurance or he wouldn't let me drive. The entrance fee was two hundred. So I was out seven hundred bucks, which represented every penny I had saved.

"The race was a week later. Carlo was already pissed that I'd wasted my money and could ruin his car. His time was four seconds faster than anyone else until I got on the track. He was already loading up on the high-fives with his buddies. Halfway through my run, one of the racing groupies yelled that I was only a half-second behind Carlo's time. The whole crowd was pulling for me and I ended up winning by one point four seconds, about four car lengths."

Paul said, "Every time you open your mouth, you amaze me further. Plea bargain?"

"When I got out of the car, a '66 Lotus Elan S3, everyone was there to congratulate me, except Carlo. I embarrassed him. I was a girl, his girl, and I beat him driving the same car. He had already gotten into a fight with one of his friends who had chided him that his dick wasn't as big as mine."

"Does this story end?" Paul asked.

"Shhh. I hadn't put a scratch on the car, but after the race Carlo said he was going to keep my five hundred as a fee for driving his car. He had five hundred for finishing second and I told him that wasn't fair. Actually, I used words worse than that. Things went downhill from there as we started screaming at each other. Everybody knew we'd worked on the car together, so I felt the Lotus was part mine. I did everything he asked and then some, on and off the track."

“This is sounding like a TV movie,” Paul said.

“He called me a bitch and said, ‘Get outta here. Find your own car. We're through,’ turned and walked away. I hit him from behind with a twelve-inch tire iron and knocked him out. The cops and medics showed up and when he came to he told the cops he wanted me arrested for assault.

“I made bail with the thousand from winning the race. I was assigned an incompetent public defender, some lady who couldn't have cared less about me. After the judge heard both sides, he ruled that my assault with a potentially deadly weapon was careless and reckless.”

“It was,” Paul said. “You could have killed him.”

“Yeah, maybe. I wasn't thinking I was so mad. Anyway, the judge then added insult to injury.” Nicole lowered her voice an octave and a half. “Miss Marrone, you should have taken your ex-boyfriend to small claims court if you really wanted to recoup your five hundred dollars. You might have prevailed.”

“So did you?” Paul asked.

“No, I was a smart-ass and told the judge, ‘I did prevail.’”

“You're kidding me. You really said that?”

“I did and it didn't go well. He offered me three months at Washington Corrections for Women or join the armed forces and try to kill bad guys, not boyfriends. There you go, my plea bargain.”

“Why the Marines?”

“I don't like boats.”

A voice from the counter said, “Señor, your burritos are ready.”

Paul stood quickly and retrieved both meals, plastic utensils, and two more Coronas. Nicole sprinkled Cholula hot sauce over her entire meal as Paul observed.

“Want some,” she said.

“No, I’m okay.”

Nicole started on her burrito and Paul watched.

As they sat, Paul couldn’t help staring at auburn and blue. Finally, Nicole realized Paul hadn’t taken a bite.

“So, you going to eat?” she asked.

“Yeah but I was just watching you. I hate to be trite.”

“So don’t.”

“No. It makes me feel better,” Paul said. “You are fascinating. I’ve never met anyone like you.”

“I don’t know about the fascinating part. I know I have trust issues with men. Not all, but most want to take advantage of me.”

“You know that’s not me,” Paul said.

“You might be right, but be aware that I’m always on guard. That’s just me.”

“I can wait,” Paul said. “Do you know how beautiful you are?”

“That’s what they tell me,” Nicole said. “When I got out of the Marines, I tried modeling. Hard to get jobs with